

TOO LATE SMART

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I remember stopping in high school with my family at a gift shop in a German community in the Midwest. I had begun teaching myself German, and I spotted a beer stein with a saying, which I struggled to translate. It said “We grow too soon old and too late smart.” It has been many years since I was in high school, and I have had many opportunities to remember that saying. Some of those opportunities have been in genealogy.

I often say that I am not the typical genealogical lecturer and writer because instead of trying to impress you with how smart I am, I am more likely to share with you how un-smart I am. So, here is my list—a very small portion of it.

PREPAREDNESS

I know that at the beginning of every research problem I need to do a systematic resource survey and compile a list. I even give a lecture on the topic. Do I do it? Not often enough and not thoroughly enough.

It isn't for lack of a system. I have one. A good one. It's just that I really like to research and at some point I can't stand it and rush off to the library or launch my Internet browser. (I'll bet there are some heads nodding in agreement on this point.)

BEING THOROUGH

In the Family History Library Catalog (FHLC), when you do a Place Search and select the place, you see a long list of topics. I know which ones are important—Cemeteries, Church Records, Land and Property, Taxation, Vital Records—and go for them first. The problem is that I don't go back and work my way through the “lesser” topics. One of them might have alerted me to a source that would have contained the problem solution.

This didn't happen as often in the old fiche catalog, because I automatically scanned the entire county. I haven't systematically adapted to the online format, probably because of my dislike of mice (?mouses).

DRILLING DOWN

In any web-page-styled screen there are likely to be many buttons and links to select from. When I am searching the FHLC for American localities, I begin with the county, at which point I see that long list of topics mentioned in my previous bad habit. On the same screen, in the upper right-hand corner, is a button that says “View Related Places.”

Not only am I not thorough in clicking on every topic, I almost always ignore that button. I shouldn't. Many records—such important things as church records and cemetery records—are catalogued at the lowest political subdivision. Once again, I haven't adequately adapted my search techniques to online formats.

BUBBLING UP

And while I'm not being thorough, I forget to consider what types of records might have been cataloged at a higher jurisdictional level. Censuses, tax rolls, land patents, histories, and genealogical compilations are all candidates for this.

HAPHAZARDNESS

I think I wouldn't have such a problem with this category if I weren't doing so many different genealogical things. But I have to admit I would still have a problem. Earlier this week I went to the library with several folders, each containing a different research problem. I worked very hard on two of them. I had my laptop computer with me, but for a variety of reasons, I made a number of notes directly on the printout for the problem.

At home, I carefully worked my way through my scribblings. First of all, the term “scribblings” describes one part of the problem. My handwriting is notoriously awful. I compound this with a tendency to make cryptic notes. Even when processed within 24 hours of the library visit, I cannot figure out what some of them say or mean. I still don't have a clue why “Lydia, 50” was jotted in the left margin. I had even written notes on the printout for the wrong research problem.

DOUBLE-CHECKING

Some of my problem with haphazardness would be resolved if I forced myself to double-check everything before leaving the library. I blame this failure on a combination of the increased parking rates at my local library—and hunger—but the truth is, when it requires a follow-up trip, my rush was indeed penny wise and pound foolish (pun intended).

ABSTRACTS

When you saw this heading, I'll bet you thought I was going to say something about relying on an abstract instead of reading the original. Nope. What I'm un-smart about is reading the original without having looked to see if there is an abstract available.

Published abstracts almost always come with every-name indexes—or at least with every-surname indexes. If I don't look for a published abstract, I can easily miss a key piece of information that is in a document focused on another surname.

COMPILATION AND CLOSURE

This week I had to provide some factual information about our family history so that my niece could write a three-page report for school. That certainly should be easy for me, right? Right. That certainly *should* be easy for me. I had no trouble making a list of the items I wanted to send her. I assured my sister it would be an easy matter of creat-

ing a focused document for her by copying and pasting from files on my hard drive, with a bit of editing to make it more appropriate for her to understand. Ha!

What I discovered was that although I had thoroughly researched the various elements, I had not compiled everything into family sketches. I *thought* I had. I *assumed* I had. But I had not. I spent the entire afternoon going

through file folders making sure that I was correct in my narrative.

Like the beer stein said . . .

I GROW TOO SOON OLD AND TOO LATE SMART