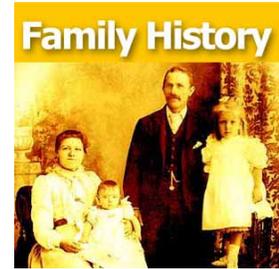


Family History: Genealogy Made Easy

with *Lisa Louise Cooke*



Welcome to this step-by-step series for beginning genealogists—and more experienced ones who want to brush up or learn something new. I first ran this series in 2008. So many people have asked about it, I'm bringing it back in weekly segments.

Episode 3: Working Backward and the SSDI

In our first segment in this episode my guest is Miriam Robbins Midkiff, a well-known genealogy blogger and teacher. She shares her best research tips, what motivates her to delve into her family history and how that discovery has enriched her life.

Then in our second segment we answer the question, “Why do we work backwards in genealogy?” and then fire up the Internet and go after your first genealogical record. Below, find current links to the record sources I talk about in the show. Also, when I recently checked, the Social Security Death Index was no longer free at WorldVitalRecords as I mention in the podcast and some of the site features I mention may have changed. I've given you links below to more options for searching, including plenty of FREE options!

Working Backward

When it comes to tracing your family history, there are standard methods that will help you build a solid family tree. Starting with yourself and working backwards is a cornerstone of genealogical research. It will be tempting to start with a great grandparent that you just got some juicy information on after interviewing Aunt Martha, but resist the temptation to start with that great grandparent, and go back to the beginning – and that's YOU!

There's a very good reason why working backward is so effective. Let's say you have filled in info on yourself, and then recorded everything about your parents and now it's time to work on one of your grandfathers and all you have is the date he died and the date he was born. If you are lucky enough to have his birth date and birthplace and you get his birth certificate it will tell you who his parents were, but it can't predict his future can it? Where he went to school, where he lived over the years, etc. Documents can only tell you what has occurred in the past, not what will occur in that person's future.

But if you get his death certificate it will give you key information at the end of his life that can lead you to the various events throughout his life. If you don't have his birthdate and birthplace, you'll probably find it on the death certificate. It will also likely name his parents and his spouse. A birth record can't tell you who he will marry, but a death record can tell you who he did marry. You can start to see how starting at the end of someone's life and working backwards will be *the most efficient and accurate way to research*.

Records are like the bread crumb trail of your family tree! If you don't work systematically backwards, it will be very easy to miss a crucial piece of evidence, and you might end up relying on guesswork and end up building a false history on it. Believe me you don't want to invest time in a tree that you're going to have to chop down and replant!

So now that you understand and are committed to following this cornerstone concept of systematically starting with yourself and working backwards, it's time to fire up the Internet and put it into practice by finding your first record. What type of record will we be looking for? A death record of course!

Is one of your parents deceased? If so, you're going to start with them. If they are still living, and you've got their information entered into your genealogy database choose one of their parents, your grandparents, who is deceased – or if you're lucky enough to be starting at a young age you may have to go back to a deceased great grandparent! (And good for you for starting now while you're young!)

The SSDI

Chances are the person that you've chosen, for this example let's say it's your grandfather, he most likely had a social security card. And there is a wonderful free database online in the United States called the Social Security Death Index, what is commonly referred to as the SSDI, that you can use to find that grandparent.

In 1935 the Social Security Act was signed into law by President Franklin Roosevelt, and consequently more than thirty million Americans were registered by 1937. Today, the Death Master File from the Social Security Administration contains over 89 million records of deaths that have been reported to the Social Security Administration and they are publicly available online.

Most of the information included in the index dates from 1962, although some data is from as early as 1937. This is because the Social Security Administration began to use a computer database for processing requests for benefits in 1962. Many of the earlier records back to 1937 have not been added.

The SSDI does not have a death record for everyone; and occasionally you may find an error here and there if something was reported inaccurately, but overall it's a terrific resource! As with all records it provides clues that you should try to verify through an additional record source.

There are many websites that feature this database, as seen in the UPDATED links below. This dataset is free at most sites, even sites that charge for access to other data.

- Ancestry.com at <http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=3693>
- FamilySearch.org at <https://familysearch.org/search/collection/1202535>

- Family Tree Legends at <http://www.familytreelegends.com/records/ssdi>
- Fold3.com at <http://go.fold3.com/ssdi/>
- World Vital Records at <http://www.worldvitalrecords.com/indexinfo.aspx?ix=ssdiall>

On the Search page, enter your grandparent's given name which is their first name, the family name which is their last name or surname, the place of their death – this could just be the state - and the year they died, and click the Search button. Hopefully you will get back a result that includes your grandparent.

