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Social Networking Websites: A Virtual Playground for Genealogists

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Using State Census Records

By Allin Kingsbury

US State Census Records are a valuable and often overlooked resource for genealogical research. The reason they are not used more is the lack of familiarity on the part of researchers and the inconsistency of the state census information from state to state. Some states have no state census data while others have many. Many of the state censuses are incomplete, often with only the records of a handful of counties surviving. Some state censuses are not indexed and only available on microfilm.

Unlike the Federal Census records which can easily be searched and viewed online after purchasing a subscription to Ancestry.com, or by a visit to one of the branches of the National Archives where there are printed indexes and microfilm of the original census returns, State Census records are harder to find. The most easily available sources are Ancestry.com which has perhaps half of the records that exist, and the local Family History Centers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints where most State Census records can be ordered on microfilm. FamilySearch plans to index State Census records and make them available at: www.labs.familysearch.org. The site has indexed census records for about six states. Other sources, usually with microfilm copies, include state historical societies, state libraries and archives, and a few state government and historical society Internet sites. The sources can easily be located using a search engine such as Google or an index of sources such as *Cyndi's List*.

In addition to the State Censuses, there are other records which can be used in lieu

of census records. These include tax lists, directories, military and school censuses, voter registration lists and other records that list individuals. There are also many other censuses such as the 1835 census that counted the Cherokee population east of the Mississippi River. There is also a census substitute for the 1890 census which is compiled from other sources. These records, except for school census records, list only adults or heads of households. All of them are useful as tools for research and should be consulted. They may contain vital information that cannot be found elsewhere. They are less consistent than State Census records and more difficult to find.

What You May Find

If you are looking for information about an early settler, there are some states that have colonial or territorial census records that predate the first Federal Census taken for a state which was taken in 1790 or after statehood was granted. You may be lucky enough to be looking for a family in Florida, the Florida State Census for 1945, available online, taken fifteen years after the most recent Federal Census that is available to the public. Many states conducted their census five years after the Federal Census, providing a look at family status halfway between Federal Census years. These are a major help if they come during the twenty year gap resulting from the destruction of the 1890 Federal Census. A few states have both an 1885 and 1895 census.

A few early censuses list heads of families, but most of them list all individuals in each family by name. Often, they include similar but usually less information than found in the closest Federal Census. There are exceptions, such as the Iowa census



May Seminar

On 8 May 2010, Barry J. Ewell is coming. He has extensive genealogical experience in Internet and field research in the Eastern

U.S., United Kingdom, Scandinavia, Germany, and Russia. Invite your friends and family historians to this special event. Mark your calendars, especially if you marked the wrong date from last month.

taken in 1825. This census lists the maiden name of the mother and full name of the father of every individual.

Where to Find State Census Records

If you can afford to wait long enough, you should find all State Census records on the Internet with indexing so the census can be searched. FamilySearch.org now includes records from Colorado, Dakota Territory, Florida, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, and New Mexico Territory. In addition to the sources already mentioned, there are many scattered sources of census data.

Table 1 in this article lists the known State Censuses. The table was intended only for state censuses conducted by the state government. However a few territorial or colonial censuses were found and are included, but the list is not complete. An attempt was made to list the Internet sources and also list the censuses available at the Salt Lake Family History Library or by rental at Family History Centers.

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Social Networking Websites: A Virtual Playground for Genealogists

by James Gross

For those genealogists who seek to connect or reconnect with their known relatives, the development and popularity of online social networks may prove to be an invaluable resource.

Depending on when one began their genealogy research, some of you may recall a time in the not so distant past when communications with family members were primarily conducted via postal mail or the telephone. This began to change as the computer became more widely available.

I can recall a time back in 1985 when an Apple IIe was considered to be an amazing piece of technology. I first used a computer for dial-up back in 1988. It was a 386 laptop. I used it to log into user groups online with a dial-up modem. Eventually I upgraded to a faster computer. Computers gradually improved as the technology became more advanced. In recent years, dial-up access has been gradually replaced by cable. In 2007, I finally made the switch in my internet access from unreliable dial-up access to fast ethernet cable access.

Some readers may have similar experiences in terms of how they personally experienced the evolution of computer technology in their lives. This march in technology has resulted in faster computers, faster internet access, and increased access to online information and databases. People have found that computers can be very useful tools for communication and information retrieval.

And, as computer use has become more popular, the usage of email has emerged as a commonplace and accepted method of communication. Many people, including genealogists, have been quick to take advantage of this tool for communication with family members.

Recently, another communication forum has emerged which may serve to further enhance genealogy research and family contacts. It is the advent of the online virtual social networking website. These online social networks, which include such websites as Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn, act as virtual playgrounds where people can choose to interact with their friends and colleagues. They can also choose to be known, or to be anonymous.

