

Researching and Finding Your Past

By Leonard D. Chan

Where do I begin? I've already done my search. Now I'd like to help you do yours.

When I mentioned my idea to Melodie Lew - OCA San Mateo President, of wanting to do research at the National Archives as a paid service for other people, she asked me if I'd like to write an OCA San Mateo newsletter article about doing family research (the search for your own family's history).

My research began over ten years ago and a lot has changed since then. When I started my research, it began as an article for my own newsletter with Asian American Curriculum Project (AACP). Our investigating team sampled what was available at the San Bruno branch of the National Archives and Records. You can read the resulting original articles at:

<http://www.asianamericanbooks.com/newslets/nlo603.htm>

Years later in 2011, I found some more time to delve a little deeper into my family's history in America. By that time, I found that many more resources were being made available through the Internet. When I went to the archives earlier this year (2013), things had progressed to the point where I spent all of my time on the Archive's computers taking advantage of their access to the genealogical website *Ancestry.com*. Therefore, it was unnecessary for me to even go the Archives that day. All that is needed to use *Ancestry.com* is Internet access and a paid subscription to their website (access to *Ancestry.com* is free to use at the National Archives and at some libraries; check with your local library to see if they have access).

The implication of websites like *Ancestry.com* is that you can now do more family research from home than ever. However, there's still much that will never get placed on the Internet. Due to time and money constraints and also privacy issues, original source materials contained in old files at archives and libraries, will most likely never be preserved digitally.

In this article, I'll give you a bit of an idea about how to begin your own family history research, what you can find online and at the National Archives, and why you should do it. This is not meant to be a tell-all about the process. There are books and websites on the subject that are more thorough. Plus the articles that we produced in the AACP newsletter still works as a great introduction to the National Archives – I hope you get a chance to read them.

Homework Before the Search

Every search is different, but most of them should probably start at home.

What do you already know? If you don't know much about your past, you need to talk to someone that does. How about your parents and other relatives?

Is there someone in particular that you'd like to do research on? You have to begin with someone or some goal. The search for a particular individual will often lead to finding others. Immigration files, in particular, often have cross references to other related or associated individuals. Sometimes the person you set out to find leads to other interesting things that you may never have known. Sometimes your search could lead to a dead end. Sadly, some individuals are forever lost to recorded history or are just too obscure or hard to ever find.

If you're planning to start your research at the National Archives, you need to have an idea about what you might find there. The National Archives collects and preserves old records from federal government agencies. If members of your family had some dealing with the federal government, then there's a chance that some information can be found on them at the National Archives. Immigration, court, selective service, and census records are good sources of genealogical information that may be saved at the National Archives.

In doing your homework, pay particular attention to events and activities that could lead to a paper trail. For example, if the person that you are searching for immigrated to the United States, make notes on when he or she arrived and the place of entry. People that arrived by ship were usually listed in passenger lists. Some lists from the early 1800s have even been preserved. Passenger lists for Chinese arriving after the 1882 Exclusion Act until its repeal in 1943 are well kept.

Do you have any actual primary records such as *Certificates of Identity* or *Residence*, or steamship tickets? If so, make photocopies or scans of these items and bring them with you on your visit to the Archives. When you make the photocopies or scans, be sure to copy both sides of these materials. Archivists at the San Bruno Archive often have a great wealth of knowledge that can help decipher clues that may be on these items.

What You Can Find Online

You can find a lot of family history information on the Internet. What I'll list here just barely scratches the surface.

A few of the things that you could find at *Ancestry.com* include

1. Immigration and travel records
2. Birth, marriage, and death records
3. Census and voting data
4. Miscellaneous tax databases
5. Photo databases – which even includes some yearbook photos, historical postcards, US Civil War photos, headstones, and Library of Congress collections

Ancestry.com's databases are searchable through a form that you fill out on their website. You enter relevant information about people that you are looking for – things

like their name, date and place of birth, date and place of death, places they resided, when they may have entered or left the United States, and more. After you enter whatever information you have, *Ancestry.com* returns a list of possible items from their databases that may contain information on the person that you are searching for.

