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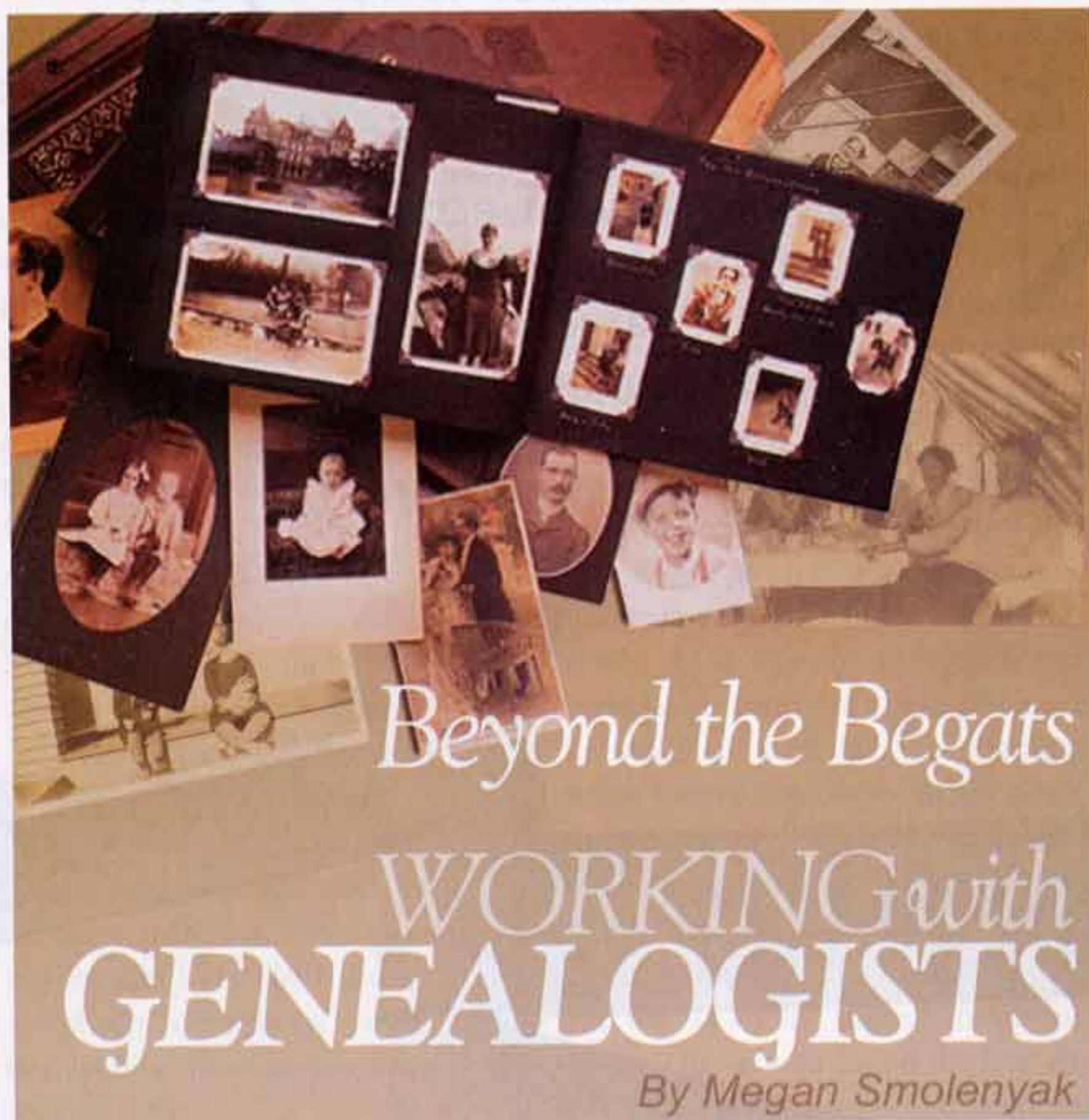
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Beyond the Begats

WORKING with GENEALOGISTS

By Megan Smolenyak

Why on earth would an investigator ever want to work with a genealogist? They're mostly blue-haired ladies obsessed with proving descent from some Revolutionary War hero, right? What could they possibly have to offer you in your investigations? As a professional genealogist myself, I'd like to try to answer this question, and just maybe my comments will surprise you.

