How to narrow your search criteria

By Elizabeth Doherty Herzfeld

Finding ways to narrow your search saves time and frustration. As a professional genealogist, I must find ways to get the information for my clients in the least amount of billable time. People are often surprised at what can be found so quickly. For example: A friend going to Germany wished to visit the home of her ancestors. She didn't know the city or town, but only that the region was Bavaria. Using a family group sheet she supplied. I was able to find the children of her ancestor in the birth records at the Milwaukee County Courthouse. These records listed various places of birth for the parents as Germany, Bavaria, Bohemia, and Nieder Bayern (lower Bavaria). According to the immigrant ancestor's death record, his father's given name was Michael. By estimating Michael's approximate birth date and place and using this information to search the Family History Library's free website <familysearch.org> a possible parent for her ancestor was found. This information along with the address of the Catholic archive in Bavaria that would most likely have that information, was given to her before her trip.

Vital records

Milwaukee's vital record indexes are quite extensive. Searching them can be time consuming, if a person has no idea when an event took place. Before starting index searches at the courthouse, I need to shorten the time period. That can be done by checking census records; obituaries of family members; city directories; the Social Security Death Index (SSDI); alphabetical indexes, such as probate and death indexes or necrologies, when available; and of course Internet sites. I usually Google the name of the state, plus "vital records," to see if there is an online index.

Using a probate index and looking at probate files, it is possible to narrow the search for death dates. The records often include a list of heirs and their addresses at the time the probate was filed. This information is more complete for heirs than what you may find in an obituary or death notice. However, the death notice may show the residences of other relatives, married names, and the names of spouses, so getting both items would be best. Looking through large city vital records indices without approximate dates can be very time consuming. I find if I work backwards in the indexes starting with deaths, then marriages, and lastly births, dates or ages and places can often be found to guide my search.

For example, one client wanted an obituary for a relative he thought had died in 1961. He told me she was a widow by 1920. I was unable to find her in the Wisconsin Death Index 1959–79, found at Ancestry.com. Looking in several Milwaukee city directories showed the family listed together from 1921 until 1926, when she was no longer listed. Did she die or move? This narrowed my search through the vital records significantly. She was not listed in the death index in 1927 or years near that. After looking in several city directories, but being unable to find her, I thought perhaps she had remarried. In the 1926 city directory I found not her, but her daughter at 85 Thirty-fourth Street. Searching the street section of the city directory, a Halbert L. Amadon was living at the same address. In the name section he was listed with Ida, the mother of this girl. Rechecking the date

received from my client, along with the woman's new married name Amandon, she was found in the death index. The death date given was correct, but she was listed under her remarried name. When a widow under 60 disappears from the city directory, the first place to check is the street listing in the rear of that directory to learn who is now living at that house address; often you will find the information you need.

Build a family profile

Create a written profile for your ancestor's family. A pattern usually emerges. This helps distinguish your ancestors from someone else's. Remember that trades were often passed down in families: a blacksmith's son may have learned that trade from his father and that is likely the work he did as an adult.

1. What was the family's occupation? Occupations varied little from generation to generation before the industrial revolution. New, but similar patterns may form later, such as skilled or unskilled laborers, or professional.

2. What do you know about the family? Is there a naming pattern? Many families have patterns, such as the first son named after the paternal grandfather, the second after the maternal grandfather, the first female after the paternal grandmother, and so on, using names of parents, aunts, and uncles. If the children in a family you found have completely different names from your family, this is likely the wrong family; but it does not always hold true today. What religious denomination did the family belong to? Some families changed religions when there was no church of their denomination in the area into which they moved. Some of my ancestors became Quakers when they married into faith. Don't assume that your family was always the same religion. If you know the religion at the time you are researching, there may be church records available.

3. Were they rich, poor, or in between? Are they likely to have owned land? Maybe somebody had the wanderlust and moved often. The census is a great way to track people, but you need to know something about them to find specific persons.

4. At what age did most of them marry? In my father's family, most men married about the age of 25 and the women around 20. In my husband's, the men were in their late 30s.

5. Were they educated? Could they read and write? Did they sign records with their mark or a signature?

6. Where did they live? What was their year of immigration? One indication that you found family is when you find them living in a particular part of a city – families usually stay in the same area. E.g., a family living on the south side of Milwaukee is not likely to move to the north side. Many cities have neighborhoods divided into ethnic groups where people remained with others of the same group.

Census data

Much information is found in census records. Review every year in which a person(s) of

interest appear on the census. By studying the census, you can find much information to help narrow your search. There are also state censuses, which vary in the amount of helpful information. Use information from census records as a frame on which to build the family.

