

# Tracing Pasts: Gut instinct can cause a genealogist to lose her head

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<http://www.newsherald.com/search/?q=Kleback&fstype=site&x=23&y=5>

All of you reading my column know I never miss Eastman's Online Genealogy Newsletter ([www.eogn.com](http://www.eogn.com)). I particularly enjoy the regular columnists George G. Morgan, Lloyd Dewitt Bockstruck and Michael John Neill.

Neill, who once was the featured speaker for a Bay County Genealogical Society seminar, is a particular favorite because I learn so much from his case studies. This morning I read "Casefile Clues: Repeated Surnames and First Names can be Confusing. Not only was the article an excellent example of careful untangling of ancestors with similar names; it also included one of the best genealogical quotes I've seen: "Gut decisions are for mealtime, not for genealogical research."

I know I've been guilty of assumptions based on nothing more than I thought something was so. An ancestor's move from one place to another looks logical. Two children of the same name in a household must be a census taker's error. An ancestor must be dead if she isn't listed with her family in another census.

Happily my skills improved as I gained more experience, but I still have to be careful to analyze all the facts I find using more than a gut reaction. I want my genealogy database to be correct more than I want my first reaction to new information to always be right.

I know I am not the only researcher who makes assumptions. Many years ago I was helping a new genealogist locate her family in printed census indexes. (Yes, we had no online indexes then.) We found a listing that met all the criteria for her family except one. The name wasn't spelled exactly as it is today.

The genealogist refused to accept that this could be her family, saying, "They were always literate." Well, she didn't find her family that day, but as she learned more about how the spelling of surnames wasn't anywhere near consistent until the 20th century, she had great success in her research.

Are gut reactions a factor in your genealogy work? We need to use all our senses and knowledge as we analyze the records we find. We also, however, need to be ready to change our assumptions when warranted.

What can seem right can prove to be incorrect as we gather more evidence or learn more about a set of records. The most successful family historians strive to learn everything they can that can help them analyze and interpret the documents that come their way.

Searching for and collecting genealogy resources is just part of what we do. Studying what we find with an open mind can keep us from going down the wrong paths and adding folks to our family tree that aren't related. It's more fun to keep going forward than going back and hitting the delete key!