“Cage Match! Ancestry vs FamilySearch” is about the pros and cons of using Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org, the two main family tree sites used by the majority of researchers I know. Each has assets and drawbacks, but they’re best used together. And get a load of my fan hot spots! All kinds of folks are tuning in. Add your friends and family to the list!



Hello, and welcome to Episode 5 of From Paper To People, Ancestors Alive! Genealogy’s new podcast. I am your hostess with the mostest, Carolynn ni Lochlainn. For those of you who missed the fun, I was interviewed on Saturday the 27th about this podcast and my work on Richard Parr’s First-Ever Pod-a-thon on Facebook. I’ll put a link to the interview on my website. I’m the next-to-last interviewee, so you can watch the whole thing or fast-forward, your choice. But there was a podcast in the discussion about psychic readings and another about COWS, so I recommend the entire 2.5-hour Pod-a-thon.

I want to say hey to my fans – I’m happy to say that this podcast now has an international reach! Hello to Madagascar, the DRC, Cape Verde, Ethiopia and Libya, as well as my friend Sir Leprechaun Rabbit, who listens faithfully from Alberta, Canada. If you need something researched in Canadian records, look Sir Leprechaun Rabbit up on Twitter. He’s your man.

In the United States, here’s a big hello to California, New York, Utah, North Carolina, Texas, Alabama, Virginia, Idaho, Georgia, Washington, Arizona, Indiana, Nevada, Michigan, Tennessee, Iowa, South Carolina, New Jersey, Colorado and Massachusetts. I value your support so much, and I can’t wait until that list is replete with all US states, territories and protectorates. Then I can just say “Hello, USA!”

Can I just say “What’s your problem, Europe? Where’s the love?” Lasso your friends in Italy and the UK, my friends. Let’s make this party grow.

Now, strap in, y'all: this week's topic is one that everybody can enjoy – "Epic Cage Match: Ancestry vs FamilySearch." All genealogy noobs and old timers are welcome here. If you're a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or Mormon, know that this is the crux of what I teach each week in Family History class, and chances are that you're not going to hear it elsewhere. If you're Mormon and you've been doing the work for a while, chances are that you are going to disagree with me. But that's OK. I'll win you over.

Now, last week's discussion was about stories, memories, and the softer side of family history. I'm going to move into structure today, and into an explanation and analysis of the two main family tree sites that I use, Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org. They are similar in capabilities, but different in intent, and I want to make sure that you walk away from this week's episode understanding that.

Ancestry and FamilySearch are both websites, online databases with a lot of bells and whistles. That's the first thing that any user needs to understand. They are glorified databases, card catalogs if you will. But there are key differences.

First, Ancestry: Ancestry.com is a for-profit, online service. It's a database that learns. It provides a platform for the user to add names, dates, and places about people, and place those people in relationship to one another. It has an enormous and ever-growing pool of documents for researchers. In future episodes, we'll discuss where those documents come from and how each can be used to best advantage, but let's stick to structure for now.

Think of Ancestry this way: when you create an account, you're creating a private room, hermetically sealed from the rest of the world. The only thing coming in is a conveyor belt with hints, or a variety of documents, on it – census records, birth indexes, marriage certificates, city directories, divorce indexes, death certificates, wills, and more. These documents have to do with establishing the times, dates and places of people's lives, and the relationships that they had in life.

This private, hermetically-sealed room, your Ancestry account, is locked to everyone in the world, unless you let them in. Unless you manually give a key, in the form of collaborator or editorial status, to another person, your tree is yours alone to build. More importantly, though, your tree can be offered up as a hint to others or not, as you see fit, and you can choose to believe other people's trees or not, as they are fed into your hermetically sealed room via the hints conveyor belt. I DO NOT BELIEVE OTHER PEOPLE'S TREES AS A RULE. In fact, I teach my students that other people's research is crap, other people's trees are crap, and the exceptions to that rule are few and far between. This makes every one of my students work hard in the actual, historical record for their information, and it builds much stronger trees with actual, verifiable historical evidence. Using other people's stories, guesses, and sloppy research as some form of truth is a giant mistake, one that I myself have made in the past and have learned not to repeat.

