

Clues, Mis-Clues and Treasure In Every Obituary

For beginners in Genealogy, reading an obituary of a greatgrandparent can be wonderfully satisfying. So many clues, so many dates and names to put in the family tree, and we merrily plug in the details feeling smugly pleased with ourselves! Whoops - we always need to remember that obituaries were written in haste and sorrow about a day to 3 days after the death. The information may have been given in person at the newspaper office or telephoned to a clerk, depending on the year (when were telephones "everywhere"?). In either case, details can be incorrect simply through haste or miscommunication. Use the details in an obituary as a starting point for more research, and try to find one to three more pieces of information confirming any of the details found in a published obituary. In other words, details from an obituary are very interesting, but are not necessarily correct!



DATES: In an obituary you will have the date of newspaper publication, date of illness, date of death, date of burial. Sometimes you will also find dates of residence, date of marriage, sometimes date of higher education, and more. Compare birth year and stated age - does the math add up? One or the other number may be written incorrectly.



NAMES: Note that a married woman - with living husband - was almost always referred to by her husband's name: Mrs. Charles Graves, Mrs. C.E.Kuhn. Even in an obituary of her death, you may well find that her full name with maiden name may not be given at all - unless her husband predeceased her. Names of sisters and brothers will be given, plus the names of parents if still alive. Names of sons will be clearly stated, plus place of residence if out of town. Daughters would be listed by their husband's names unless widowed, e.g, a widowed/divorced daughter would be listed as Mrs. Caroline O. Patterson. Again, residence will be given if the daughter(s) live out of town.



Names of grandchildren may be given, with or without their surnames. Names of pallbearers are generally given; these may be direct relatives, or by-marriage, close friends or business/society colleagues. Each name needs to be investigated for details of relationship and more. Finally, you will also have the name of the minister officiating at the burial or service.

PLACES: Goldmines abound here: place of birth is usually given, places of past residence, place of final residence, church, cemetery - all these details are usually given in an obituary. These place names may give you clues of where and when to search for property records, census records, directories, marriage records, wills and probate records, and much more.

MEMBERSHIPS: Memberships in various organizations, business groups, societies, political associations and more, may provide additional clues. Is there a symbol shown in the obituary or on the gravestone? Search online to see what that symbol stands for - Military? Elks? Legion? FreeMasons? Religious symbols? Political Association? Remember that large groups or organizations have Libraries with access to historical records, possibly with details of your ancestor on file.



CAUSE OF DEATH: For those of us interested in medical issues, finding out the cause of death can be very interesting. For example, some families have been able to see a pattern of very early heart disease of men going back through a line of ancestors - leading to better pro-active medical care now. You may find odd words used for some illnesses; search online for "*old names for illnesses*" to actually understand the illness label that the doctor used on the death certificate.

MISCELLANEOUS: Occupation or profession may be stated as well, which allows you to search in various types of directories, schools, and more. Church records may be useful if the obituary states that your ancestor was active in church - and came to that church after a move; membership may have been transferred, and so a record of previous churches and residence may be at the final church office. At times, immigration details of the deceased or an ancestor may be given as well, giving you very useful information to follow up for ship arrival, naturalization papers, and more. Sisters and brothers' details may give you the



names of their parents, if you can find marriage records, or at least allow you to confirm possible census records that you find. This is particularly helpful if there is at least one sibling with an unusual name. Also, look at whether or not there is a statement about donations: for example, memorial gifts to a particular organization or society will give you another clue regarding either cause of death or personal interests.

FINALLY: remember that a published obituary is a secondary source of data because all information has been provided by one or more individuals to another individual, with many opportunities to make errors on all sides. Check and recheck all the information with other documents and sources, and evaluate the quality of the details BEFORE you make a decision on the correctness of the data for your family tree.

Keep these points in mind as you do your searching. You will find much treasure in an obituary of your ancestor. Happy searching!

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