

A Dozen Ways to Find Your Living Kin

Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak shows how to trace descendants who may be alive today.

WHILE GENEALOGY is primarily a study of the past, more and more of us are using our detective skills to locate living kin. We may do it to find more attendees for reunions, discover what happened to the family Bible, identify strangers in mystery photos or recruit participants for DNA studies.

As a researcher for the US Army's Korean Repatriation Project, it's my responsibility to trace the families of soldiers MIA or KIA in Korea about half a century ago, so I frequently do exactly this kind of research. Over the last several years, I have found myself returning to certain online resources time after time for this purpose, so I thought I would share this cluster of "old faithfuls" in the hope that you will find them equally as useful.

1. Social Security Death Index (SSDI)

Yes, I know this article is about finding the living but information about the deceased can often lead us to their survivors. Over the last century, American families in particular have been extremely mobile, so even if you know where they resided 50 years ago, it may be difficult to find them now.

The SSDI is one of the best means for tracking down scattered kin. The last residence and last benefit information provided can direct you to likely localities for their spouses, children and grandchildren. Once you know where to focus your search, you can either use phone directories or perhaps request a death certificate to help identify the cemetery, funeral home or informant. All of these can usually direct you to someone connected to the family. In fact,

funeral home directors have been some of my best allies in solving Army cases.

The SSDI can be found in multiple locations on the Internet, including Ancestry.com, Genealogy.com and FamilySearch.org. I tend to do most of my SSDI searching at RootsWeb (www.ssdI.genealogy.rootsweb.com/cgi-bin/ssdi.cgi), where I make heavy use of the various fields to hone in on individuals of interest. Specifying the state of issue and the year of birth, for instance, can often help me pluck out the correct person even if they have a common name or died in a state 2,000 miles from their place of birth.

2. Online State Vital Records Indexes

The last year has been a rough one for genealogists with several states closing, or at least limiting access to, online vital record indexes pre-

ing California, Texas, Kentucky, Minnesota, Washington and Oregon, but know that there are also helpful online resources for Alabama, Idaho, Illinois, Maine, New Mexico, Ohio, Tennessee and Utah among others.

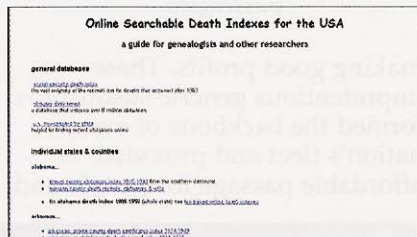
If you haven't already, I suggest that you bookmark Joe Beine's Online Searchable Death Indexes for the USA (home.att.net/~wee-monster/deathrecords.html). This will give you a running start in finding what's available and will tell you which are free and which require a fee-based subscription. It also includes many county level resources. As with the SSDI, these death indexes can lead you to survivors.

It's also a good idea to make it a habit to search for "___ birth index" and "state marriage index" (just fill in the name of the state of interest) on your favorite search engine. While there are more states with online death indexes than birth or marriage ones, it doesn't hurt to check. A hit could lead you to a woman's married name or even the names of a couple's children.

3. Indexed Census Records

If the last year hasn't been the best for vital records, it's been a boon for us in terms of accessing census records. The every-name 1930 US Federal Census at Ancestry.com has been particularly valuable because it so often leads to people who are alive. When looking for descendants from a family, I frequently search the 1930 for children and then try to locate them today.

But it's not just the 1930 census that helps. The 1920 head of household (Ancestry.com), 1910 head of household (available at www.nygb.org if you join the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society), 1900 head of household (Genealogy.com), 1880 every-name (FamilySearch.org)



Joe Beine's Online Searchable Death Indexes for the USA.

viously available to us all. Given their value in locating living relatives, this is unfortunate. Rather than dwell on what's been lost, however, I remind myself that none of these indexes was so readily available just a decade ago and focus on making the best use of those that remain.

For instance, I always check online database for cases involv-

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obtaining copies of a past issue or particular article. I also read the small print to be sure that obituaries are included as some newspapers regrettably do not index them.

Many will refer you to another site that houses archives for a collection of newspapers across the US. These will generally allow you to download relatively recent obituaries for about \$1-3 each. I also make extensive use of News-Library (www.newslibrary.com) which I find especially useful for newspapers from major and mid-sized cities.

Finally, if I can find no other means of obtaining an obituary that I know exists, I will sometimes see if I can find a local volunteer through the Random Acts of Genealogical Kindness site (www.raogk.org) to get a copy for me. On two occasions, I have been delighted by 24-hour turnaround on obituaries from Honolulu, Hawaii.

