

GENEALOGY: It's Actually Becoming Popular!

by Vic Berecz

This hobby of mine ... family history ... has long been relegated to the preoccupation of old-fogies and elitists ... in other words to those "people whose past is brighter than their future." But, look what's happened lately: two nationally broadcast TV shows with excellent ratings; an inundation of users to genealogical websites; and enthusiastic public interest in the recent release of the 1940 U.S. Census data. These all lead one to the conclusion: family history is truly becoming popular.

Since my retirement, I've always viewed it as a fun game ... an enjoyable and inexpensive way to pass the time doing something useful, interesting, and which can be categorized as *lifetime learning*. I've also tried to encourage genealogy as a focused way of learning about the triumphs and mistakes of the past in a personally relevant manner. As such, I hope that my findings concerning our family history will provide some useful *teachable moments* to my children and grandchildren ... and perhaps even to future generations. Maybe that hope is unrealistic ... on the other hand the newfound popularity of genealogy provides me an impetus to carry on.

So, let's take a look at the factors that apparently are driving interest in family history, beginning with the recent release of the 1940 census.

The 1940 U.S. Census. As directed by our Constitution, every ten years our government takes a census. In accordance with law, the detailed personal information of each census is not released until 72 years later. Therefore, this year the 1940 census was released. It is the first census released in what we can truly call the *Internet Age*. Not only is the Internet available, it has become pervasive and virtually everyone has access. That, coupled with the fact that the release of the 1940 census has been planned for several years, and that access is free, make this a real phenomenon that has not gone unnoticed. The free access is the result of joint efforts between the U.S. Census Bureau and private companies like *Ancestry.com*.

For the old-fogies like me, it gives us what used to be a rare opportunity ... to see our own names on an original census enumeration sheet! Before you start, please recognize that finding your family in the 1940 census may not be all that easy right now. At present, you must be able to identify the enumeration district your family lived in on April 1, 1940. Access by name is not yet available, but it will be soon ... *Ancestry.com* already has the states of Delaware and Nevada indexed by name. [But, don't be surprised if such "value-added" will result in fees for access ... everybody's got to make a buck somehow!] Anyway, if you have no idea where your family lived in 1940, you're out of luck for now.

To find the enumeration district you must start with an address. I found my family on the first try ... we lived on a street in Norwalk, Connecticut that was less than two blocks long, so it was all in one enumeration district. With my wife's family, who lived in Brooklyn, New York parts of the street they lived on were in 54 different enumeration districts! Fortunately, there is a "One-Step" procedure that lets you (using a map if necessary) narrow down the number of EDs by cross-streets. I found her family in less than a half-hour. Give it a try, especially if you know your family's address or if they lived in a small town.

Finding the census record is one thing ... finding useful new information is another. Obviously, since I've been studying my family's history for many years, and I had the opportunity to discuss their lives at great length with my parents prior to their deaths, I wouldn't have expected to find out anything new. But, I did. I found valuable new insights into our

31	67	0	200	Glenwood Avenue, Norwalk	Head	M	W	59	M	Ar	NY	Ar	NY	New York	New York
				—, Esther	Wife	F	W	56	M	Ar	NY	Ar	NY	Westchester	New York
				—, Victor Sr	Son	M	W	29	M	Ar	NY	Ar	NY	Westchester	New York
				—, Helen	Son	F	W	26	M	Ar	NY	Ar	NY	Westchester	New York
				—, Victor Jr	Son	M	W	7	S	Ar	NY	Ar	NY	Connecticut	

family's life, I found miscellaneous facts of questionable interest, and I found errors ... both obvious and worth looking into. So, let's take a quick look at the part of the 1940 census record for the Bercz clan of South Norwalk that you see above. Hopefully that will aid you when you explore the 1940 U.S. Census for your own family

It starts out with our house number "31" Glenwood Avenue, we were the 69th household enumerated in this ED, we owned our home, it was valued at \$4000 and it was not a farm. No surprises so far ... except I know they bought the house in 1937 for \$2900 (my grandmother paid the \$200 down, and my parents took on the \$2700 mortgage) so either property values increased rapidly in those three years, or the estimate of value was a bit exaggerated.

