

Kenneth Marks Genealogy Journey and The Ancestor Hunt

My name is Kenneth R. Marks, and I live in Sun City, Arizona, spending over half of my time in Modesto, California. I am 75 years old. And this is the story of how I began the journey of finding my family history. And furthermore, the story of The Ancestor Hunt website.

In 2002, for a reason long forgotten, I joined ancestry.com as a “free subscriber”. Not driven by a passion to “know” my roots, but just interest, I began the search.

When I started, quite honestly, I knew the first and last names of only two of my great grandparents – both on my Mother’s side of the family – William William Williams – her grandfather, who she never had met, and her other grandfather, John Delano Lutgens, who she did know because he lived with her parents and her brothers and sister as she grew up in West Oakland. I did remember Grandpa Heyman, my father’s grandfather, but did not know his first name. He was the only one of my great grandparents who were alive when I was – up until I was nine years old. All five of my remaining great grandparents were a total mystery to me. In fact, I have no memory of anyone in my family even mentioning them – not necessarily because they led “bad” lives or had a sordid history – just because no one talked of them – and I do not think it is because I was not a good listener.

My Mother passed in July 2003. After her passing, I became more interested, again not a passion but just interest.

And since then, over the past two decades, I have become an obsessed Ancestor Hunter. I have made connections with previously unknown cousins who have collaborated with me to dig out family historical details through photo identification, translations of over a hundred Letters from Germany, and other cooperative endeavors. Most importantly, I have connected with far flung cousins who did not have an extended family, but now do and their life has changed because of it.

[I Discover Newspapers](#)

After some intense searching for residents of my family tree and connecting with new (and old) cousins, I discovered that it was not my main goal to find new tree members and their birth, marriage, and death dates and locations necessarily. In other words, I had ZERO interest in becoming a “Name Collector” or a “Celebrity Ancestor Digger.” I was much more interested to discover the stories of my ancestors' lives. The BMD stuff became boring to me. I of course understood the need to ensure that the right people were in my tree and there were no “intruders” that I put there.

I then moved on to researching newspapers to find out those stories. If one of my living relatives did not know stories of ancestors from over a hundred years ago, then how could I find out more about them and how they lived?

Newspapers! Newspapers could hold the secrets to so many questions

- What was their occupation? Were they a miner, a gasfitter, a salesman, a stenographer, or a farmer?
- What lodges or associations did they belong to?

- Did they have a dark past as a criminal, or were they a victim?
- Were they an inventor or an entertainer?
- What church did they go to?
- Were they a council member, or a lawyer?
- Did they own some kind of retail establishment?

Newspaper articles were the key for sure. Not only to discover the life stories of my ancestors, but also to understand the back stories of events that happened that affected their lives.

When I started my personal genealogy research, I had very few relatives who were older than me as I am the oldest great grandchild and grandchild, and all grandparents and parents are gone. I had one uncle and two of my father's cousins left, and no one on my mother's side. Despite their help with some stories as they were few and far between, my only "hope" was to dig into old newspapers.

While on this newspaper research path, I discovered my two guiding passions:

1. If we do not document the stories of our ancestors, who will?
2. Our ancestors can "live forever" through this documenting of their life stories, and they deserve our attention to their memory.

Honestly, It hurts me to know that there are ancestors who did not have children, or did not marry, that no one will ever remember UNLESS I become the one who records what little or maybe a lot about their life story. And without a ton of information obtained through relatives' interviews, that left me with only old newspapers to research.

[The Beginnings of The Ancestor Hunt \(2010-2012\)](#)

Along the way of doing my own genealogical research, I discovered dozens of techniques to use to make progress in this journey. It was my intent to share these techniques in order that the journey for others would be less bumpy and hopefully just as rewarding as it has been for me.

The Ancestor Hunt website was created to share those techniques and tips.

[The Ancestor Hunt and Newspapers \(2013-2015\)](#)

As I got "good at it" (newspaper research that is), I discovered that there did not seem to be very many genealogists and family historians that used newspapers much as a tool. And there were not "places to go" to learn newspaper research best practices.

So, the next few years, The Ancestor Hunt was devoted to historic newspaper research methods.

Because of my personal interest in newspaper research, I naturally decided to share what I had learned. I began writing articles about how to research newspapers effectively. I started a YouTube channel that has about fifty "How to" videos about newspaper research and other genealogy pursuits.

In looking for newspaper sites to search, I decided to build a list of links to digitized newspaper collections and online historical newspaper titles. Yes, there were other similar "link sites", such as ICON, Xaxxle, Bowling Green State University, Wikipedia, and the University of Pennsylvania. Yet I decided to build my own. Subsequently, all these other link sites have ceased to exist or have stopped adding new titles.

What started as 10,000 links to Free Online Newspaper Titles in 2014 has blossomed to over 40,000 for the U.S. and Canada.

[The Ancestor Hunt Adds New Genealogy Categories \(2016-2019\)](#)

Although creating and updating the lists is extremely time consuming, I found added time to focus on other areas of genealogy research. I decided to create lists to free online collections for three common categories of collections that most researchers seek: Photos, Obituaries, and Birth, Marriage, and Death Records.

During this period, I added links to free online collections for new categories. Today, there are 21 different categories. What started in 2014 with 10,000 newspaper title links, is now over 165,000 links in twenty-one distinct categories.

Also, during this period, I created a Genealogy and Newspapers Facebook Group (now over 14,000 members), a Facebook Page with over 37,500 Followers, several Pinterest Boards, as well as a Flipboard dedicated to Newspaper Research.

[The Ancestor Hunt \(2020-present\)](#)

More recently, I started publishing one- or two-page Quick Reference Guides. They are free. In late 2021, I published my first book – “Learning More About Your Ancestors Online”. I had so much fun doing that, I am working on two more books for 2022, one in the Summer, and one in November.

[What Are My Personal Genealogy “Axioms”?](#)

1. In my personal genealogy pursuits, I am much more interested in the life stories of my ancestors. None of my ancestors were born in the U.S. prior to the 1850s. In fact, I stop researching backwards intentionally. I have very few ancestors who were born in the 18th century. Why should I research to find their parents? It is highly doubtful that I will discover their life story.
2. Our ancestors deserve our attention to their memory. We MUST write about them. To honor them.
3. I have never been interested in genealogy academic pursuits or certifications. I follow the rules about FAN research, evidence gathering and analysis, and citations because they make sense, not because they are “have-tos”. I am not interested in doing other people’s genealogy research. Although I highly admire those who study to become more accomplished researchers, it isn’t in my plan.
4. I have zero interest in DNA research. I cannot explain why not. My first cousins on both sides have done it with no positive reasonably close connections.
5. The Ancestor Hunt website exists to “help people find stuff.”
6. I create these long link lists, Quick Reference Guides, etc., primarily for hobbyists, I think. I have discovered that a significant percentage of them do not know how to research, do not know where to start looking, yet really want to find out more about their ancestors. Many are just lost and have a tough time building good genealogy habits. Hence, they develop the “bad habits” that you and I gripe about (e.g., tree copying without verifying).
7. And.... Finally – I love newspapers!