

ANCESTRY.COM'S FAMILY TREE: A PERSONAL HISTORY OR AN ORCHARD OF DOUBTS?

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In previous eras, genealogy was reserved for royalty and was used to show their elite lineage. With the current ubiquity of do-it-yourself websites like Ancestry.com, however, genealogy has quickly grown as a popular hobby for many average people. Therein lies the danger. Information is now available to everyone without any standards or guidelines in place for the proper use the data that these sites provide. The names, dates, and places listed on family trees are often submitted by users and therefore not checked for accuracy. This is among the reasons why many historians, like William Cronon, look down on genealogy as being a hobby and not a "good" historical venture: "Genealogy is a wonderful pastime, but family trees should be only the beginning of the historical adventure...We need to plant each of our family trees in the larger forest of history."¹

What is "good" history? The ubiquitous nature of Ancestry.com poses this very interesting question for academic historians. Are these websites a productive use of history because they allow the every person to feel connected to the broader historical picture? Or is Ancestry.com an abuse of history in that it is perpetuating the fantasy these websites sell: that everyone is a descendent of royalty or fame, and that with a click of a bouncing leaf one can grow an entire family tree (accuracy not included)?

It is undeniable that Ancestry.com provides a great service; it is "without question, the world's largest online collection of family history records and resources."² Creating a family tree was once a daunting task involving long hours and endless roadblocks. But the availability of facts and figures compiled on the internet and just a few clicks away has made it possible for the average person to piece together their own personal history. However, there is a glaring flaw to this

¹ William Cronon, "Why the Past Matters," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 84 (Autumn 2000): 9.

² "Ancestry.com – Mission and Values," Ancestry.com, accessed April 15, 2013, <http://corporate.ancestry.com/careers/missionandvalues>.

service: standards. Ancestry.com writes on its own page that “members have created more than 46 million family trees and added more than 4 billion profiles.”³ None of the 46 million family trees Ancestry.com boasts are checked. Until there are some standards on accuracy Ancestry.com is doing all of its consumers a disservice. The naïve, first time genealogist will be taken in by the names and the “shaky” leaves.⁴ The leaves represent a hint on a family tree. These “hints” are distributed when one gets a hint; it can be a census record, a marriage record, or another family tree with the same name and details.

Yet these family trees are user-submitted. Thus, the consumer is forced to rely on other people’s research, which may be of questionable accuracy. This problem exists because Ancestry.com does not contribute to the family tree portion of their service. The family trees allow users to put in a first name, last name, date and place of birth. But the user can literally put any name into that space. Unfortunately many abuse the trust that seems to be implied in creating their family tree. It is quite easy to show that one is a descendant of royalty or famous people. In fact, ancestry.com encourages this fantasy—that of connecting one’s self to a particular lineage of well-known ancestors—for marketing purposes.

The tendency to mine historical sources to elevate one’s class status has a long history that is not unique to ancestry.com. Consider the following 1900 poem in which the residents of Bedford, New Hampshire try to connect themselves to their colonial forebearers:

Written for the Occasion by a Young Lady

Pass on! Sons of Bedford, press on in your glory;
Pass on! Deck your brows with the bright wreaths of fame,
Generations, unborn, will rejoice at your story,
For history just waits now to take down each name.⁵

History can be used as a way to gain fame and recognition. It is unfortunate that most of these stories have been forgotten through time and that now descendants

³ Ibid.

⁴ “Ancestry.com Commercial – Shakey Leaf,” last modified April 27, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORmxCXmily4&list=UUTtRzqUPXKZkpVc8xSpzCqw&index=2>.

⁵ Town of Bedford, New Hampshire, *History of Bedford, New Hampshire, from 1737, being statistics compiled on the occasion of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the incorporation of the town, May 15, 1900* (New Hampshire: The Rumford Printing Company, 1900), 78.

are interested in uncovering their pasts by searching for stories that would provide the notoriety of their ancestors. What is perceived as normal is far less interesting or memorable than the unusual, and it is the latter that is largely touted by Ancestry.com.

This aggrandizement does a disservice to those who innocently want to discover their roots, since these people may be led astray, not realizing that ancestry.com's information is subject to potential manipulation and misuse. As Paul Connerton argues, there can be a type of social or collective memory, but this collective memory needs to be distinct from mere exercises in nostalgia or manipulation: "We need to distinguish social memory from a more specific practice that is best termed the activity of historical reconstruction."⁶ The members of Ancestry.com are treading closer to the historical reconstruction about which Connerton warns than they are to his conception of social memory.

