**From the July 2008 *PastFinder***

# Search and ye shall find

*By Janet Brigham Rands*

My dad used to take me fishing along little creeks ("cricks") in the remote wilds of northern Idaho. When we were heading out to fish, my dad would walk through meadow grasses and catch grasshoppers with his cap. He then would put the live grasshoppers in an old Band-Aid can. I was not only unwilling to catch grasshoppers, but also incapable.

As we approached the creek, he would pull out a grasshopper and stick it on his fish hook alongside a tied fly (made of tiny oiled feathers carefully configured to look like a real fly, at least to a fish). He would look at me expectantly, then shake his head in resignation and bait my hook.

We looked for pools where fish would congregate. He taught me to sneak up on a pool and dangle my fly/grasshopper onto the top of the water. If I followed his instructions—whispered, stayed out of sight of the fish, and kept the fly oiled and on the water's surface—the result was invariably a tug on the line, and fresh trout for dinner.

His judgment about where fish liked to hang out and what they liked to eat was nearly infallible: He knew how to think like a fish.

When the first accessible search engines emerged on the Web in the 1990s, I found myself drawing on my father's strategy: Even though different search engines use different strategies, the approach to using them efficiently is about the same, no matter what search engine you use. Like mountain trout that tend to snooze in pools, search engine results will tug on the fishing line if you give them what they want.

The first thing to learn is to box in the results you want. If you use a broad term, you'll get a gazillion broad results, few of them relevant.

Let's say you're hoping to find information about your Scots Irish ancestors who settled in Canada in the early 1800s. If you enter simply *Canada immigration* the results will be many pages of general information about being an immigrant in Canada, starting with instructions on how to become a Canadian citizen. These results are of little use because the search was **too general**.

So you try to narrow the search by focusing on the year they emigrated, and you enter *Canada immigration 1819.* This time, you get specific family websites for 1819 emigration, passenger logs, and related lists, but nothing specific about your ancestors. This is because the search was **too specific**. By tying it to a specific year, 1819, you limited it too strictly. Perhaps a website won't mention that year, or won't use the terms *Canadian* and *immigration*. Unless the website has metatags that respond to keywords in

a search (which most homegrown websites don't), overarching terms about your search might yield nothing useful.

It's time to think like a fish.

Think, what do I really want to find? And, what words might show up in a website? In other words, what does this "fish" like to "eat"? The answer to the first question is that you want information about immigrants from Ireland to Canada in the early 1820s. It's okay to truncate your terminology a bit, since Google, for example, ignores letter case (upper or lower) as well as punctuation, and common words such as *to*, *in*, and *the*. If you answer your first question in a straightforward way and enter *immigrants from ireland to canada in the early 1820s* you do find something useful, because the search engine is using your terms *ireland*, *canada*, and early *1820s* to focus in on information.

A subtle shift in your searching will bring up different results. If you enter *Scots Irish immigrants to Canada in the early 1820s*, you will lose many of the sites using the term *ireland*, and you'll pull up sites more related to the Scots Irish. To focus more accurately and yet be more inclusive, you could enter *scots scotch irish ireland canada 1820s.*

As brilliantly executed as Google is, the search results differ for the terms *scots* and *scotch*, since both terms are in common usage. Because the application of the terms overlaps, many sites use both terms. To be sure you don't miss a site that uses only one of the terms, it's best to **include multiple terms**.

This also can be the case for terms with abbreviations, such as *NCAA* and *National Collegiate Athletic Association*, and terms with historical precedents, such as *Ottawa* and *Bytown*. A smart web author will use all the applicable terms to maximize hits, but some web authors are stubborn about using one term in lieu of another. To capture their content, you'll need to think like them—if they won't bite at a tied fly, maybe they'll bite at a grasshopper.

Another strategy for finding an ancestor can be to simply enter a name and see what happens. If you enter *william wilson*, you'll get a vast amount of irrelevant information, starting with the short story "William Wilson" by Edgar Allen Poe. If you narrow it by putting the name in quotation marks, so that only that ordering of the words is searched, you get virtually the same collection of irrelevant results. This is because William Wilson is **too common** a name for focused searching, even if you use the exact name for the search. Adding the term *canada* to the search would be useful only if the name and the country were both listed on a website. Which they are, obscurely, but you might have to plough through dozens of pages of results to find that site, and you might not recognize it even if you did find it.

A more efficient way to search is to include something unusual in the search. Let's say that prior research has indicated that William Wilson (common name) was married to Eliza Argue (uncommon name). If you enter *"william wilson" "eliza argue"* together, the search is **too narrow** and brings up nothing. But get rid of one of the limiting

elements, the name *eliza*, and you are now searching for the intersection of William Wilson (in quotes, to keep searching for his name rather than all Williams and all Wilsons) and a family named Argue.

Bingo! You've caught a fish! Several fish, actually, This search brings up several relevant websites relating to these two relatively obscure people's ancestors and descendants. . You've accomplished what my dad always thought was the best luck in fishing—you're able to catch a fish with a grasshopper, and then use the same grasshopper to catch another fish.

Let's apply the same principles of boxing in the search results with another quest that's the sort of search you'd do in family history research. Let's find the athletic record for a gymnast named John Louis. Searching for *john* would be too general, and even searching for *john louis* would be too broad, resulting in information about people named John Louis who make custom closets or are ministers. It especially helps to double-check the name spelling (a computerized genealogy database is good for this, if the original entries were accurate) and learn that the name actually is *jon louis*, minus the *h*.

Enter simply *jon louis gymnastics* and you are rewarded with multiple hits about his being the 1986 NCAA all-around men's gymnastics champion. Even the terms *jon louis ncaa* or *jon louis stanford* yield ample information about his accomplishments, whether or not you knew he was a gymnast rather than a swimmer or football player.

Sometimes results do seem to hide in little pools of information along the main stream. You can learn how to dangle your search line irresistibly on top of the water and reel in those elusive tidbits about your ancestors. Heat up the frying pan, and—as we always muttered around the campfire—*bon appétit*!