Ancestry's Summer of Pain seems to have ended, but what does Autumn look like? And have they left us in the Winter of our discontent? They're answering their phones again, the screens seem more stable, but their primary new feature, Potential Parents, is a wolf in sheep's clothing for any genealogist who wants to use best evidence and best practices to do their best work. Revel in my wrath as I discuss why this is not a good development, why the re-indexing of the 1870 census was a friendly-looking mistake, and why we must be more cautious than ever when using Ancestry. If your family tree is based on fact and not myth, and if your family history is about HISTORY, then this episode is for you.

Hello hello!!! Thank you all for your patience, kindness and good wishes. I had to stay briefly in the hospital, and because of that, I had to take a little time away from the podcast to heal. I'm slowly getting up on my feet, though, so it looks like I'm baaaaaack, and maybe even stronger than ever! And so, here we are, with episode 27 of From Paper To People, Ancestors Alive! Genealogy's irritant podcast that does its best to make pearls.

First off, we have to play a little bit of catch-up on some housekeeping. Groovily enough, the podcast exceeded 8,650 lifetime downloads while I was away. Thank you very much for that!! Each episode has been downloaded over 300 times, so I know that you guys are listening, and I'm very grateful for you!

Next, I want to thank Rose Mullice! Rose has become FPPP's newest financial patron with monthly support through Patreon.com. She and other supporters like her helped me to buy a headset for our guest on Episode 25, Joe McGill, who founded the Slave Dwelling Project. Without Patreon support, that interview would have been impossible.

There are a lot of things that go into making a podcast. So far, I have kept it incredibly low-tech with a $25 mic, free software, and no outside editor. No guests are paid. But there are

many more people I'd like to interview, and equipment and software upgrades I'd like to make by the New Year that would enable me to interview people at RootsTech on the fly this February (yep, I am hoping to attend). So yes, we do have to talk money for just a minute. Because I don't sell ad space to sponsors (which I KNOW you would HATE).

The only way that I can make this podcast improve and grow is if I have backing for that growth. Since I know that at least 300 people listen to every episode that I post, and I only have 12 supporters who are kicking in any kind of financial support on the regular, I'm asking the rest of you to think about how much you value this podcast. If you're listening on a weekly basis, all I'm asking is this – is this podcast worth a dollar a month to you? $2? $5? If it is, please go to patreon.com/ancestorsalive and sign up to give the amount that you feel is fair for the work that I do, and the value that my guests lend as well. Support this podcast on a monthly basis via credit or debit. Not only are you paying for the program that you hear, but you are investing in the future of what this podcast can do. I have a long list of book authors, genealogists, food historians, archaeologists, archivists and other related professionals who have already agreed to be interviewed. I have a list of lessons yet to be taught. Only technology stands in the way. Many knowledgeable professionals don't podcast themselves, so they don't have a mic or a headset. In order for them to come on, I need to provide them with headsets. And internet connections can be awful, so I need to upgrade from shareware to a decent editing software package.

Right now, I'm working on a shoestring, with less than $40 profit per month on Patreon after meeting costs. It would be nice to have a little more profit, too, since I am currently unable to work. I'll end my PBS moment by saying that this can be a better and better podcast if you will support it with a small amount monthly. Rewards include being named here on the podcast and on the website, earning teaching hours every month, and being interviewed on the podcast. We can have lessons over the phone, or over Zoom, the platform that I used to interview my guests. We can work on your tree in general, or work on specific issues that you have. I can be your personal consultant. Thank you very much for your support so far!

Now, to the issue at hand: What I hate about new Ancestry. Within the last few months, you may have noticed that Ancestry was lagging and not answering their phones, and they made some major changes to the way that they provide hints. The screen may look the same, but the changes in function are there. And, in fact, a lot of them are bad. The problem is, they SEEM good. They're kind of like Ted Bundy – he LOOKED like a nice guy, but he turned out to be a serial killer. This Bundy-like deceptive ease of use that spells out the death of accuracy in Ancestry is one of the things we need to talk about today.

The main new toy is definitely Ted Bundy's genie cousin. It's called Potential Parents. And it's really, really got me on a slow burn. It looks very sexy. In the past, when a line ended and you looked at your tree either in the Pedigree or Family View, and there were no parents for an individual, insipid pink and blue silhouettes would be winking back at you, mocking you in your dead-end lack of self-knowledge. And you would hate yourself a little. And maybe it would keep you up at night. But now, Ancestry is bringing the sass. NOW, frequently you will see that in place of a mocking pink female or mocking blue male silhouette, there is a bright green box, and the box lures you like a Granny Smith apple on the tree in the Garden of Eden, and the box says Potential Parent. Now this is designed to get you all excited and fired up. It's designed to make you think that something magic is there and that a certainty lies beyond. In fact, it's not a certainty at all. The Potential Parent function is a grouping of hints smashed together under the kind of pressure insufficient to make diamonds out of old, dead dinosaurs. Those hints, in turn, are culled from other people's trees.

