JUDGING YOUR OWN RESEARCH

BY PATRICIA LAW HATCHER, CG, FASG

It can be difficult to judge our own work. Because I am an editor, I find it easier than many researchers do to change hats and assume a purely analytical role. Recently I found it necessary to define some of the questions I raise when analyzing research. You may find it easier to analyze your own work by asking yourself these five questions.

DOES THE CHRONOLOGY FIT?

List all of the events for each family, with an associated date and place. Sort them chronologically.

Indicate for each event if the date is REAL (from a record), STB (Said To Be, as in a family history which did not give a REAL source), or EST (estimated). Are there far more entries labeled STB and EST than labeled REAL? If a date is STB, this implies that you should be able to track down the source and turn it into a REAL.

Examine events with EST dates. We often have to estimate events in areas with insufficient records. However, consider whether it is a reasonable estimate based on other events or whether you estimated it as you did because that's what you wanted it to be.

Add events such as county formations to indicate that the switch from Brown County to Greene County was probably not a move. Add an event for any moves. This is usually a range of years. Make sure that the number of moves is reasonable and that they make sense. This is a good way to spot same-name problems.

Jot down the age at which significant events such as first marriage, first purchase of land, and death occurred. Make sure they are reasonable. Calculate the time between the births of the children. Any gap that is too small indicates a serious problem. Any gap that is larger than expected may suggest the death of a wife and a remarriage.

ARE THE COUSINS ALL ACCOUNTED FOR?

I find it scary to contemplate how much of my research was done solely by tracing my lineage, before I understood the value of whole family research. Again and again I have seen invalid lineages revealed in information sent by clients as soon as I started compiling a whole family with all the siblings and cousins.

I find that it often helps to view any family group as having three generations (parents, children, grandchildren), not just the two provided on the standard family group sheet. One benefit is that when I carefully determine birth dates for all grandchildren (not just those in the line of interest), use their birth dates to estimate marriage dates in the second generation, and use the marriage dates to estimate birth dates in the second generation, sometimes a significantly different family structure appears for the parents and children in the first and second generation than I got by focusing only on them.

This is another good way to highlight potential same-name problems. When cousins, nephews and uncles, or fathers and sons share the same given name, reexamine all events to see that they are assigned to the correct individuals

DID YOU FOLLOW THE FEMALES?

Is your research unbalanced? Do you have much more information on sons and brothers than on daughters and sisters?

Quite frankly, it's easier to focus on the males in a family. They left more records, and they didn't change their names. You probably found it relatively easy to find records for all the males in a family because they were listed in the index right there with the male ancestor you knew about and were researching.

Females are a different matter. First, there are more names to check. You'll have to look for the records of them, their husbands, and their children under their married surname(s). Second, it is unlikely that you started your research knowing all of those names. Make a list of all female names (with their spouses) and review all of the sources you examined originally.

WAS YOUR ANCESTOR A WIDOWER?

What evidence do you have that the woman whose name is listed as the wife of your ancestor is the mother of his children? Many widows and widowers remarried, particularly those with children still in the home. Look at each of the children, not just your ancestor, and ask yourself why you think this child belonged to both the man and the woman you have listed as parents.

Some common "gotcha's" derive from the US census, which did not request relationship information until 1880. Even then, stepchildren of the head of household may have been listed as children and possibly even shown with the same surname. Be sure you have found every child on every census during their life to protect against this problem.

What is the last record you have for each female? Have you been looking unsuccessfully for a tombstone, death certificate, and other record under the surname of your paternal ancestor? You won't find them if she remarried.

HAVE YOU USED UP THE LEFTOVERS?

Leftovers are records that aren't assigned to an individual in a whole-family construction. If you researched properly and collected information on all persons of the surname in the time and locality, you usually have leftovers.

Some leftovers are understandable. For example, if you have three Samuel Smiths in your family (father, son, and nephew), all of whom were between 25 and 50 in 1841, and you have a record for a Samuel Smith who served on a jury that year, you will not be able to determine which Samuel the record should be assigned to.

On the other hand, if the 1841 record is a marriage, but according to your family construction all three men have

wives at the time, then you have a problem. A *big* problem. Dig in and research this, even if no Samuel is in your ancestral line. Resolving this may rearrange the family and realign your own ancestral lines as a result.

There is another type of leftover to watch for—a potentially important person such as a beneficiary in a will or a sponsor to a baptism whom you did not identify. They may hold the key to answers you seek.

CONCLUSION

Why do these questions matter? I can't predict for any given case, but I do know that asking these questions and following up often changes lineages, rearranges families, and leads to the solutions to genealogical problems.