

Genealogical Cold Case: a Step-by-Step Process

Lisa Louise Cooke, of the *Genealogy Gems Podcast*

Website: www.GenealogyGems.com

Email: GenealogyGemsPodcast@gmail.com

Step 1: Get Prepared and Organized

The old school approach: 3 Ring Binders and file folders

New approach: *Evernote* available free at www.Evernote.com.

An Evernote notebook is a great way to create a Cold Case File. It synchronizes all of your notes between all of your computing and mobile devices.

Step 2: Retrieve all Pertinent Case Information

You probably already have this available if you use a genealogy database software program. Pull together family documents. Here's a checklist:

- ☐ Family Group Sheets
- ☐ Individual Summary
- ☐ Pedigree Chart
- ☐ Descendant Chart

Step 3: Fully Reacquaint Yourself with the Case

This is what detectives do! Carefully comb through everything that currently exists in the file. This means:

Re-interviewing Witnesses

In genealogical terms this means we may be re-interviewing folks that are still living, or we may be going back and reading the autobiography of someone that is long gone.

Reexamining the Record Evidence

Go back and look at your records - don't make assumptions. Re-examine everything!

Physical Evidence

Examples of physical evidence are photographs, books, heirlooms, or any other physical item that pertains to the brick wall. Look over them and make notes about things you notice that you might have questions about.

Step 4: Create a Time Line

Check out your genealogy software because it may include a timeline feature that you can print. There are also timeline tools available online:

- ☐ Our Timelines at www.Ourtimelines.com (free)
- ☐ www.TimeLineMaker (paid service and 30-day free trial)
- ☐ Smart Draw at www.SmartDraw.com. (\$)

Offline tool: Excel

Step 5: Examine the Bigger Picture

Learn more about the time, the place, and the people involved in the case with these tools:

Google Books - www.Books.Google.com

Old history books are often in the public domain if they were published prior to 1923. Many of them are fully digitized and searchable. Search within old county histories for keywords; anything to do with the location, people, the places, the businesses in your case.

Boundaries

Be sure you have identified any boundary changes. Whether it is a country, a province, or county, boundaries change over time and unless you have the correct boundary lines for the time frame you are researching, you will not find success. Here are some resources that can help:

1) *Atlas of Historical County Boundaries (U.S.)* www.Publications.NewBury.org/ahcbp

Here you will find an interactive map that will allow you to select a location at a particular time. County boundaries changed regularly in the U.S. and this tool will prove invaluable.

2) *Google Earth (International)*

If you want to see the bigger picture, as well as plot and analyze your evidence, Google Earth is a powerful free tool. Download it for free at www.Google.com/earth. Try using the "Historical Imagery" slider tool in the Google Earth toolbar to go back in time visually. User Google Earth plot place markers for all related events on the map. (Resource: *Google Earth for Genealogy Volume I and Volume II* video cd by Lisa Louise Cooke. www.GenealogyGems.com or in Canada through Global Genealogy.)

Step 6: Round Up the Suspects

All good investigations start by looking at the family first, specifically the suspected relatives. Finding them in the census, locating their vital records, etc. Ensure you have filled in all the record blanks.

Cluster Research

Move out from the immediate family into the ancestor's circles of influence. Look at your records and see who is listed as a witness for events such as a baptism. In the census, who were the neighbors? Who is signing as a witness to citizenship? Who were their friends? Who were their associates? Who worked at the companies where they worked? Scout the newspaper social columns. These are all potential *suspects*, and in pursuing them you might find a newspaper article that lists your ancestor and their relationship.

Step 7: Formulate Your Questions

Write a Narrative

Write down what you know in a narrative. By doing so, you will notice gaps that you didn't see before. Record your questions in your notebook and pursue them further.

Blogging about your genealogy is a great way to write your narrative while connecting with other researchers and family members online.

Step 8: Develop a Hypothesis

Even though you want the evidence to lead you, a hypothesis will give you focus. If a hypothesis turns out to be a dead end, it can be checked off the list with confidence.

Step 9: Look for New Evidence

Checklists - www.FamilyTreeMagazine.com/freeforms

Checklists help ensure you don't miss a single record, or look for the same record twice!

Overlooked Records

You can also get the evidence that some people forget. Here are some examples:

1) Marriage Applications

Some jurisdictions have the original marriage applications, but they may not include them with a regular marriage record request. Be sure to ask for them specifically.

2) Voter Records

In the U.S. they are more common than you might think.

3) Non-Population Census Schedules

There are other census records available beyond Population. In the U.S. keep an eye out for Agricultural, Mortality, Veteran, Slave, and Manufacturing. Learn more here:

<http://tinyurl.com/kgkmbmp> In Canada look for Nominal Census, Head of Household Census, Aggregate Census, and Agricultural. More info: <http://tinyurl.com/7mym9xt>

4) Beyond the Obvious

Ask yourself: "what other agencies / entities were involved in this event and could they have recorded their own version of the event?" Here are examples of sources available beyond a death certificate:

- ☐ church records
- ☐ burial records
- ☐ cemeteries
- ☐ grave stones
- ☐ obituaries
- ☐ coroner or medical examiner reports
- ☐ Social security death record

Google Searches

Expand your thinking in terms of *new* evidence. In your search for new evidence consider these specialized Google searches:

Google Search #1) Linked Search

Find which websites have linked to a great site. Copy the URL address of a website that pertains to your family history (my example was the Thompson Family Tree) and then

go to Google.com and type LINK: and paste the URL address (no spaces.)
Example Search Query: **LINK:**<http://www.greatwebsite.com>

Google Search #2) Related Search

Find websites that most closely match the great site you found. Example Search Query:
RELATED:<http://www.greatwebsite.com>

Step 10 Call for Back-Up Reinforcements.

Sometimes a cold case detective involves the media to gain additional leads from the general public. Genealogists have their own media outlets:

- 1) *Social networking websites* like Facebook, media blogs, Twitter, Pinterest, and Google+. This is where you can go and ask for help!
- 2) *Hold a Google Hang-out* www.google.com/+learnmore/hangouts/ Pull together your genealogist friends and talk about your cases.
- 3) *Skype* www.skype.com Dial up a friend / expert for free. Did you know Skype allows you to share your screen?

Step 11 Go on a Stakeout

Google Alerts - www.Google.com/alerts

Google Alerts can do the searching for you. Run a web search query and then save it as a Google Alert. Google Alerts will run your searches for you behind the scenes, 24/7. When Google finds a new webpage that meets the criteria, it will email you the result and link. (Requires a free Google account)

eBay - www.eBay.com

Sign up for a free account, and then run a search on keywords related to your family history. Save your search as a "Favorite Search" and eBay will search it for you, just like Google Alerts.

Message Boards - www.Rootsweb.com

Put a message out there and let folks know what you are trying to find.

Step 12 Posting Wanted Posters

Genealogy Forums

Head to the genealogy forum at www.FamilyTreeMagazine.com, and put a message out there - a "wanted poster" in a sense.

Your Own Genealogy Blog

Start a blog for free at www.Blogger.com . Put family history information out there, and one day someone will do a search and up will pop your blog in the search results. Then they can get in contact with you.

Online Family Trees

There are lots of options for *free* online family trees: www.WikiTree.com, www.Ancestry.com, www.MyHeritage.com