Now, let's think for a second about what I say about other people's trees. What are other people's trees? That's right. They're crap. What Potential Parent does, is it pulls on other people's research, trees from across Ancestry who have your ancestor in them. It pulls up the parent who is showing in all of those trees, including multiple occurrences of each child because hey, who's counting, gloms them together into one common human, and slaps them into the Potential Parent slot.

So let's say I've got Annie Sinclair. Annie Sinclair has no parents in my tree, because there's

no legitimate documentation to lead me backwards, and I have the deep shame that keeps me awake nights. But all of a sudden, her two parents, the blue male silhouette and the pink female silhouette, they stop mocking me and they light up green – Potential Father, Potential Mother. And quick as a wink, when I click on the one for her dad, up pops Fred M Sinclair, complete with a photograph, and it gives a birth date and a birth place and a death date and a death place, his parents' names, his spouse's name, and all of his children, including a child that corresponds to Annie Sinclair. Now, this might will be him. This might well be Annie's father. And if I say yes to this new-fangled hint, Ancestry will add Fred into my tree. But it will add absolutely no sources whatsoever, nor any other members of Fred's family as shown in the Potential Parent preview. It will add Fred, his stats, the photograph, and that's it.

I can do the same for Annie's mom. But it may pull the wrong person for Annie's mom – it may not pull Fred's wife. It may pull some rando chick with a husband named Fred and daughter named Annie. I won't be able to tell – I can't see Fred M Sinclair's suggested wife anymore because only he was added to my tree. You can see the problem because the addition function is even less reliable and thorough than that of adding a tree: at least when you add someone else's tree to your tree, each person in that other user's tree shows on screen and gets added over at the same time. Each place, each event, each name – each individual item from that other user's tree gets added into your own tree, unless you elect to uncheck the box and not add that data over. But when you use Potential Parent, only the information for one individual gets added over, and you can't hark back and see who Fred's suggested wife was because that screen is long gone. So instead of adding a chain of islands, an archipelago of information, you're adding one island, adrift in the sea, with no reference points to other land. And that's very, very bad news.

Now, when you do add an ancestor using Potential Parent, and I have done it in order to see how it works, hints come with that ancestor. However, the quality of the hints that come with that ancestor are only as good as the quality of the hints derived from the trees where that ancestor originated. Do you see what I'm saying? If the person I'm adding, Fred M Sinclair, comes from a conglomeration of 10 different trees, then the hints that come with him are

only as good as the hints that were examined and accepted by the 10 users from whose trees he was drawn. And we all know, once again, say it with me – what are other people's trees? What is other people's research? That's right – crap. At least when you examine other people's trees as an overall hint, you can choose which trees to examine and which to reject. With Potential Parents, you're getting a bundle of bad hints. It's the subprime mortgage crisis of genealogy.

This piggybacks onto another NEW ANCESTRY problem, the issue of the 1870 US Federal Census. I mentioned this a while back. It used to be that the 1850, 1860, and 1870 censuses were what I call minimally populating – that is, you had to work each one of those censuses manually because Ancestry didn't add the entire family over into your tree, it only added over one person at a time. You had to have either a pad and pen next to you, or you had to have two tabs open in your browser, one with the family group open in Ancestry, the other with the View Record view of the 1850, 1860, or 1870 Census in the other. The idea was that, whatever page of the Census you were considering, you had to record all of the names, ages and family relationships in your tree before you started adding data from record to tree. For more on this, listen to Episode 16, which uploaded on May 12th, 2018. The reason is very straightforward – in the censuses themselves, relationships to the head of household were not recorded until 1880. So in the 1850, 1860, and 1870 censuses, there was no stated relationship between Dad, Mom, kids, potentially grandparents, potentially aunts and uncles, and potentially cousins, or potentially nieces and nephews all living under one roof. And a variety of family members DID live together in many households over those decades.

