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Genealogy as Detective Work

What is a Detective?

- Asks: Who? What? When? Where? Why?
- Researches all aspects of a case
- Seeks clues in many places
- Doesn't overlook anything
- Puts all the clues together
- Comes to a conclusion
- Presents a solution

Both Detectives & Genealogists

- Gather and unravel sets of facts and circumstances
- Try to answer unanswered questions
- Need innate curiosity
- Need the courage to talk to strangers, go to new places, and try new approaches

Genealogist as Detective

- We want to know who was where when, doing what and with whom, why they came or left, and where they are when we need to find them
- We need:
 - The skill of observation: What exactly are we looking at? We don't want to miss anything
 - The skill of discrimination: When we observe something, we want to be able to determine what's important and what's not
 - The ability to analyze and draw conclusions

A Genealogist

- Researches all aspects of a case:
 - Looks at siblings to find answers
 - Explores godparents, sponsors, and neighbors
- Seeks clues in many places:
 - Uses documents, books, newspapers and other sources
 - Considers history of the time and area
- Doesn't overlook anything
 - Looks at other family trees
 - Notices discrepancies in findings
- Puts all clues together
 - Does the census record and the marriage record match? Why does one book say one thing and another record something else?
- Comes to a conclusion
 - Knows why one came to the conclusion
- Presents a solution
- Asks:
 - Who? Who was my ancestor? Who were my grandfather's parents?
 - What? What was their life like? What do I need to know to find out about them?
 - When? When did they immigrate? When did they get married?
 - Where? Where did they come from? Where did they go?

- Why? Why did they leave the old country? Why did the father abandon the family? Why was someone not named in the will?

Who?

- What is the full name of my ancestor?
- Did they go by their middle name?
 - Common, especially in Hispanic research where many boys have the first name José or Juan and many girls have the first name Maria
- What about nicknames?
 - What are some common ones for my ancestor's name?
- What were their siblings' names?
- What were their neighbors' names?

Name, Name—It's All the Same

- What do I do when I run across people with the same name in the same area in the same time period?
 - Hints:
 - Find something unique about your ancestor that will show up in records
 - Do a timeline for each person
 - Indicate occupations, birthplace and other identifiers for each and follow in census
 - List family members' names and look for naming patterns in families
 - Use indirect evidence

Evidence

- **Direct evidence** is “relevant information that states an answer to a specific research question or appears to solve a research problem all by itself”
- **Indirect evidence**, on the other hand, is “relevant information that does not answer the research question all by itself. Rather, it has to be combined with other information to arrive at an answer to the research question”

Source: [Evidence Explained](#) by Elizabeth Shown Mills

Hints for Using Evidence

- If you can't find answers directly, be prepared to find them indirectly
- The answer may not lie in different sources but in new approaches and techniques
- Ask:
 - What does the record add to what I already know?
 - Does it support or contradict information I have already found?
 - Other than my ancestor, who else was mentioned in the record?
 - Do these people appear in any other records of my ancestor?
 - Would there be other records created before or after this one?
 - Are there clues that could lead to additional records or other people?

FOLLOW THE TRAIL!

What?

- What information am I seeking?
 - Be as specific as possible
- What records are available?
- What records are NOT available?
- What records don't I need to look at
 - If my ancestor died before Social Security records, I don't need to look there
 - If the death certificate indicates my ancestor wasn't in the military, I MAY or MAY NOT need to look there
 - Eg. WWI and WWII draft registration records may be available even if your ancestor didn't serve

When?

- When did the records I need begin?
- What other sources can I use when the records I need don't exist?
- A timeline will help me see what time periods I need to pursue

Where?

- Where can the records I need be found?
- What entity had jurisdiction for the records at that time?
- What records are online and which do I need to pursue in person at a repository?
- What about boundary changes?

Why?

- Why do I need this information?
- Why can't I find what I need?
- Am I looking in the right place?
- Have I tried all avenues?

