

SEARCHING FOR SUBSTANCE

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At the NGS conference in Milwaukee, I presented a lecture on traditional genealogists and the Web. Preceding the lecture, I interviewed a number of colleagues on how they use the Internet.

They almost never use it to search for names. Most of them are so disgusted with the lack of documentation and solid information on the Internet that they don't even try, although some occasionally search to track down migrating collateral lines.

Almost all use it for e-mail, of course. Most use it to access library catalogues. Many of them use it as part of their business—booking travel arrangements and preparing for research trips and for lectures.

There is one aspect of research that many traditional genealogists do pursue regularly, however. The Internet is very useful for finding information about local history and lifestyle. This is something from which family historians can benefit greatly. Let's look at some examples and search techniques.

Many early, out-of-copyright town and county histories have been converted to text form on the Internet. They are on commercial sites, on free sites, on institutional sites ranging from local governments to universities, and on personal websites.

How would you find such a history? Enter the name of the town and state in a search engine. If the choices are too widespread and overwhelming, consider searching within the results for a more localized word, such as the name of the local river.

Look at the events in which your ancestors participated. Did your family live in Essex County, Massachusetts, during the witchcraft trials? Was your grandmother one of the children on the orphan trains? Think of a reasonably narrow search term. "Revolutionary War" is way too broad. Do you know the name of any battle in which your ancestor participated or the Regiment in which he served or the name of his colonel?

Websites focusing on social history and occupations offer rich possibilities. Many of these have been created for use by students. A search for terms such as "cordwainer," "coal mining," "indentured servant," "soddy," "midwife," "preemption claim," "homestead act," "musket," "steamship," or "wagon train" can open up a rich learning experience. The photographs, maps, and document images on these sites are designed to catch and hold your attention while the text informs.

The Internet is especially powerful in that it lets you access sources such as these in other countries as easily as those nearer home. Be aware, however, that if the country is France, or Germany, or Italy, rather than England, the text will most likely be in the local language.

Internet searching for history and context requires two things—first, that you forget your ancestor's name, and second, that you use creativity. When you see the search results listed in the search engine, you will have to deter-

mine if you need to broaden, narrow, or shift your focus. If you find a well-developed site, it will have numerous links to other sites that provide additional information or information on related topics.

As an example, I tried searching for information about the very different lives of my grandfathers.

My paternal grandfather was born in 1870 in Illinois. As a young man he went to work for the western railroads, served in France as a railway engineer in World War I, and was the engineer for part of the route of President Warren Harding's funeral train.

My maternal grandfather was born in 1888 in a soddy (sod house) on the Nebraska prairie in the midst of a blizzard. They placed him in a boot box padded with cotton wool and put the box on the warming side of the oven, never expecting him to live.

What could I learn about my grandfathers' environments from the Internet?

I had a list of several railroads for which my grandfather had worked, so I searched for each of them. Unfortunately, I found material on only one of them. I searched for "western railroads" + history. There are many railroad history enthusiasts, but I scanned the hits and found several sites with organized links to other sites. Many included photographs of the trains and depots.

I was not successful in learning about the Army Engineers in France, but a search for Harding + "funeral train" was most interesting. Notice that in my search I left out terms such as President and Warren, since I could not be sure how any writer would phrase their sentences, but was quite specific about finding the words funeral and train together.

One of my first hits was most astounding. I discovered that President Warren Harding had died not from a digestive ailment complicated by pneumonia and a heart problem, but from vampire bite, somehow connected to agents of Al Capone. What? My first thought was that there were more nut cases out there on the Internet than I had realized, but further exploration disclosed that the entire website was an elaborate and well-done spoof.

Having been distracted from my search, I returned to my hit list. It listed the archives for Scouting magazine. The article told of connections between various presidents and the Boy Scouts. I found this one to be an interesting coincidence. My father was a Boy Scout executive, and I even have a photograph of myself as one-year-old "reading" Scouting magazine. The story said that in Kearney, Nebraska, the train passed through without stopping, and that 100 Scouts helped control the crowd of 10,000 people who lined the track. This is quite possibly the stretch on which my grandfather was the engineer.

My search for background information related to my maternal grandfather focused on the sod house. As a child I had pictured an igloo-style dwelling, but as an adult, I had seen photographs of sod houses complete with double-

hung sash windows and wooden floors with Turkish carpets.

I searched for both “soddy” and “sod house.” The first thing I learned is that there are modern sod-house enthusiasts, several with their own websites. In several places I found instructions on exactly how to cut the sod and construct the house.

PBS often creates auxiliary information about its shows. My search found a link to the series “The Frontier House.” I found interesting photographs at the PBS website for the series “Prairie Settlement: A Visual Essay.” Especially interesting to me were those showing children’s clothing from the time period of my grandfather. They looked most uncomfortable.

The Library of Congress’s American Memory website adds new material frequently. This is a richly visual site, with many photographs and documents, including the collection that was the source for the PBS “Prairie Settlement” program mentioned above. I found it efficient to use their word-search feature, and then take advantage of the links to related topics on individual pages.

The most personal view I found was at the website of the Women of the West Museum, which offers profiles of several frontier women, including extensive extracts from letters and diaries. I read the entries about life in sod houses with special interest.

By turning your focus away from names and searching for elements of your ancestors’ lives, you may learn much about them.