Over the last decade or so, genealogy has exploded in popularity. Some sources now rank it as the number one hobby in America, with almost 80 million hardcore adherents and dabblers. Consequently, it has evolved into a veritable industry, and as often happens in such cases, this shift has been accompanied by greater emphasis on both professionalism and specialization.

It's true that genealogists vary

widely in their skill sets and experience. In fact, with the massive influx of "newbies," it's more important than ever to do your homework on any you might consider hiring, but fortunately, that's now easier to do. And while genealogy, by its very nature, focuses on the past, a growing number of professionals are choosing to specialize in the 20th century research that may well be relevant to your own cases.

What Genealogists Do

Genealogy is essentially the study or investigation of ancestry, so most genealogists are trained to start with themselves and work their way backwards in time. Those who do good work will gather extensive data (e.g., dates and places of birth, marriage, and death) on each person in their family tree, search for evidence that might reveal their ancestors as real people (e.g., court and newspaper accounts), and perhaps bring all this together into a written family history.

But with the advent of the Internet, which has made it so much easier to find distant cousins, many genealogists now spend almost as much time seeking the living as they do the long deceased. They do it for a variety of reasons — to find family artifacts, research buddies, and the like — but whatever the motivation, the result has been a crop of genealogists who are surprisingly talented at finding people and information from recent decades.

How a Genealogist Might Be Able to Help You

A couple of years ago, I was asked by the U.S. Army to participate in an experiment. They wanted to locate the families of several thousand soldiers who were still unaccounted for from Korea. Most of their personnel records had burned in a 1973 fire, so the information the Army had on each soldier from this 50-year-old war, was scanty. The decision was made to give a series of test cases to selected genealogists to see if they would be able to locate people with the right relationship and blood lines. While I had never been asked to do this kind of work before, I was pleased to discover that the genealogical techniques I had learned over the last three decades were exactly what I needed to solve these cases. All that was required was for me to learn about some more contemporary sources.

Admittedly, this is not the most typical of examples, so how might this translate to your world? Colorado-based Kathleen W. Hinckley, who is both a professional genealogist and professional private investigator, sheds some light on this, explaining that genealogists can be most helpful in cases involving adoption, missing or unknown heirs, or any situation that entails locating a living person (e.g., finding military buddies, classmates, witnesses, and debtors).

"The private investigator is bet-

ter suited for cases that involve finding a person that has been missing for a short period because of their contacts and skills in interviewing and surveillance, but the genealogist is better suited to locating a relative or descendent of someone with a last known address over 20 years old," Hinckley says. In other words, don't expect a genealogist to work the phones to trace a missing child, but consider calling one if you only have a name and address from 1970.

Hinckley also points out that while genealogists lack certain specialized skills such as those required for workers' compensation investigations and insurance fraud cases, they "are more experienced and trained in paying attention to collateral research that will often solve a case." Since genealogists are so accustomed to hitting brick walls in their research into people who died decades or even centuries ago, they tend to have a lot of practice using a "surround and conquer" approach of tracing all the known friends, relatives and associates of an ancestor. This tactic, it turns out, is quite effective with the living as well.

Finding the Right Genealogist

Let's say that hypothetically you have a case that might benefit from a genealogist's assistance. How do you find the right one? Hinckley, who also happens to be the Executive Director of the Association of Professional Genealogists (APG), recommends gaining an understanding of the credentialing of genealogists. The APG (<http://www.apgen.org/directory/index.php>), International Commission for the Accreditation of Professional Genealogists (www.icapgen.org/Programs/aglist.htm), and Board for Certification of Genealogists (www.bcgcertification.org/associates/index.php), all have directories that can help you find likely candidates.

To qualify for these organizations, a genealogist would have had to demonstrate skills and agree to a code of ethics, or both, so you are assured that you will be dealing with a professional. Possibly of greater importance, however, will be your need to find a genealogist who specializes in 20th/21st century, or perhaps missing heir, research. This one factor will rule out most contenders.

