

Random Thoughts About Family History.... By Dan Boyle

The rule is to start with what you know about yourself and work backwards: your parents, grandparents, etc. It is not a good idea to start with a known history of a famous family and try to work your family into it.

Starting with yourself and going backwards you might find some famous people. Among my first cousins is one who married Jimmie Dykes, a major league baseball player and coach from the 1920s. Another cousin now carries the name Guggenheim and has lived for years in a castle in Spain. Both of them started out as North Dakota farm girls. I once e-mailed her about her father's love of good horses. Yes, she said, there were horses before Mercedes!

Consult your elders. Funny thing—we've become the elders. Questions should be simple. Not tell me everything you know. Instead go with questions like: Did grandfather have brothers? What were their names? Did they live nearby? Did they get along? How was Christmas celebrated?

I heard of sleigh rides nine miles long to Midnight Mass with a meal afterward at the home of my uncle who lived in town. My Dad would sneak some EverClear alcohol into the Christmas punch of my teetotaler aunt. Families with means put their horses in a livery barn. The driver then had a cold walk from the livery barn to the church.

Remember; not everything written down is true. I've found this particularly true of women's ages. I'm not sure my grandfather knew the age of his second wife. She wanted to be known as 15 or 20 years younger. Even in her obituary she was 16 years younger. I had to go to the 1880 census to get a more accurate age, when her mother gave her age. She was really seven years younger. My Aunt Mary was 30 when she married, not 25. She apparently did not want to be five years older than her husband.

Records filed immediately after an event tend to be accurate. Birth, baptism, death certificates are accurate or no more than a few days off. Tombstone inscriptions, especially on old stones often are incorrect. Some stones were erected years after the death. My great grandmother's stone says she died in 1872, aged 75. She had her last son in 1846. Not many women have children at 49. A lot of them at least in my family had children at age 45, including my mother, me!

There may be surprises. You might find documents signed with a witnessed "X" or find second cousin, or even first cousin, marriages. Some of my relatives homesteaded in Dakota Territory. Several adjusted their ages upward to be old enough to homestead. One adjusted her age downward to be young enough. She was 75, the maximum age to homestead was 65.

The Social Security Death Record index is a good source of information. For those who died while receiving Social security the death date and birth date is given.