

# Tracing pasts: City directories have their role

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

Ancestry.com has announced the release of a 1940 Census substitute. They are referring to some city directories that have been added to their collection of databases. So far, eight states are included: California, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island and Vermont.

That's a good start, and I hope they add more states soon. As far as a census substitute goes, I'm not a big fan. City directories are great resources, but since they usually list heads of household only, they don't provide the kind of detail we get from the federal Census records from 1850 and later. Still, they do place a person geographically - for the most part. They can provide information on occupations. And when they include street listings, they give us a great piece of information: the other people who lived nearby.

When I search city directories, I first check for names. I then track the person through as many directories as I have available. I especially note the first and last year they appear. These are valuable clues.

The first year should be close to the time that they moved to an area or were old enough to establish their own household. I say "close to the time" because city directories are dependent on the information they receive.

I was once interviewed by a city directory worker in my driveway who asked who lived in my house, when I had moved there and my occupation. I answered truthfully, but there are many people who are suspicious of those asking for personal data. The information they furnish might not be accurate.

The last listing for a person is a clue to when the person might have left the area or died. Remember that they may have moved in with another family member or may just have been missed. You can use the dates you find to check other indexes like the SSDI. If the local library doesn't have an obituary index, city directory listings can help narrow the years you'll need to search in other ways.

After I finish examining all the name listings, I check all the directories for the address where my person of interest lived. Is he or she no longer listed at the address, but someone with the same surname is? This could be a relative. Do others of the same name live nearby? Record the names of others in the area. There may be descendants still living there that may have information on your relatives. They may also have photographs that include your family members.

Locating city directories isn't difficult. Many are included in the databases at Ancestry.com. Local libraries hold on to these, and it is possible to find some very early ones in some places. Google or other online searches can also turn up city directory holdings.

City directories may not serve as a true census substitute, but they have a value all their own. They are well worth pursuing. And we don't have too long to wait until the real 1940 census is released. Come on, 2012! If you want to see a second-by-second countdown to the release, visit <http://www.genealogue.com/2005/12/1940-census-release-countdown.html>