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SILICON VALLEY COMPUTER GENEALOGY GROUP

PastFinder

Genealogy and military records Ten-hut!

By Richard D. Rands

Some records are so intrinsically valuable to our research that they always deserve our attention. Understanding the importance of the records we are researching often make it easier for us to get the most from them.

For example, once we realize that payment for service in the early American military was primarily the promise of land rather than cash, it becomes clear that a knowledge of our ancestors' military service may tell us how, why, and where they migrated toward the West. These military land payments were common in the Revolution, the War of 1812, various Indian Wars, and the Mexican War.

Service records from the Civil War are most useful when a pension was sought by an injured veteran or by a widow or children, because the pension file may contain many genealogical details. But even when the only information in the records pertains to a soldier's military activities, that alone enriches your family's heritage.

My grandfather Oswin Percival Rands was eligible to serve in both World Wars I and II. Unfortunately, his service records have yet to be located, and I have precious little information about how and where he served.

In general, the military does not have a sterling track record for taking good care of the myriad records in their repositories. Prior to the 20th Century, it is understandable that conditions on battlefields often led to records being destroyed or lost. A fire at the War Department in 1800 destroyed many Revolutionary War records.

But the disastrous fire in July 1973 at the National Personnel Records Center at St. Louis, Missouri, that destroyed some 16 to 18 million 20th Century official military personnel files was inexcusable. Those records are lost forever because there were no duplicate records, no indexes, and no microfilm to allow reconstruction. If your ancestor served in the U.S. Army between 1912 and 1960, or the U.S. Air Force between 1947 and 1964, you are not likely to find official records of how or where he or she served.

Yet in spite of the enormous amount of lost records, plenty of sources are available for pinpointing information that will help your family history research. A typical search project involves several steps:

1. Identify the veteran's name and age.
2. Identify the most likely military campaign or war he or she served in.
3. Determine the specific unit your veteran served in.
4. Decide the appropriate repositories or databases to search.

Alternatively, it may be interesting to go through every name in your family history file and determine if individuals were old enough or young enough to have served in any of the major wars or conflicts in U.S. history, keeping in mind that in many cases, men of a certain age would have been drafted or required to

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Outside and inside

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Military records (continued)

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enlist. See the [Wikipedia.com](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_U.S._Military_operations) entry “Timeline of U.S. Military operations” for a comprehensive list of conflicts.

Another interesting detail to keep in mind is that during the early years of the country, when the government did not have the resources to pay cash for supplies to maintain an army, farmers and other suppliers were occasionally enlisted into the military for short durations in exchange for food, horses, materiel, or shelter. Once the army had moved on, these people were discharged but would have the credentials essential for receiving an appropriate plot of land for their services, without having marched a single step.

The biggest challenge is to pinpoint the repositories you need to search. Most extant military records are housed at either the

National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Washington, D.C., and Bethesda, Maryland, or at the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) at St. Louis, Missouri.

In some cases, a military unit will have been raised and maintained as a state militia, meaning the records could be located at a state archive. Additionally, supplementary databases of military service records are created and maintained by veterans associations, lineage societies (e.g., Grand Army of the Republic [GAR], Daughters of the American Revolution [DAR], and Sons of the American Revolution [SAR]), and the National Parks Service (Civil War).

The records at NARA are catalogued by unit name, usually by regiment or by company mustered in a specific state (i.e., the 41st Regiment of the Ohio Infantry). Online indexes by veteran’s

name have been created by [Ancestry.com](https://ancestry.com), [Footnote.com](https://footnote.com), the National Parks Service, and other sites, to aid in locating the name of the soldier’s unit.

The U.S. military records housed at NARA include—

- Regular Army enlisted personnel serving from 1789 until October 1912.
- Regular Army officers serving from 1789 until 1917.
- Navy enlisted personnel serving from 1789 until 1885.
- Navy officers serving from 1789 until 1902.
- Marine Corps enlisted personnel serving from 1789 until 1904.
- Some Marine Corps officers serving from 1789 until 1895.
- Those who served in predecessor services to the Coast Guard from 1791 until 1919.

