

**The First Two Steps in
Tracing and Recording
Your Family's History:
Getting Started©**

Written by

Lorraine Escobar

Certified Genealogist/Native American Lineages

September 20, 1999
Revised March 27, 2010

**THE FIRST TWO STEPS IN TRACING AND RECORDING YOUR FAMILY'S
HISTORY: Getting Started**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction..... 3

INTERVIEWS

 Start talking to your relatives 3

 To whom do I start talking? 3

 The Internet..... 4

 What questions should I ask?..... 4

 Should I ask for copies of certificates? 5

 Are photocopies good enough for legal documentation? 6

 How should I keep my notes organized? 6

 Explanation of forms

 What if the information I get doesn't fit on the forms?..... 7

 Okay, I've talked to everyone. What now? 8

**OBTAINING CERTIFIED COPIES FROM COUNTY & STATE
RECORD OFFICES**

 How do I know where to order certified copies of my documents? 8

OBTAINING CERTIFICATES FROM CHURCHES 9

 Is there a difference between a certificate and a record found
 in the church registers? 9

CONCLUSION & AUTHOR INFORMATION 9

FORMS INCLUDED IN THIS PACKAGE

 Ancestry Chartback

 Single Family Record Sheet (Part I)back

 Single Family Record Sheet (Part II).....back

THE FIRST TWO STEPS IN TRACING AND RECORDING YOUR FAMILY'S HISTORY: Getting Started

INTRODUCTION

Webster's New World Dictionary defines genealogy as "a recorded history of a person's ancestry, the study of family descent, lineage." Most often, in my area of specialty, Native American Indian Lineages, the goal is to produce enough legal documentation to enable the client to legally enroll with their perspective tribes. Therefore, when one contemplates such a legal purpose for this "recorded history," one must also contemplate the quality of research and reporting that goes with it.

Good genealogy is a science – the systematic application of specific, time-tested, research methodologies that produces a reliable compilation evidence of one's ancestry. As daunting as this task may seem, all journeys through time begin with a single process, a simple one - family interviews. The next step is simple as well - obtaining county records.

Thus, the purpose of this publication is to get you started in your family research with the first two tasks. Although there is so much more to genealogy than is presented in this publication, once you have completed this two-part phase of your research, you will be ready to move on to other areas of research. At that point, if you feel you cannot continue the search yourself, you will at least be prepared to make the job easier for anyone who helps you.

Now, let's have some fun and get you started!

INTERVIEWS

Start talking to your relatives

It's real simple. Start talking to everybody you possibly can about your family history. Living testimony is such a great resource. Of course, you may find out some things that you really didn't want to know. But, there's a clue to be had in everything you hear. Even if you think its just gossip, always write all of it down; you can always clean it up later.

To whom do I start talking?

Everyone has relatives somewhere - parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, second cousins, third cousins, great grandparents, grand aunts, and grand uncles. I'd bet that some of your relatives would be very honored that you would value their contribution to your project. Some might not be so cooperative but you never know until you ask them. Ask them to show you their family pictures. Make a nice visit out of it. Oh, and don't forget to make it worth their while - bring a pie, take them out to coffee, offer copies of your finished work (you can think of something).

Family friends are also a great resource, especially older family friends, people who knew you when you were just a knee-high-to-a-grasshopper-snot-nosed kid. In fact, they

THE FIRST TWO STEPS IN TRACING AND RECORDING YOUR FAMILY'S HISTORY: Getting Started

might be more apt to tell you things that your other family members may not want you to know. That's okay. Remember clues are clues, and just like panning for gold don't waste an ounce of dirt without being absolutely sure you have every possible lead it can produce.

Another great living resource is other people whom you don't know very well - your old high school teacher, counselors, policemen, the town janitor, and town elders. Think about it. Is there a town historian in your hometown? You may not be that familiar with these people but I'll bet one of them knows more about your family than you realize.

Call them, write them, visit them, do what it takes, but do it. Don't wait until it's too late. Remember, everyone who goes to their grave takes their memories with them.

The Internet

Ah, the best thing since (name your invention). Maybe so, but there's lots of pitfalls with what you can get from the Internet. Lots of people publish their genealogies but not everyone is a certified genealogist or even understands how to interpret the evidence they possess. If you download or copy someone else's work, use it as a guide for more clues. Never use it as an absolute statement of fact until you, or a certified genealogist, have verified each fact with documentation. A pedigree chart is not evidence!

