

Society Spotlight

What Twenty-two Years of Genealogical Publishing Has Taught Us

by Carmen J. Finley, Ph.D., CG, Project Director, Sonoma County Genealogical Society

It took twenty-two years and 106 volunteers for our society to produce thirty-one genealogical publications. At least that is the record attained by the Sonoma County Genealogical Society of Santa Rosa, California. What have we learned between 1985 and 2007?

We have learned a great deal about how to make efficient use of volunteers as project directors, project coordinators, technical advisors, historical researchers, data entry persons, proofreaders, editors, and producers of camera-ready copy. We have also learned how difficult it can be to accurately transcribe deteriorating records, to decipher handwriting that is all but illegible, and to explain to our readers the limitations of the data abstracted.

A Bit of History

The Sonoma County Genealogical Society produced its first book, an *Amended Index, Sonoma County Homestead Declarations*, in 1985. For the next seven years, groups of dedicated volunteers did it “the old fashioned way.” That is, data was copied by hand onto 5 x 7 index cards, the cards were organized, and someone typed final copy for publication. This was often as much a social event as it was a work session. We met at the home of one of the volunteers, worked, enjoyed lunch, and worked some more. The first volumes were self-published, often with the financial help from the Sonoma County Historical Records Commission.

Although a computer was used in the preparation of final copy for the *Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery* book in 1987, it wasn't until 1995 that serious use of the computer in compilation of the data began when the *1890 Census, Sonoma County, California: Reconstructed* was prepared. With few exceptions, this was the last publication that was published

by the society itself as we changed to a commercial publisher. From that date on, many variations in how the data were abstracted, transcribed, and prepared for publication were introduced.

Roles of Volunteers

A project director must be someone who will accept overall responsibility for any project from start to finish. This includes planning how the data is to be abstracted or transcribed and entered directly into electronic format, or onto a form that could be entered later into electronic format.

This includes writing detailed instructions on conventions to be used—date formats, abbreviations, general comments, etc. An example of these can be found at <http://rootsweb.com/~cascgs/abstract.htm>.

This particular project, that of indexing vital data in old newspapers is an ongoing one, and seven volumes have been published between 2001 and the present time, covering the time period between 1841 and 1906. The indexing will continue up to 1930. As can be seen, separate instructions were developed for abstracting data, entering data, and coding newspapers, along with defining file formats compatible among volunteers. For this project, volunteers worked on their own, either abstracting information at their local library or entering data on their own computers at home.

Once the ground rules for a project have been defined, work can begin. For projects that are large and involve more than a few volunteers, it is necessary to have a project coordinator. The project coordinator trains other volunteers, monitors quality control, finds proofreaders, and monitors their work until all data have been entered and proofread. Close monitoring is important, especially with new volunteers, be-

cause, even though the ground rules may be spelled out, not all people interpret them the same way, or the project designer may not have included all possible variations that may occur in the data.

Some projects, which depended on non-circulating original records, had to be done at the library annex. For these projects, we used a technical advisor who set up the layout on the computer which was set aside for SCGS project use, and solved any problems that might arise in the course of data entry. Volunteers were scheduled to come in one day a week to abstract or enter data. Other projects, which could be done off-site, allowed more flexibility, and volunteers worked at home on their own schedule. In either case, the data were sent to the volunteer who was responsible for preparation of camera-ready copy. Proof copy was prepared for volunteers who did the proofreading. Copy was then returned to the project director for correction, compilation, and preparation of camera-ready copy.

Problems in Our Specific Projects

Most of our publications give some history about the data. For example, in our *Indigent Lists of Sonoma County, California: 1878 to 1926*, we wrote:

The earliest records for persons seeking financial aid from Sonoma County are found in the Sonoma County Archives dated 1878 and span the years up to 1926.

Over that period of time, the document forms varied considerably in content and detail. The earliest applications consisted of no more than a few words scribbled on a scrap of paper. After 1900, most applications were on a standard form which required the signatures of at least ten taxpayers who knew the applicant. Generally, the taxpayers lived in the same township

as the applicant. After printed forms were used, the information varied from time to time, but most of them asked for the indigent's place of residence, marital status, number of children, ages of children, who the applicant lived with, reason for asking for support, property owned, sources of income, and sobriety. In some years, information on age and nativity of the applicant, birthplace of children, and relationship of person(s) with whom the applicant lived was also included.