Next comes the people. On April 1, 1940 we were a family of five ... my grandfather died later that year. At right is a family photo taken in 1940 ... the only picture of me with my grandfather. Note on the census register the little circle with an "x" in it next to my grandmother's name. That indicates she was the person who provided the information to the census taker. Since her English was not good, it is no surprise there may have been a bit of miscommunication. The first (and very obvious) error is my relationship to the "Head" of the household ... it says "Nephew" rather than "Grandson" ... Victor Sr, Victor Jr, and Victor 3rd should have made that a *slam-dunk*. Note also after the relationship column and elsewhere there are (lighter) pencil notations. These were added later to incorporate codes used to categorize data as well as make some corrections.



There is nothing notable about the next group of columns: sex, race, age, marital status, whether attending school and years of schooling. I'm not sure about the equivalence between American schools and European schools (which my grandparents attended), but I expect the census taker only wrote down what he was told. Place of birth for each of us is correct, as was my grandparents being identified as naturalized American citizens.

Then comes an interesting question: where did you live in 1935? This question was probably added to the census in 1940 because of the peculiar circumstances of the previous decade that led to unprecedented dislocations ... the joblessness of the *Great Depression* and the drought and *Dust Bowl* conditions on the plains. This data is where I got a surprise. It showed my grandfather living in New York City and my grandmother and my father living in Westchester County. [Note the penciled arrow correcting "Westchester" to the county column.] Could this be correct?

My dad didn't like to talk about it ... but it was obvious that my grandparents were estranged during much of the late 1930s. My grandfather had gone to Hungary for a visit of several months in 1934-5 and later lived alone ... a hard-drinking apartment *super* in New York. My dad worked in South Norwalk from about 1933, living with an aunt during the week and going "home" for the weekends. My parents married in 1936, and set up housekeeping in a rental

apartment in South Norwalk. In 1937, with my grandmother, they purchased the house at 31 Glenwood Avenue. Sometime later ... probably not until 1939 ... my grandfather rejoined the family. Perhaps that was due to my birth (or am I just biased by my love of my grandchildren?), or perhaps because he found out that he was terminally ill with cancer. In any case, the “home” my father went back to prior to his marriage I had always assumed was in New York City. Yet, I recall my grandmother having friends she was very close to who lived in Hartsdale in Westchester County. It makes sense ... husband left, only child off working all week, give up your apartment in the city and go live with friends. That little notation in the 1940 census cast new insights on the depth and duration of my grandparents’ estrangement. By the way, there’s also an error here ... I’m quite certain my mother lived in New York with her mother and siblings in 1935 ... not in Westchester with her future mother-in-law!

The part of the census form not shown above focuses on employment ... things like: whether employed; reason for not working; how many hours worked per week; occupation; industry in which employed; how many weeks worked the previous year; and total wages or salary for the previous year. This is the part of the census of greatest interest to many people, and allows them to gain an understanding not only of inflation, but how relative costs have changed and altered our standards of living. Note though that people who worked on their “Own Account” ... that is proprietors like my grandmother (bake shop) and my father-in-law (butcher) ... didn’t have to disclose their income.

So anyway, that’s my first look at the 1940 census. Hopefully you’ve gained a few hints on how you might learn more about your family from this fabulous, newly-available resource.

Finding Your Roots with Henry Lewis Gates, Jr. is a 10-episode PBS series premiering this spring (2012). The show’s website states that “The basic drive to discover who we are and where we come from is at the core” of this new series, and that the series “explores the tapestry of American history through the stories of celebrity guests.” As you would expect from PBS, and from Dr. Gates (a renowned Harvard professor), this is a serious show. Also as you would expect from PBS, the series will be re-broadcast for years to come ... so don’t worry too much if you missed it this time around ... though you can replay past episodes on your computer from the series’ website..

