Step 8: Census Records
— Terry and Jim Willard

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the eighth in our continuing series "Family History Made Easy: Step by Step." http://ancestry.com/library/view/ancmag/2082.asp

If you've chased your ancestors back more than a couple of generations, you no doubt have been amazed at how mobile they were. This mobility presents a problem for the modern genealogist—it is easy to lose the trail of ancestors as they moved from country to country or state to state. Fortunately, there are clues the genealogist can turn to when the trail seems to have gone cold.

Imagine being given a picture of one of your ancestor's families. In the picture all the family members are grouped together with a description that includes names, ages, employment, addresses, even birth dates. This imaginary picture is not as far-fetched as it might seem—this is the type of extractable information included in census records.

In Step 8 of our series, we will examine federal census records and explain how to get the most from this source of genealogical information. We will define these records, explain how to use them in genealogical research, and detail where they can be found.

A census, according to *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary,* is "a periodic governmental enumeration of a population." Simply put, a government counts its inhabitants on a regular basis and records the totals. In the United States, both federal and state governments have conducted these "periodic enumerations." (For excellent coverage of all available census materials, refer to *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy,* Rev. Ed., edited by Loretto Dennis Szucs and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking, SLC: Ancestry, 1997.)

The census has proven to be a boon to genealogists. Although census records were never intended to be genealogical records, few other records give us better leads as we track our ancestors. As a beginning genealogist, you will come to appreciate all that the various censuses have to offer. We encourage beginners to use federal census records as a starting point. The reasons for this recommendation are these: the federal census records—especially those since 1850—provide excellent material for the researcher, and this material, unlike its state counterparts, is readily available at most major public libraries. The federal census data from 1790 to 1870 is alphabetically indexed by family name and the indexes are available (individually by state) in printed form at most public libraries and electronically on CD-ROM or the Internet at Web sites such as Ancestry.com.

The first U.S. federal census was conducted in 1790, and a census has been conducted every ten years since then. From 1790 to 1840, the census takers asked few questions, thus limiting the value these records have for us today. Starting in 1850, however, both the number and scope of questions began to change. Enumerators were instructed, for example, to list the names, ages, and gender for all persons living in the house (prior censuses had listed only the names of the heads of household and a simple tabulation of broad age groups). Each succeeding census asked

additional questions, and by the 1920 census twenty-nine questions were asked of each household.

Due to federal privacy laws, no federal records within a seventy-two year period are open to the public. Thus, the 1920 census is the most recent federal census available to researchers. (The 1930 census will be available after 2002.) One of the rules of sound genealogical research is to start with yourself and work backward in time, moving from the known to the unknown. If we apply this rule to census research, then 1920 is where you should start. In using this outstanding genealogical source, consider the following tips before you leave for your research trip:

••Write down as many facts as you know about the family or families you are researching. This should include names of family members, their respective ages, city and state where they resided in 1920, occupations, etc. Residence is especially critical in locating census records.

••Spell the family name in as many different ways as you can imagine. While the Soundex system (more on Soundex later in this article) can help with most phonetic spelling differences, some variations are so unusual that a family might be located using a totally unexpected code. Even a reasonably simple name such as Willard has appeared in census records with the following spellings: Williard, Wylerd, Villard, and probably several others we have yet to encounter.

••Convert all the surnames you are going to track using the 1920 census into their corresponding Soundex codes.

••Find a good research template to help you record any information you find. At the library you could make a photocopy of any results, but the cost for this can quickly add up.

••Call ahead to confirm that the library in which you intend to conduct your research has the 1920 census records and the Soundex. We have found some libraries with the census microfilm but not the Soundex microfilm. A trip to such a library can be frustrating.

The Soundex
Armed with the necessary names and supplies, you are ready to begin using the 1920 census data. It is important to remember that this is a multiple step process and each step must be done in order. First, however, we must discuss the Soundex as this is the most important piece of the puzzle.

Prior to the enactment of Social Security in the 1930s, Congress needed to know how many people might potentially qualify for benefits under the new, national relief scheme. The census, particularly from 1880, seemed to offer the most reliable estimate of how many recipients there might be. However, no adequate index existed for the 1880 census, and the sheer numbers of Americans counted in 1880 made any indexing a daunting task.