According to one website, Compete.com, of the top 25 social networking websites, Facebook was ranked #1 with 68 million unique visitors and MySpace was ranked at #2 with 58 million unique visitors.(1) Per Facebook's statistics, there are more than 350 million active users, more than 35 million users update their status every day, and there are more than 1.6 million active pages on Facebook. (2)

And, according to one source, Facebook is apparently adding new users at a breakneck pace of 50 million every couple of months and is generally considered to be the world's largest social-networking site with 5% of the global internet audience. (3)

In my own social networking experience, I have found Facebook to be the most useful networking website for my goal of locating relatives. It is simply amazing to see how so many relatives, especially the younger ones, are on Facebook. For example,

a blogger named Robyn recently posted the following timely comment: "I have often wondered if Facebook could be a good tool for today's genealogist." (4)

A similar view on the merits of Facebook was voiced by blogger Robert Ragan. Ragan, in his blog entitled, "How do You Feel about Facebook - Waste of Time or Great Genealogy 2.0 Online Social Tool," discussed the merits and advantages of using Facebook for locating relatives. (5)

Terri W. in a post on Robert Ragan's blog, commented, "Facebook has helped me keep in touch with cousins I haven't talked to in years. It also tells me when friends are online and allows me to "chat" with them" (6) And, Aaron S., a sophomore at Vassar College, observed that Facebook had helped him keep in touch with his parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Suzuka commented that, "Facebook allows all of us to keep in touch, even though we are all over the country or in different countries." (7)

I will admit that the search engine options within Facebook may not be perfect, but with some perseverance, one can still manage to identify a number of relatives. I have found that Facebook contact is a much faster method of locating relatives, especially younger ones, as opposed to depending on slow postal mail.

I have also noticed how these social networking sites appear to be a less invasive method of initial contact as opposed to using the telephone. As many of you know, in today's mobile society, not everyone has land lines, much less published phone numbers.

According to an online article reprinted from the National Genealogy Society newsmagazine, social networking sites such as Facebook, "provide a way for genealogists to quickly and easily share information about their research with their families, especially with people who think they are "not interested" in genealogy." (8)

In order to use Facebook or Myspace to locate someone, you must first sign up for a free account. After you are signed up, you can begin to locate friends and family. High school buddies, old college friends, fraternity buddies, the list is endless.

In terms of methodology, I have found it useful to begin by first locating a known relative who has a unique name. I first locate relatives with obscure names and then attempt to mine their "friend's list" for other known relatives. This method has worked well for me, especially when faced with the alternative of a name search involving a common surname. The reason is that those users with common names, depending on their identified city and state, can be more difficult to identify as relatives.

It is best if one strives to locate someone on Facebook whom you know is related to your family. Go down through their list of friends. Look for names of other known relatives. Check each of their friends list for known relatives. When you locate a relative's name that you recognize, send them a message. There are apparently so many relatives of mine on Facebook that I am slowly identifying and contacting them as I go through my various family lists.

Users of social networking sites, such as Facebook, should be aware of some current issues related to privacy concerns. Recently, there have been number of articles and blogs, including an article in PC World, regarding Facebook's decision to change their policy on user data. (9) The issue is how the user data is collected and how it affects user privacy.

User privacy can be a very important issue for some people. In fact, this issue is so important, that one consumer advocacy group, the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC), recently filed a complaint with the FTC (10). Their complaint was focused on Facebook's recently proposed changes to their privacy policy and default user settings.

In addition, groups including the Consumer Federation of America, the American Library Association, the Privacy Rights Now Coalition, and Foolproof, also added themselves to the EPIC complaint. (11)

So, what is all the fuss about? An important issue deals with Facebook's decision to change user default website settings. The new settings could result in user's Facebook data to be preset so that more of user information would be public rather than visible only to friends. There is also the risk that some personal user information, could be deemed publicly available information and shared with Facebook's commercial software developers.

As social networking websites, like Facebook, have gained popularity, they have also exponentially increased the potential to attract dishonest people and schemes. And, unfortunately, there is the ever present concern that some of these people could be stalkers looking to prey on children. As Jordan Jones noted, "the biggest concerns voiced about Facebook over the years have been about privacy and security..." (12)

Whether it is the inclusion of a town name, an identified organization, or some other identifying information, some Facebook users are becoming more concerned about personal safety.

Hopefully, social networking websites will soon realize the importance of ensuring that their users feel free to engage others without worrying about safety. Issues such as privacy mining and human predators are real and should not be ignored by the user.

Of course, the ultimate guardian of privacy is the user. If social networking users do not want their wild Spring Break photos or other potentially embarrassing activities made public, then they should keep their photos private, delete them, or take a few minutes to review their privacy settings.

In closing, social networking websites, such as Facebook, can be a real asset to one's genealogy efforts. While one should be cognizant of the pitfalls, social websites such as Facebook can be a real bonus for locating relatives. Privacy issues aside, I can attest to the usefulness and benefit of conducting searches for relatives on social networking websites. Even if you can only locate the younger relatives, they can often refer you to their parents or other older family members.

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James Gross formerly worked as a micrographic technician with the National Archives in College Park, MD. His duties included camera operator microfilming and film preservation and storage. James has worked on personal genealogy research since 1991. He has also contributed genealogy articles to various genealogy publications, including Avotaynu and Chronicles. James is presently a Masters in Library Science (MLS) candidate at Drexel University. He is active in genealogy via his affiliation with the Jewish Genealogy Society of Greater Philadelphia (JGSGP). He is also assisting the JGSGP as the coordinator of the Jewish Exponent Indexing Project, which is being jointly conducted with the Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center. He can be reached at (navistar96@yahoo.com).