

LESSONS LEARNED FROM A JIGSAW PUZZLE

BY PATRICIA LAW HATCHER, CG

I should never have opened the box. There was research to do, reports to write. Jigsaw puzzles are addictive. Once begun, they are impossible to ignore. My mind is overworked, I rationalized, it needs a break from genealogy. Besides, it wouldn't take long. I am efficient at jigsaw puzzles. I have a method: find the corners, complete the borders, select the pieces with distinctive colors or patterns, sort the rest by shape. It wouldn't take long.

But this puzzle was different. My methodology didn't apply. As I worked, I was repeatedly reminded of similarities to those genealogical puzzles I was trying to forget.

First, I underestimated the effort. It took several days, not several hours, to assemble the puzzle. How often had I failed to allocate adequate time to my genealogical problems, shortchanging analysis and preparation time, taking too many problems with me to the library?

The puzzle didn't look difficult, only five hundred pieces with no tricky repetitive patterns or vast expanses of blue sky. How often had I failed to correctly evaluate the difficulty of a particular family problem, plowing on as if it were just like other problems?

My methodology failed me immediately. The puzzle was shaped like a cat. There weren't any corners, and the edges weren't straight. I didn't identify some sections of the border as such until the puzzle was nearly complete. I felt insecure without that defining outline. How often had I relied too much on knowing the shape of the solution to keep a problem contained?

Having assembled a somewhat cat-shaped border (with cheating glances at the box cover, an option not available in genealogy), I efficiently selected pieces with bright colors. Each color would form a ball of yarn. No, there were too many pieces. It didn't take long to recognize this pitfall, that of assuming that all documents bearing a specific name belonged to one man, or at most two.

How often had I found that there were really four or six or even fourteen men of the same name?

I switched to assembling kitty cats. Their fur was so distinctive that surely this would go quickly. Wrong! There were more black and white cats than I thought; and surely these pieces of yellow and orange didn't belong to the same animal. How often had I assumed that name pairs (husband and wife, for example) would be sufficient to separate men of the same name, only to discover that the pairs weren't unique.

Managing the pieces was a tremendous problem. My system of organizing by shapes (three innies and an outie over here, wavy edges over there) didn't apply. I found myself suffering from information overload. There were just too many pieces to consider at the same time. Most genealogical problems I work on suffer from a lack of available records, but more recently I have faced three problems, each with a plethora of records, which I was ill-equipped to handle.

So what did I learn from the jigsaw puzzle?

Like jigsaw puzzles, most genealogical puzzles follow similar patterns. Using our tried and true methodology and organization is the most efficient way to solve them. But maybe one problem out of a hundred doesn't respond to the traditional approach. I don't mean that we're having trouble solving it. Lots of problems are difficult or impossible to solve. I mean that we're having trouble going about the tasks of trying to solve it, working aimlessly in circles or unable to analyze the information we already have.

When this happens, we immediately should stop and analyze the shape of the problem. Why are we going in circles? Why is this information difficult to organize? If we can identify what makes this particular puzzle so different, we can adjust our techniques and move more effectively toward a solution.