8. Cemetery Resources

As with the SSDI and obituaries, online resources focusing on cemeteries can often help you find the living via the deceased. Findagrave.com, which continues to grow at an impressive rate, now has an index to 4.1 million gravesites and Internment.net is not far behind with its 3.3 million. I have found that these resources are strongest when it comes to veterans buried at national cemeteries but I find a hit often enough to merit a search on most of my cases.

I also occasionally have a look at the Virtual Cemetery on Genealogy.com and make an effort to seek out location-specific tools. For instance, some of the Army cases I've worked on involved soldiers from Michigan who had relatives in Ontario, so I've benefited from the Ontario Cemetery Finding Aid (www.islandnet.com/ocfa/homepage.html).

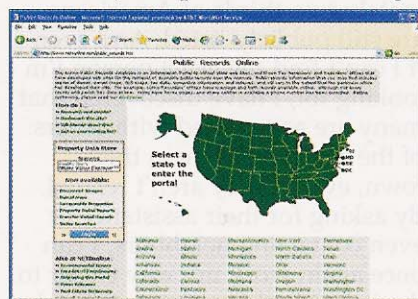
9. County Sites

Although they vary widely in content and value, I like to look at county-oriented sites, such as those at RootsWeb (www.resources.rootsweb.com/cgi-bin/townco.cgi)

and USGenWeb www.usgenweb.net. Sometimes I find nothing but sometimes I hit the jackpot. Since the majority of them feature at least a simple search capacity, it takes just a moment to see if it may help in a search. In tracking down the rightful owners of a family Bible recently, for example, one of these sites not only led me to the family in a matter of minutes, but also allowed me to furnish them with details of their roots going back to their immigrant Irish ancestor born in 1802.

10. Online Public Records

One of the lesser known, but often fruitful resources for finding living relatives is Public Records Online (www.netronline.com/public_records.htm). As with other sources, it is somewhat patchy with some counties being well represented and some having no genealogical value. Also, content sometimes disappears due to the same privacy concerns that have resulted in the removal of some vital record data from the Internet. Still, I have found it worth searching property and tax records for the details they may offer. I might find a spouse's or child's name or other properties owned by the person I'm seeking.



Public Records Online is a site worth checking.

If I then return to phone directories or search engines with these new tidbits, I will often be rewarded with information that allows me to make contact.

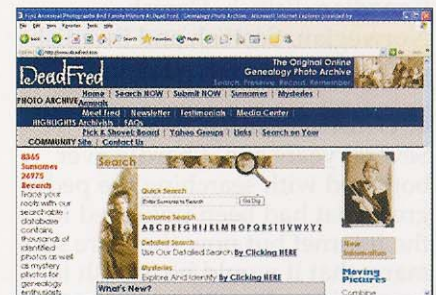
11. Surname Boards

Many of the major sites such as Ancestry.com and Genealogy.com contain surname boards where people can post messages. Especially when I am dealing with an unusual name, I may visit one of these to do a search and see if

anyone else is connected to the party I'm seeking. Even if I discover no hits, I will sometimes leave a posting myself as a bit of a trail to help my target find me! Perhaps it will go unanswered for six months or a year, but they (or someone who knows them) may just happen on the board through a vanity search and find me a little down the road.


12. Photobases

Much as with surname boards, photobases — those sites that allow you to search databases of photos and to upload your own — have become increasingly useful as a means of connecting with kin. Better yet, if you find a hit here, you may end up with the bonus of a family photo! Visit www.honoringourancestors.com/orphanphotos.html for links to more than a dozen such sites or go directly to my favorites at www.deadfred.com and www.ancientfaces.com.

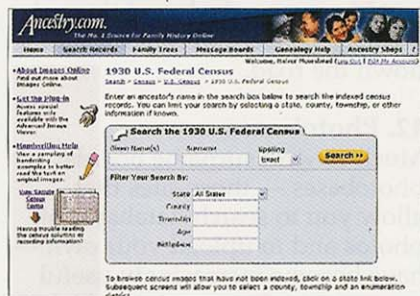


DeadFred is a good site to search for a photograph of an ancestor, although the odds are long.

While the odds are longish on such resources providing your answer, they are improving every day as more and more photos are uploaded. Also, I have learned from personal experience not to dismiss the long shot as an image I uploaded on one of these sites — strictly for research purposes for an article I was writing — resulted in an e-mail from a lost branch of my own family I had sought for decades.

Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak, author of *Honoring Our Ancestors: Inspiring Stories of the Quest for Our Roots, In Search of Our Ancestors* and *They Came to America: Finding Your Immigrant Ancestors*, can be reached through www.honoringourancestors.com. 

and 1870 head of household census again, at www.nygb.org have all steered me to those I seek. If I search the 1930 and can't find likely candidates, I simply back up a decade or two and find the names of siblings, so I can return to the 1930 and search collateral lines.



Ancestry.com's 1930 US Federal Census. This is a subscription site.

If you're interested in other countries, I once again refer you to Joe Beine who has a tidy list of resources at www.zensite.home.att.net/genealogy/international.html. Here you'll find links to online Canadian, British, Danish, Norwegian, Scottish and Swedish census indexes.

4. Online Family Trees

Several years ago, I hardly ever bothered with searching the pedigrees that had been uploaded to the Internet but now there are so many that it would be foolish to ignore them. Yes, it's true that the data contained in them is often suspect. Just the other night I found a person I was looking for linked to two different sets of parents. This wouldn't have been all that remarkable except for the fact that the same contributor had uploaded these apparently conflicting pedigrees.

Having said that, the millions of names in these lineage collections may provide clues. And they frequently take you to the current generation, even though the first names may have appropriately been replaced with "living" in order to protect privacy.

When I find a person I'm seeking in one of these family trees, I generally contact the submitter to see if they can direct me to someone closer to the individual. Since these folks have often uploaded

thousands of names — most of whom they do not know personally — this will usually result in an e-mail telling me that "so-and-so shared this information with me". I'll then contact so-and-so and repeat my request. By doing this, I slowly work my way closer to my target until I finally reaches someone who knows him or her.

5. Online Phone Directories

Assuming I've found names and a likely location from any of the sources mentioned above, I go straight to online phone directories. My favorite changes over time depending on functionality, display, fees (I just can't justify paying anything for publicly listed numbers) and other features. At present, I use www.whitepages.com quite a lot because it allows for reverse look-ups by address or phone number, giving me more flexibility in my searches. For instance, I once solved an Army case when I discovered that the soldier's nearly 100-year-old mother was still residing at the address listed in the 1930 census.

While people's concern with privacy and shift to cell phone usage will make this a less useful resource in the future, approximately two-thirds of Americans are still publicly listed. And even if I can't find the exact person I'm looking for, I have discovered that many are acquainted with others of the same surname in their town, even if they aren't related. By asking for their assistance or even contacting neighbors, I can once again work my way closer to the individual I'm trying to reach.

6. Search Engines

This might seem like a blinding flash of the obvious to some readers, but you'd be surprised how many neglect to simply try a query at www.google.com or some other search engine. Unless I am dealing with a painfully common name, I almost always try "name, location" to see what might pop up. Recently, I solved a stubborn case when such an attempt revealed the name of a police-woman profiled in a local newspaper. She turned out to be exactly

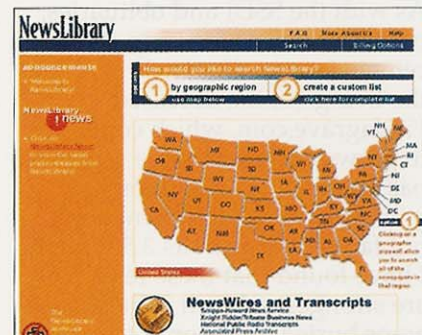
the person I needed to find.

I often try this approach when the one I'm seeking has an unlisted number as people will often be mentioned, even fleetingly, under a business affiliation or through membership in an organization. As often as not, this leads me to an e-mail address, which tends to be a less threatening way to make initial contact in any case.

7. Newspapers

Newspaper items, while a little more difficult to find, are pure gold in locating people. Not surprisingly, I often try to obtain obituaries which detail the names (and sometimes the towns) of children, grandchildren and others connected to the deceased. The more recent the death, the better the odds that the obituary will be accessible online. Generally, I will make an attempt if the death occurred in the 1990s and sometimes in the 1980s.

RootsWeb's Obituary Daily Times (www.obits.rootsweb.com) is



NewsLibrary's website is especially useful for finding newspaper obituaries from major and mid-sized cities.

very helpful with its listings of more than eight million obituaries. If I succeed in obtaining a citation from a particular newspaper from such a source, I will locate it via NewsLink (www.newslink.org) or by using a search engine. If I don't know which newspaper to search, I use the same techniques, simply substituting "location, newspaper" in a search engine query.

Once I find the website of the appropriate publication, I search the archives for the obituary. If they don't have an archives online, I look for directions (usually buried somewhere on the site) for