Accessing some of these records will require a visit to the NARA archive at Bethesda, Maryland.

NPRC contains most of the records for subsequent time periods plus the Air Force and Coast Guard records. The U.S. Air Force did not become a separate service until 1947. Prior to that time, it was primarily part of the Army (Army Air Corps). The U.S. Coast Guard became an official service in 1915. No online indexes are available for the NPRC records, so you must make a formal request for a service file using an online ordering procedure. Expect a lack of responsiveness using this technique.

Other sources of information about military service can be found

Galtour U. S. Army General Hospital,
Portsmouth, Va. July 23rd 1864.

Commanding Officer *C* Company,
8th Regt. Conn. Vol.

I have to inform you that *Private*
W. William Russell of your Company, died
in this hospital on *The Twenty* with day of July 1864
of *Chronic Diarrhea*

I inclose his descriptive list, with pay and clothing account, and
inventory of his effects. His Des. List has never been Recd at the
Dept.

Very respectfully, yours, &c.,
1st Lieut. V. R. C. Military Assist.

A Civil War death certificate

(Continued on page 3)



Ask the doctor

Extra information in a database?

Q I have a lot of useful information about my family history that I would love to keep in my database, but it is not specific to a given individual, and hence would not be appropriate to enter into the notes of a particular individual's record.

For example, my direct-line ancestors came from a small town in Suffolk County, England, and I have collected some interesting details about the history of the town. This information pertains to hundreds of individuals in my database. Is there a good way to handle this type of information?

Certainly.

Nothing is sacred about having every record in your database belong to an individual. You can create records for as many different uses as you wish. For example, I have a record in my database with a given name *Miscellaneous* and surname *Information* (i.e., *Miscellaneous /Information/*). Only the Notes screen for this record contains information that I consider

generic, or unrelated to a specific individual. With a bit of creativity in the name field, you can maintain such items as a running record of GEDCOM downloads, research projects, to-do lists, files, films searched, and so on. You can have an Information record for every significant place in your family history containing historical facts and links to photos.

I have another set of records that I label as Template records. When I create many citations linked to a particular type of source document that occurs often in my database, I always enter the text of the specific item in each citation entry.

To simplify and reduce the amount of typing, I create a template of the source record's format in the Notes page of a template record with the individual's details left blank. Each time I need to enter the text of the citation, I open the corresponding template record, copy the template from the Notes page, and paste it into the text page of the citation. Then all I need to do is fill in the blanks.

Saves a lot of time! 

Military records *(continued)*

(Continued from page 2)

in the Family History Library Catalog, draft registration cards, the Special Schedule of Union Veterans of the 1890 Federal Census, pension files, bounty land warrants, cemeteries, newspapers, and the Compiled Service Records.

The Compiled Service Record collection results from a monumental project to extract individual details for every soldier who fought during the early history of the United States. In those days, virtually all military records were kept at the company or regimental level.

In 1894, a large staff of military personnel began poring over millions of records, including muster records, pay rolls, battle histories, discharge certificates, death certificates, and so on,

recording every soldier's name and unit on note cards. The cards then were sorted by unit name and soldier's name. Each soldier's collection of cards was saved in a separate envelope that may contain a single card or even dozens of cards.

Examining the results in chronological order amounts to an alternative service record for each soldier, albeit one with very little genealogical detail. Compiled Service Records are indexed by soldier's name at Ancestry.com and can be accessed at NARA.

Newspapers, especially for the modern wars, can be a great source of a soldier's activities. Even though I have little detail about my grandfather's service history, a reference during WWII in his hometown newspaper mentioned

that he had been assigned to an Air Force base in Chico, California—something that no one in the family had ever been aware of. Digging through the history of the base gives us a general idea of what he was doing there. Fortunately, this type of information was commonplace for the local newspapers of the time.

Finally, the discovery of a military pension file will be a veritable gold mine. Such a file is often thick with affidavits, medical reports, lists of descendents and their birth dates, proof of marriage, details of service activities, and a record of residences.

I recommend that researchers always make a concerted effort to find and examine a pension file for every veteran ancestor. 