Bureau of Indian Affairs Paperwork

You'd be surprised at how many sources are misunderstood. For example, everyone who enrolled in the 1928 California Indian Jurisdictional Act may think that is proof of an American Indian heritage. Not so. I guarantee it. Even the federal government knows this paperwork can be in error. This is why the Office of Federal Acknowledgment requires petitioning tribes to prove back to a historic tribe by using other substantive documentation. I have seen too many people use the Bureau of Indian Affairs evidence to try to get their Indian rights only to fail upon discovering they are not really Indians. And, some have discovered that the tribe, to which they thought they belonged, was different than the one that was actually in their heritage.

Okay, I'm off my soapbox now, but I think you get my caution. Don't get your hopes up until you've seen all the proof.

What questions should I ask?

Start with one person, and get as much detail as possible - exact dates, exact places. If all you get is a general statement, i.e. "He was born somewhere in Mexico," then you ask, "Where in Mexico?" If you don't get an exact answer, do not fear. What one person may not be able to provide, someone else might. At least, you'll have something to use to stir the memory of someone else.

These questions can be re-formulated for brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. However, I think you get the general idea. If you were to begin with interviewing your parent, for example, here are some questions you should ask:

THE FIRST TWO STEPS IN TRACING AND RECORDING YOUR FAMILY'S HISTORY: Getting Started

1. What was your full name at birth?
2. What date were you born?
3. In what city, county, and state were you born?
4. Were you born on a reservation, at home, in a hospital, or other?
5. Were you baptized as a child?
6. If so, in what church you were baptized, and where it is now?
7. What is your dad's/mom's full name?
8. What is your dad's/mom's birth date?
9. In what city, county, and state was he/she born?
10. What are the full names of your brothers/sisters?
11. When and where were your brothers/sisters born?
12. What were the names of their spouses?
13. (If applicable) When and where did your brothers/sisters die?
14. On what date did you get married to Mom/Dad?
15. In what city, county, and state did you get married?
16. Did your marriage take place in a church, in front of a Justice of the Peace, somebody's backyard, a tribal reservation, or where?
17. Did you get married more than once?
18. (If applicable) Who did you marry and when and where did you marry?
19. (If applicable) How did the marriage end, in annulment, divorce, death, other?
20. (If applicable) When and where did these events happen?
21. (If applicable) When and where did Mom/Dad die?
22. (If applicable) When and where did your dad/mom die?
23. Where did you live as a child?
24. Where did you live as a teenager?
25. Where did you live as an adult? (Gets years, and corresponding names of places - addresses are excellent!)
26. Did you serve in the military? What branch? What war?
27. Did you get a social security card? (Get the number if possible)
28. Did your dad/mom get a social security card?
29. Who else do you know that might be able to talk to me about our family?

Should I ask for copies of certificates?

By all means! Assuming you are conducting this interview in person, always ask if there's a birth, baptism, marriage or death certificate at which you can look. If they'll let you make a copy, offer to do it right then and there. Run down to the local copy shop, make your copy, and hand them back the original right away. If there's a problem with trust, take them with you and buy them a cup of coffee, lunch, a steam bath or whatever their fancy. Whatever you do, make that copy and never take someone else's property on a promise. Things get lost in the mail, then that valuable document could be a goner and you've just lost some trust. Don't take that chance.

If it is not possible to get copies in person, always offer to pay for making copies (plus a little extra for gas money and postage). And, send that money right away. Don't dawdle

THE FIRST TWO STEPS IN TRACING AND RECORDING YOUR FAMILY'S HISTORY: Getting Started

or people won't take you seriously. If they don't want your money, at least thank them profusely.

Are photocopies good enough for legal documentation?

It depends on who is requiring the information. Some Indian tribes demand an original birth certificate should be sent directly to them from the county office. For the federal acknowledgment process, they just need photocopies. One area of caution is to be sure that the information has not been altered from the original. If you suspect such an alteration, definitely order a certified copy of the record. I should state here that you may not need to produce the originals, in every case, but it is good to have them just in case they're required.