Each episode of *Finding Your Roots* does not ... as one would expect ... deal with the family history of a single individual. Rather each follows a theme. For example one show juxtaposed the family histories of three prominent clergy of different faiths. It explored the “Quest for Religious Freedom” focusing on how religion has played a part in attracting immigrants to the United States, and the role it plays in modern American families. Another episode featured two well-known actors who have mixed Jewish and Christian backgrounds. The theme here was “Tradition and Identity” ... an exploration of how one sees themselves. Finally, a third episode dealt with the issues relating to slavery in the northern part of the U.S. Here the family history of a married couple (Kevin Bacon and Kyra Sedgwick) was used to focus on how their ancestors were involved with the issues of slavery in the late 18th and early 19th centuries ... with particular attention to the attitudes of Quakers toward slavery. BTW – in the course of this episode the audience found that Kevin and Kyra are distant cousins, as is the case in our own family where we recently found my in-laws to be distant cousins. No surprise though, if we go back far enough aren’t we all distant cousins?

The other interesting characteristic is the show’s focus on two distinct aspects of family history in each of their thematic settings ... the *paper trail* and the *genetic trail*. The “paper trail” encompasses traditional genealogical methods ... searching for and through church records, government records, property records, etc. My biggest gripe about *Finding Your Roots*

is that no indication is given of the ease or difficulty of accessing those paper records, or of the methods employed to locate them. Rather, they are simply presented as a *fait accompli* often in the form of an unrealistically elaborate scroll featuring ornate calligraphy and tied-up with a pretty ribbon!

The unique feature of *Finding Your Roots* is the segment at the end of each episode where they discuss the results of DNA testing of each of the participants. DNA testing adds in a broad general way something about our heritage in the far-distant past beyond the possible reach of paper records ... going back to ancient migrations. A newer aspect of DNA testing is able to assess the percentage of European vs. African vs. Asian heritage in an individual over the last 500 years. While it's no surprise that Pastor Rick Warren is "100% white" ... for people of mixed lineage these facts can provide a very interesting perspective on how you see yourself. Occasionally, DNA testing provides clues to specific relationships that existed in recent centuries, where perhaps a paper trail might be found. This was the case when Korean-American Rabbi Angela Buchdahl's DNA test established that she "shares long bands of DNA" indicating that she also shares "a common ancestor on her father's side going back about 300 years" with another *Finding Your Roots* guest ... Barbara Walters.

Overall, I'd rate *Finding Your Roots* a B+ for its approach and content and a B- for its entertainment value. [Remember, when I taught I was considered a *hard* grader.] It's definitely worth a try for anyone with a serious interest in family history or American history.

Who Do You Think You Are? is in its third season as a prime time show. Its longevity is its proof of success in the commercial TV environment. Let's start out with the fact that this show is on a major network ... NBC. Therefore, it must take commercial breaks and keep its sponsors happy ... and its principal sponsor is *Ancestry.com*, a for-profit company in the genealogy business. Needless to say, "product placement" is an essential aspect of this show.

Unlike *Finding Your Roots*, *Who Do You Think You Are?* is a show focusing on entertainment value. There are the usual *too-many* minutes of commercials interspersed through the hour. Just before each commercial an important new revelation *almost* comes to light ... just wait a couple of minutes while watching our ads. What's new? That's American TV ... what we've known and loved since childhood. That's how we expect to be entertained! And, they do pull it off quite well.

Each episode of *Who Do You Think You Are?* focuses on the family history of one celebrity. Those revelations that follow each ad are often surprising, and are at least interesting. From a genealogical point-of-view, on this show you get to see *some* of the methods used in following the paper trail toward historical conclusions. This is both good and bad ... my biggest gripe about *Who Do You Think You Are?* is that only two methods of following the paper trail are used: going on-line to *Ancestry.com* and traveling all over the world tracking down information.

Ancestry.com is a very good and rapidly improving resource – more on that below – but, it's certainly not the only way to access information on-line or near your home. [I know, they're the principal sponsor ... it's to be expected.] In fact, depending upon the focus of your search, other resources than *Ancestry.com* may be much better ... as is the case for my Hungarian family history work which is best pursued in the massive collection of microfilms owned by the LDS Church's *Family History Library* and accessible at my local *Family History Centers*.

As for the travel aspect of *Who Do You Think You Are?* it makes for a very entertaining show ... and I must admit that I've spent time studying records in churches and town halls in Germany, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia as well as in the U.S. But, it was usually in conjunction with travel planned for other reasons. I, like most of you ... and unlike the show's

celebrities ... simply can't afford to go off on worldwide excursions to track down a piece of paper about our 6-greats-granduncle. So, in that respect the show is somewhat unrealistic.