A search for descendants (Part 2)

By Allin Kingsbury

This series is about compiling a genealogy of all of the descendants of one of your ancestors. Through this process, you can find others who are actively working on descendants of these ancestors.

Family trees and census records may introduce a list of new names to be searched. If you skip around rather than staying focused on one family line, you might forget some searches, unless you have a research to-do list.

I worked on one family at a time and then did the same for the children in that family in order of birth until I could go no further. Then I went back one generation and started on the next child until all the children in the family were completed. Even with an orderly sequence like this, I found that I needed to check the index of individuals for additional information. I paid particular attention to individuals who had no spouse or children, before concluding it was indeed the case for them.

It is also important to make notes of information you find. You should update your genealogy database by adding new information as you find it. Focus on sources that you have not found. For example, I found the family of William Trick in the 1900, 1910, and 1930 censuses, but not in the 1920 census. I searched for his spouse and children in the 1920 census but found nothing. Eventually, a first-name search of the county where he lived yielded a mis-transcribed *William Crick* whose wife and children matched entries in earlier censuses.

By noting what you search and what you find, you can avoid wasted time with unnecessary

duplication. As you come back to previously incomplete searches, you may find, as I have, that new searches are successful. Your earlier notes will help you remember what you have done and not done.

As you find families, the number of searches remaining may grow faster than the searches completed. Keeping your to-do list on your computer will help you keep track of information as new leads are discovered; also, you can remove completed items. The list never goes away, because available information changes over time.

Finding the right one

Another strategy is to select data about a person based on proximity. Sometimes you will notice the record of an individual who appears to marry into the family before the next census. If the age, birth information, full name, and other information match what you know of the person who married your ancestor, it may well be the same person. However, remember that several individuals with the same name may live nearby. Separate the individuals until you are sure you have identified the correct one. This may require finding each of the individuals in a later census or gathering more information from other sources.

I have had to remove several individuals from my database because I had collected data on the wrong person. As I gathered more information, I found discrepancies indicating mixed identification.

Summary

In my family, I have found hundreds of living descendants and have contacted some of them. Gathering the information can be tedious, but I have encountered

fewer brick walls in finding descendants than in finding ancestors. Finding descendants, you often start with the name of a child, while tracing ancestors may involve looking for a birth record with unknown parents at an unknown place.

I started with ancestors who were all in the United States by 1830 and whose children were already known and listed in the 1850 census where they could easily be identified. I am sure that these factors made my project easier than it would be for those with recent immigrants or with non-English-speaking ancestors.



This distant relative, a Pennsylvania physician, showed up in a Web search.

I am slowly reaching the point of diminishing returns, where the searches are taking longer and key information cannot be found. I look forward to the release of the 1940 census, which probably will add more individuals to my database. It also might uncover an error or two in the data I have gathered and interpreted.

I have found many living individuals, including many second-, third-, fourth-, and fifth-cousins. When contacted, some were not interested, some were helpful, and some wanted to help but did not have much information. I found all of them interesting, and am pleased with the results of my project.

Grandma Sibyl becomes an author – finally

By Janet Brigham Rands

Grandma Sibyl — my mother’s mother — was many things: a midwife, a single parent, a social worker, a nurse, an activist, a Daughter of the Utah Pioneers, and most important to me, a grandma.

She taught me how to spell my given name (J-A-N-E-T, one letter for each finger of my hand) and at bedtime told my sister and me the stories of her ancestors. She had many stories; in the dark of our bedroom, we asked for the stories over and over.

She was born in 1886 and died when I was 9 years old, but I knew her well. Or I thought I did. In 2002, her oldest daughter, my Aunt Mary, died at age 89. In Mary’s basement were several boxes of family papers that Mary’s daughters graciously gave me. The papers included dozens of Sibyl’s letters, and notebooks in which Sibyl jotted ideas in her childhood.