Meanwhile, copies of existing documents are extremely useful in figuring out your next clues while waiting to get a certified copy from somewhere else. So, as a safeguard to yourself and to anyone who helps you, do the following when making copies:

1. If you make a photocopy of an original certified document, always make a notation of where you got it. You can put it on the back or neatly write it on the front where there is room (top or bottom). State the following, "Original certified document in the possession of (then put down the name and address of the person who loaned it to you)."
2. If it was just a photocopy that you copied, then write, "Copy provided by ... (as above)"

By the way, certified copies always have some sort of impressed seal on them or are printed on specific government paper, and are always dated by the recorder. Lastly, while hospital certificates are useful but more often than not the hospitals don't keep records of those certificates. In the event of an adoption, one tale-tell sign is an amendment date that does not coincide with the birth date. If you find that, it's time to ask more questions.

If you find a Notice of Birth Registration instead of a birth certificate, this tells you there is a birth record on file with the local county office or the state office. It is always better to go after the fullest record possible, so don't stop at a notice of birth registration.

How should I keep my notes organized?

I have enclosed three forms for you to use and copy for your research project. (I have provided one copy of each form, and a master, so you can get started right away. But, do make more copies or work in pencil.) Below are some pointers on how to use each one:

Ancestry Chart

First, make copies. As you proceed, you might make mistakes or you just might need to add more pages.

THE FIRST TWO STEPS IN TRACING AND RECORDING YOUR FAMILY'S HISTORY: Getting Started

There are instructions on the left side of this form. Put your name in the #1 slot which is located in the middle, left-hand, side of the page. Put your father's name in the #2 slot and put your mother's name in the #3 slot, and so on.

The abbreviations are also explained in a box located on the top, left-hand, side of the chart. Fill in the appropriate information as you get it for each person on that chart - "b" for birth date, "b.p." for birthplace, etc.

Single Family Record Sheet (Two Parts)

You'll need to make more copies of these forms because you will need to track each generation in your family's lineage. For example, if you start with your parents, you will be listed as a child along with your siblings. Then, you'll need to start one with your grandparents that lists their children, including your dad/mom. Once you begin learning more about your great-grandparents, you'll need to do one for them as well, and so on.

Just as precaution, generally you won't need to do a family record for your uncle and aunt, listing their kids, or other collateral relations. The goal is to track your direct descendancy. And, it is through this tracking process of all the siblings in each generation that can help you through a more advanced form of research such as census records, church records, wills, probate records, etc.

The second part of this form acts like a second page to the first sheet. As you will note, the boxes to the left of the children's names are left blank. You can number them on your own, and then you can add as many pages of this form as necessary for each single family.

If a parent had more than one spouse, with or without kids, you'll need to have a separate record for each marriage.

What if the information I get doesn't fit on the forms?

These forms are not meant to hold everything you will hear. However, they are meant to organize the pertinent details of the facts for which you are looking. Once you have had a chance to look over your notes (and re-write them neatly, if necessary), log each fact on these forms. (Use pencil if you suspect that there's doubt.) Stick to names, dates and specific location (city, county, state) of each event. And, although I left one line for additional notes, you may want to simply attach those extra notes, for each family group, to the back of the form, or in a file for each family group.

Keeping good notes is an art. The more you do it, the better it gets. Just remember, you should always put down the date you conducted that interview, the name of the person you interviewed, and his/her address and phone number. Personally, my handwriting is so bad at times even I can't read what I wrote. So, sometimes I have to re-contact the person to clarify what I writing about. Lastly, if anyone questions your work, you can

THE FIRST TWO STEPS IN TRACING AND RECORDING YOUR FAMILY'S HISTORY: Getting Started

quickly point to the source and say it was "from the horse's mouth" or something far more brilliant and complimentary than that.

Okay, I've talked to everyone I can possibly find. What now?

Now it's time to pull out the old pocket book and send away for certified copies of records. It's really not so difficult as you'll see in the next section.

OBTAINING CERTIFIED COPIES FROM COUNTY & STATE RECORD OFFICES

How do I know where to order certified copies of my documents?

Generally, that information is on the certificate itself.

1. Look at that photocopy of the record you snagged from old Uncle Rasputen. In what county and state was that birth/death/marriage registered? Once you spot that, then;
2. Call information (or go on-line), for that county, and get the phone number of the county recorder's office.
3. Call that county recorder's office and ask how much they want for a certified copy of a birth/death/marriage certificate, if they need a check or money order, their mailing address, and what kind of details they need in your request letter.
4. Write the letter, provide all the details you possibly can, and send the check or money order.
5. Wait and "ye shall receive" in two to six weeks.