Recently, in an attempt to provide an easier (or more immediately gratifying) experience for new users, Ancestry re-indexed the 1870 Census. They took on a paternalistic role that I find rather scary, by deciding who was a likely spouse to the head of household, and who were the likely children to the head of household sing the order of the names as they were written by the census-taker. In doing so, they also left the potential parents and in-laws of the head of household out of the presumptive family group. They decided that the standard family format was Daddy, Mommy, Children, when in fact, that was not always the case – not by a

long shot. They then reset how the 1870 functioned, making the 1870 Census maximally populating in its ability to add an entire family to your tree within Ancestry, just like the 1880, the 1900, and so forth. BUT THEY HAD NO HISTORICAL EVIDENCE TO BACK UP THEIR ASSUMPTIONS beyond the order of names on the page. Hence, they refer to all relationships as "inferred spouse" and "inferred child" of head of household. YIKES! WORST PRACTICES!!!! WORST EVIDENCE!!!! Big bells going off, big red lights flashing!!!!!!!

What this means is that now, when you go to utilize the 1870 Census in Ancestry, it will auto-add, or line up to auto-add, ALL of the people in the family group at any given address in the census to your family. This is wrong and bad because these assumptions are not backed by historical proof. And far from making a more "friendly" experience, it means that you, the discerning user, actually have to work harder to catch their likely errors. The people going through the Census records and making these assumptions about who is related don't know your family. You DO. For instance, I worked with a family and Mom had predeceased dad. Head of household was Dad. A woman very close in age to him was the next person in the list on the census for 1870. The re-indexing attempt named her as a theoretical wife. The children underneath the two of them were named as their theoretical children. In fact, I knew my family. I knew that he was widowed, and that the woman living with him was his unmarried sister, helping him keep house. If I didn't know my family very well, I would have given him a new wife, I would have started looking for her maiden name, and I would have been led a merry chase by a poorly indexed record. That would have seriously wasted my time. The same happened in another family, where a young woman appeared as an adult daughter in her so-called father's household. But since I'd already worked the kids, I knew she was a daughter-in-law, again saving myself time and grief. And for those of you out there who are Latter-Day Saints, these really would have messed me up in terms of adding people over into FamilySearch, and starting temple work. I would have created fictitious people. As if FamilySearch needs more headaches.

What Ancestry is doing right now feels a lot like making a state forest into Disneyland. It's making something that was already simple and beautiful into something flashy and garish

and designed to attract people who are willing to spend money in order to get quick, gratifying results. I'm not liking it. I think it's setting bad precedent. I understand the motivation – money, cash, dosh, cheddar, filthy lucre, big bucks. They've attracted a lot of fair-weather, one-stop users who buy DNA and skip town, and they want folks to buy memberships and stick around for a tree or two. And I respect a person's need to do business. But what they're doing is very dangerous. It's a dumbing-down of a process that is, and should be, scholarly, time-consuming and deliberate. It's based in history and reality. It's not fluffy and feel-good. It's not YouTube videos and minky-cuddle blankets. If you're serious about doing good work, if you're serious about researching things carefully, using best evidence and best practices, and finding the truth about where you come from and providing good data to others so that they can utilize it properly, Ancestry has just gone that extra mile to make it that much harder. Personally, I am not a fan of My Heritage. I think it's too user-friendly and thus not scholarly enough in its offerings as well. I feel the same way in some measure about FamilySearch. I thought that Ancestry was the place where you could actually have maximum control over your data – privacy, correcting errors in indexing, giving feedback on problematic records, choosing what to utilize and what to ignore. Now, I feel like these sites are engaging in a race to the bottom. But I don't know. Maybe I got grumpy while I was sick.

Then again, there is light at the end of the tunnel – Ancestry brought back the Family Group Sheet. This is good. It's possible to view and print a Family Group Sheet for any particular individual and his or her parents, spouse and children. You can find that in the Tree View by highlighting a person on your tree and then clicking on the down-caret next to the name of the tree. It's very handy, particularly if you need it in order to take it to a library, or to a family member, to do any kind of research or to have a discussion.

And FamilySearch has slightly redesigned its profile screen to make things a little bit easier to use. Searching for a possible duplicate by ID number is now its own clickable line on the lower right of the screen on any ancestor's profile, which makes life a lot easier. But you still have almost zero control over the data, so that's annoying. There's no correcting bad

indexing in FamilySearch. But that's a discussion for another day. Despite my growing misgivings, Ancestry is still the place to do primary online research.

I asked folks in the Facebook group what's been driving them crazy about new Ancestry lately. Here's what they had to say.