Getting background information sometimes required a trip to the county's legal library. One or two volunteers were generally responsible for this aspect of the project.

With any project using original records, the legibility of old handwriting can be a problem. Often the documents themselves are fragile or faded, and some handwriting is all but illegible, or even totally illegible. It helps if proofreaders just happen to be persons who have lived in the area for many years and are well acquainted with the names of historical figures in the county. In any case, our introductory comments often include a description of the physical status of the data, along with an example of the forms from which the data was transcribed.

The original records must also be a concern. We saw this continually in the preparation of early school attendance records. We include cautions in the interpretation of data in almost all of our publications. For example, in the attendance records:

Readability of old records is always a problem, as well as possible clerical errors made in the original records. Some ages and grades seem inconsistent. For example, a child who was 10 years old in 1908, could not be 14 years old in 1910. However, examples of this inconsistency were encountered and are reproduced as found. When there are four or five entries for the same child and such inconsistencies are encountered, the researcher will need to interpret and integrate the information with other known facts about the family. Remember, too, that there may be two different children in school at the same time

PUBLICATIONS OF SCGS (TITLE, YEAR, PUBLISHER)

Amended Index, Sonoma County Homestead Declarations; 1985; SCGS
 Sonoma County Death Records, 1873–1905; 1985; SCGS
 Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery, 1852–1980; 1987; SCGS
 1895 Map of Sonoma County; 1988; SCGS
 Great Register of Voters, Sonoma County, California, 1890; 1989; SCGS
 Sonoma County Marriages, 1847–1902; 1990; SCGS
 Sonoma County Coroner's Inquests, 1852–1898; 1991; SCGS
 Sonoma County Delayed Birth Certificates, 1855–1971; 1992; SCGS
 1890 Census, Sonoma County, California: Reconstructed; 1995; SCGS
 Sonoma County (California) Cemetery Records, 1846–1921; 1999; Heritage
 Sonoma County, California, Death Records, 1873–1905; 2nd Edition ; 2000: Heritage
 Early Sonoma County, California, Land Grants, 1846–1850; 2000; SCGS (on line)
 Sonoma County Records, Volume 1, CD: 6 files; 2001: Heritage
 Index To Naturalization Records In Sonoma County, California Vol. 1; 1841–1906; 2001: Heritage
 Naturalization Records in Sonoma County, California, Volume II; 1906–1930. ; 2001: Heritage
 Index to Vital Data in Local Newspapers of Sonoma County, California, Volume 1; 1855–1875; 2001: Heritage
 Index to Vital Data in Local Newspapers of Sonoma County, California, Volume 2; 1876–1880; 2001: Heritage
 Index to Vital Data in Local Newspapers of Sonoma County, California, Volume 3; 1881–1885; 2001: Heritage
 Militia Lists of Sonoma County, California, 1846 to 1900; 2002: Heritage
 Index to the Sonoma Searcher, Volume 16, No. 1 to Volume 28, No. 3, August 1988 to Spring 2001 ; 2002: Heritage
 Judgments in Sonoma County, California Courts, 1852–1917 ; 2002; SCGS (online)
 Index to Vital Data in Local Newspapers of Sonoma County, California, Volume 4; 1886–1890; 2003: Heritage
 1930 School Census of Sonoma County, California; 2003: Heritage
 Pueblo de Sonoma Court Records: Expedientes, 1841–1849; 2004; SCGS
 Early School Attendance Records of Sonoma County, California, Beginning 1858 ; 2004: Heritage
 Indigent Records in Sonoma County, California 1878 to 1926, Volume 1: The Indigents; 2006: Heritage
 Indigent Records in Sonoma County, California 1878 to 1926, Volume 2: The Taxpayers Who Certified Indigent Need : 2007: Heritage
 Early School Attendance Records of Sonoma County, California, Volume II; 1874–1932; 2007: Heritage
 Index to Vital Data in Local Newspapers of Sonoma County, California, Volume 5; 1891–1899 ; 2007: Heritage
 Index to Vital Data in Local Newspapers of Sonoma County, California, Volume 6; 1900–1903; 2007: Heritage
 Index to Vital Data in Local Newspapers of Sonoma County, California, Volume 7; 1904–1906; 2007: Heritage

with the same name, or a child may spend more than one year in a grade.

