

GENTREK: Another Look at Obituaries

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The traditional, biographical obituary, with which we are so familiar, primarily developed after the U.S. Civil War. As the interest in local news grew, newspapers added more and more information and a wider range of people to their traditional death notices. While there may not be an obituary on every person who died in the latter half of the 1800s, you will find them for a very large number of the adults, especially those who resided in a community for a number of years.

Let me begin this topic with three recent obituaries I've looked up as a member of RAOGK.

"FORT WORTH - Inez G. Crawford, 78, a retired registered nurse, died Friday at a Fort Worth hospital.

"Memorial service: 2 p.m. Tuesday at Memorial Baptist Church, South 13th Street at Avenue H, Temple. Burial: Hillcrest Cemetery. Visitation: 4 to 6 p.m. today at Thompson's Harveson & Cole, and 5 to 8 p.m. Monday at Harper-Talasek Funeral Home in Temple.

"Memorial: Intercessory Prayer Ministry of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth; Memorial Baptist Church in Temple.

"Inez G. Crawford was born March 10, 1917, in Belton to Alvis L. and Ethel Savage Gilliam. A graduate of LeVega High School in Bellmead, she received her R.N. degree at the King's Daughters Hospital School of Nursing in Temple in 1939, and attended Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. A minister's wife, she served with her husband in churches in Bell county, Paris, Houston and Nacogdoches, as well as Golden Triangle Baptist Association, Waco Baptist Association and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

"Survivors: Husband of 55 years, the Rev. Edwin Crawford of Fort Worth; sons, Dr. Dan Crawford and wife, Joanne, of Fort Worth, and Bob Crawford and wife, Linda, of Nashville, Tennessee; granddaughter, Danna Crawford Heiliger of Fort Worth; grandson, James Crawford of College Station; and great granddaughter, Whitney Heiliger of Fort Worth."

What do we know about Inez Crawford?

- 1- Her age
- 2- Her occupation
- 3- Her place of death
- 4- Her Church affiliation
- 5- Her date and place of birth
- 6- Her parents' names
- 7- Where she went to high school
- 8- Where she earned her RN degree and when

- 9- Her husband's name and profession
- 10- Several places where husband and wife worked
- 11- Names and locations of children

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"David Stiles Maxwell, 82, of 1937 Fairmont Ave, died 2 p.m. Saturday in his home after a long illness.

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"He was born in Danville, Kentucky, and attended Centre College there. Maxwell later lived in Wichita, Kansas, and Des Moines Iowa. He moved to Fort Worth in 1919 to enter the oil business. He retired about 25 years ago.

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"He was a Mason and Shriner and a member of the Technical Club. Maxwell was the oldest living member of the United Commercial Traveler's Association, having joined when he was 18.

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"Surviving are his wife, and one daughter, Mrs. D.H. Stallard; a brother, J.C. Maxwell, all of Fort Worth; one sister, Mrs. W.E. Kennedy of Brownville, and three grandchildren.

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"Funeral services will be held at 2 p.m. Monday at Robertson-Mueller-Harper Chapel. Rev. John Leatherbury will officiate and burial will be in Rose Hill."

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What do we know about David Stiles Maxwell?

- 1- His age
- 2- Date and time of death
- 3- Address at time of death
- 4- Place of birth
- 5- Social affiliations
- 6- Names and locations of surviving family members

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Any assumptions?

- 1- Occupation - sales, possibly, for he moved around a lot.
- 2- Education - geology, perhaps?

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"Mrs. Lenora Garrett, 2228 Fairmont, on Thursday, Oct 15. Member Broadway Baptist Church and OES. Survivors: Son, Billy H. Garrett, New Orleans, Louisiana; two grandchildren; brothers John G. (Jack) Harrell, Fort Worth; Dr. H. J. Harrell, Lebanon, Missouri; sisters, Mrs. Mary E. Hurst, Boulder Colorado; Mrs. George DeWoody, Superior, Wisconsin.

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"Friends may call at Harveson & Cole Funeral Home 702 8th Ave, where services will be conducted 3:30 p.m. Saturday. Rev. Roy DeBrand, officiating. The family is at 2810 Primrose. Interment Laurel Land. Pallbearers: Nat M. Wilson, O.J. Butts, James C.

Thurman, Ray T. Ramstrom, P.M. Cornell. Arrangements, Harveson & Cole."

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How helpful is this shorter obituary to the researcher? Very good, I think. Let's see what we know about Lenora Garrett:

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1- Street Address
2- Date of Death
3- Church affiliation
4- One son, 2 grandchildren
5- Two brothers and two sisters
6- Names of pallbearers, some of whom may be family

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Let's see what ELSE we can learn:

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1- No husband mentioned: death or divorce?
2- Was she married more than once? Her son has a different last name.
3- Was her maiden name Harrell? Both brothers are Harrell.
4- Except for one brother, family is out of state.

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By the way, there are more leads here, too. If you review them closely, you'll find them.

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. What makes an ancestor's death event significant in family history research is that record generation is greater than at any other time in their life.

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One of the first things family survivors do when a person dies is publish news of the death. The obituary or tribute in a local newspaper, serves several purposes. First, it notifies anyone close to the family so they can comfort the remaining family members and assist in any funeral arrangements. Second, it notifies the community and friends about the funeral. Third, it gives notice to creditors and debtors that it is time to settle the estate.

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Always seek an ancestor's obituary. Usually the smaller the community, the more likely the obituary will be extensive, providing more details about the person's life, his or her family, the events which led up to death, and the survivors. Check newspapers for death notices at the local and state libraries where the death took place. Most public libraries maintain a collection of their towns' newspapers, and most state libraries do it for the entire state. Genealogical societies and DAR chapters often provide obituary indices for cities and counties, too.

