

IN PRAISE OF WHOLE-FAMILY GENEALOGY

BY PATRICIA LAW HATCHER, CG, FASG

I've learned some disconcerting things during the past couple of years. First, I learned that other researchers have been wrong. So what's new about that? you ask. Well, I've learned that they've been wrong far more often than I ever imagined. Furthermore, they've been wrong even when they seemed to have passed "the test." There was documentation; the sources were cited. The documents matched the conclusions. Sometimes the researcher was someone whose work I respected. But the conclusions were still wrong. On bad days, I had begun to feel that all I did was knock down other people's research—not an act I took joy in. It was depressing.

Then I learned something even more disconcerting (and even more depressing). I learned that I am wrong an astoundingly large number of times.

I have become involved in several whole-family publishing projects. In the typical "descendants of" family history, we normally begin with a progenitor (often an immigrant) and cover all of his descendants for a number of generations.

Whole-family genealogy isn't new to me. When I hit a brick wall, I often go into whole-family mode, tracking down as many records as possible on the family in the area. I analyze, I sort, I arrange family groups. And once I'm comfortable with my solution to the problem, I quit.

When you are publishing on a whole family, however, you can't quit. You have to include everyone. Second cousin Hiram isn't any less important than your ancestor. OK, so your ancestor is going to get three pages and the second cousin will only rate a paragraph, but the point is, you can't leave him out. Nor can you apply any lesser standards to analyzing his information. If he seems to have married three women in the space of a month, you must investigate. And be forewarned—what you find may force you to rearrange other family groups.

Whole-family research causes you to cast your net more broadly for information. When you search for information on second cousin Hiram, you may open up entirely new avenues to explore. An entry about Hiram on the Internet or a CD or in a book may lead to a new locality, to a set of private family records, to a different family arrangement than the one your records point to.

The computer age has greatly changed how much information we have access to, how easy it is to access it, and how rapidly data can be collected. Checking up on Hiram isn't difficult.

Databases such as those on Ancestry.com and CD-ROMs with census images or previously printed material save us hours of library time.

Even compiled family trees online can reveal information about other branches of the family, such as where they went when they disappeared from the records (perhaps taking both grandpa and the family records with them).

Printed books haven't gone out of style, either. In fact, computers made it much easier to abstract and index source material. I have had to rearrange several family groups this past year based on a series of recently published deed abstracts, even though I had already read the deeds for my ancestors. Valuable lineage information was hidden in deeds in which neither the grantor nor the grantee was closely related to my ancestors.

I'm finding today material that just five years ago I never would have gotten to, material that earlier writers had even less ability to access.

Like other genealogists, my research was lineage-oriented. The goal was to find the correct parents. I try to follow good research standards at all times, and I hope I wasn't wearing blinders, but single lineage research narrowed my focus. Sometimes that led me unwittingly to the wrong conclusion. Often everything fit—right up until I had to deal with second cousin Hiram's three wives. Only when Hiram received the same level of attention I gave to my ancestors, did I discover the error of my ways.

Fortunately, the speed and accessibility of data today can—and should—encourage us to look beyond our own lineage. If you are finding yourself stuck on a puzzle or a bit uncomfortable about a family, consider making a commitment to write a whole-family, descendants-of genealogy. It seems to be the best way to assure the reliability of genealogical conclusions.

Hiram and his three wives are theoretical. The potential results to be gained by whole-family genealogy aren't theoretical. They're real.