Now remember you're looking at an index, not an original record or primary source. We talked about sources in [Episode 2](#), available at <http://lisalouisecooke.com/?p=3576>. A primary source is a document that was created at the time of the event by an authoritative source, usually someone with direct personal knowledge of the event that's being documented, like a death certificate is completed at the time of death by the attending physician. These are the best and usually most accurate types of sources you can find. And that's what we want!

The really key information in this search result is the county information. In order to get an original death certificate which would be your primary source you have to know which county they died in. You may already know that for your grandparent, but keep this in mind because the further back we go, the more crucial it will be to know the county involved since that's where death certificates are recorded.

By any chance did your grandparent not show up in the results even though you know they worked after 1937 when the Social Security got rolling, and you know they have passed away? Don't fret – We have other ways to try and find the info!

This brings us to what I think is a really important concept to keep in mind whenever you're researching your family on the Internet. Each search is conducted at a specific moment in time. Running an SSDI search or a Google search tomorrow might give you results different than the one you ran today. The Internet is being updated second by second, and the SSDI has been updated several times over the years.

In the case of the SSDI database, you can't be absolutely sure that the website you are using to search the SSDI has the most current version available. Look in the database description on the site to see how recently it was updated.

Here's a perfect example of that: When I searched for my grandfather on my dad's side from the Family Tree Legends website, I got no results. Now I KNOW he died in 1971 and I KNOW he worked his entire life so he had to have been registered with Social Security. Then I went to Ancestry.com and searched for him in their SSDI database and he popped right up.

On the other hand, my maternal grandmother shows up on all three websites I've mentioned. In most cases, you'll find who you're looking for, but occasionally, like with

my grandfather, you may have to dig in your heels and try the SSDI on a couple of different websites to find who they are. Never give up, never surrender. That's my motto!

And of course, each website offers just a little different variation on the terms that you can search on.

So just in case you have a stubborn ancestor who eludes your first SSDI search, try finding them at several of the SSDI databases. If you do have luck on World Vital Records, be sure and click the More Details link next to your search results because it includes some fun extras like a link called Historical Events next to their birth year and death year that will take you to a list of important historical events that were happening those particular years. It's kind of fun to see what was going on in the world when your grandparent was born.

You'll also find a link called Neighbors which will take you to a listing of folks who lived in the same county as your ancestor and died in within a year or two of them.

But most helpful is that your research results on World Vital Records will include a listing of nearby cemeteries which are good possibilities for where your ancestor may have been buried. (Again, just clues to hopefully send you in the right direction.) But as I said, the death certificate is going to be your best and primary source and almost always includes the name and address of the cemetery where the person was buried.

Here are a few more search tips if you don't find your ancestor right away:

1. Make sure that you tried alternate spellings for their name. You never know how it might have been typed into the SSDI database.
2. Many SSDI indexes allow you to use wildcards in your search. So for example you could type in "Pat*" which would pull up any name that has the first three letters as PAT such as Patrick, Patricia, etc.
3. Try using less information in your search. Maybe one of the details you've been including is different in the SSDI database. For example it may ask for state and you enter California because that's where grandpa died, when they were looking for Oklahoma because that's where he first applied for his social security card. By leaving off the state you'll get more results. Or leave off the birth year because even though you know it's correct, it may have been recorded incorrectly in the SSDI and therefore it's preventing your ancestor from appearing in the search results.
4. Leave out the middle name because middle names are not usually included in the database. However, if you don't have luck with their given name, try searching the middle name as their given name. In the case of my grandfather his given name was Robert but he went by the initial J.B. But in the SSDI his name is spelled out as JAY BEE! Go figure!

5. Remember that married women will most likely be listed under their married surname, not their maiden name. But if you strike out with the married name, go ahead and give the maiden a try. She may have applied for her card when single, and never bothered to update the Administration's records. Or if she was married more than once, check all her married names for the same reason.

6. Don't include the zip code if there is a search field for it because zip codes did not appear in earlier records.

While most folks will appear in the SSDI, there are those who just won't. But knowing where information is not located can be as important down the road in your research as knowing where it IS located, so I recommend making a note in your database that you did search the SSDI with no result. This will save you from duplicating the effort down the road because you forgot that you looked there. I admit it, in the past I've managed to check out books I've already looked through and order a record or two that I already had. Lesson learned!

So here's your assignment for this week: Go through your genealogy database and do a Social Security Death Index search on every deceased person who was living after 1937. Hopefully you will be able to fill in several more blanks in your genealogy database and family tree!