Search Tip for Ancestry.com: Use a Wildcard

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REFLECTIONS FROM YOUR CHRONICLES TEAM

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“Never rule out even the most insignificant clue.”

Several months ago I was rummaging through memorabilia that my late parents had saved. I came across a postcard with the photograph of a man with a white beard wearing a top hat.

‘Who is he?’, I wondered. I also saw a message in Yiddish on the flip side along with an address in English: “Mr. J. Baron, 153 Prince St., Newark, N.J.” and a 1914 postmark.

I recognized the addressee as my great great uncle. Had that meaningful address not appeared, I would’ve put this postcard on the back burner. Apparently someone in my family had saved this now, century old document for some unknown reason.  

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which allowed the author to reconstruct much of his deceased father's and grandfather's genomes, giving him a much more powerful tool for analysis.

Being part of an endogamic population implies that two individuals in that population are likely related on many branches of their families. This is stressed throughout the book as well as in the title--we are truly "One Family, One People."


Reviewer, Lara Diamond, Ukraine SIG Projects Director for IAJGS is President of JGS of Maryland and has been researching her family for twenty-five years, since she was too young to have a driver's license and had to rely on her mother to drive her to the National Archives. She has traced all branches of her family back to Europe and most multiple generations back using Russian Empire-era records. Most of her research is in modern-day Ukraine, with a smattering of Belarus and Poland. She blogs about her mostly Eastern European research at http://larasgenealogy.blogspot.com.

Lara will be the speaker at the December 20th, 2015 JGSGP meeting. Her topic is “Researching Your Roots in Ukraine with the Ukraine SIG.”

SEARCH TIP FOR ANCESTRY.COM: USE A WILD CARD

by James Gross

For many readers, the subscription website, www.ancestry.com, is a familiar genealogical resource. Like many of you, I find it to be a useful resource which can be conveniently accessed online. But every so often, I run into a name which I am unable to locate on Ancestry. Here are a few tips to enhance your search.

Ancestry.com is a subscription fee-based website which is available for free at many local libraries and is also free at all LDS Family History Centers. If you have been unsuccessful in your searches and you are reasonably certain the person existed, try to think outside the box. I suggest using creative spelling or conducting a wildcard search.

Depending on the category being searched, using creative spelling can help improve the search results. When searching ship manifests, one may tend to find Yiddish or Hebrew given names. When our early relatives came over to the United States, many were conversant solely in their native tongue, Yiddish or Hebrew. Many did not speak English. Thus, if you know the relative’s Yiddish or Hebrew name, perhaps from the Hebrew inscription listed on his/her headstone, this would be helpful information to use in a search on Ancestry.

Some immigrants had variations of their given name or surnames recorded. For example, my SCHWARTWALD branch had a relative who was listed per his naturalization document as Schulim Schwarzwald, but the ship manifest listed the name as Solomon. His brother George came over with the given name of Gerschon Schwartzwald.

As a search strategy, I sometimes find it easier to bypass the given name variations and search by surname and town. I eventually found my Schwartzwald relative as I recognized his Ukrainian town name, RADZIECHOW. Be aware that given names and surnames may be misspelled. If name variations do not work, try using a wildcard.

What is a wildcard? Ancestry defines a wildcard as using either the asterisk (*) symbol or the question mark (?) symbol. The ? symbol indicates only one unspecified letter is being sought, while the * symbol indicates any number of possible letters are being sought.
Per Ancestry.com’s search tips, you must have at least three non-wildcard characters in a name.

The default drop-down search in Ancestry can easily be used to run in advanced mode. First, click the search button at the top of the main Ancestry page.

After you click the search button, click the option “Search all collections.”

When you start typing in the given and surname in Ancestry, the Ancestry website dynamically adds the clickable button “exact,” under the given name and surname boxes.

After typing the first and last names, you can click “exact,” under the given name and surname. You can also choose whether to further limit the search by clicking on the box “match all terms exactly.” See the images to the left and below.

Be aware that you can use a wildcard as the first or last letter, but not both. An example of acceptable search terms would be *berg or Stein* for my surname Steinberg.

Either the first or last letter must be a non-wildcard. For example, searching for the surname Steinberg, Ste* and *berg are okay, but a search using [*teinber*] is not a valid search query.

In other words, your search query can have the wildcard character in either the first position or the last position, but not in both positions at the same time. So, the search Ste* is okay, and *erg is okay, but *ste* is not a valid search query.

A search must contain at least three letters. For the surname Stein, the search [St*in] is okay, but St* is not because three letters are required in the search. Also, be aware that a wildcard search will work in a ranked search (standard search) or exact match search (match all terms exactly), but they will not work with a Soundex search.

Another example is using the surname GERINGER.

• The following wild card names will return results:
  
  Ger*, Ger*ger, G*ger, G*g?r, G*r*n*r, ?e*ng*r, G*r*ng*, ??*ger.

• The following wild card names would not return results: G*r, and ??*er because they don’t contain the minimum required three letters.
Users should be aware that Ancestry weighs the two wildcard symbols, the asterisk and the question mark, differently. The asterisk (*) in the search [Bell*] will return zero or more letters. Hits would include Bell, Belle, and Bella.

The question mark (?) symbol will return one extra letter. For example, the search [Bell?] would return Bella, Belle, but not Bell. If you do a search and use both wildcard characters, such as Stein?*, you will get returns of Stein and Steinberg. After an initial search, you can change your wildcards using the Refine Search panel on the left side of the results screen, but what you’re really doing is performing a new search.

If you are unable to locate the surname Stein, you can try Ste?n, as this will match both Stein and Steen or you can try [Ste?] as this will cover the variations of both Steine and Stein.

Some given names and surnames contain double letters. If you are searching for a given name or surname (such as Gerringer) which contains a double letter, try substituting the second double letter with a *. For example, Ger*inger. This way if Ancestry has an error, you’ll still get a match.

For given names such as Benjamin or Solomon, you may want to try searching with their nicknames, Ben and Sol. I have found that the U.S. census contains a mixture of nicknames and formal given names. Thus, Benjamin may be listed as Ben, and Solomon may be listed as Sol.

In summary, do not give up your search efforts even if your initial attempts on Ancestry come up dry. There are some indexing errors which are inevitable in such a large collection of databases. You may accidently find one relative living with another relative. Try searching for those family members with unique surnames, or narrow your search by specifying a particular town. If you find an error, especially in one of the U.S. censuses, look for the correction button and submit the correction to Ancestry.

References:


Author James Gross has been working on his family tree since the early 1990s. A periodic contributor to various genealogy newsletters, James volunteers regularly at the Cherry Hill, NJ Family History Center where he helps other genealogists in their research. He also has a genealogy website: http://tinyurl.com/gross-steinberg.
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