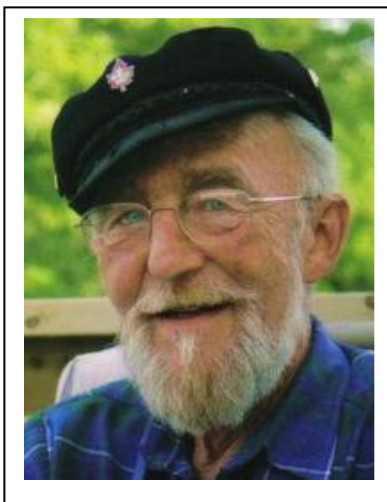


The Family Historian

Patrick Wohler

Column #21



What Am I Looking For?

I recently had a call and a very pleasant meeting with reader Janine de Salaberry who was temporarily stymied in her research of Manitoba relations. The situation highlighted the importance of asking the right research questions.

Professional researchers sometimes spend a lot of time determining the questions that they should be looking for answers to. “I want to know everything about Great-Grandma Mason” is not really helpful unless she is available, in good shape, and likely to tell you the truth. You might even be lucky enough to find some of her correspondence to her siblings, parents, or friends that will give you some insights. But beware of the possibility that she might have been trying to create a certain impression that may not have accurately reflected reality.

That original research question reflects your goal but it has to be reduced to questions that can actually be answered by available resources. Keep that original question in mind as your objective but

start with questions that will provide evidence of her life. At what age did she marry? What did her husband do? How many children did she have? How frequently? Did she have domestic assistance? All of these can be answered from church, provincial, census records city directories, etc.

If you find that she married at fifteen, had her first child a year later and seven more at two year intervals and that she had no domestic assistance, and her husband was a railroad engineer, it isn't hard to guess what her life was like.

This is why it is important to have a fair idea of what resources are available and where, so that it is easier to frame answerable questions. Once the questions have been framed, then we can strategize how to answer them. I generally group the strategies by repository so that one visit there (especially if it is distant or parking is difficult or expensive) might provide answers or partial answers to a whole bunch of research questions.

In Janine's case we were able to find some answers directly from on-line resources and identified other resources that were available locally to answer some of them. Some could only be answered by sources in the West but don't take the trip unless you know what sources you are looking for and where they are. I had a note recently from an American researcher who spent time in Montreal and Quebec City and found zilch—he was not happy! Homework may be a bad word for high school students but it is a critical activity for family history researchers.

1901 Census Update

Anyone who has worked with the 1901 census on line will be delighted with the news that the national volunteer project to index the census is now complete. We can go on line at www.automatedgenealogy.com and search by name (including soundex) or place.

The index provides the name, relationship to the head of the household, sex, marital status, birthdate, age at time of census and a hot link to the actual census page image so that you can check out further details or verify the material.

They are now indexing the 1911 Census and when I last checked it out, on Feb 4, the project was 45.12% complete. Judging by the traffic on their Bulletin Board, the transcribers are certainly busy. Finally, there is no fee for the basic search because the work is being done by volunteers.

This is an amazing resource and a wonderful example of what dedicated volunteers can achieve through collaboration.

A Unique Marriage Record

RootsWeb Review: 28 December 2005, Vol. 8, No. 52 reported that researcher Alva Van Houten recently found this marriage record on Family History Film #2243649 (Marriage Certificates, 1809-1950, Knox County, Ohio):

“A sprightly lad named Amos Nichols by name
This day was united to a blooming young dame
Her name Sarah Davis as her parents say
The company was pleasant good humoured and gay
--October 28th 1819 By me, H. Rigdon”

I welcome comments, queries, and suggestions at: p_wohler@hotmail.com

© Patrick Wohler, 2007