Genealogy: A How-To For Beginners
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Ever stop to think about the remarkable events that had to take place in order for you to exist? It's easy to think that if your parents never met, you wouldn't be here. But did you ever stop to think that the same is true for your four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, sixteen great-great grandparents and so on? A lot of things had to occur, and a lot of people were involved in bringing you here.

Genealogy, the search for these ancestors, is one of the fastest growing hobbies today. Researching your ancestors is like working on your own personal puzzle, a mystery put together just for you. It's an activity that you and your kids can share in together. Read on to learn how to get started in this rewarding hobby.

<u>Starting and Organizing Your Research</u>

What do you know?
Take out a piece of paper and write down your name and date of birth. Write down the names of your parents and grandparents and their birth dates. Then add in your siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, spouse, children, etc. For each person, write down known dates and places of birth, marriage and death. If you don't know an exact date, for example, you think your grandmother's sister was born in 1930, but you're not exactly sure, write down 1930 for now. Be sure to include any middle names, maiden names and known nicknames.

Already this might seem like an overwhelming amount of information. To help start organizing it, go to http://mignogna.org/resources.html and download the Pedigree Chart and the Family Group Sheet. The Pedigree Chart shows the ancestors for a single individual while the Family Group sheet lists all the children in a family.

Now start interviewing all your living relatives. Interviewing relatives is probably one of the most important and most overlooked steps when entering into genealogy. This is also an excellent place to get the kids involved. Sit down with your kids to come up with a list of specific questions to ask their grandparents, aunts, uncles, even great-grandparents. Use an interview form like the one found at: http://mignogna.org/resources.html . If you can, record the interview either on video or with a cassette recorder. If your kids are too young to write well, let them ask the questions and have someone older do the writing.

Collecting your information
You should keep copies of any records you find, correspondence, interview notes as well as the pedigree charts and family group sheets you created. You'll need a three-ring binder, a box of sheet protectors, divider sections and small colored labels.

When starting out, one binder will probably suffice. Divide it into 4 sections, one for each of your grandparent's last names (surnames). If you collect any information relating

to your great-grandparents, put them under your grandparents name. As your record collection expands, add another binder and split the records: two grandparents in one binder, two in the other. Eventually, you might want to split your binders into the names of your 8 great-grandparents, but it might be a while before that happens.

Put each record into it's own sheet protector and put a small colored label in the corner. Don't punch holes directly in the records – even if it's a copy, you might wind up punching a hole in parts you want to read. If you are able to collect any original documents, do your best to keep them in as good condition as possible. You might even want to make a copy for your binder, and store the original in a safe, fire proof box.

As you gather records, create an index so you can easily find them later. Write a unique number for each record on that colored label on the sheet protector. Start a new sheet that will go in the front of your binder and record the number and title of each record.

Using Software to aid in your research
There are several software products available to help you keep track of your information, produce charts and share data. These programs service a wide range of needs.
Before purchasing any software product ask yourself the following questions:
- Do I just want to produce a family tree or chart?
- Do I want to use the software to keep track of my sources?
- Do I want to use the software to keep track of conflicting sources of information? For example: You have two records that show different years of birth for your great-grandmother. You think one is the correct one, but want to make sure you don't loose track of either until you are certain. Some pieces of software can keep track of this information and even allow you to declare one date as the primary one.

In depth reviews of several popular genealogy software products can be found at: http://www.mumford.ca/reportcard/reviewfrm.htm

Sources of Information

After setting up your binders and exhausting your relatives, it's time to start searching available records. Records can be anything that provides you with information. Records are usually taken and kept by local and federal governments and by religious institutions. Here in the U.S., our federal government takes a census every 10 years and is also responsible for military records and social security records. They also have naturalization records from the early 1900's. Before that, naturalization was handled at the state and even county level. States also record "Vital Records" which include records of birth, marriage and deaths.

U.S. Census Records. Once you've collected all you can from your family, one of the next best places to start is with the U.S. Census. The census has been taken once every

10 years since 1790. An individual census becomes available to the public after 72 years have passed. Currently, the most recent census available is from 1930.

There are two main places to search the U.S. Census (and other) records. The first is at the National Archives in Washington D.C. Their Research Room is open to the public. Be prepared to spend many hours there! For each relative you're researching, you'll need to know the state and county where they lived at that time. You'll need to look through an index on microfilm that will point you to another microfilm where the record itself is located. Once you find records, you can make copies for a small fee.

A much easier way to search the census is now available by subscribing to the website Ancestry.com. They have most of the U.S. census records online and you can search them electronically. The time Ancestry.com can save you is well worth the subscription fee. In addition, you have access to many other record types such as passenger lists, military records and more.

Each census contains slightly different information. U.S. Census records will tell you who lived in the household, how old they are, how long they've been married, where they were born, where their parents were born and occupations. Some years will even give you information about level of education. As great as this is, all information obtained from the census should be taken with a small grain of salt since anyone in the household, or even a neighbor, could give the census taker information on the household.

Start with the most recent census and search backwards. A fire in 1921 destroyed almost the entire 1890 census, so you'll most likely skip that year.

Other resources

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints maintains a very large family history library in Salt Lake City, Utah. The best part is, all their information is available to the public for free! You can search some of their info online, but just as useful are their Family History Centers (FHC) located all over the world. At an FHC, you can order microfilms and view them. Their collection contains records from all over the world so once you've exhausted U.S. record sources, go to the FHC to seek out records in foreign countries. To learn more about the FHCs and find one near you, visit www.familysearch.org .

There are many more sources of information than those discussed here. An excellent resource for the new and experienced genealogist is "The genealogists question & answer book: solutions and advice for maximizing your research results" by Marcia Yannizze Melnyk.

If you're having problems locating records for a relative, don't give up. For several years, the ship record for one of my great-grandfather's eluded me. I was pretty certain about the year (based on several census records) and was also very certain that he came

here with his mother and younger sister. It wasn't until very recently that I found their ship records – the three of them were listed under the mother's maiden name.

If you're stuck, try other versions of the name, places or dates. Most importantly, document your research process so if you take a break, when you come back you won't be re-doing your previous work.

The further back you go with your research, the more you'll need to learn about record keeping at the time. For example, not all states required the registration of births, marriages and deaths in the early 1800s. Learning about local history where your relatives lived will also aid in your research because it might provide clues as to where and why someone moved. Learning about the culture of your ancestors might give clues to why someone had a particular given name.

Where does it end? That's up to you. You might only be interested in knowing the names of who came before you or you might be interested in learning every detail you can. Since genealogy relates to the whole family, everyone can get involved. Besides, it's an excellent way to teach your kids about respecting their elders as well as organization skills, history and more! Either way, it should be an enjoyable project that could possibly last for a lifetime and beyond. Good luck and enjoy!