Methods

- The level of our success may well depend on the quality of our methods
- Methods determine:
 - Whether we get the most benefit from the sources
 - Whether we make decisions that can propel our research toward answers
 - Whether our efforts exhibit high standards of quality

1st Step

- Get organized
 - Choose a system that allows you to:
 - Develop an efficient and systematic way to store research data on ancestors
 - Be able to access any given piece of it relatively quickly
 - Have an effective way to pull materials together for comparison and study
- If we are disorganized, we won't make much progress!*

Genealogist as Detective

- We organize so we can readily access information and put clues together
 - At least once a year, look at everything you have on a family and reorganize it, if necessary
 - Do a timeline or chronology—include specifics on place (boundary or county changes)
 - Write down what you know—what is provable and backed up with sources
 - Write down holes in your research—identify the problem—ask specific questions
 - What clues do I have already that may lead to answers?
 - What else am I missing?
 - Read a history of the area you'll be researching
 - Learn what sources are available for the area and time period—new ones may be available
 - Choose a focus on which to continue (2nd step)

2nd Step

- Choose a beginning point—a person or a family
 - Study what we already know, meaning “what we can prove” or “what we can back up with specific information”
 - Record the sources that back up these facts
- Identify the problem
 - What are our holes and blanks
- Determine our focus—narrow it to specific missing information
 - Sometimes answers we seek will direct our search

3rd Step

- Have a research plan—everything in genealogical research takes place in the context of location and time
 - Outline ancestral locations on a timeline

- This will help define the framework for research
- Check maps to clarify boundary changes
 - Maps help us to visualize exactly where events in our ancestor’s lives took place (county, city, town, church, home address)
- Look up when a county began and note from which county it was formed and when

A Research Plan

- Write down what you already know
- Identify sources to research
- List any activities or events that may have generated records (marriage, war, flood)
- Write down a logical order in which to consult the sources you think will help
- Analyze what you find so you can plan the next step
- Identify other sources to research

Hints for Effective Research

- Read some basic history of the place you are researching
- Learn about the sources available for research of this area
- Learn about sources that are unique to that location
- Use indexes wherever possible
- Original sources are best, but look at the actual document (if possible), not just the transcription
 - Transcriptions may contain errors or have omissions

Some Techniques

- Look at a source from a different point of view or in more depth
- Correlate what you find in different sources
- Look for patterns and connections and look for discrepancies
- Look at every tidbit—every name, date, place, and other detail—in every record
 - Ask: is it a clue?
- Don’t skip back in time too soon without researching in-between years
- Request photocopies of records seen in abstracts—often, not everything was abstracted in the record
- Sometimes, we have to read documents page by page
- Develop a list of people associated with your ancestor
 - They may lead you to information, especially if they keep showing up in records

Think About This

- Some families have intermarried so much that they are related by blood or marriage to just about everyone in their small community
- That’s one reason we research extended family
 - Siblings, in-laws, nieces and nephews, aunts, uncles, cousins, other relatives
 - Neighbors who may turn out to be relatives
 - People with the same surname in the same area

Genealogist as Detective

- We hone our skills by:
 - Asking questions:
 - What have I learned so far?
 - Where do I go from here?
 - Trying different approaches
 - If birth records are not available, try wills or probate records, Bible records, passport records, delayed birth certificates, pension records

Asking Questions

- We have to ask the right questions
- We have to define the question or problem before we can look for an answer
- We must break it down into manageable pieces

- We must identify one small question to try to solve
- Then we work on other small questions one at a time

Genealogist as Detective

- Think outside the box
- Example:
 - Why aren't my people where they're supposed to be?
- Possible answers:
 - They went to visit or were living with relatives when the census taker came
 - The husband is in the military and the wife and children went to stay with her or his family and he died in the service so they stayed there
 - Nature—winters were too cold in Minnesota so they went to Florida
 - History—the government offered land in Ohio so they left Virginia to stake a claim
 - They didn't move but the county, state, or country boundary did

Caveat

- Go in with no preconceived idea or you might go down the wrong path
- Keep an open mind to those family stories and unsourced bits of information from books or websites
 - They are only clues
 - Don't base your whole research strategy on them

Dead Ends—What Next?

- Return to Step 1 and reexamine what you know
- Reanalyze the records already found for clues that were missed and/or obtain more pertinent information
- If no clear direction emerges, then basic knowledge and assumptions must be questioned
- You might have to develop a new hypothesis

Finally

- Write a report to yourself that says what you concluded and why you came to that conclusion
- Your conclusion could be that you don't have enough information to reach a definitive conclusion
- If you put your thought processes regarding a conclusion in writing (including the evidence looked at), you can explain your conclusion to yourself or others further down the line
 - It also makes it easier to return to your work if you have to put it aside for awhile—you'll know where you are at

Very, Very Important!

- We can't interpret or analyze or research a conclusion if we don't know where our information came from
 - Cite sources for all research
 - When transcribing, cite your source first on the paper (including URL's)—then you can more easily connect information to a source
 - If you get information from a printed source, make a note of the library or repository where you saw it, so you or others can find the item again

Here's to Success!