PastFinder

Measure twice, cut once

By Richard Rands

A wise adage for carpenters to help avoid costly mistakes is also a great metaphor for very different fields, and it certainly works for genealogy research: Measure twice, cut once.

We should always be prepared for research opportunities, so that we can learn all we can while avoiding mistakes that will take us in the wrong direction.

Another way that I like to look at the metaphor is that having good skills and tools, plus the ability to use them effectively, will always save a lot of time and resources in the long run.

In my classes, I often use the metaphor of a toolbox full of skills and equipment that can be used to assist us with our research. None of us has an unlimited amount of time and funds to devote to our work, so it is to our advantage to develop good skills and to have on hand a collection of tools to supplement how we collect and manage the information we uncover.

As a professional, my genealogy toolbox goes with me virtually everywhere I go. You can think of me like those pickup truck drivers who always have their huge toolbox spanning the width of their truck bed going every place they go. If you were to dump my ever-present backpack upside down, you might be surprised to see how prepared I am to jump into research mode at the slightest opportunity.

And when Janet and I travel, the weight of our luggage is mostly from additional equipment that might be helpful as we watch for the slightest chance of a genealogy moment.

But not all carpenters carry a full box of tools at all times. Nor would I expect most genealogy searchers to be fully equipped everywhere they go. By necessity, we use a wide range of different size toolboxes: a small one for everyday use for chance encounters, a slightly larger one for trips to the local research center, a moderate size toolbox for visits to family members, a bigger one for family reunions, and a good sized one for visits to the Family History Library in Salt Lake City or another library important to our work. We might add special items to your toolbox for a trip to a cemetery, or to your ancestral home.

Measuring once

So what should a genealogy searcher's toolbox contain? For sure, today's cell phone technology will play a major role in equipping us for most unexpected discoveries by giving us the ability to digitally record photos, documents, objects, and sources, and to communicate with others who are helping with research.

An absolute necessity is a pocket-sized means for making notes, in writing, orally, or electronically. A smartphone can be used to record details of a chance encounter with a newfound cousin, or a

Measure twice (continued)

small spiral-bound notebook can be used to exchange phone numbers or email addresses. A pencil and eraser are great to have with you at all times.

Many devices support genealogy apps that allow you to carry with you either all of your genealogy database or a significant portion of it. Above all, you should develop the skills to use your electronic devices and the apps on it for collecting family history details. And be diligent in keeping the devices charged.

For circumstances when you fully expect to be in a research mode, such as a Family History Center, library, or archive, you will want to have additional tools in your box. Perhaps you can afford to have a laptop or tablet computer loaded with genealogy software and your research log.

You'll need to think about how to access to the Internet wherever you go so that you can enhance the scope of your research by using the web, and especially if your database is in the cloud. If a laptop or tablet computer is not feasible, have some blank pedigree and family group charts, a spiral-bound notebook, and other favorite worksheets.

I recommend a small digital camera that gives you a higher resolution (dpi) than your cell phone camera. Other items include these:

- Magnifying glass or reading glasses
- Paper clips
- Stuck-on-Sources pads (Post-It notes for source recording, available from SVCGG.org)
- Flashlight (for poorly lit archives)
- Flash drives or thumb drives
- Power plug adaptors (when outside the United States)
- A small extension cord with multiple outlets
- Pencil sharpener, or spare lead for a mechanical pencil, and a good eraser.

Make certain you have with you the appropriate library cards, reader cards, and sufficient identification to apply for additional cards. Have a small stash of local coins to feed the copy machines. I carry a small calculator to check my date calculations. Keep in mind and prepare for the fact that some archives and libraries prohibit the use of items such as ink pens, blank paper, and even some electronic equipment, or at least the cases they are carried in. I cannot tell you how many times I have had to take my backpack back down to a locker room in the basement of an archive and only bring back a pencil and my bare computer.

I suggest you always have with you a personal telephone directory with telephone numbers and email addresses for key people in your family in case you need to contact them on the spot to ask questions about your discoveries. More serious adventures may allow adding a portable scanner; a camera tripod, a digital voice recorder; a cable to connect a camera, scanner, voice recorder, and other equipment to a computer; and a power adaptor for your car or an airliner.

If you are traveling far, it is critical to check the open hours and holiday schedule for any repositories you plan to visit. It is also wise to determine if you need to reserve microfilm readers or computer work space ahead of time.

It is not uncommon for public libraries to have every single power outlet occupied by students doing homework, or by people accessing the library's free wireless service. Just last week Janet and I found ourselves in a public library where every available power outlet was occupied, with people standing around waiting for one to become available.