In addition to its hints for genealogical research and its travelogue component, *Who Do You Think You Are?* often provides very interesting and stimulating historical content. For instance, I found the story of Blair Underwood most interesting ... especially the portion of the show about his land-owning free Negro ancestors in early 19th-century Virginia, who bought family members to hold as "slaves" to protect them. Overall, this was an amazing episode. Just as inspiring was Rosie O'Donnell's visit to an Irish "workhouse" similar to the one in which her ancestors were held during the *Potato Famine* for more than a year while awaiting emigration to America. That episode made me rethink my lack of effort in pursuing my grandsons' Irish ancestors who came to New York during the same era. Almost every episode of this series provides some meaningful insights into history.

I'd rate *Who Do You Think You Are?* a B for its approach and content and an B+ for its entertainment value. It too is definitely worth your time.

Ancestry.com is a public company (ACOM on NASDAQ) in the business of offering genealogy tools and databases to Internet subscribers ... in other words, it's a pay website. It justifies its existence by adding value to public-domain databases largely by moving them on-line and providing indices and other accessibility aides. That said, they represent, in my view, the leading edge of on-line family history research for *most* American users. [Disclaimer: I do not own any ACOM stock, and I am not at present an *Ancestry.com* subscriber ... though I am an *Ancestry.com* user ... more on that later.]

Let's begin with two facts. *Ancestry.com* does not meet the needs of all researchers; and you do not have to pay to connect to it. They are adding new databases regularly, but they are by far the strongest for research of American ancestors. All the U.S. censuses are available and nicely indexed ... but note that the censuses before 1850 have little to offer many researchers, and most of the 1890 census was lost long ago in a fire. The 1880 census (because of the long information gap following it) and the 1910 census (because of the extensive data it gathered) are particularly important. Also there is a good variety of other American records, and these databases are expanding rapidly ... but foreign records are few and far between. For instance, the Hungarian records I usually work with are non-existent in the set of *Ancestry.com* databases.

You can go to *Ancestry.com* without paying and "nose-around" quite a bit. I'm sure they view this feature as a "teaser" hoping to entice you to subscribe. But, the important thing is that you can get far enough without paying to determine whether they have any information of significance to you. For example, in preparing for this article, I went to *Ancestry.com* and typed in my name "Victor Berecz" and asked for records in all categories. They hit me with a list of 56 records matching that name exactly. Keep in mind that my name isn't "John Smith" so I don't have to deal with thousands of others with the same name. Actually, I believe I'm the only living American with that name, and there have been only two others in the past ... my father and grandfather. So all 56 records were about us and all were American records. There were 1920 and 1930 census records (1940 is separate and free as noted above); my grandfather's immigration, World War I draft registration, and naturalization records; my father's death records; my own marriage record; plus lots of references in city directories and phone books which almost certainly are of little value to me. It didn't show me any of the actual records ... just listed them to let me know what's available. With unusual names like mine, it's easy to determine whether it's worth proceeding. For others, the decision is likely more difficult.

Since my research is primarily in Hungarian records, and *Ancestry.com* can't help me in that area, I have chosen not to subscribe. OK ... obviously from time-to-time I'd like to go further and see some of the actual records they have available. As mentioned above, I am an *Ancestry.com* user ... more than just peeking at the free portions of their website. When I want to see and/or print a copy of a document I've identified by going to *Ancestry.com* at home, I simply go to a library that has licensed *Ancestry.com* for their users. This includes most LDS *Family History Centers* and many *Public Libraries*. For the frugal occasional user of *Ancestry.com*, like myself, this is a very reasonable and perfectly legal way to deal with the issue.

Ancestry.com is an excellent service and for a researcher who has determined that their website provides access to a large number of important records and who expects to use the service regularly, a subscription would be both cost-effective and convenient.

It pleases me immensely that genealogy is becoming a popular pastime and learning tool. I've called myself a "historian wannabe" and so making history personally relevant is important to me ... that's why I enjoy searching for the "roots" of my family . Hopefully you will enjoy seeking your roots as well.