

# SOLVING THE MOST COMMON GENEALOGY RESEARCH PROBLEMS

James M. Baker, PhD, CG

jimb@starstream.net

## Common Genealogy Problems

General Problem Areas	Specific Problems	Types of Solutions
1. Names – getting both the first and last names correct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unknown names, such as maiden names</li> <li>• Nicknames</li> <li>• "Americanized" names</li> <li>• Shortened names</li> <li>• Use of middle names</li> <li>• Business names</li> <li>• Very common names</li> <li>• Census spelling and transcription problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look carefully at official documents</li> <li>• Search using different spellings; use "wildcards"</li> <li>• Look for data on close relatives – then "back into" your own data</li> <li>• In census, search via non-name fields such as locations or ages</li> </ul>
2. Missing or Questionable BMD Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data that is unsupported by any reasonable source</li> <li>• Data from family legends or family memory</li> <li>• No available official or other documentation</li> <li>• Data available but has a questionable timeline</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look for varied records in different places</li> <li>• Dig deeper into the online sites and their data</li> <li>• For missing people, sometimes you may need to search census for ALL the people in a certain area</li> </ul>
3. Conflicting Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different postings and different records tell different stories</li> <li>• Family stories/data don't match official records</li> <li>• Official records may be in error</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carefully evaluate the evidence, get unbiased opinions</li> <li>• Use logical analysis; check timelines and such</li> </ul>
4. Proving or Disproving a Family Myth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognizing that some family data may be wrong</li> <li>• Moving forward with new firm data, such as DNA</li> <li>• Facing the wrath of family members who love the old myths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborate more with others, get different data sources</li> <li>• Take a logical approach to data gathering; don't just rely on family stories</li> <li>• Be skeptical of family legends</li> </ul>

### **Case Study #1: Origins of Fred Pawl (Original Name Unknown, Parentage and Birth Data Unknown, Ancestry Unknown)**

Problems: Original name unknown; birth town and birth date questionable; US arrival date unknown; he may have come from an area that used to be in Germany, but is now in Poland; but some family legends were known. Family legends placed his birth in present-day Poland (formerly Germany) about 1904 with certain named parents and one sibling.

Solutions:

1. US Census data – helped with age and with locations for different time periods
2. Ellis Island site data – used the "advanced search" option and wildcards to find him. Good clues as to his exact name, town of birth, and date of US arrival
3. German church records – identified parents, dates of key events, other ancestors, total families
4. When comparing the family legends to recorded data, there were similarities but also some differences; the legends put us on the right track while the official records sealed the deal.

### **Case Study #2: Who Was Paul Harvey Aurand? (Use of a Different Name Made This Man's Data a Challenge)**

Problems: Mary didn't have much data on her extended family, didn't know if any were prominent; she had never heard of anyone who was well-known who was surnamed Aurand.

Solution: She found a man who was well-known but not by his original family name. The moral of the story is to be careful about names that may have been shortened, or changed for use in business or for use in the entertainment business.

### **Case Study #3: How Old Was Nellie?**

Problem: Nellie had different husbands in different time periods, and found it convenient to be of a "proper" age for each husband. How can we learn her true age?

Solution: The US census gave conflicting results, but by looking at a variety of census data, including some from her childhood days, her birth year could be established.

### **Case Study #4: Jack Pettis, the Jazz Man (Missing Death Data Proved Challenging)**

Problem: Some information was available for this man, such as birthplace, birth date, and parents, and wife, but no information existed for him for the last 15-20 years of his life. Jazz buffs were interested in him and wanted more complete data. A family legend placed him in Oklahoma during his last years but this was very soft data.

Solution: The jazz buffs, with limited data to go on, went to work to find death data for Jack. They found the data via a funeral home in Oklahoma City. The moral of the story is that it may

be necessary to look in fairly obscure places to find needed BMD data. By the way, once again, the family legends put us on the right track, but it took some digging to find the records that were needed to get the required data.

### **Case Study #5: Billy Meyers and Mollie Pettis (Missing Marriage, Death, and Other Records)(And with Special Problems Due to Altered Names)**

Problem: Billy Meyers, a show business personality, married Mollie Pettis when each were middle-aged. However, nothing firm was known about the dates or places of their marriage nor of their deaths. Family members had known them, knew where they lived during their married years, but there was no documentation.

Solution:

1. US Census data provided basic leads for data on Mollie – dates, names, and places, and data on her 1st marriage.
2. Searches for their marriage and death records included looking on ancestry.com; familysearch.com; IL BMD records; Chicago newspapers; and SSDI - nothing was found.
3. Different spellings were used for each of the sources – again, nothing.
4. Cook County BMD Records – provided data on their 1953 marriage, but only after using some ingenuity to find the data there. Mollie (whose official name was Margaret) had a marriage record to a man named George W. Maurer, which was Billy's real name.
5. Local Newspaper – had Billy's obit – but under his real name.
6. IL State BMD Records – had Mollie's death data – but under her official name.

### **Case Study #6: Sam Pettis, 1831-1875 (the Baltimore Family Legend)**

Problem: This man's origin was mystery, although the family legends were solid in placing him in Baltimore where the family was said to be prominent in the early 1800s. But there was a big fire in Baltimore, burning the property and also the ownership records.

Solution:

1. US Census Records located Sam throughout his life: OH, IN, IL – no Baltimore – but maybe he descended from Baltimore people.
2. Baltimore records – no Pettis families there in the desired time period, and no notable fire.
3. IL Marriage records – showing Sam getting married in 1864.
4. US Census records – in 1880, for Sam's brother, where it showed that his father (and probably also Sam's father) was born in VT, not MD.
5. VT Records – there were Pettis families in Brattleboro – does that sound like Baltimore?
6. By the way, family members still think the family came from Baltimore

## **Case Study #7: Lizzie Bruce, c. 1845-1900 (Scotland Origin Legend) (Conflicting Data for Age, No Birth Record)**

Problem: There were plenty of family legends about Elizabeth Bruce, placing her birth in Scotland, and there was some evidence of her marriage(s) , and her death date was known. But the lack of birth data and the lack of data for her for much of her life made her case rather challenging. There were also problems regarding her true name, the names of her parents, her birthplace, and her changing ages.

Solution:

1. IL Marriage records – showed her marriage in 1864 to Sam Pettis.
2. US Census records – showed 4 children born from 1868 to 1874 in IL.
3. Danville, IL cemetery records and family stories – provided death data in 1900.
4. US Census records for 1870, 1880, and 1900 – showed different ages for Lizzie – she grew "younger" over the years; also, the US Census records consistently stated she was born in TN, not Scotland.
5. IL Marriage records – showed records of 4 different marriages for Lizzie, and with somewhat different ages for her during that time. Her name varies in different entries, but it is the same person. One marriage record gave the names of Lizzie's parents.
6. IL Land Records for 1868 – shows Lizzie as a purchaser of property – this official record shows her full name as Mary Elizabeth Pettis.
7. Because the records were consistent about her birthplace, that is identified as TN. Her age is more difficult to pin down, but through a careful analysis, we can mostly get close to her real age. One lesson learned is to be wary of data in official records, because it is supplied by people who are not always trustworthy.