Immigration records

You can learn when your ancestor came to America by doing a little investigating. With recent immigrants, use the 1900 through 1930 U.S. federal censuses to identify the approximate year of immigration and to see if the person was naturalized. For women, realize that immigration laws changed over time. Women and children were often given derived citizenship if their husband/father became a citizen. In 1922, women were given their own citizenship. However, some women did obtain citizenship on their own before this time.

You will find Ancestry.com and other subscription websites to be a great help in this area. There are immigration databases on some sites. In addition, check the free websites, like Ellis Island <http://www.ellisisland.org> and Castle Garden <http://www.castlegarden.org>, to help retrieve passenger records. Many local libraries offer free access to subscription sites.

County of origin

Knowing the formation date that the county in which your ancestor lived will help. You may be looking for records in the wrong county if it was formed during or after the time your ancestor lived there. If your ancestor was there before the county was established, look for records in the parent county.

- You can find some of the county formation dates by searching the Family History Library's online catalogue at <http://www.familysearch.org/eng/Library/FHLC/frameset_fhlc.asp>.

At the top of the county's screen the date of the county's formation is often shown, as well as from what county or counties it was formed. West Virginia is a good example. Though many of its counties were originally part of Virginia, they are listed under West Virginia in the Family History Library Catalog.

Obituaries

Obituaries are useful when you know the date a child, spouse, or other relative died. The obituary often lists living relatives, and usually gives the spouse's name. If the spouse is dead, it might say "late wife or husband or widow/er of," and that spouse's name. Occasionally parent names and birth dates or ages are listed. Cities of residence for living relatives may be given. Caution: obituaries are an excellent way to narrow a search, but there are mistakes in obituaries; the people giving the information are suffering from grief. Also helpful in smaller towns are newspaper articles on the life of the deceased. Articles may appear in a later paper so be sure to check for several issues after a death notice appears. Look for an obituary in hometowns, as well as places of death. Often, an obituary or article will appear in the local paper for a former resident. Obituaries can be

obtained from the main library in the city or county where the person lived or formerly lived.

City directories

City directories are quite useful, typically having listings by both name and street address. When little is known about a person other than a city of residence, check city directories until the name appears. They list both adults and teenage children with that name living at that address. When address/street listings are available, look at the address and see who else it lists there. Don't forget to look at the neighboring addresses, as they could be related, but have different surnames. The early city directories did not have as much information as later directories.

Later directories list occupations (including "student"), as well as spouse names. During past wars, city directories listed people in service with USN, USA, or USMC after their names. This is a great way to find what happened to some of those people. Sometimes the death date appears when a person died the previous year. When a woman is listed, you may find after her name (widow of <her late husband's name>). When a person is no longer listed, it is a good indication that he/she probably died, moved, or the couple separated in the previous year.

Knowing an address helps verify that you have the right person when searching other records. It also helps when looking for the church they attended. Directories list churches by denomination and location. The names of ministers, priests, sextons, rabbis, hospitals, asylums, cemeteries, orphanages, and fraternal organizations are listed, which also helps identify people. Directories also list newspapers. This can be helpful if you are looking for a local ethnic paper to locate an obituary. Some city directories are available online.

Internet searches

Internet searches can be very helpful. Searching Familysearch.org, Ancestry.com, Genealogy.com, Heritagequest.com, or other sites can give you hints. Caution: contributed, online information can contain many errors; view the information as helpful hints, not factual data. Another Internet source is Google.com. On Google, type in an ancestor's name between quotes, then add genealogy after the last quotation mark to find what is available online. Typically, you will get a lot of hits and have to narrow your search by adding words, such as a date or city to limit the hits. If you enclose your search information (i.e., the name and date) within quotation marks, only hits that include all the information between the quotation marks should appear.

USGenWeb.com, Cyndislist.com, and Google.com are good sources to find websites of county genealogical societies, libraries, and historical societies. Many of these sites have a search feature and you can search all the databases on their site to see if there are any relevant references to your research. Many genealogical websites direct you to relevant pages on the site, or provide links to other helpful websites.

Using Internet sites at the beginning of your search can help focus the search. Obviously, look beyond the name. Be certain the person is in the right place at the right time or you are liable to spend a lot of time researching the wrong person.

Conclusion

When you take the time to study the person or persons being researched, you can often find ways to narrow the search. Decide what you want to know and figure out the best way to find it. There are many tools available to help you narrow your search. If you want to find the parents of your grandfather get his marriage and/or death record and search the census. Don't forget the collateral family. If you can't find the parents on your grandfather's records look at his sibling's records. The marriage record also has witnesses, who are usually related. This is in red because I don't know if it should be here or not.