Connie Sabo mentioned another TOTALLY FREAKY thing happening with hints and their dumbing-down: she said "I type in a name, a date, and a location. And the top responses are often WAAAY off. Seriously, if I'm looking for Steve Cannon in Georgia in 1870, I'm probably not wanting Edna Canton, 1930 Census, in Missouri." Stacy Cole agreed, and so do I – Ancestry is getting fast and loose with the hints!!! This is the antithesis of having to use the spyglass and card file to hunt up possible records. "Make it easy" is actually becoming "make it inaccurate." I'm getting piles of hints from UK collections, too, including from wrong genders and wrong centuries. I'm glad that new UK collections are becoming available, but let's not OD on them.

Some people add every hint they get because they have no idea what they're doing, and because Ancestry historically has been a database that learns from the habits of its users, Ancestry is learning bad habits, and suggesting idiotically-grouped records as hints. The dates, places and even generations are off. It's the denigration of best practices. It's the ignorance of best evidence. It's a Six Flags at the Grand Canyon.

Stacy Cole also observed: "I don't mind the untrustworthiness of other people's work. That's human nature. But I do wish Ancestry would give us better tools. Chromosome browser! Customisable ways to mark our DNA matches. More graphical ways to view our DNA matches." YES Stacy, yes!!! We should not have to upload to gedmatch to get triangulation tools. It's silly.

Stacy made another salient point that I've heard many times for a while now: "I don't trust that Ancestry is actually delivering all those messages I send people, or sending me their

responses. I got an email saying I had a response, but it never appeared in my inbox. If they are delivering the messages, they need to make it more apparent to people that they have A MESSAGE." Too right, Stacy. I know so many people who are using Ancestry DNA to establish contact with people who will help them establish the identity of a parent, or both parents. They're looking for crucial connections to ancestors, cousins or parents. They're looking for photographs or other types of data that they really need for purposes of identification. It's not just a hobby for them, and they send out these messages, and there's nothing there for them. That's why I urge everyone listening to do a couple of things – first, use a real name, unless it is for some reason not safe for you to do so, on your profile. Second, use a photograph of you, your face, not your cat and not your family crest. Oh, and in response to a tweet by Jennifer Mendelsohn, WEAR A SHIRT – IT'S NOT TINDR. Third, fill out your profile completely. Fourth, make sure that folks can reach you in some way outside of Ancestry. I'm not saying list your phone number. But make sure that folks can find you, somehow, some way. If we rely on Ancestry too much for communication, we will never be able to be found. I provide Ancestors Alive!'s URL as a way for people to find me. Your Instagram account or your Twitter account are good ways to be found. Be safe, though. If we have to hotwire this car, fine, let's hotwire it. Let's brainstorm and find ways around as many of these problems as possible.

In summary, I've been on Ancestry since 2000. I will still teach Ancestry in class and on the podcast because I believe it is the best way to research online. To be clear, throughout 2018 I have refined what it is that I believe is the best way to do the work. Here's the deal – do your research on Ancestry. Refine and perfect people one at a time. Cross that research over into FamilySearch, checking for duplicates and merging them as you find them. Upload photographs and documents to FamilySearch. Encourage all of your relatives who are interested to get free memberships to FamilySearch so that they, too, can enjoy all of your discoveries, and all of the photographs and documents that you have uploaded. This will also allow them to upload photographs and documents, and to tag family members in those photographs and documents. Make FamilySearch what it is supposed to be – a one-world tree. Use Ancestry for what it is supposed to be – a personal scratch pad, a whiteboard, a

workspace. Don't let the jealous, divisive nature of human beings be a bar to discovery. The fact that people can keep their trees private? Don't let that get in your way. Share what you find, either about your own people or about people for whom you do research, friends or clients, put that on FamilySearch so that all can enjoy. This is a service. It's a community. We do this for ourselves and one another out of love. Ancestry is a means to an end. It's a crucial tool, one we need to learn how to use properly. But it's not one that solves all problems, just as FamilySearch isn't, just as My Heritage isn't, just as going to the library isn't, just as human memory isn't. Use your research in Ancestry to build a tree that will lead you to the next step at a brick-and-mortar, another website, or a family reunion. Use Ancestry to achieve all you can, and then take it to the next step.

Well, that's all the snark I can muster today, so thanks for listening! It's good to be back. If you want to be on an episode of the Family Cookbook or you want to be interviewed about your work in family history or a related topic, go to ancestorsalivegenealogy.com and fill out the form. Please visit ko-fi.com/fromtpapertopeople or patreon.com/ancestorsalive to become a financial supporter of the podcast so that we can go further together. You can also find those links on the website. Until next time, have a great week, do your research, don't be a Jeffrey, beware of Potential Parents, and above all, Expect Surprises!

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