We have a portable battery pack for our small devices (phone, tablet computer), but not for laptops. Keep this in mind if you are thinking of acquiring another laptop. A device with batteries lasting at least 8 to 10 hours is helpful on a research excursion, or at a family reunion or other visit with relatives.

Also, check ahead of time to make sure you will have Internet access should you need it. Many libraries have free wifi, but you may need a password. If you do not have your own source of wifi connectivity

(such as a wifi or mifi card), do a web search for wifi hotspots ahead of time. Many restaurants (Starbucks, for example) have free wifi. Check listings ahead of time.

You will have peace of mind on your research excursions if you develop and make use of a checklist. List items in ascending order by the seriousness of a particular type of trip. It is so exasperating to find yourself limited in your research in a far-off place, at closing time, because you are missing a simple inexpensive item.

I recall quite vividly a time some years ago when telephone modems were the only way to connect to the Internet. Janet and I were making our way through the Loire Valley in France, and the chateau we were staying at still had the old-fashioned French telephone connection in the rooms. We lost nearly a whole day searching for an electronics store that had an adaptor for the old connectors to our modern connectors; we bought the only one they had left, which was tucked away in a drawer.

You cannot foresee every circumstance, but if you measure twice, you will be happier cutters.

Measuring twice

When a craftsperson loads up a toolbox before heading for a job, there has usually been a prior visit to check out the requirements of the project and to make an estimate. As you head to a research site for the first time, or if it has been some years since you were last there, you don't have the luxury of knowing exactly what to expect. Sometimes you will not even be able to predict where you might eventually end up because you are advised to visit a different repository by someone while you are there. So how does one prepare ahead for the unexpected? Here are some suggestions beyond what has already been mentioned.

1. Seek out and talk to others who have done research at that repository or in that geographical area.

2. Keep a journal of previous experiences taking note of unexpected circumstances so you can prepare for them in the future. Don't let a mistake catch you unprepared twice.

3. Search the Internet for local societies and use

their contacts to give advice for being prepared.

4. Search your genealogy database and list everyone who has any connection with the area you plan to research.

5. Check the hours and holidays for the places you plan to research.

6. Identify retail outlets for businesses close to your hotel or work site where you might need to purchase forgotten items, or items that have broken or have been used up, such as batteries, stationary, cables, etc.

7. Bring a sturdy clear plastic bag for carrying items into research rooms that prohibit certain equipment.

8. Make sure you have all your cables and power adaptors.

9. Bring a sufficient supply of medications, snacks (in my case, it's chocolate!), and comfortable shoes and clothing.

What's in *your* research toolbox?

Share your favorite 'toolbox' tips with *Past-Finder* readers. What do you do to be a prepared genealogy searcher? When you head out the door, whether it's to a Family History Center or to Denmark or South Africa, what do you do to be sure you will be ready to capture the information you need?

Email siliconvalleygroup@earthlink.net with your suggestions, and we'll share your ideas on our website and in the newsletter.

How I found it
Searching around the edges

By Richard Rands

I'm fond of calling the kind of research we sometimes need to do "brute force genealogy" because it requires a lot of creative problem solving and plain old grunt work to get through lots of records.

This month's column is about a variation of brute force research that I call "searching around the edges," because it involves attacking the problem from a variety of angles using peripheral clues that by themselves have failed to help resolve the problem, eliminating unlikely individuals, and then assembling a preponderance of evidence that what you have uncovered makes sense.

This case involves tracing the descendants of a large family named Roberts in Wake County, North Carolina, with children born between about 1856 and 1880. My overall objective was to locate living descendants of the family's parents in hopes of finding family documents.

As I worked down the list of known children, I found mostly dead ends or potential descendants who failed to respond to my inquiries. I did find a daughter named Patti Roberts, listed in the 1880 U.S. Census for Raleigh City, Wake County, North Carolina, at age eight. Just above Patti's entry in the census is that of a brother named Charles who was also eight years old. There is a temptation to conclude they were twins, but Charles appeared with his parents in the 1900 census as 26 years old, suggesting that he might have been two years younger than Patti.

Furthermore, the parents and other siblings apparently had birth dates a few years off from those listed in the 1880 census, making it likely that the informant for the 1880 census details was not all that knowledgeable. The only consistent details gathered from previous research about the family was that the father was a farm laborer, and that as the children grew older, they worked in cotton mills in and around Wake and Durham counties as carders, cutters, burners, and winders.