In Ancestry.com's defense, the website does not claim in their mission statement to be any sort of guide or standard. They are simply a collection of historical documents offered to subscribers for a monthly rate. Copying a bunch of pages from Ancestry.com and stapling it together to create a personal history is sufficient for most people. They have physical evidence of their heritage. Those pages are their personal collection of their history and there is validity in those pages. "Collecting is a way of linking past, present, and future."⁷ That is enough satisfaction for many. But it is not "good" history.

The database on *Ancestry* contains lists of military records, census records, and universal family trees. This is assuming that the records are accurate. Often, customs officials incorrectly or tendentiously transliterated family names. It is also an unfortunate fact that census records are good for finding an ancestor's address or family size, but they rarely reveal other information clearly. Some people choose not to answer certain questions, especially the question of race. Another question that is either not answered or answered inaccurately is the birth country of an ancestor. There are many factors that went into the decision of not answering or falsifying

⁶ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 13.

⁷ William Davies King, *Collections of Nothing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 4.

census records:

Whether or not a person responded to the ancestry question, I believe, depended on both cognitive and social psychological factors. Those who had arrived recently in the United States and those whose parents were first-generation immigrants knew that they had an origin which distinguished them from most residents. Those who were well educated learned much about our nation's history, the fluctuations in immigration policy, and the frequent racial and ethnic conflicts. In brief, education brings an awareness that Americans have foreign 'roots,' which leads individuals to respond to the ancestry question.⁸

Does providing historical context for your family history make it "good" history? Or is this still an abuse of historical practices? The inherent danger in writing about your own family is where Ancestry.com plays a large role. A family may have a verbally transmitted and accepted past. The use of Ancestry.com can either support this past or debunk it.

Yet believing in an accepted family history can influence the present. These family history myths can shape how people view themselves and their families. One can look up an ancestor that one was verbally told fought in the Civil War and discover what Ancestry.com has recorded. But is this a benefit, or is there wisdom in leaving oral family traditions as they are? For these stories to come into existence there must be a reason, such as shame, pride, or misinformation. An example of shame would be a family that tells the story that they come from greater means. A poor working class family could pass along the history that they were an upper class family that did well for themselves and did not struggle because they were ashamed of their heritage. An example of pride would be perpetrating a story that claims elite or royal blood where it does not exist. Finally, an example of misinformation would be passing down that a female ancestor was a member of Daughters of the American Revolution when she was really a member of the lesser known activist group Daughters of America.

These revisions of history are, on the surface, fairly passive and of the little-white-lie variety but over time they can become valued family lore. They can, and

⁸ Reynolds Farley, "The New Census Question about Ancestry: What Did It Tell Us?" *Demography* 28 (1991): 414.

most times do, have an impact on how people later view themselves. Sometimes it is better not knowing; as Thomas Gray suggests, “Ignorance is bliss”. It can be better living as you believe versus the unknown. “History is a dead thing brought to new life. It is fragments of a past, dead and gone, resurrected by historians. It is in this sense like Frankenstein’s monster. It threatens our versions of ourselves.”⁹ He wants to examine how he fits into his family history. It is a way of placing yourself into history. “The bigger the collection gets, the more completely it represents me and my history.”¹⁰

Providing context is a key element of successfully investigating and writing about personal histories. If one is able to look at the broader scheme of history and place one’s family in it, then one has succeeded. For example, a family may easily discover that their ancestors emigrated from Ireland to America on Ancestry.com. Without examining or even being aware of the socio-economic decisions behind that move, an important element of context—*why* they may have come—is lost. Academic historians would consider this a failure, since the mere fact of an emigration is missing the bigger picture. For example, a mere tree on Ancestry does not illuminate the plight of landless peasants during the potato famine of the 1840s, many of whom subsequently came to the United States: “And in this parish you, and your fathers before you, knew what it was to starve because you did not own your own land – and that has increased this unappeasable hunger for land.”¹¹ Here in that story the family connects themselves to the land and understands history is about more than just the people who came before. There is a personal connection that ties you to your ancestors. This view of their lives provides an explanation, certainly not the whole, of why they would emigrate. Focusing on your own family is done for many reasons: to find out who you are, to find out where you have come from, or to simply learn about the past:

It’s as when following the others’ lines,
Which are the tracks of somebody gone before,
Leaving me mischievous clues, telling me who
They were and who it was they weren’t,

⁹ Richard White, *Remembering Ahanagan: Storytelling in a Family’s Past* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 21.

¹⁰ William Davies King, *Collections of Nothing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 93.

¹¹ John B. Keane: *The Field* (Ireland: Mercier Press, 1991).