The documents that come in on that hints conveyor belt never leave the room, either. You can accept hints and apply them to your tree, say maybe to the hints you're not sure about and leave them sitting in a sort of anteroom in case you want to re-examine them, and you can say no to hints, leaving them sitting in a different anteroom in case you change your mind later. But hints are never, ever lost.

These hints are indicated by little green leaves in the onscreen graphic depiction of your tree. You've probably seen that on the TV ads for Ancestry. Working with those hints takes care and discretion. Not every document that Ancestry offers up belongs to a given person in your tree. You have to know what to look for and how to think about each type of document. We'll get into critical thinking and analysis of hints in future episodes.

Now, to FamilySearch: FamilySearch is also a database that also provides a platform for the user to add names, dates, and places about people, and place those people in relationship to one another. It is free for everyone the world over to use, but it also has an express purpose for Mormons. It is connected to our Temple system, and thus, to some very important religious work.

It, however, is one giant world tree, the exact opposite of the hermetically-sealed room that you create for yourself when you create an account and a tree on Ancestry. When you create an account on FamilySearch, you are not walking into an exclusive and protected space. FamilySearch is like the giant forest you walk into when you go through the back of the wardrobe in a CS Lewis novel. FamilySearch is Narnia. It's as if each researcher is a tree, and the branches of each tree all touch one another. It's a bit mysterious in there. There is unusual wildlife, flora and fauna. It's a rare and magical ecosystem where every researcher's work has the potential to augment or destroy every other researcher's work. It's all connected. Sooner or later, multiple FamilySearch users share ancestors, and if users make errors that disrupt or duplicate one another's lineage, that's potentially very dangerous to the truth. And, because Mormons use this interdependent forest for religious purposes, errors there can cause very real problems for our Temple system. If you are a non-member and using the FamilySearch site, good research hygiene is simply good manners in someone else's home.

The idea in FamilySearch, in fact the IDEAL in FamilySearch, is that, for every one person who lived on the planet, there is one electronic representation of that person in FamilySearch. Think about the difference between that and Ancestry: Ancestry is a bunch of little, unconnected rooms, FamilySearch is one giant longhouse filled with people trying to connect to one another. But because many people have misused FamilySearch due to a lack of education about doing the work of assembling a family tree, FamilySearch is filled with errors. Some of those errors are decades or even a century old. For instance, a few years ago, I found that there were 40 versions of my 10th great-grandfather, George Pace. It took some time to get all 40 versions merged into one.

Over time, the accuracy of FamilySearch ebbs and flows, not through malice, but through repeated error. Some people take great care with their work, and they correct others' errors, but others start in FamilySearch and create new errors due to ignorance or a lack of caring about best practices and best evidence. It's a very fragile ecosystem, and it has to be protected.

In FamilySearch, anything that you enter has the potential to affect every other branch of the one world family tree that is constantly being created and adjusted. This is an enormous responsibility, so if you are considering using FamilySearch, you must do so with a great deal of care and thought.

For example, if you and I share a set of great-grandparents, Mary Smith and John Jones, I work on their family history in Ancestry in my sealed-off room and you do the same in yours. My work doesn't affect your work, and vice-versa. If, however, we are both working on Mary Smith and John Jones just in FamilySearch, and you created a new version of them extending back from your parents and grandparents, while I am working on a version of them extending from MY parents and grandparents, we've just defeated the purpose of FamilySearch and made a big mess that will only get worse the further back we go. Though it claims to, FamilySearch is not very good at finding those duplicate versions of the same people.

- So, to hints and records. What kinds of records are available in Ancestry and FamilySearch? A wide variety, but the biggest collections include:
- Birth, marriage, divorce and death indexes & records
- Social Security records for United States citizens
- Wills & probate records
- Photos added by other users
- Obituaries
- Findagrave records, which come from the Findagrave.com online cemetery website
- Baptismal records and other records from churches and religious organizations.

Remember when I said that Ancestry is a database that learns? This is a very important point. Hints accrue as a result of Ancestry's learning function. If 4 different researchers all research the same person or family group in their individual, hermetically sealed trees, and they all attach the same set of records to these ancestors, Ancestry has an "ah-hah" moment. When researcher #5 shows up on the scene with a tree containing that same family group with the same names and dates attached, Ancestry says to itself "four other people used these

census records, these social security records and these birth and death records to identify and bind this family group together. #5 is looking at a group of people with the same names, dates and places attached to them. The parents seem to have kids with the same names as those other four researchers. I think I'll suggest these records in a lump to #5." This is how your research can benefit me if we're related – by combing through record hints carefully, and then actively seeking more records within Ancestry, you can attach a set of records to a parents and their kids that will benefit me when I show up at another time, looking for evidence of that same family group existing together in real time and space. This is just one of many reasons why it's important to DO THE RESEARCH, and DO IT RIGHT.