Once you have narrowed the field,

you may wish to look for genealogists located in the geographic area of your primary interest, as many repositories and some records, can only be searched onsite. Researchers in the Salt Lake City, Utah and Washington, D.C. areas will generally have easy access to the broadest reach of records, but if you think you'll need court records from Monroe County in New York, for instance, you would be well

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• <http://home.adelphia.net/%7Ejavaughan/index.html> "Property Assessment Databases".

There are web sites that have business licenses in a database.

• Looking for information on a corporation? www.internet-pro prospector.org/company.html

• For a large site of business information, <http://gwis2.circ.gwu.edu/~gprice/direct.htm>

• "Free Executive / Company Search" www.ecomponline.com

• Business, corporation, and more information: <http://crimetime.com/bbostate.htm>

• All kinds of business information at www.libraryspot.com/businessinfo.htm.

Still have not found that person? Here are a few more web sites to check out:

• Military web sites <http://members.aol.com/papillon53/Military.htm>

• "National Archives and Records Administration", www.nara.gov/regional/stlouis.html.

• "Military Record Requests (SF 180)" www.nara.gov/regional/mprsf180.html.

NO hits? Could he or she have passed away? Most, but not all, deaths are listed at this web site. (If there was nobody to collect the Social Security death benefits, the deceased person may not be listed) www.ancestry.com/search/rectype/vital/ssdi/main.htm.

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advised to call the courthouse, library, or genealogical or historical society to ask for their recommendations on local researchers.

When you contact the recommended genealogists, ask for details on experience, and for references, as you would of any professional. Having subcontracted to a number of other professional genealogists, I can tell you to expect to occasionally encounter well-meaning people who just don't have the kind of experience you need, so resist the urge to let someone learn on your dime! Quiz them extensively, and be very precise about what information you need and the means that you consider acceptable and unacceptable.

How Much Is This Going to Cost?

According to APG, "Most genealogical practitioners charge by the hour, and also bill for out-of-pocket expenses such as photocopies, telephone calls, travel, and vital records fees. Hourly rates range from about \$15 to \$100, with the average between \$25 and \$60. Fees vary among professionals, depending upon experience, credentials, specialty, and geographic area." Expect to pay the most for those residing in major metropolitan areas where many of our ancestors lived, such as New York City or Chicago. Such researchers not only have a higher overhead, but are in greater demand.

Let's Work Together

Just as I know that those reading these words are not the shady characters I've seen in the movies, please understand that we genealogists are not all octogenarians hoping to enthrall you with our "so-and-so begat so-and-so" tales. I am convinced that cooperation between professional private investigators and genealogists will prove mutually beneficial. In fact, writing this article inspired me to hire a private investigator to assist with one

of my Army cases! I have every expectation that this will be the first of many occasions when I do so.

Megan Smolenyak, author of In Search of Our Ancestors and Honoring Our Ancestors, can be reached through her website at www.honoringourancestors.com.



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unredacted report.

Despite having over 35 co-sponsors, this bill is stalled in committee. It needs a push and it needs it now. If every private investigator would arrange to write a letter to a Congressman and have clients do the same, then perhaps this bill would get passed. There does not appear to be any real organized opposition to the amendment, but there is not a lot of pressure on Congress to move this bill.

The National Council of Investigation and Security Services (NCISS) has been fighting for four years to get this bill or similar ones passed. As hard as they are working for the entire profession, they are waging this battle with limited funds. Each responsible private investigator in the United States should be a member of this organization, helping protect your business and your livelihood. Only with a united front and relentlessly pushing Congress, will this law be fixed so that you can do your job for your clients.

For information on how you can be of assistance on fixing the FCRA, contact the NCISS nciss@aol.com or visit the web site at www.nciss.org and click on the Legislative Page link. (This article is prepared by a private investigator who barely understands the FCRA himself. The opinions and interpretations are his alone and should not be relied as anything other than one person's opinion. Since he has never been near a law school, nothing in this paper is intended to be