

# Prelude to Effective Research

## by Mary Lou Bevers

### Thoughts to Ponder:

1. **Why am I researching?**

Just curious? To have something to do? For my children & grandchildren? To help other researchers? To see how many names I can collect so I can brag about how far back I "have" my ancestors? Or because I want to know who my ancestors were?

2. **What if I have made a mistake in identity?**

Am I wasting my time on the wrong people? Have I shared unproven information with others, thereby misleading them? Do I distinguish in my own mind and record keeping what I have proof for and what, after careful study, is only a "maybe" or possibility or probability?

3. **Have I been thorough in my research?**

Am I developing the entire family group (other children, siblings and in-laws) to use as a tool for identity issues and to lead to needed information? Have I located my people in all possible census years? Have I searched (or had someone search) all available and appropriate records in all counties where my people lived? Am I building my case with solid evidence gathered from multiple sources that I have evaluated? Do I have photocopies of all of this evidence as a quick reference to analyze over and over as I become aware of new information--or to refer to if seemingly conflicting information is found?

### Summary:

It is essential that you understand the difference between merely collecting names with no supporting evidence, and the science of building your pedigree with evidence from multiple sources (when possible) for every name, date, and place in your records.

If you do "play in the trees" on the Internet, be aware that much of the information is probably wrong unless supporting evidence is cited. At best, you might see something among the errors that might spark an idea for a new location to search. Don't believe anything until you see the proof.

There are no bells and whistles to tell you if you have made a mistake. If you have made one, the sooner you discover it and correct it, the better. Without evidence you have nothing of value.

### Preparation:

Record your known facts onto pedigree charts and family group sheets. Build a Life Chronology Sheet for each ancestor you are studying. Other useful tools: A "do" sheet, a "did" sheet, a fact/study sheet, a census age chart, and a land section chart.

Learn about all record types and what information they should or might produce. Always write dates as: 16 Sept. 1863. This alleviates any misinterpretation. Don't assume that "Jr." and "Sr." are father and son (often they are not), or that children in a census household before 1880 are necessarily the children of the head of household, or that so-and-so must be the father because "no other names seem to be around" (often children moved to a new area with a remarried mother and stepfather whose name you may not know). Don't assume that a name spelled "incorrectly" is not of interest to you--spelling means nothing--consider anything close.

Learn about boundary changes and county formations in your localities of interest (see *Map Guide to the U.S. Federal Censuses 1790-1920* by William Thorndale). Other pitfalls: nicknames; initials; multiple persons of the same name; handwriting; punctuation (or lack thereof); loose terminology; city/county confusion in databases (death records would be located in the county where the person died, but probate records would be in the county where the person lived); errors can be everywhere--even in official records.

Become familiar with these other important books: *Ancestry's Red Book: American State, County & Town Sources*; *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy*; *Everton's The Handybook for Genealogists*; *Courthouse Research for Family Historians: Your Guide to Genealogical Treasures* by Christine Rose. Your library should have them.

Learn about the very important free internet sources: USGenWeb Project; Rootsweb; Cyndi's List; FamilySearch (has an 1880 census index); Indiana State Library and Indiana State Archives websites; Bureau of Land Management and National Archives websites; genealogical society websites. Ancestry.com has some free information and good paid subscriptions. Sign up for their free newsletters--they contain very helpful information and news. Attend programs, seminars, workshops and learn all you can. Research has never been easier for the knowledgeable researcher!

### Methodology/Formula:

Review your known/proven information; determine in what records that information should be found and where those records are. Go there (if possible) to do your own research. If that is not an option, then consider hiring a professional research near those records. Check their credentials & experience, and expect to pay anywhere from \$10 to \$50 an hour. Obviously you will want to be sure that the information you are giving them to work with is correct. See the directory from the Association of Professional Genealogists. Record newly-found information onto charts, citing evidence; review, determine, and then act again.

*Mary Lou Bevers has done on-site court house research in all types of records since 1966 and has researched for clients since 1980.*