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An experienced researcher lets each piece of evidence generate new sources of data and more genealogical evidence. Comb through obituaries for every possible lead.

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How can data in an obituary be evaluated to discover more information?

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1~ Place of residence: Check city and county directories to determine

- . (a) how long the person may have lived in the area,
- . (b) if family members lived nearby,
- . (c) if an occupation is listed it could lead to business records, and
- . (d) if a place of origin or birth is provided.

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2~ Age: A year of birth can be determined from it.

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3~ Cause of death: Health details can lead to other sources of information if the death was due to a prolonged or chronic illness.

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4~ Location of death: If the death occurred in a hospital or nursing home, seek the institution's records for additional family details such as date of admission, responsible person(s), lists of visitors, attending physician(s), etc.

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5~ Membership in organizations: Search the records of any specifically named organization for additional data.

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6~ Lists of surviving family members: Check for married names and other residences for these family members. The obituary may be the only evidence of a marriage you have!

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7~ Church: Check church records for births, blessings, baptisms, ordinances, marriages and deaths of family members.

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8~ Funeral home or mortuary: Check funeral home records for details of death, including the financially responsible party, minister, and pallbearers, and information on other deceased family members from the same area. Modern funeral homes maintain remembrance cards and memorial registers which family, friends, and acquaintances often sign. The National Yellow Book of Funeral Home Directors can help you locate funeral homes in the US. Funeral directors are valuable sources of information.

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9~ Cemetery: Check cemetery records of the cemetery, paying attention to burial plots and locations. The business records of a cemetery may include plat maps that indicate who purchased the site and who is buried in it. They can also include information about the deceased such as date of death, date of interment, nativity information, next of kin or significant other, information about parents, and data on any church or funeral home involved. If a cemetery is no longer maintained, check the holdings of the local historical society and local public library to "uncover" some of the old cemetery records.

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Burial in another cemetery other than the family's may mean the ancestor was buried with the spouse's parents and open whole new line of research.

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Additional Value of Obituaries

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1~ Before Vital Records were kept, older obituaries may provide information otherwise unavailable.

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2~ Look for obituaries not only for direct ancestors but also for siblings and children. One obituary may give information which your own ancestor's and other immediate relatives' obituaries do not have.

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3~ Don't overlook obituaries for other people in the same area with the same surname as a possible line of research.

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4~ Notice of death at a former place of residence or at a descendant's locale may reveal where to search for death and burial records, mayhaps where the now deceased was visiting. Also, obituaries may have been placed in newspapers where the other children resided at the time.

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4~ Read the words! "Suddenly" is a tip off that the death was not natural. Therefore, check for an inquest.

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5~ And don't just look at the obituary page, especially if the person who died was well known in the local area. The death may be classified under "news" and could be a local society item. In the case of murder or suicide, it could even be front page.

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6~ According to George G. Morgan, "obituaries are secondary records, and should be used only as pointers to help you locate other corroborating documentation." I agree, mostly. I consider them primary sources for place and date of death because they are recorded in close proximity to both. No, obituary information is not always correct, but you don't have to strain your brain to recall other primary documents with errors, either.

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6~ Finally, look for multiple obituaries. If there are other newspapers in the same county, check them out, too! Perhaps another family member posted it or it was posted by a friend or organization to which the deceased belonged.

Offline Obituary Sources:

Here are three good places to begin searching for published abstracts of death notices:

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Betty M. Jarboe's Obituaries: A Guide to Sources, second ed. (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1989). This is a listing of published death notices, as well as local, unpublished, obituary files. However, the author's definition of obituaries is very broad, and she includes many cemetery listings as well. Arranged geographically, with the United States followed by individual states and a few foreign countries, you can also use the index at the back of the book, which alphabetically lists authors, titles, and subjects to find known sources, especially those which may defy geographic identification.

The Family History Library Catalog is perhaps the most comprehensive listing of published newspaper abstracts. Although the library does not collect newspapers themselves, they aggressively seek and obtain published collections of births, deaths, marriages, and news notices with genealogical information taken from newspapers. These are listed in the catalog under the locality where the paper was published, under the heading "Newspapers."

Of course, don't forget to check the ***Periodical Source Index*** (PERSI). This million-entry index to virtually all English-language genealogy magazines and journals will help you locate periodical articles which are abstracts from local newspapers, rather than book-length collections.

TIP O' THE DAE:

I found my grandfather's obituary in a neighboring state where he had resided twenty years earlier. He had two brothers still living there. In the case of my grandmother who lived in Nebraska, I found hers in Michigan where her mother had lived in a small town. It never hurts to check, you may have a bonus find.

Online Obituary Sources:

Obituary Central
www.obitcentral.com

Obituary Daily Times
<http://www.rootsweb.com/~obituary/>

Obituary Look-Ups
freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~obitl

Obituary Links
www.obitlinkspage.com

Obituary Depot
www.daddezio.com/obituary/index.html

Cyndi's List (local newspaper listings)
www.cyndislist.com/obits.htm

Newspaper Obituaries
www.ancestralfindings.com/obituaries.htm

What about using search engines to find online obits? Type your entry as follows:

`"marion morrison" obituaries`

The quotation marks around the name tell the search engine to look for the name exactly as written inside the quotes. Use the plural term "obituaries" since most newspapers don't use the singular term "obituary" on their sites.

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Summary

Shorly following the funeral, you might find a "Card of Thanks" or similar expression from the family in the newspaper. While these notices seldom indicate the town where an immigrant died, they may mention surviving family members not mentioned in the obituary.

It is our hope that you'll take another look at Obituaries ... even the ones you've already extracted. There may be some clues you missed the first time 'round. Thank you so much for joining us!

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