Now, if you do not have even a measly, faded out photocopy of the document in question, but, you do have information that you have dutifully gleaned from your family interviews, you can still get what you need. If you know the exact date and details of the event, you can send a request letter, just as in the example above, to the county where the event occurred. It does not matter if you already have a photocopy. If you have the details, and the money, you can get a certified copy. Just follow steps 2 through 5.

If you don't have every piece of information that the county recorder's office might request, you might be able to get them to conduct a search based on what information you can provide. That usually costs a little more so you should ask them if they charge a search fee before you put together your request.

Lastly, if you have absolutely no idea as to what county in which the event occurred, but you do know the state, you can still find what you are looking for. The first thing to do is to contact the Bureau of Vital Statistics for the state in which the event occurred. Do the same things as outlined above, call information, get the cost, find out what details they needs, etc. When you get that certificate, it will be in the form of an abstract certificate. All that means is that some of the better details are left out. However, that abstract will provide the county. From there, you can contact the recorder's office at that county, and follow the steps as outlined above.

THE FIRST TWO STEPS IN TRACING AND RECORDING YOUR FAMILY'S HISTORY: Getting Started

OBTAINING CERTIFICATES FROM CHURCHES

Generally, there is no problem in obtaining baptism, marriage or death certificates from a church. The only problem is that the availability of the record may depend on when the event occurred. Whether the event happened 10 years ago, or 100 years ago, you'll need to contact that church and find out where they keep the records for those years. Once you've done that, be sure to ask how much they expect, as a donation, for making the certificate.

Usually, obtaining a church certificate is quick and easy when you have exact dates and names of the person and relatives. But, if you only have a general idea, you might be able to get the archivist to search their records for you. However, not all archivists are willing to do searches. Always inquire regarding these services when you communicate with them. And, again, if at all possible, always offer a donation for their services.

Is there a difference between a certificate and a record found in the church registers?

As many know, most churches have a register where they log specific events in which they participated - baptism, confirmation, marriage, and last rites. Many of the older books are on microfilm, thanks to the Genealogical Society of Utah, Church of Latter Day Saints. Photocopies of these pages are very, very useful if you can get them. But, if you use these, write down (in the margin somewhere) the film number you used, the date of the event, the name of the church, the type of event, and the name of the person. As long as the record can be verified, it's legal.

Anytime a church certificate is requested, it is verified by a designated church official. Each certificate is filled out, according to the register, and signed by an archivist. Therefore, it can definitely serve as legal documentation as an original document.

However, there is one area that I would caution any researcher to take special care - the more times information passes through the human brain, the more chances there are that it did not get written down as it truly appeared in the register. If the person's eyes skipped a line or the person could not correctly decipher the handwriting (which can be a major challenge at times), there is room for human error. Nobody's perfect. What's the solution? I say, get both the certificate and the photocopy of the record. If the certificate is not right, chances are somebody made an innocent boo-boo. But, at least, you'll know for sure. And besides, archivists don't always write down every detail.

CONCLUSION

Obviously, once you've gathered every bit of information from living people and county and church records, you'll know if you're hooked enough to keep going. (Hey, I said these were simple steps, not quick ones!) Has it been fun? Do you want to know more? If you could trace all the way back to Adam and Eve, would you want to keep going? Well, the last question was a little much, but it's a common funny to those who

THE FIRST TWO STEPS IN TRACING AND RECORDING YOUR FAMILY'S HISTORY: Getting Started

understand the fever very well. But, it will be at this point, that will be able to decide if you want to get a leg up to do your own work, figure the rest out on your own, or if you would rather pay somebody to do the work instead of you.

I can continue to work with you in your personal quest of recording your family's ancestry, either in helping you through roadblocks and teaching you the ropes, or by doing it for you. My rate is the same but the hours, that I spend, are up to you.

But, even if you do not hire me to finish this important work with you, or for you, I hope that you have found this publication, and forms, to be useful in getting started. Feel free to offer comments and send them directly to me at the address below.

Happy hunting!

Lorraine "Rain Cloud" Escobar
Certified Genealogist/Native American Lineages
P.O Box 7458
Santa Maria, CA 93456
Cell: (209) 985-9282