

# Today's Genealogy World

by

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[Lightly edited text only, with graphics and suggested other links omitted]

We live in a day when the methods and tools and available online systems out there for genealogical research have dramatically changed over the past two decades. The world of genealogy in today's world would be totally foreign to those of the 1900's.

Gone are the days of the previous century where much of genealogical collaboration was done by US mail and research usually meant visiting a library, family history center, or courthouse.

And even with the dawn of computers – gone are the days of about 20 years ago when people were hooked on genealogical list servers and state/county base GENWEB pages. These seemed to be the greatest things ever.

Now we live in a day when even a newbie can log on to a site like Ancestry.com or other similar sites and very easily create a database going back several generations and do it all within a few days. It seems to be so easy to leverage the work of others and to enlarge one's database without having to do much of the "hard genealogical research". The hints and tips and reports of possible needed merges - - seem such a wonderful world to the newbie. It all seems so easy for anyone to do - and so fun to learn about these newly discovered ancestors.

And yet there are many who wonder if we have actually gone quite "downhill" in our genealogical work and genealogical standards and the quality of the average person's genealogical data.

So many people out there are focusing on how quickly they can "grow their family tree" - - how they can leverage the "work" (sloppy or not) of others and how easy it is to just click a few hints and tips and add a whole branch to the family tree (with no clue as to whether it's accurate or not) . . . and so few are actually thinking about the impact of what they are doing – (not just as it relates to the data quality of their own database) but as it relates to the world of genealogy and millions of users around the world.

I mean what a person does in their own private genealogical database is their prerogative. Let them do whatever they wish. This is America by the way - the country of freedom and liberty. But let's just think about a very simple and extremely common scenario and how it can impact hundreds or even thousands of users on genealogical web sites.

John Doe has just signed up for Ancestry.com – it is so cool!!! He starts entering his family tree – his father, his mother, and grandparents. He uploads a few photos and sees a photo pedigree chart – and can't believe how amazing this is. The genealogy bug has bitten and bitten hard!!!

Luckily, many of his cousins are also Ancestry.com users and have also entered their family tree data. He quickly finds ways to add his cousins' family tree data to that of his own data – and he sees just how easy it is to start adding new people from the info already added by his cousins - and not have to

type in all the information from scratch. Soon he has entire branches on his tree almost appearing out of nowhere like magic - - - This is genealogical HEAVEN for John!!!

Eventually he has to look at trees besides his close cousins – maybe those of his new found cousins - and they too have collected quite a bit of info that he is able to leverage. This is like mining for gold - so awesome! Eventually after various generations - things slow down a bit - and John has to look harder for additional steps back on the genealogical ladder back in time. But the "leaf hints" that are such a cool tool in Ancestry make it easy for John to see end points in his family tree where a possible match on someone else's tree could allow him to break the brick wall. Within a few clicks he has added a new generation and links to the old world ancestors.

One Sunday John's first cousin Jane Doe comes to visit. John is eager to show his new passion to cousin Jane. Jane is much more analytical than John and more skeptical of whether his new information is actually correct or not. John in an attempt to impress his cousin Jane prints out a cool photographic pedigree chart.

Jane begins to analyze John's family tree and notices various anomalies. In some families John seems to have various duplicated children by the same name or multiple spouses with the same name. John wonders how that happened. Jane also quickly notices that the immigrant ancestor John traced back to - was one Adam Doe - and his wife Eve Doe. And she breaks out laughing. . . . and tells John his genealogy must be complete if he has already traced back to Adam and Eve. As John and Jane analyze the data more closely they recognize many errors and conflicts in the data. And Jane realizes much of this data must have come from their crazy Old Uncle Bubba Doe.

Uncle Bubba was quite the genealogist in his day - but couldn't quite figure out the computer when he got one - even though he never gave up trying. In his years of learning the computer and at the same time dealing with the onset of Alzheimer's - he had struggled to put all of his records in the computer - he finally felt he had it right - but not without hundreds of records being mis-linked, duplicated, generations skipped, and even inter-relationships mangled. It seems his data had somehow made it onto Ancestry - and that is what John Doe (among various other databases) had been copying in the data from his "cousins".