The “correct” spelling of names, especially surnames, is always a problem. Early newspaper were not consistent in the spelling of names. In our indigent project, one applicant who applied on three different occasions, spelled his name differently each time—Ferguson, Fergusson, and Furguson. In the school attendance records it was not unusual to find the child's surname spelled differently than that of his parents—Cuicci/Ciucci, Hardin/ Har-

don, Santos/Santas, William/Williams. Not knowing which is the correct or traditional spelling, we transcribed them as we found them. The researcher using the data has the responsibility of interpreting these data in conjunction with other information he/she has on the individual being researched.

Unexpected Rewards, Surprises, and Humor

There is gold buried in the local archives. We have found, on several occasions, examples of original signatures of early well-known citizens of the

county. For those volunteers with local ties, there are some pluses when data buried deep in the archives yield new information about their own ancestors. One volunteer, who was researching the Armstrong Redwoods State Reserve, discovered a letter written by James B. Armstrong in his own handwriting on his business letterhead written in 1889. Rewards also come in the form of humorous answers to questions. For example, in the indigent project, on the question that dealt with sobriety, one applicant described himself as a "quiet old hermit," another claimed his habits of sobriety were "medium." One applicant gave his source of income as "eggs of 50 chickens." Another claimed his last application was "dejected."

Formatting Concerns

Most of our books present data in tabular form. To conserve space, column headings are not written out on all pages. In several of our projects, explanatory information immediately precedes the first data. In our newspaper index project, for example, it was given in eight columns as follows:

- (1) Surname, including some alternative spellings when used elsewhere
- (2) Given Name, may include relationship to individual listed
- (3) Type of record - b.=birth; d.=death; m.=marriage; p.=probate; o.=other
- (4) Newspaper Code - see introduction page v
- (5) Date of newspaper
- (6) Page of newspaper listing
- (7) Column of newspaper listing
- (8) Comments - 5:1 means page 5 column 1

Not infrequently the introductory material may also include a map of Sonoma County, a historical description of towns and villages in the county, or lists of local cemeteries, or school districts, depending on the nature of the data.

Self-Publishing Versus Commercial Publishing

In the early years, SCGS published its own books. Since the up-front costs of publishing even as few as 100 books was a strain on the society budget, the Sonoma County Historical Records

Commission graciously provided the funds for a number of the first publications. However, storage, advertising, and distribution became a problem. Since 1999, Heritage Books, Inc. has published SCGS books. We provide camera-ready copy. They print, publicize, store, and sell our books for us. We receive five complimentary copies, the right to buy additional copies at a 40% discount, and 10% of sales as royalty. We do not get rich on this, but it

saves publishing costs, storage space, advertising costs, and distribution.

[Carmen I. Finley serves on the editorial board of the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, is chairman of the NGS Family History Writing Contest, and has published in the *NGSQ*, the *American Genealogist*, *Magazine of Virginia Genealogy*, *The Virginia Genealogist*, *The Genealogist*, and *Tennessee Ancestors* among others.]

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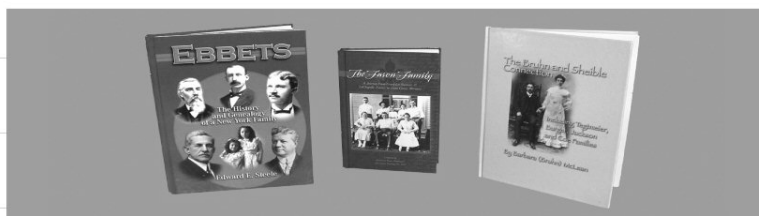
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