And who it is I am because of them,
Or, just for the moment, reading them, I am,
Although the next moment I'm back in myself, and lost.¹²

This poem by David Ferry perfectly sums up the feeling that historians get. An important and disappointing fact is that you can never reconnect to your past ancestors. They are gone. Nothing, not learning their birth date or visiting their grave, will bring them back. It is also impossible to recreate the past. What has occurred in the past is gone and will never be experienced again. As close as genealogy can make one feel to one's ancestors, it unfortunately will never make them alive. Genealogy can make history too personal, and there "is a general feeling among professionals that outsiders care too much or, perhaps more precisely, assume self-centeredly that others care as much as they do: they take history too personally."¹³ This is why when you go into genealogy you need to be aware of context. Find your family's history and then place it in the bigger picture. Richard White does this with his family's personal history titled *Remembering Ahanagan*. His family is great at providing context and relation for him, especially his mother Sara Walsh White:

Her stories are about people she knew, about places she lived, about the relations she established with the world...She does not understand herself as people who write autobiographies usually understand themselves. She does not see herself as a distinctive self, developing as she journeys through the world. She speaks more casually about others than about herself. It is the relations with others that matter; it is these relations that have defined the world she has known and made.¹⁴

Providing context, showing relation, and expressing the truth is what makes Richard White's personal history, and many others like it, "good." White is able, through contextual interpretation, to relate his story with those of Irish emigrants and those with Irish heritage. He looks at his family's past through old stories and memories. He describes his method as living "in this junkyard of the past. I haul pieces into the

¹² David Ferry, "Ancestral Lines," *Poetry Magazine*, January 2012.

¹³ Benjamin Filene, "Passionate Histories: 'Outsider' History-Makers and What They Teach Us," *The Public Historian* 34 (Winter 2012): 20.

¹⁴ Richard White, *Remembering Ahanagan*, 16.

present, and there they confront my mother's memories."¹⁵ The problem with memory is that it is faulty. It is part of the human condition to misremember. Another problem is attempting to remember a time and place you have never been to. However historians do this frequently. They research and read accounts so that they can analyze what happened. Ancestry.com does not offer any time lines, not any placement in historical context. It is cut and dry numbers and names. The "good" genealogist should consider this a starting point to build a full personal history.

Ancestry.com has created a fantastic business plan offering family histories which are compiled and added onto by their customers- without the hassle of needing proof as to its truth- and with a hefty price tag. Genius! Their business grows exponentially as customers connect the dots of their families online. As of April 15, 2013 the advertised price on Ancestry.com, <http://www.ancestry.com/cs/offers/subscribe>, to access records only pertaining to the United States is \$19.95 per month or \$99 for six months. If the subscriber has ancestors from other nations then they need to upgrade to the World Traveler which is \$29.95 per month or \$149 for six months. Ancestry.com has also not been shy about buying out smaller websites that provided the same documents for less money or even free. They list on their website a chronological timeline of their acquisitions and their major successes. While they have provided a great service it is also interesting how capitalist this website promoting family and history has become. Should Ancestry.com be putting a price on historical documents? There are other sites that do not have the flashy commercials but provide the same service for free, websites that have yet to be purchased by the massive conglomerate that Ancestry.com has become. Familysearch.org is a great alternative to Ancestry.com and is run by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It provides the same type of service: family trees, search functions for the United States and search functions for European nations at the cost of zero dollars.

There is perhaps in American culture a certain mentality that does not value services that are provided for free; as the dollar signs go up, so does the so-called importance of the service. This mentality also benefits Ancestry.com. The average

¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

consumer of genealogy may also not be interested in searching for free services because of the high profile of Ancestry.com. It is an extremely popular website that just continues to grow and expand. That expansion has shifted from helping people find their ancestors to putting a price on what should be public historical information. Public records, census and baptism records should not have a price tag and yet on Ancestry.com they do. The consumer is paying a price for decontextualized information that they could receive for free.

In conclusion, there is sufficient information to show that because of Ancestry.com's lack of standards on the contribution of information and lack of contextualization, is a detriment to the overall profession of history. Ancestry.com is both a blessing and a curse to history. It is a blessing in that it provides historical documents and excites people about history. However, it is a curse in that it commodifies history and limits its accessibility on to those wealthy enough to afford its monthly fee. This brings genealogy back full circle by limiting its consumption. Ancestry.com can be used as a tool for personal histories if you are cognizant of its flaws and use the raw material while fact checking any use of the family trees. "Good" history should be about being accurate and discovering the truth. Genealogy and personal histories have shown to be "good" use of history as long as context and relation is provided. Ancestry.com can lead you to finding context if you sift through all that is presented. But relation should be an enforceable standard for personal history and accuracy should be an enforceable standard for Ancestry.com.