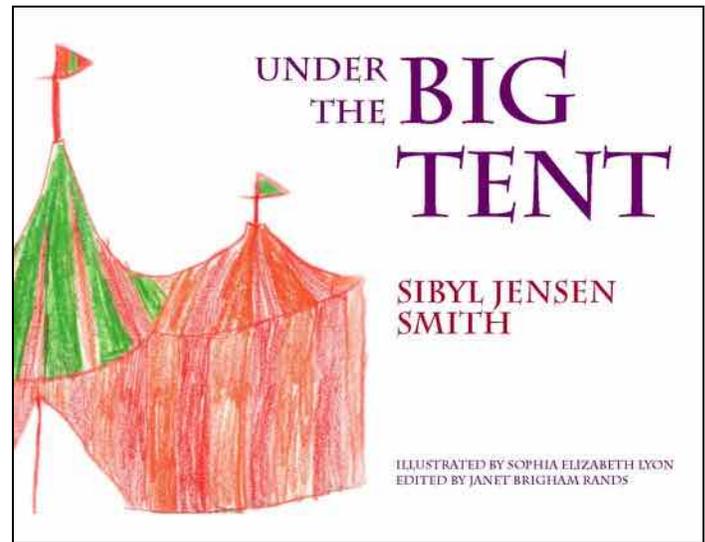
Reading Sibyl’s letters taught me that she had secretly wanted to be an author. Instead, she raised six children through challenging times. She bartered her skills to keep food on the table. Her vacations involved visiting relatives along the corridor from north Idaho, through Utah, and down to Southern California. She loved visiting relatives.

I wanted to do right by Sibyl’s papers. I worked through them slowly, picking out the things that made me laugh out loud or cry. She had an unerring and pointed eye for detail and an ear for dialogue. The longest story told of Sibyl and her younger sisters sneaking out early one morning to watch a circus train pass by on its way to nearby Logan, Utah.

This spring, I asked my oldest step-granddaughter, nine-year-old Sophie, to illustrate the story. I sent her an artist pad, pencils, a dozen or so illustrations from the Web, and a self-addressed postage-paid Priority Mail envelope. Sophie got to work.

Sibyl’s story existed in one handwritten version, never edited after she wrote it in her adolescence. I edited Sibyl’s story lightly and loaded the text into a Microsoft Publisher file configured for the size of the book. (MS Word or Adobe InDesign also would have worked.) I scanned and inserted Sophie’s drawings and some public-domain illustrations, and got permission from the Logan Library to include circus parade photos of the period from their collection.

I included an Afterword page with an explanation of the history of Sibyl’s story, and a studio portrait of



The front cover of Grandma Sibyl’s book, based on a short story she wrote as an adolescent.

Sibyl when she was age five, with a baby sister, taken six years before the circus came

I spoke with the printer (MyPublisher.com) to learn that I needed to upload the pages as 300-dpi JPG files. Online printers usually print photo books uploaded into preset templates, but some print full-page JPG files. I turned the MS Publisher files into high-resolution Adobe Acrobat files, then converted the Acrobat files to JPG files. I did each step probably a dozen times before I was satisfied. Even so, a problem lurked. The printing increased the contrast of the illustrations, which made Sophie’s drawings look visibly smudgy.

When I asked the printer for an adjustment, a customer service representative offered to reprint and ship the books at no cost if I wanted to modify the pages. I used Photoshop Elements to whiten all the edges of Sophie’s drawings. I uploaded again.

The reprinted books were perfect. I sent copies to children, grandchildren, aunts and uncles, cousins, my sister, my niece, my grand-niece — and, of course, to Sophie and her family.

My grand-niece Audrey (Sibyl’s second-great-granddaughter) got to open one present early, and chose the book. I’m told she often turns to the portrait of Sibyl, taken when Sibyl was Audrey’s age.

Once again, Grandma Sibyl visited her relatives for Christmas. 

Who do we think we are?