Without an 1890 census, a child who was eight years old in 1880, would not appear in a census until he or she was 28, well after a possible marriage age. So finding Patti Roberts in 1900 was not likely. A search for all the females named Patti born between 1870 and 1874 in North Carolina and living in Wake or Chatham county gave me close to 200 hits, the most likely of which could be eliminated by other criteria. Next I approached the problem from the point of view that some logical hits could occur in records where the spouse or the mother was named Patti.

I started in Ancestry.com and ran a search in birth, marriage, and death records for anyone (both name fields blank) born in North Carolina between 1870 and 1874 whose spouse was Patti, or whose mother was Patti. I even used the wildcard approach with Patt* to pick up variations in the spelling. The result was either zero hits or far too many to be practical to evaluate.

Experience has taught me that FamilySearch.org has been making significant strides in accumulating a searchable record collection for individual states, making it a good idea to try the same approach as above at the FamilySearch Discover Your Family History website. In fact, it appears that the search engine at FamilySearch.org has been fine-tuned to make searches for parents and spouses more effective by including a Search by Relationship feature on their search page.

Census image for Patti in the 1900 U.S. Census (image: Ancestry.com).

And the take-home message is . . .

So now that you know "how I found it," how can you "find it" too? The path starts with "if at first…" and ends with "…try, try again." To break that down into some applicable steps, try this approach:

1. Find a variety of angles from which to attack the problem.

2. Look for peripheral clues that help you resolve the problem.

3. Don't give in to the temptation to draw conclusions without evidence.

4. Evaluate the quality of the information.

5. Learn about the area and the history, so that you'll recognize common occupations and circumstances.

6. Use logic and think reasonably: Don't stretch possibilities too far, but be open to alternative interpretations.

7. Start with basic information, such as birth, marriage, death, and census records.

8. Look for alternative spellings and names.

Searching for a spouse named Patti, without regard to the specific collection, turned up four hits, none of which made sense. The same search for Patti as a parent turned up more than 16,000 hits, with nothing interesting among the first several pages. The fact that all the hits were from census records told me that the search engine was not reaching into the collections specific to North Carolina.

I next narrowed my search to the Browse by Location feature, with 16 collections specific to North Carolina, some of which have been indexed for searching by name. There I started with a search for a marriage in the North Carolina Marriages, 1759-1979, containing more than 2 million records.

Choosing to search for a marriage first was logical because I would be able to include Patti's maiden name *Roberts* in the surname field. I started with a search for Patti Roberts born in North Carolina between 1870 and 1874. No hits.

I searched for a Patti Roberts married between 1888 and 1900 on the assumption that she could have married as early as 16 years old and before 1900, or else she would still be a Roberts in the 1900 census and would have shown up in previous searches. Still no hits.

Just as in the Ancestry.com search above, I tossed in the wildcard entry *Patt** to cover spelling variations. That did the trick, because a single hit showed up with a marriage record for a Pattie Roberts on 26 April 1891 at House Creek Township, Wake County, North Carolina, to George C. Ray. Patti's birth was listed as occurring in 1872 in Wake County.

House Creek was listed in several of Patti's siblings' records. This was very good evidence, but not quite a preponderance. Now that I had a candidate for Patti's spouse, George C., born about 1869, I was able to look in the 1900 census. However, the search for George Ray turned up nothing useful in a birth range of 1867 to 1871.

Next, I looked for Patti Ray, born between 1870 and 1874. That gave me 15 hits, with the first one in Durham County. A look at the census record itself explained why George and Patti's entry had been elusive. George's age was off by five years in the marriage record, and in the census they were not listed as husband and wife, but as fellow boarders in the home of a separate family of fellow cotton mill workers, along with their three-year-old son, Charles.

Following this family for two more census decades showed they moved back to the same part of Wake County where they had met and where the remainder of Patti's family had lived. They continued to work in cotton mills, providing additional evidence to show that the correct family had been uncovered.

Sadly, their entry in the 1910 census indicated that Patti had borne five children with only one still alive. Finding descendants of their two children listed in the 1920 U.S. Census so far has eluded me.

Q **I've inherited a long, rectangular box of old family group sheets and pedigree charts from an older relative. The information is new to me, about family members I haven't researched before. I'm used to doing my own research, so incorporating this information will be a new challenge. Should I just enter the information into my database and start trying to verify it?**

We recommend verifying first before incorporating the information into your master database. You can build a smaller database as you verify the information a name and a generation at a time. Once you create and document that database, you can merge it into your master database and attach relevant files.

