

Finding Family – November 2017

## **What's in a Name? – the Importance of Names in Genealogical Research**

By Christine Dunn

A person's name is the starting point in genealogical research. A genealogist traces a person through history by using their name to conduct research. Legal documents such as birth certificates, marriage licenses, military records and death certificates, all of which are based on a person's legal name, contain critical details about the person's life. Other sources of information, such as telephone directories, census records and newspaper stories also start with the person's name. Such information is used to confirm the facts of a person's life and to corroborate family stories and anecdotes passed down through the generations. Genealogical research does not go very far without a name.

Discovering and verifying a person's name is not always simple. Genealogists are often faced with the challenge of untangling multiple spellings of the same name. There also can be several generations of people with the same name. This is seen not just from one generation to the next but within the same generation, with cousins who have the same first and last names and even similar birth dates. To make things even more complicated, it was not uncommon for cousins to marry.

Today, a baby born in a hospital does not leave until the mother fills out the application for a birth certificate. Since 1987, the birth certificate form has included a request for a Social Security number, which is required when the new parents file their income taxes.

We were not always so efficient.

In 1936, when my in-laws, Clara Giesick and John Dunn, went to get their marriage license, Clara was very surprised to find that her finance's name was not John, but Donald. Close questioning revealed the unusual story behind John/Donald's two names.

The first Dunn baby, Fred, was followed by Mildred in 1900. After Mildred came seven boys, every other year, one after the other. The streak ended with a little girl, June, in 1916.

The story goes that a very proper aunt came to visit the family on their remote Colorado farm. This aunt was shocked to learn that seven of her nephews did not have proper names but instead were known only by colorful nicknames: Ted, Ginger, Billy, Jim, John, Hap and Mutt.

Mrs. Dunn was surely a very busy woman. All of her children were born at home and, since there was no requirement to provide proof of age for school admission, driver's licenses or Social Security, making the trip to the county registrar's office to get an official birth certificate was not high on her to-do list.

The visiting aunt devised a plan to rectify this lapse in civilized behavior. The family gathered around and made a list of their favorite boys' names, complete with middle names. Big sister Mildred had a crush on a boy down the road named Donald Denton, so she added that name to the list.

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Seven of these names were written on scraps of paper and baked in a cake. The cake was divided into seven equal pieces and each boy was given a piece. The name in each boy's piece of cake became his official, legal name. Ta-da! Floyd Temple Dunn, George Benjamin Dunn, William W. Dunn, Stanley Stuart Dunn, Donald Denton Dunn, Kenneth Truman Dunn and Richard Wainwright Dunn were born.

Although Donald Denton Dunn had a very proper name on all of his legal documents, including his marriage license, he was called John by everyone who knew him. My mother-in-law perpetuated the story by naming her son (my husband) Donald Rodger Dunn. I was afraid to ask why she chose Rodger.

Caption for photo:

Back row, L to R: Frederick Marvin (Fred) Dunn, George Benjamin (Ginger) Dunn, Kenneth Truman (Hap) Dunn, Donald Denton (John) Dunn.

Front row, L to R: Richard Wainwright (Mutt) Dunn, Mildred A. Dunn Diegel, Stanley Stuart (Jim) Dunn, June Virginia Dunn Desserich, Floyd Temple (Ted) Dunn

William W. (Billy) Dunn died when he was 15 years old and is not included in this photo.