

High-tech hunt: Internet, DNA take genealogists directly to family roots

January 08, 2009 01:51:00 PM

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For local resources from genealogist Linda Pazics Kleback, see

http://www.newsherald.com/articles/local_70875_article.html/resources_roots.html

Genealogists live in a community where the old meets the new.

Mike Ward, 32, public-relations director at Ancestry.com knows that well. He's only been researching his family for four years, but he works with an organization of experts.

He's also living in a nation of people who increasingly want to be genealogy experts. A 1995 poll for American Demographics magazine found that about 113 million American adults are at least "somewhat" interested in their family histories, and that 19 million of those were "involved a great deal" in tracking their lineage. It's believed those numbers have grown substantially since then.

That popularity has helped the company Ward works for and others providing similar services. Ancestry.com - a pay Web site with 850,000 subscribers worldwide and repository for family history records - lets researchers blend Internet searches and DNA technology with a quest to find family members from hundreds of years ago.

Ward answered a few questions to help people who want to start looking into family history.

Q. What's the first and best tip you can give someone getting started with family research?

A. The first thing we encourage people to do is start building that family tree with information you already know. You start with information on yourself, your parents and grandparents. Start involving your family some.

They may know information on when and where your grandma was born. They may be able to tell you when other family members immigrated. So many family history records are available online. One of the best resources is the U.S. federal censuses from 1790-1930. (Census records are available only through 1930 because of privacy laws that limit their release for 72 years to protect living individuals.)

The next step is start collaborating with other people. At Ancestry.com we have 3 million active users, and those people may have started a family tree where you can see your second or third cousins.

Q. Is the deck stacked against certain people searching for ancestors? Blacks whose ancestors were slaves, for instance?

A. Everybody's situation is different. In one person's family you could have colonial roots all the way back to the 1600s. Then you have another line whose family immigrated to the U.S. and came in through Ellis Island. In Europe and Eastern Europe, some of those records are impossible to find. It depends on location.

In some countries and even places in the U.S., records have been burned, damaged or lost. In some countries, records are not kept on a national level. You might have to travel to a church house where great-grandparents were married. U.S. and U.K records are pretty great.

I think for many African Americans, it can be difficult past 1870. Slavery does create problems for African Americans to find roots. Yet, in that time period, one in 10 blacks were actually free. There is a chance your ancestors' records will be available. And for the time period from 1870 to 1930, the Census and other records can provide wonderful clues about African American family history.

Q. Can you trust all the genealogy information on the Internet?

A. It depends on where it comes from. Ancestry.com is home to 7 billion names and 26,000 titles and databases, such as birth and death records and censuses. Most of these are scans and/or indexes of original records created during an ancestor's life. The information on these records are as trustworthy as the person who created the record.

It's true some people can put up supposition, but you can take what you learn in their (family) tree and track down more information to prove what another tree provides.

Q. Any surprises in family searches?

A. I think somebody who doesn't know genealogy would be surprised by how much information is available on censuses. You can see how much your grandparents paid for rent in the 1930 Census, whether the family had a radio and their exact street address. There are 24 million World War I records. Your grandfather and great-grandfather's signature is right there on the record to look at.

As a company, we've explored presidential candidate Barack Obama's ancestry and found his Irish roots.

Q. Let's talk about DNA in family research. Is it becoming more prevalent?

A. Absolutely. We see DNA as another component to allow people to find other ways to discover their family's past.

Q. Explain how DNA works without getting too technical.

A. There are two different types of tests. A "Y test" looks at the Y chromosome of males, and the (paternal line). A mitochondrial test can be taken by men or women and looks at the mitochondrial DNA passed down to children (both male and female) by their mother.

The Y DNA is really valuable from a genealogy standpoint. You can take a series of numbers (which represent your Y DNA code) and match against others who have had their Y DNA done. If the numbers are close - there are lots of scientific and mathematical formulas involved - you can find out how closely you're related. It gives you a chance to verify, outside of records, if two men are cousins.

Mitochondrial DNA gives you more of an overview of maternal migration patterns. It can show where your ancestors lived thousands of years ago. Mitochondrial DNA does not give the possibility to say, "You and I are four generations from each other." Mitochondrial DNA doesn't mutate as frequently. The markers don't change frequently enough for you to see how closely you're related.

Q. What's the cost for DNA tests?

A. \$149 for the Y test looking at 33 markers. And \$199 for the Y DNA test looking at 46 markers. The mitochondrial test is \$179. The tests have to go through Sorenson Genomics laboratory and are quite expensive for us to process. As more people get tests done, the bigger the database and the more chances you'll find matches. If there's a really close match, our system e-mails you.

Q. What's the process?

A. The process is the same for both tests: You order a kit, swab the test-taker's cheek, put the swab in an envelope and the lab processes it. In three to four weeks, you check your results online.

For Y DNA tests, you receive your results, a haplogroup prediction with a map of your ancient migration on your paternal side, and a database to see who else matches you closely. You can find genetic cousins who may be closely related to you, and then contact them anonymously to swap information to see if you can find how you're related.

For mitochondrial DNA tests, you receive your results, a haplogroup prediction with a map of your ancient migration on your maternal side.

Q. What about privacy concerns?

A. We're committed to people's privacy. Our lab tests the DNA samples only for Y chromosome DNA and mitochondrial DNA. These two types of DNA test do not provide information about medical history, they can't identify you individually, and they won't be used in criminal or legal matters. You can be completely anonymous if you want to. But you can have your account set up so you can contact someone else who has closely matching markers. You get e-mail through an anonymous connection broker. You can share your e-mail address within these brokered e-mails, if you choose.

Q. So DNA doesn't replace good old-fashioned investigative work?

A. No. It's not as easy as "swab my cheek, and tell me who my ancestors are."