SVCGG: A diverse group, many interests

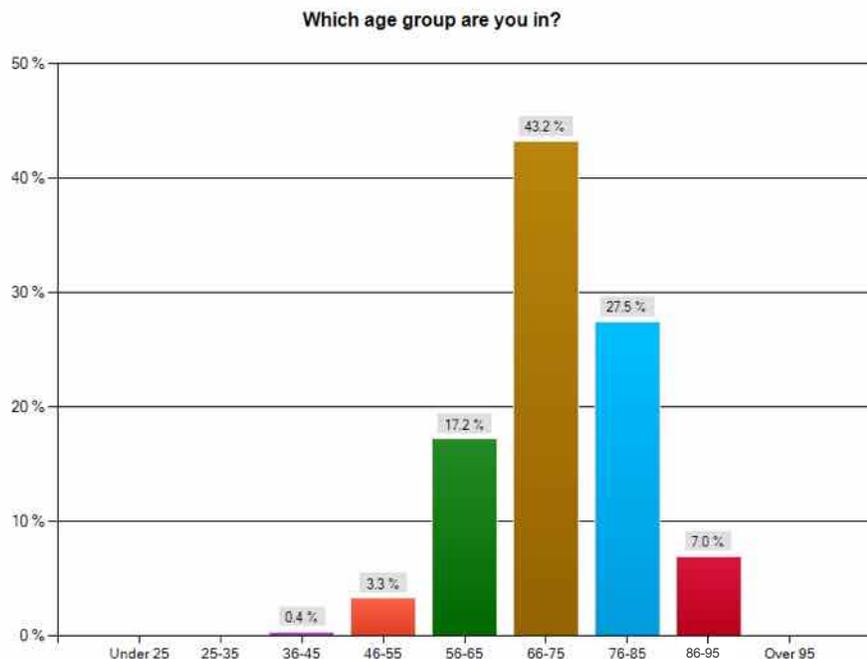


Figure 1. Members of SVCGG are mostly between ages 55 and 85, with the largest group between 66 and 75.

Every few years, the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group takes its pulse. We ask not only how we're doing, but who we are and what we like.

Our last survey of SVCGG members was in 2005. The 2010 survey shows that our research interests and needs are evolving. About 46% of SVCGG members responded to the survey. They comprised about two-thirds of all respondents. These results are about members.

Who are we?

We are not youngsters. Figure 1 (at left) shows that most of our responding members are between 56 and 85 years old, with the bulk between 66 and 75. Although about the same percent of responding members are in the 66–75 age range both in 2005 and 2010, the age of members of the group has decreased since 2005, with more now in the 56–65 age range than in 2005, and fewer in the 76–85 age range than in 2005. This also could be impacted by members' work, health, and family situations.

Our religious backgrounds and current practices are primarily Protestant, Latter-day Saint (LDS, or Mormon), or Catholic. Although the group meets in an LDS chapel near an LDS Family History Center, only about one-third of SVCGG members indicate that they are LDS. As in 2005, the group continues to include Jewish and Buddhist members, as well as those with no religious preference.

What software do we use?

A comparison of the 2005 and 2010 responses shows a definite shift in software usage (Figure 2). Personal Ancestral File (PAF)

