

Tracing pasts: Be on the lookout for genealogical treasures

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I have often said there are genealogy resources out there just waiting to be discovered. A recent post on RootsWeb certainly proves this. It gave the URL of a story posted on the BBC (British Broadcasting Company) News site concerning a fascinating discovery.

In "Piecing Together the Past," author Robert Hall tells the story of historian Peter Barton, commissioned by the Australian government, who was researching the identities of World War I casualties discovered in a mass grave at Fromelles in France. In Switzerland he was allowed to search through records housed in the basement of the Red Cross headquarters in Geneva.

What he discovered was a treasure trove of data that had sat there mostly ignored since 1918. His find? About 20 million details written on card indexes or in ledgers. The records? According to the article, "They deal with the capture, death or burial of servicemen from over 30 nations drawn into the conflict; personal effects, home addresses and grave sites cover page after page. All were passed to the Red Cross by combatants; volunteers logging the information by hand before sending it on to the soldiers' home countries."

"According to Peter Barton, the UK's copies no longer exist, but the originals are still here and are immensely important.

Why no one has ever discovered the potential of this collection or even asked to see it before Peter Barton is a mystery. Perhaps it was just luck since we now have the technology to preserve and digitize these terrific records. The Red Cross has set aside 2 million pounds to begin the project. They hope to have the records online by 2014.

For all those who have a missing soldier from WWI, this collection brings the possibility of closure. There are records of burials at battle sites that have remained undiscovered and unmarked. There are records of mass burials with exact directions to their site and the names of soldiers buried there.

The information might help to identify the remains buried in many WWI cemeteries and simply marked as Unknown. For many families worldwide, this is such great news!

The Red Cross, known for its humanitarian mission, is taking on something unusual for them with their determination to make this collection available. They are asking other countries to share their expertise and will be making use of volunteers. No monetary donations were mentioned, but the project will end up costing at least 4 million Swiss francs. If I hear anything about contributions being solicited, I 'll let you know.

To read the article, go to <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7940540.stm>.