The reason for doing it this way is that it will help avoid the problem of entering undocumented information into your database and moving on to other lines of research before verifying that the information is correct. This is how a considerable amount of junk genealogy is generated—people are excited to have new information and then get distracted and forget to go through the records carefully. Sometimes these incorporated errors result in years of wasted work on spurious lines and links.

Q **In an old box of family records I chanced upon a hand-drawn pedigree chart of my direct-line ancestors. When I began to examine it, I found a great-great-grandfather who was 73 years old when his son was born. I suppose it is possible, but it sure seems like a generation is missing. What is the best way to check out this problem?**

Before you dig into the records, you should go through each generation, checking to make sure there has not been a transposed digit in the birth years of generations before and after the apparent missing generation. Your 73-year-old ancestor may be listed as born when his father was 13, rather than the correct age of 23 or 31. This process is the same whether the child is a son or a daughter.

If every other date seems reasonable, then you need to chose which end of the problem to attack first, finding sources for the child's actual parent, or finding sources for the grandparent's actual child. Keep in mind that the individual in the missing generation may have the same given name as individuals before or after, making it difficult to separate him or her from the surrounding generations. Focus on finding

the names of both the father and the mother.

The choice of which end to start with first will depend on the time period and the availability of record collections to check. Starting with the child makes sense because his or her birth records will be more recent and more likely to be available. Remember that the search engines for both FamilySearch.org and Ancestry.com provide a feature to allow searching records by parents' names.

If you can locate a birth record that includes the parents' names, you may be able to settle the question immediately by comparing names with those on your pedigree chart. However, a birth record rarely notes the ages of the parents, so you may still need to continue to work backward in time to verify that the parents on the birth record are the same as on the pedigree chart. Pay close attention to subtle details such as middle names or initials, birth places, or occupations.

Another good source to check is a census record, or even better, a succession of census records, where the ages of the parents and the children are usually listed. The relationship to the head of household may clarify the problem by showing that the child was a grandchild, a niece or nephew, or even adopted.

If the problem has not yet been resolved, then approach the problem from the other direction. Look for a birth record with the names of the older generation as parents, and make the same analysis looking for subtle differences in the details.

After that process, the next step is to look for probate records for the older generation's parents. An elderly father leaving his estate to family members may have gone to great lengths to take care of very young children, setting up guardians and trusts. When children are not mentioned in a will, it usually is because they already are adults and the father has given them their inheritance before he died. The will also could mention the relationships of heirs, which could clear up the issue.

If you have had to rely on church registers, watch for couples with identical names having children in the same place and time period. Plot the time spread between christenings to verify that the wrong parents have not been linked to your ancestry.

Consider widening the scope of your search, looking in military pension files, land records, newspapers, or obituaries where you might find the elusive clue to put the issue to rest.

CensusTools.com: Indispensible census tools

By Patricia Burrow

Finding my great-grandmother on the 1880 U.S. Census in the home of *her* grandparents was a big breakthrough for a family line I had very little information on. I love having access to the census data. And I especially like it that the census images are mostly available online, indexed and searchable.

What treasures we find: Grandpa had *another* wife? How did that family get all the way to Oregon? How did Aunt Nellie age only five years with each decade? Lots of fun details emerge that begin to shape our family's history. We might never have those details without the census records.

You have heard it before—start with yourself and work backward, tracing your tree as it branches. For as long as I have been researching, I have been transcribing each census image I find with my family on it. For one thing, it puts the information into a more readable format. For another, it makes me think about each piece of data as I transcribe it. Does it make sense with what I already know? Are there clues as to where I should look next? It's definitely a productive exercise.

Segment of the 1940 U. S. Census spreadsheet available for free download from CensusTools.com.

Early on, I found a website, CensusTools.com, that had *all* of the census forms, from 1790 to 1930 (now 1940), as Excel spreadsheets. Wow! All I had to do was type in the data, save, and print. It was something I actually could use that the non-genealogists in the family could read. Many times I have caught them reading the transcribed versions and passing over the images of the originals.

The genealogist who was so generous in developing the spreadsheets and putting them online for others to use is Gary Minder of Poulsbo, Washington. He has been researching his family history for 40 years, starting as a teenager in Florida. One day he picked up a book on researching family history to read on a summer trip to Toledo, Ohio, to visit grandparents. During his visit, his grandparents took him to the library and the county courthouse, and he was forever hooked.

"Six of my great-grandparents immigrated from Switzerland or Germany in the late 19th century," he explained, "but I eventually discovered that my pater-

nal grandmother was a Mayflower descendant. So over the years her lines have provided me endless challenges and avenues for new research."

