

WHAT GOOD ARE PROBATE RECORDS?

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In doing research for others I am seldom asked for probate information, typically receiving requests for obituaries. However, obits in the 1800s and early 1900s were seldom placed in the newspaper unless the person was affluent or active in the community, and many of the people in Milwaukee were immigrants at that time.

I use probate records extensively in my own research, my family not having been prominent. Its a good way to find other family members and to prove that this person for whom I have a will or estate settlement, was or was not an ancestor. Many times wills and estate settlements name the wife and children, often giving the married names of daughters, and occasionally their husbands given name.

The most interesting probate record I found in Milwaukee County's probate files is a guardianship file where a mother and her children ask for a new guardian because the mother is mentally incapable of doing so. In an earlier request the children named included a son who seven months later in the second hearing was not mentioned. I assume he died and may be the reason the mother could no longer handle the care of the children. The yearly reports of the guardian show placement of two of the children (at different times) in an orphanage in Cincinnati. It also shows that the support for the children was paid by an estate through lawyers in New York. The guardianship continues for quite a few years ending when the oldest girl is about 30. It also includes the information that the guardian absconded with the remaining money in the youngest girl's guardianship account.

Another guardianship hearing was for an adult who was spending his money on drink instead of supporting his family. You will find descent of title where the descendants come to prove they are the heirs of a person who died some time earlier. Since they want to sell some of this persons real estate property, they must go through probate to prove title. The person probably died intestate and nothing was done about his property at the time of death. Besides names, their relationship to the deceased is often mentioned, such as sister, brother, etc. This important source of information is often overlooked. The probate records at the Milwaukee County Courthouse are all indexed on 3 x 5 cards and give the type of information that can be found in the file (such as the descendency of title, guardianship, will, etc.).