As Jane point out more and more issues with John's family data – John begins to wonder how he will ever get it all straightened out - how he can differentiate between what is actually correct in his database and what is not.

John also notices – he isn't the only one who has this apparently “bogus” set of immigrant ancestors of Adam and Eve Doe. He sees that numerous Doe family researcher in Ancestry have also copied this bogus info – apparently from the “hint” feature of Ancestry.

The memory of Uncle Bubba will live on forever - I guess unfortunately “in infamy” - - as his quagmire of bad data seems to be this unintended legacy propagates endlessly across the Internet – like wildfire. And good trustable info seems to mainly find its way only to a select few researchers – totally frustrated when they look at online genealogical databases and willing to shoot Old Uncle Bubba if he's still around.

### Some tips for fellow researchers

- One of the most common regrets – by a newbie in genealogy who is beginning to morph into a more serious researcher - - is their lack of keeping track of sources on the data they compiled up to that point, and the lack of identifying items as having some sort of proof or not in their records.
- Understand the difference between primary and secondary sources and what rules to use as to the reliability of your genealogical "facts".
- As you gather family data – try to categorize it into what can be supported by referenced source documents and what can't. Be sure and compile references to these source documents.
- Realize that even if a database on line “is yours” - if you have made your on line database “public” – information in it (most especially about early generations of a family - that may be of interest to hundreds of other researchers) then it may have the tendency to very easily propagate from your database to other people's database - - especially through what many on line systems have created through “hints”, “tips”, and other possible connections pointed out to you by the system. Things like guestimates, theories, and inferences can be copied by others as if they were fact.
- The Internet is full of “well-intentioned” family researchers – who unsuspectingly get caught in this temptation of accepting “hints” in their family tree without doing their homework in really analyzing the validity of all records. Realize that BAD information can so easily propagate on the Internet like wildfire – whereas GOOD information usually moves so much slower. Consider the research concerning the very earliest members of a family line – as a real example the surname Yancey of early Virginia about 1700. The truth is no one seems to have found any primary evidence for any Yancey living prior to 1704. And yet if you search on line databases like Ancestry or ROOTSWEB – you may easily find various people who have names, dates, marriage etc., before 1704. After 30 years of my own family research – I don't know anyone who has any proof of exact Yancey birth / death dates prior to like 1750 – and no primary records at all before 1704. And if you ask anyone where they got their exact dates or names and relationship for these early Yanceys – they just shrug their shoulders and say “Oh I just copied it from “so and so's” database.
- As to the “hints”, “tips”, and “possible connections” pointed out in the paragraphs above by the system you use on line - which may seem like an extraordinarily wonderful tool that allows you to grow your family tree faster than ever - - - on the reverse side of the coin, it may also be a propagating wildfire of totally false and erroneous information that few seem to be able to stamp out. What you entered very innocently – could in a few months be replicated in hundreds of individual databases – and turn out to be totally false.
- Find others working on the same families as you - - compare notes and ideas and compare the information you have with others to get ideas as to its validity before you start uploading it into collaborative systems. Before just accepting a hint – see where it came from – talk to someone else about why they think it may be correct or incorrect – before you fill your own database with very shady information.