If you have membership, you're also allowed to create a family tree that other *Ancestry.com* members are allowed to see, if you give them permission to see it.

In my family research on the site, I was able to make contact with someone that created a family tree that included someone that is in a family photo with my great-grandfather. I also made contact with my first cousin's daughter-in-law. I never knew either of these two people prior to doing my search. As you can see, not only are you searching for your roots, you may connect with others that have some link to your family too.

Websites like *Ancestry.com* might lead you to an impression that their records are all inclusive and easily searchable. During my use of *Ancestry.com*, I found this to be far from the truth. You can easily spend hours searching through their records and not come-up with anything useful.

Anyone that has used Google will understand the frustration of thinking that the entire world's information is at your disposal only to realize that finding the exact thing that you are looking for may be quite difficult. This is also the case with *Ancestry.com* and other genealogical websites. There is much promise in what they are trying to do, but at this time there are often huge gaps in what is available and difficulties in accessing what is already in their collections.

A couple of other Internet genealogical websites include – *Archives.com*, *FamilySearch.org*, and *worldvitalrecords.com*. The website *FamilySearch.org* is free to use and is created and maintained by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church or Mormon Church).

The National Archives also has a website that can aid you in your online research. It is located at <http://www.archives.gov/research/>.

Names

A word of warning for all those that are interested in doing research on Chinese members of their families – names can be the most problematic part of your search.

Websites like *Ancestry.com* place much importance on knowing the name of the person that you are searching for. However, early Chinese immigrants to the US could have had their names spelled in many different ways. The following Canadian website (which also applies well to Chinese in the US) gives a good explanation of the problems of Chinese names and their transliteration to English:

http://www.vpl.ca/ccg/Chinese_Names.html.

During my search for my great-grandfather I noticed that ship's passenger logs were often incorrectly transcribed into the computer databases. Some of this was due to the

unrecognizable handwriting of the persons writing the passenger logs and some of it was due to the poor condition of the log books or microfilm copies. When my great-grandfather took a trip back to China in the 1880s and came back to the United States, his name was spelled in two different ways. Therefore *Ancestry.com*'s database has his exit and reentry as two different persons.

What you may find at the Nationals Archives

As mentioned earlier, online genealogical websites don't show you the contents of individual case files housed at the National Archives. If you should be so fortunate as to find an actual case file of someone that you are trying to find at the National Archives, you may find photographs, birth certificates, visas, records of employment, family-related documents, transcripts of testimony, personal artifacts, and other important biographical and historical information within it. Finding these case files can truly be like hitting pay dirt for your family research.

If you can find case file reference numbers from your research online, you may not need to actually go to the Archives. The National Archives does provide fee based duplication services of case files. You can also hire independent researchers like me to do the duplication and research for you. The web link for the National Archives, that I supplied earlier, is your best starting point for figuring out how to conduct your research with the help of the National Archives' archivists and private researchers.

So why look?

If you've read this far in this article, you probably already have an interest in doing some family research. If you are still on the fence about doing it or just don't know if you can find the time, don't put it off. With online services and private researchers, it's becoming easier than ever to get started. In addition, the ones in your family that have some knowledge on the family are not getting any younger. Talk to them before it's too late.

For me, I've found my own family research to be rewarding. When we learned history in school, for most of us, it was hard to see how it related to us personally. Now that I have a better grasp of my own family's history, it's given me new found interest in knowing as much as I can about the past.

Even though my ancestors may not have any connection to the American Civil War, I can now imagine where they were when it happened (my great-grandfather was starting his family shortly before coming to America – possibly to work on the Transcontinental Railroad).

To see early Thomas Edison film footage of a steam ship that my granduncle sailed on nearly 120 years ago is absolutely breathtaking. It's as if I could almost see him getting off the ship as he came to America. See for yourself at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWnNieMtxFs&feature=relmfu>

They now live in my imagination as I hope your ancestors will live in your thoughts too.