Upon recommendation from the National Archives, a different indexing system was utilized, a Soundex system. The Works Progress Administration hired individuals to go through the census data beginning with the 1880 census and create a Soundex card—an actual 3x5 card—for each

main entry in the census. In 1880, only families with children age ten and under were included in the Soundex. (These children represented the people potentially eligible for Social Security.) Later censuses were also soundexed.

In the Soundex scheme, all surnames would be reduced to a four-character code and a uniform set of rules applied to the process. A simplified list of rules follows:

1. Print out the name you wish to code. Example: WILLARD

2. Keep the first letter but remove all remaining vowels and the letters H, W, and Y. Example: WILLARD would become WLLRD (the I and A are dropped)

3. Keep the first letter but remove one consonant from any double (back to back) consonants. Example: WLLRD would be reduced to WLRD

4. Keep the first letter and use the Coding Guide to assign the appropriate number to the next three remaining consonants.

Coding Guide
B, F, P, V....1
C, G, J, K, Q, S, X, Z....2
D, T....3
L....4
M, N....5
R....6

Remember, the vowels (A, E, I, O, U) and the letters H, W, and Y are not considered at all. WILLARD is reduced to WLRD so the Soundex code is W463.

To use another example, JONES would be reduced to JNS. This would convert to J520. Note that if less than three characters follow the first letter, zeroes are used as place fillers. The name LEE would be reduced to just L and the Soundex code would thus be L000. As a final example, HENDERSHOT would be reduced to HNDRST and the Soundex code would be H536. Note that the code stops after the fourth character, even if there are consonants remaining.

For additional information on Soundex coding, refer to Using the Census Soundex, General Information Leaflet 55, published by the National Archives and Records Administration (Revised, 1997). Also, if you are online, visit a site such as www.cyndislist.com and follow the links to a Soundex converter—a program that will automatically convert any name you type into the Soundex code for that name.

You are now ready to begin your search in the library. First, locate the filing cabinet that contains the microfilm for the Soundex to the 1920 census. These rolls of microfilm are filed alphabetically by state so it is critical that you know the state where your ancestor lived in 1920. Second, locate the roll for the state that has the code you are seeking. Third, take this roll to a reader and scroll through the reel looking for the entry on your ancestor. For the most part, the

microfilm is in alpha/chronological order by code, then in alphabetical order by first name. Fourth, once you locate the card for your ancestor, write down all the information you see on the card—this leads you to the actual census entry. See the sample Family Card above (taken from the publication, *Using the Census Soundex*). You will need the information that appears in the upper right hand corner:

Vol. —— The volume number
E.D. —— The enumeration district
Sheet —— The sheet number
Line —— The line number with your ancestor listed

Fifth, locate the filing cabinets that contain the actual rolls of census microfilm and locate the volume number you copied from the Soundex card.

Finally, take that roll to the reader and scroll to the appropriate sheet number to locate the entry for your ancestor. Congratulations! You have opened a new door on information on your family. This last step will lead you to the most useful part of the 1920 census. You will be looking at the answers to the twenty-nine questions your ancestor provided when the enumerator showed up at his or her doorstep in 1920, pencil in hand.

Included will be information on place of abode, name, relationship to head of household, personal information, citizenship, education, nativity and native tongue, and occupation. Each of these categories offers either concrete information for the researcher or clues that will lead to concrete information. Quite literally, the answers to those twenty-nine questions represent the true essence of genealogical research—the opportunity to discover previously unknown information about an ancestor or a relative. The benefits of this information are twofold. It answers some questions and provides clues that may actually answer others with additional research.

It is a good idea to keep in mind the following tips:

••Verify the information you discover by using vital records and other primary sources.

••Make a hard copy of the information—either written or photocopied—so you can refer to it at a later time.

••In your research log, write down all the relevant information (where you found the data, the page number, the microfilm roll number, etc.)

••When you locate your ancestor, scan the entire page of microfilm. Quite often, other family members lived nearby and you might gather other good information.

••If you are researching an unusual name or a small town/county, you may want to locate all census entries for that family name in that area. These other families may prove to be related to the one you are researching.

••Follow up on all the clues provided from the census data—immigration, naturalization, etc. These sources will be covered in future Step by Step articles.

Census research is one of the most rewarding activities in genealogical research. It can also be boring and frustrating. Be prepared for a little of each end of the spectrum. But one thing is sure, of all the topics we cover in our classes and workshops, no other topic generates as much excitement as census research.