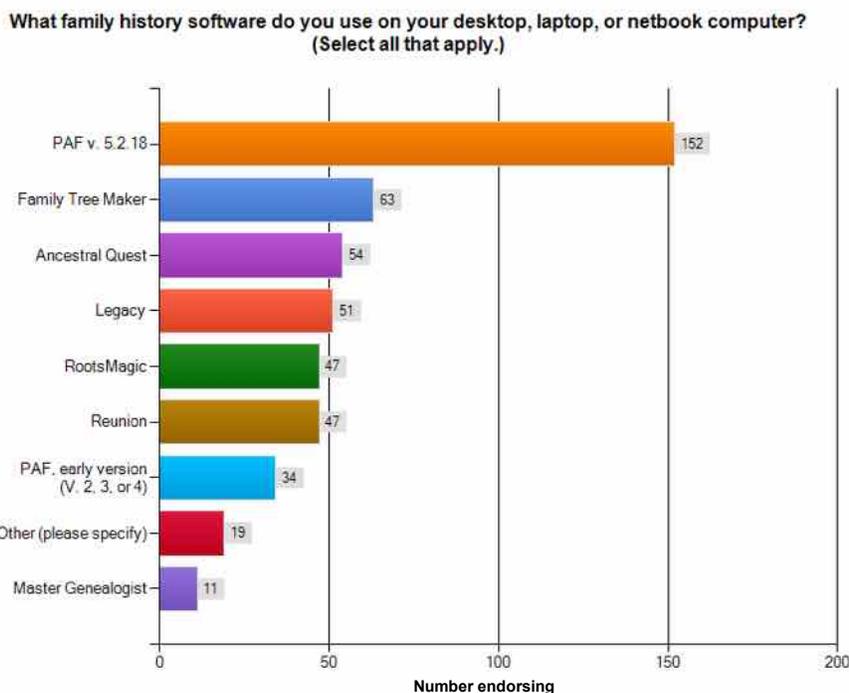


Figure 2. Members of SVCGG use a variety of genealogy database software packages. Some members use multiple programs.

remains the most commonly used genealogy database software—perhaps reflecting the group’s origin as a PAF user group—but other usage has shifted. In 2005, only a handful (literally, five respondents) reported using Reunion Macintosh software. Now, Reunion is as frequently used by our members as RootsMagic, probably because of SVCGG’s excellent classes on Reunion and Macintosh. As in 2005, four popular commercial PC database software packages are in a dead heat among our members.

What gadgets do we use?

We use scanners, broadband, flash drives, digital cameras, DVDs, and peripherals. What would most of us like to try that we currently don’t have? Digital cameras, external drives digital photo frames, mobile devices, and iPads.

What interests us?

We continue to express interest in North America and British Isles research, learning new skills, exploring genealogy on the Internet, and documenting sources. We would like to learn to use a variety of records for research (Figure 3).

How do we participate?

Fully one-third of our dues-paying members live outside the Bay Area of northern California and thus never have attended one of the group’s monthly meetings. Of those who do attend, two-thirds are able to attend only three or fewer of the eleven SVCGG meetings and seminars each year (Figure 4).

Those who don’t come to meetings do read the newsletter—more than half of members say they read it completely every month. 

Please indicate whether you are interested in classes on the following types of records:

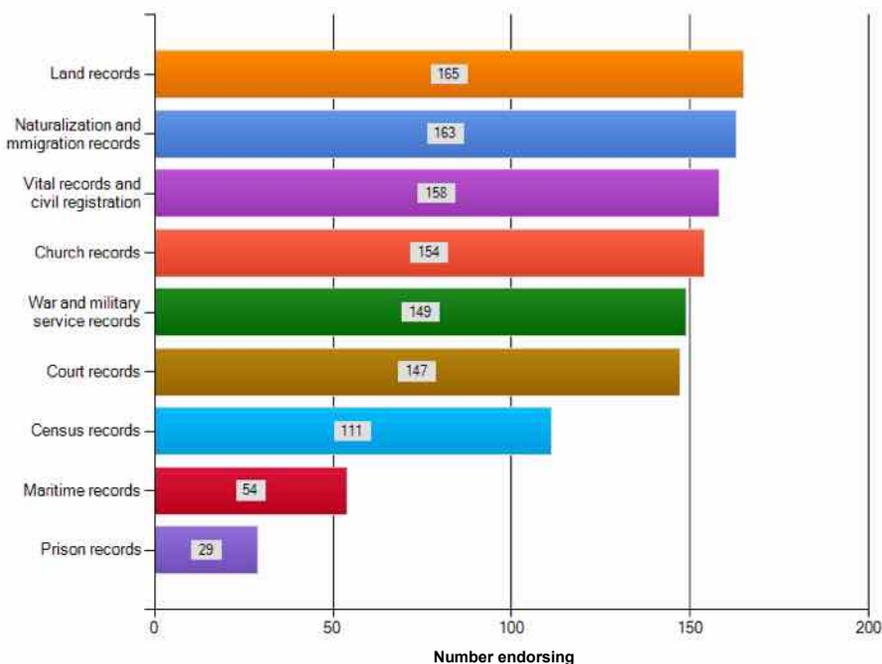


Figure 3. SVCGG offers classes on many types of records. This ranks the records that our members would like to learn more about.