There is a downside to this "database that learns" understanding of Ancestry. While it is very good for long-term Anglo-American, Euro-American and Canadian families, it does not benefit those whose population profiles are smaller in the Ancestry research community. In plain English, if you come from a family of recent immigrants – Asians, Central & South Americans, Caribbeans, or you are African-American in origin, Ancestry might not have had the chance to learn which records go together for your family group. In that case, you may need some assistance getting started in your research.

FamilySearch doesn't have a parallel to this learning function because remember, its structure is different: there's only supposed to be one version of each person who ever lived in FamilySearch. Ideally, a group of researchers working together (albeit unwittingly) are doing so to assemble information about ONE person, ONE couple, and ONE family. This is one of FamilySearch's shortcomings.

Another strength in Ancestry that FamilySearch lacks is that, because it is a paid service trying to keep investors and paying customers happy, Ancestry has millions and millions more records to utilize in research than FamilySearch does. Don't get me wrong – FamilySearch has records that Ancestry doesn't, and FamilySearch has great value in that way, but Ancestry's learning function plus its plethora of available records make it a preferable research space.

So, here's my recommendation, and this is especially true for Magical Mormons who can use both sites together and transfer citations from one to the other: USE ANCESTRY AS THE PLACE TO MAKE AND FIX ALL OF YOUR MESSES BEFORE ADDING A NEW PERSON OR GENERATION TO FAMILYSEARCH. Once your research is complete on an individual and you are sure that you have the most complete and correct information possible, carry it over into FamilySearch, but not before. Excellent work and complete facts developed in Ancestry will act as a trigger mechanism when crossed over into FamilySearch, pulling up hints in FamilySearch that Ancestry does not have. This will help you to complete your research on any given individual. Consider FamilySearch a place to polish off the tiny flaws, or a holding place for perfected things, and you're looking at it the right way.

There are MANY more reasons why this process of "Ancestry first, FamilySearch second" is important, but we'll have to discuss those in future episodes. For the time being, trust your hostess with the mostest when I say that I've been doing this work since 1980, I have tried numerous online services as they've come up, and I am here to tell you that you should NEVER do your initial research on FamilySearch. NEVER. And, my Mormon friends, if someone tells you otherwise, send them to me. If they're willing to learn a better way of doing things, I'll teach them.

Regardless, please, if you are going to use FamilySearch, remember that your research there touches thousands, maybe millions of other researchers. DON'T poison the ecosystem. Be certain of what you're doing before you do it.

And if you're not up for spending money on Ancestry, you can use it in two free ways: check your local public library to see whether they can accommodate you with a free account using their computers, or stop into any local Family History Library. FHLs exist all over the world and are run by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. You can use Ancestry for free there, in addition to performing on-site microfilm and book research. And, of course, you can use FamilySearch there. Know that most Family History librarians are unfamiliar with any services outside of those created and provided by the Church itself, and use this as a guide

to starting or continuing your work. You may need to consult YouTube and other resources for your Ancestry learning needs. And, of course, I'm always here for you.

What have we learned today? Family tree sites are databases with bells and whistles. Ancestry has the capacity to learn, FamilySearch does not. Using FamilySearch as a primary research site can screw up the entire world, so it's not such a good idea to do that. There are public libraries and Family History Libraries where you can access both programs.

That's a lot, and it's time to stop, so I am going to leave you with this thought: genealogy is a lot more fun if it's based in facts and good research than it is if it's based in crummy methodology. Be a groovy guy or groovy gal – do good research and contribute to the positive energy in the genealogy universe.

Thanks so much for listening. If you podcast and you want groovy theme music like mine, email my good friend Curt Brady at curtisbrady@yahoo.com. Tell him I sent you. He can hook you up with rock, blues, country, folk – pretty much anything that you can think of.

As for me, I'm around. You can find me online at ancestorsalivegenealogy.com, and on Facebook at AncestorsAliveGenealogy

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