- Realize that doing genealogical research is much more than GATHERING/COLLECTING family information. With time - -as you spend more energy on analyzing/cross checking/weighing information that you have collected - you will become a much better genealogist - and you, instead of just getting confused by collecting more and more conflicting info, will be able to make sense of a growing pile of conflicting info. Don't just be a "collector" of info – be an analyzer of info!
- Take into consideration the difference between genealogical databases or systems that **a)** you have on your local computer that maybe you (or only a few people may have access to - example PAF or FTM on your local PC **b)** data that you upload to databases on line such as ROOTSWEB or Ancestry.com, wherein though you retain your database separate from others - none the less others may very easily be able to COPY information in your on line database to their database and **c)** Collaborative online genealogical systems where there is a single database used by many users and where one person can modify or delete what another person has entered into such system (such as FamilySearch.org for example).
- If you use all three of the above systems at different times and ways – realize it may not be a good practice if you are not modifying the way you work based on what type of system you are using: (private / on line and public / collaborative).
- Before you update something in some collaborative system – seriously consider the possibility that what you may be entering – might possibly be totally wrong information. Also realize that information that MIGHT POSSIBLY be correct – is not always better than NO information at all (especially if you don't even have a clue if it is actually right or not. And what if it turns out to be blatantly wrong?
- The internet has its pros and cons as it related to genealogical research - - - but the excuse that many people once had - - - that they didn't have access to primary records to confirm their data - is no longer true. A multitude of source documents can be found on line - much of it free of charge - such as census records, probate records, death certificates, and a thousand other sources.
- Realize that one system or database does not have the monopoly on genealogical data – don't limit yourself to just to one system when gathering information.
- Realize the HUGE difference between databases that are merely database submission of genealogical data people have collected and submitted, versus other databases which are based on extracts from official and primary documents. (such as the difference between a person's database on ROOTSWEB - - as compared to a Social Security Death Index database – as part of some online system that houses many databases).
- Realize that many on line genealogical system are a MIX of both family tree's submitted by thousands or millions of people - - as well as databases taken from primary official sources. And just because you find the family tree data to be highly flawed - - does not mean that the other databases taken from official sources also have a high degree of flaws - - - it's like comparing apples and oranges – and yet many people often make an evaluation of or have a certain bias to a given system by the reliability (or lack thereof).

## **So how did all of this messed up information become part of the on line family trees???**

The answers are varied. In some cases it's just a result of someone making an honest mistake as they enter data into their database. In other cases it might be a merge between two people that were never actually the same person to begin with. At other times – it is the result of people making educated guesses, estimations, assumptions, and inferences that were based on flawed info. Also so often a person copies a name or date from another person's database never considering the possibility that this may have only been a guesstimate or theory that a person had – never expecting that other people would copy such info as if it was fact. I have even found people who entered “bogus” names into their family tree – and never considered the consequences of what they were doing. Now you are probably thinking – surely this would be very rare that a person enters a “bogus name” into their database – why would they do that – you ask? And indeed generally this would be very rare - - but keep in mind there are millions of family researchers worldwide accessing these online databases.

All it takes is ONE single person (out of the thousands) to enter something a little crazy and totally unfounded – like a bogus name for the parents of their earliest known Family Line ancestors - - - and voila - - thousands of family users now see a “family tree hint” popping up on their database – showing a hint to a new generation of [their family line](#) – and surely of all those thousands of [fellow](#) researchers – many accept the hint – and this totally bogus info spreads like wildfire. You may feel I am blowing this out of proportion - - - but just such a case has happened on various occasions. At one point a person had created a bogus name of “Cymru Yancey” as the father of our earliest Charles Yancey of Virginia - - “Cymru” is the name for Wales – and thus their play on “bogus name” - - and yet many a people across the country – found this name as a hint on their ancestry tree, added it to their own tree – and had no clue – what “Cymru” even stood for – and that it was totally bogus. Other cases show people copying exact birth dates for Yanceys born in the very early 1700's - - - when after decades of research – no one is quite sure where these dates came from – even though there seems to be no evidence of anyone earlier than about 1970 ever knew of these dates.

If you have no info about the parents of a given Yancey - and you find "some" info on line - the temptation is to replace no info with "some info" even if one doesn't have proof. Consider the possibility that in many of these cases (especially on the very earliest known generations of a family) - this is so often blatantly erroneous info you are adding to your database if there are no sources to back it up.

Analyze, cross-check, consult, and compare before you just mindlessly copy info into your database - or you will have a database that few people come to have any respect for.

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