Gary joined the US Navy in 1984. His first tour of duty was in Naples, Italy. (How bad is that?) Taking advantage of some time off, he took a road trip vacation that included the small village in Switzerland where his Minder ancestors had lived for several generations. Walking in the footsteps of your ancestors is such an awesome experience.

Gary loved computers and was an early adopter of various family history software programs. He found them to be a great help in recording events, but they seemed to do a terrible job of recording and formatting census data. He was familiar with Mircosoft Excel so took a stab at creating a spreadsheet that would duplicate original census forms. It was a natural fit. That was 2000.

He quickly developed a set of spreadsheets for the 1790 through 1920 U.S. censuses and figured that other researchers might benefit from them. He posted a notice on a few genealogy email lists and was flooded with requests. He was quickly emailing dozens and hundreds of copies and on a few days hit Yahoo and Hotmail account limits for outgoing emails.

Over the years, he says, he was helped countless times with genealogy questions by strangers willing to share their knowledge, so was happy to be paying back with his spreadsheets. Responding to email was taking up a lot of time, so he created a website that eventually became CensusTools.

He continued to create new spreadsheets such as the Tracker, state census records, and some international sheets. Today his website has more than 40 spreadsheets for census, cemetery, and ship manifest records.

Gary continues his research and currently splits his time between his European ancestors and a particularly frustrating brick wall he has been trying to knock down for many years. He taught himself enough about reading old German script to be able to research origi-

CensusTools.com *(Continued)*

nal Swiss and German church records, which he is enjoying.

Gary explains: "My brick wall involves a third-great-grandmother, Margaret Fenno Rathbun, who died in 1906. Her obituary states she was a granddaughter of Revolutionary War heroine Molly Pitcher.

"I have read enough about Molly Pitcher to know the obituary claim can't be true. My third-great-grandmother's father was Captain Moses Fenno, who was an early settler near Buffalo [New York] and who died when the British burned Buffalo in December 1813.

"His parentage is my brick wall. There was a Fenno family in Milton, Massachusetts, and there was a Moses Fenno born to that family in 1773. That Moses's mother was named Mary Pitcher. The coincidence was startling.

"My Margaret was only five when her father died and was living near Buffalo. If her father's family was living in Massachusetts, it's possible Margaret never knew them. She moved to northwest Ohio after marrying, and it's certainly possible all she ever knew of her paternal grandmother was her name.

"It's not hard to see how a family myth could have evolved. Or it could just be a coincidence. I'll keep chipping away at the brick wall, and hopefully I'll eventually find a definitive link to the Milton, Massachusetts, Fenno family, or proof that my Moses Fenno's family came from somewhere else."

For 10 years Gary operated CensusTools using a free download format as his way to pay back the genealogy community he so enjoyed. The time commitment has necessitated that he offer the spreadsheets as CDs rather than downloads.

For $15 he will send all 40 spreadsheets, which can be used with Excel (PC or Mac), including PDFs for those who want high-quality extraction sheets. For details, go to CensusTools.com. (The new 1940 Census form can be downloaded for free at this time.)

Upcoming meetings

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). The group is not affiliated with any church.

8 September 2012, 9–11 A.M.
- Finding your star-spangled War of 1812 ancestors (Janet Brigham)
- Customizing your database (Richard Rands)
- Reunion 10 for Mac (Pat Burrow)
- Mac Reunion basics (Deb Callan)
- Getting started in genealogy (Carleen Foster)

13 October 2012, 9–11 A.M.
- Rooting around in RootsMagic 5 (Janet Brigham)
- Converting a brick wall to stepping stones (Richard Rands)
- Reunion 10 for Mac (Pat Burrow)
- Mac Reunion basics (Pat Solomon)
- Getting started in genealogy

Meeting site has ample free off-street parking, with a wheelchair-accessible entrance near the front of the building.

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.
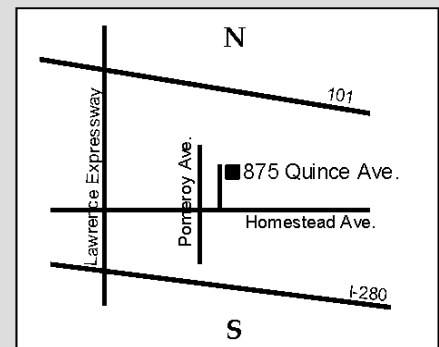
SVCGG offers classes, seminars, and publications to help family historians improve their skills in using technology for genealogy research.

PastFinder, the official publication of the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group, is published monthly except December. *PastFinder* is distributed at meetings to members and mailed to others after the meetings. Members can receive the newsletter electronically by emailed download link.