Not all Genealogy Databases are Created Equal – Consider the Source of the Information!

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How reliable is the information that is included in that database or record collection that you are using? Can you trust the source? Read the specifics!

Does the database include family group sheets and/or pedigree files submitted by private individuals? Is it a collection of information obtained from a variety of sources, without your being able to track the information back to the original source? These databases tend to be riddled with errors. Treat the findings with suspicion. If you use them, consider them as clues only for future research and investigation. Do not treat them as facts. Don't list them as a source citation. If you base your family tree on these databases, your family tree will lack credibility.

An example is the "Family Data Collection," to be found at Ancestry.com. To quote from the description of the collection, "Millions of individual records were created from birth, marriage, and death records; obituaries, probate records, books of remembrance, family histories, genealogies, family group sheets, pedigree charts and other sources." Further on, it is noted that there is an "absence of cited documentation" in these records. So these records can be pure fiction or fantasy. At the bottom of the description of the collection is the following recommendation, " Use this database as a finding tool ... When you find the name of an ancestor listed, confirm the facts in original sources, such as birth, marriage, and death records, church records, census enumerations, and probate records for the place where the event took place" Good advice! In other words, look for public records.

One World Tree and Ancestry Family Trees are member-submitted family trees. There is no requirement that submissions be based on evidence. Some of them are quite fantastic: tracing the family back 1500 years to multiple kings in multiple locations. No source documentation is attached. The only way to get sources is to contact the member who submitted that information. That is often difficult, if not impossible. And, frequently, this person has copied the family tree information from another submitted family tree. Again, these are riddled with errors which are passed from one tree to the next. These may be tempting to use, especially if one is new to genealogy. Perhaps people reason that if someone has already done the work, why duplicate the effort? Or, perhaps it is believed that if the information is posted online it must be true. These databases are not reliable or credible sources of information. Don't use them to document the facts in your family tree.

On the other hand, is it an index or database representing a collection of specific public documents, where you know exactly where you can go to find the original document? Among the many databases of this sort are the Indexed United States Census Records; Boston,

Massachusetts Passenger Lists, 1891-1943; Illinois Deaths and Stillbirths, 1916-1947; and the Ohio, County Death Records, 1840-2001. This is to name just a few of the many, many indexes of this sort. Many of these indexes are located on FamilySearch and on Ancestry.com. Just for fun, go to the FamilySearch website and look at the collection of public records available for each state. An impressive list! And, of course, there are many other websites that offer indexes with the same quality of records.

While there can be indexing errors, the information in these indexes is much more likely to be accurate because it is based on public records. Many link to a digital copy of the actual record. If they don't, you may well want to obtain a copy of the original to verify information. Not all information on documents is recorded in the database. You might learn something new and valuable to your research. You will also want to evaluate the accuracy of the information in the public record, in light of other information you have gathered on this individual.

Again, take time to evaluate the reliability of the database you are considering using. Not all genealogy databases are created equal.