

IN-GENious!

When Do Beginners Graduate?

By **SHIRLEY RICHISON FIELDS**
IGS Treasurer

When do you graduate from being a beginner and become an intermediate or advanced genealogical researcher?

I can't really answer that because I have been trying to do genealogical research since 1969, but I know that I am still a beginner despite many years of "playing" at genealogy.

A beginner is someone who is trying to learn the fundamentals of a discipline, a subject, or a craft. That is what I am and what I am trying to do.

I began as everyone is told to begin. I got some Family Group Sheets and began filling in the blanks with everything I knew.

I did the next step as well. I talked to my mother and other older members of the family, making page after page of notes about what they remembered. I would then take the notes and pull out any pertinent facts to add to the Family Group Sheets.

Now this was before computers so I spent many hours handwriting

New column starts in this issue of IG

A new column about "doing genealogy," *IN-GENious!* debuts in this issue of *Indiana Genealogist*. Guest columnists will explore a variety of topics in coming issues.

Writing for this issue is Shirley Richison Fields, treasurer and head of long-range planning for the Indiana Genealogical Society. A Certified Public Accountant and an online instructor, Shirley is developing her family history website at <http://home.indy.rr.com/richison>.



all this information into a card file, onto Family Group Sheets, Pedigree Charts, and any other forms I could find or make up.

I even followed the advice of the experts who said to collect everything about the surname(s) of interest in each document, book, or microfilm you search so you don't have to retrace your steps to get information about new individuals when you find they are also relatives.

The result of trying to follow all these steps quickly added up to stacks and stacks of paper. Unfortunately, I didn't document my sources well. I thought collecting was enough.

When personal computers came along, I just knew all my problems were behind me as soon as I could afford to buy one – which eventually I did. Oh, what a job it was to type in all the information from all those stacks of papers.

A lot of the material didn't fit into some of the early computer programs. There was no place to record, for instance, two or even three birthdates after you discovered the conflicting data.

And I did not dare throw anything away because sometimes the card file had information that never made it to the Family Group Sheet, and the Pedigree Chart did not contain everything the Family Group Sheet had. I was stuck with all that paper and no way to start whittling it down.

Sure as I would throw something away, I knew it would be the one with that crucial bit of information on it, so I kept it all!

Now here I am many years later being asked to contribute to a column about beginning genealogy. The only expertise I have has come by first doing it the wrong way!

I cannot write a scholarly article on land records, or military records, or even census records. I can only tell you from my mistakes and how I would correct them if I were truly back at the beginning again.

The first thing I would do is join a local genealogical society. Go to the meetings, attend all the classes or workshops that are offered and get to know the other members. Volunteer to help out on any projects the society may have in process.

I would learn a great deal from the other members by doing all

these activities with them. Soon I would be ready to go a step beyond my local society and start reaching out to neighboring societies in the area or in the localities of interest to me.

I would join my state society and/or that of a state where I need to do some research.

There I would find still more knowledgeable people and more opportunities to network and volunteer. I would learn about bigger conferences and seminars to attend where I would begin to hear from recognized experts.

Hopefully such exposure to the genealogical world will come early enough in your research that you do not have years of mistakes behind you.

Mistakes caught early are much easier to correct. Without early exposure to the genealogical community, you may not recognize mistakes until many years later. You could sit at home blissfully unaware of what you should be doing instead of what you are doing – which was what happened to me.

Genealogical research is like any other research. For it to be of value to anyone else, you must document every step in your research process. Others must be able to read the results of your research and trust the conclusions you have made.

For them to do that, all your research findings must be verifiable. Simply put, if you list a source of information, a total stranger should be able to find that same bit of information in the same place you found it by using your documentation.

Saying "Got this from blue book on second shelf of library" is not documentation. A total stranger is not going to know which library, which blue book, or which second shelf – and library shelves change! Even something as important as information from a death certificate cannot be traced easily if the source you give is "Aunt Nellie's death certificate."

A recent book on documenting genealogical sources, *Evidence! Citation & Analysis for the Family Historian* by Elizabeth Shown Mills, takes into account many of the more recent technological sources. A copy may be available at your library or bookstore, at a genealogical conference, or (this is where your society networking will

pay off!) from a source someone in your society can tell you about.

Learning proper documentation early in your career/hobby as a genealogist is a **MUST** and will save you much time later – but you will never realize how much unless you do it the wrong way first and then have to repeat years of research to get the documentation.

Designing a filing system for the documents you collect is also a **MUST** for beginners. If you have a death certificate but cannot find it, what good does it do to know you have it?

How you set up your filing system is a matter of personal choice. The only requirement is that you must be able to lay your hands on any document you choose in a matter of a minute or two. If it takes you longer than that to find it, your filing system needs work! Do the filing now before the volume of paperwork gets totally out of hand!

Many books, seminar topics, and speakers are ready to tell you about possible filing systems so you should not have to look far for good suggestions. Pick a system that compliments the way you work. If you prefer binders, then use binders. If you have space for a file cabinet or two, by all means use files. Be comfortable with what you choose and have room for.

So once you determine to document all your sources properly and you have a filing system you like, go after as many *original records* as you can!

What means you will have to get up from your computer and go to the courthouse, the archives, the cemetery, and the library special collection to view the original records for yourself. There are several reasons for this. The most important is that once there, you very possibly will find more information than you anticipated.

On a recent trip to a courthouse for a marriage record, I was surprised to find more than just "Groom Jones and Bride Smith on X date at Some Co. were married by Joe Adams, JP." There were books of consents, naming parents of some of the brides and grooms. There were also separate books of marriage applications

which contain a lot more information than that found on the marriage register.

Writing to the courthouse for a marriage record will get you exactly what you ask for and nothing more! Going to the courthouse yourself can get you that "something more" and your research will produce more results with fewer brick walls.

"Old too soon, smart too late" is a saying I heard many years ago. I refuse to believe that I am old yet but am equally determined not to let the "smart too late" apply to my genealogical research. I'm putting it in order to pass on to future generations. What shape is yours in?

Business Records Collection, 1909-10, Indianapolis Public Schools

Extracted by RON DARRAH, IGS Central District Director

The following groups of records were taken from an old ledger book in the Indianapolis Public Schools archives at 1316 South-eastern Avenue, Indianapolis.

New Teachers

For The Year 1909-1910

Alice ALLEN, Librarian, SHS
 Jessie ALLEN, History, SHS
 Caryl AMES, Cooking
 Pauline L. BATTIES, #25
 Margaret COUDON, #35
 Agnes E. GARBER, SHS
 Ruth GILBERT, MTHS
 Hazel HACKSHAW, Cooking
 Robert F. HIMELICK, Prin. #16
 Howard HOLLENBACH, MT
 Millicent HOSMER, PT SHS
 Lawrence G. IRWIN, MTHS
 Mrs Carrie M. JACKSON, SHS
 Winafred JENNINGS, #52
 Frank JENNINGS, #57

Claud E. KITCH, Math MTHS
 Effie E. LITTLEFIELD, #25
 Arthur T. LONG, #26
 Adda MAY, #51
 J. R. H. MOORE, History MTHS
 Jessie MOORE, #18
 Everett OWEN, MTHS
 Donna I. PARKS, #32
 Anna PAUL, #54
 Charlotte READ, #57
 Mary C. ROBERTSON, #32
 Osmund SPEAR, MTHS
 Milo H. Stuart, Asst Prin MTHS
 Flora TRAYLOR, #18

Substitute List

Micha BUTLER, Bertha Ballard
 (Hotel?)