

Finding family roots is relatively easy

If you're trying to track down your family history, the Social Security Administration's Death Master File is a good place to start.

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Sherry Parmley wondered if she really was related to Robert E. Lee, as her family had long believed.

Mark White wanted to know if the story about one of his relatives being involved in the longest bare-knuckle boxing match was true.

Both decided to do a little genealogical detective work, and in each case, the family story checked out.

Parmley, 42, of Berkeley, discovered that a distant grandfather was the famous Confederate general's brother, while White, 48, of Hazlet, verified that in 1855, in Dalesford, Victoria in Australia, a raw-fisted Irish relative by the name of James Kelly won a 6-hour, 15-minute stem-winder of a bout against a British soldier named Jonathan Smith that the Guinness Book of World Records recognized as the longest of its kind.

"The fight ended after, like, 115 rounds," White said.

What stories from your family's history would you like to know more about?

Parmley and White say one of the best places to begin your search is the Social Security Administration's Death Master File. Newly updated with 2.4 million more records, the "death index," as it's commonly known, is available at www.DataUniverse.com, the Asbury Park Press's free public records site.

To access the data, go to www.DataUniverse.com and click on "What's New."

What is the death index, exactly?

It's the nation's largest death registry, now totaling more than 82 million records of individuals who died between 1937 and June 2008.

Not everyone who died during that period is in the database. To be in the registry, a person would have to have qualified for Social Security benefits, which didn't exist before 1937. Also, there are relatively few records for those who died prior to 1962, which is when the index was computerized. White says that those who worked for the railroads or the federal government don't turn up, either, because their pension plans were different.

Still, the index is an invaluable tool for those who want to research their family roots, Parmley and White say.

At DataUniverse.com, the records are searchable by name, last residence and year of death or birth. Some people are alarmed to learn their deceased relatives' Social Security numbers are so easily accessible, but those numbers are retired once a person dies. They are of no use to identity thieves.

The DataUniverse.com death index page also includes a link that allows users to order a copy of an

individual's Social Security application form online, and another link with instructions on how to obtain the document, known as a SS-5, by mail. The standard fee is \$27.

"The SS document is the easiest place to begin," Parmley said. "All you need is a name, birth/death date and that's it. Send away for the original and in a few weeks you'll get back a great wealth of information."

The SS-5 includes the person's name, address, place of birth, the names of their parents and the date the application was filed. If the person filed the application as an adult, it might also include the name of the person's employer at the time, as well as their signature, White says.

"The neat part, too, is that it is all written in your ancestor's own hand," Parmley added.

All this information can ease the search for other key documents, such as birth and death certificates, marriage licenses, draft cards, church and cemetery records and obituaries. And with this corroborating evidence in hand, you can begin retracing your roots with confidence.

"When beginning family tree research and gathering information I like to have at least three sources on each family member to be sure I am tracing the correct line," Parmley said. "It's very easy to go off onto someone else's branch."

White, whose wife, Debra, is president of the Monmouth County Genealogy Society, has been able to trace his Irish roots to the 1840s, relying heavily on online research. He said it took him a good two months to piece together the story of James Kelly.

"His wife was the sister of my great-great-grandfather," he said. Born in Ireland, Kelly somehow wound up in Australia, the common fate of Irishmen in those days, and then emigrated to America, eventually settling in Matawan, where he lived for 50 years before his death in 1914.

After completing his research, White sat down with an aunt of his who told him all about Kelly, relating the details with perfect accuracy.

"What took me about two months to learn, she recited — literally the exact information — in about five minutes," he said. It was all the more enjoyable for him to hear the tale, though, knowing it was true.

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