7 CENSUS SEARCH STRATEGIES

By Juliana Smith 08 June 2010

 "They've just got to be here!" How many times have we uttered those words as we searched for ancestors in census records? I think we've all got at least one family that's playing play hide-and-seek with us. Before you jump to the conclusion that they were abducted by aliens, here are seven strategies that may help you to pull them from hiding.

1.) **First, determine whether or not they really should be where you think they were**. Arrange other records you've collected chronologically, creating a timeline that will help you to pinpoint exactly where they were at the time of the census. City or county directories and other records that include addresses are particularly helpful.

2.) **Search for a neighbor from a previous or subsequent census**. This is particularly helpful if your ancestor owned their home and didn't move around as much. You'll want to choose a neighbor who also owned their home, and was of an age that they would likely have been still living there at the time of the census.

3.) **Consider ethnic given and last names**—particularly if your ancestor was a recent immigrant at the time of the census. For example, your ancestor named John may be listed as Jan, Janos, Johann, or Giovanni. BehindtheName.com is one resource for finding ethnic equivalents or related given names.

Likewise, your ancestor may have used a more traditional spelling of his surname when he first arrived or it may have been spelled phonetically by a census taker who wasn't familiar with the name. In this case, learning more about pronunciation in your ancestor's native tongue can be the key. For example, in Polish, ę represents an "en"

sound. This could explain why I sometimes found my grandmother's surname spelled as Mekalski and other times as Menkalski.

4.**) If your ancestor's surname was prone to butchering by record keepers,** perhaps a search with given name only can help. Try adding in birth, relationships, and any other criteria the advanced search allows. While your grandfather Charles, may have been one of 1,246 Charleses in Lake County, Indiana in the 1910 Census, there weren't as many born in 1903 (166). Throw in the fact that he was born in Pennsylvania and you're down to 14. I used the advanced search settings found below each field to restrict my search to exact on all except the year of birth, which we all know can be off a bit in censuses. If you're still not able to locate Grandpa, there are additional settings now that could allow you to expand your search to adjacent counties and state for location, and for variants of the name Charles. Just make sure you're in the "Advanced Search" and click on the links below each search field.

5.) **Search for a sibling**. Sometimes while your ancestor's name might have been misspelled or obliterated by a smudge or tear on the page, his or her sibling's entry may be legible. Or if you're doing a given name only search like we discussed in #4, a sibling's more unusual given name could make it easier to locate the family.

6.) **Browse around the areas where extended family lived**. Families often stayed close to one another. Locate extended family (siblings, parents, in-laws, cousins, aunts and uncles), and then browse pages around them to see if your ancestor was living nearby.

7.) **Expand your horizons.** Open yourself up to the possibility that your ancestor may have moved away for a short time around the time of the census. Perhaps the economy drove him to seek work elsewhere for a time. Include personal details about your ancestor, but leave the residence field blank. You may find him living somewhere unexpected.