I do not attend meetings because-- (select all that apply)

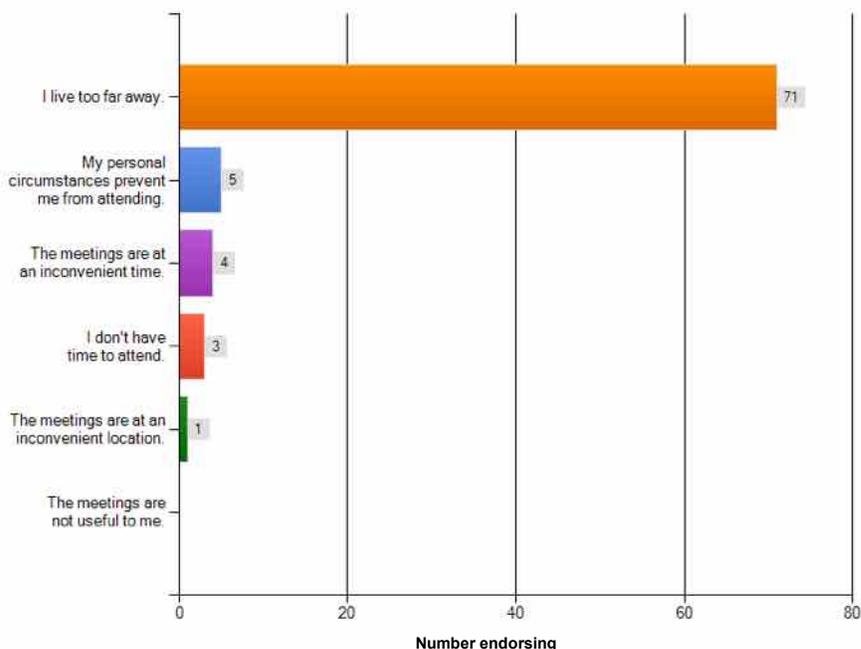
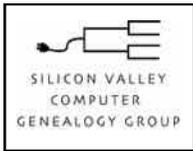


Figure 4. SVCGG members who live in the Bay Area do not necessarily attend the meetings. None indicated that meetings weren’t useful to them.



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Electronic contribution of articles is welcome. The editors reserve the right to accept, reject, and edit articles.

Upcoming SVCGG meetings, events

The group meets monthly except December, on the second Saturday of the month from 9 to 11 a.m. at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 875 Quince Ave., Santa Clara, California (see map at right).

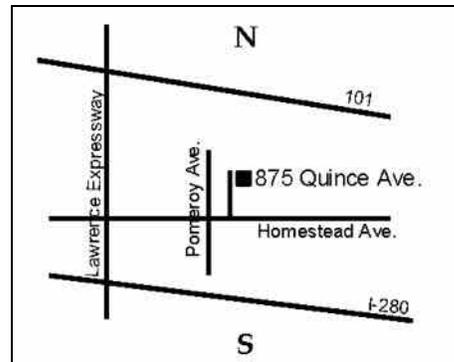
See the Meetings section of our website (www.svcgg.org) for any last-minute changes in the class lineup each month.

Classes for 8 January 2011

- What's new (a lot!) in the December 2011 release of FamilySearch.org
- RootsMagic (part of a new series)
- Reunion for the Mac
- Getting started with Reunion
- Beginning genealogy, questions and answers

Classes for 12 February 2011

- Customizing your database
- Research in Canada
- RootsMagic (series)
- Reunion for the Mac
- Getting started with Reunion
- Help for Beginners 



See www.svcgg.org/directions.html

About the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group

SVCGG is the former Silicon Valley PAF Users Group, a nonprofit group of some 600 genealogy enthusiasts. The group is based in Silicon Valley in the Bay Area of northern California, but members live all over the world.

PastFinder is the official publication of the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group. Published monthly except December, *PastFinder* is distributed at meetings to

members in attendance and mailed to others after the meetings. Members can receive the newsletter by e-mail containing a download link.

SVCGG offers research tools and materials through its Web site, www.svcgg.org.

Membership dues are US\$15 per household per year, US\$20 for Canada, and US\$25 for other international locations. 