

GENTREK: *Forensic Genealogy*, a book review

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So much fascinating information is locked in old family photographs, documents, or stories that is just waiting to be ferreted out! All we need are a few new tools and a healthy dose of creative curiosity. This book gives us those tools, all we need to provide is our curiosity.

Every fan of the popular television shows *Forensic Files*, *CSI*, and *Medical Detectives* knows that the investigators use all the resources at their disposal to solve crimes. They do not limit their investigations to conventional sources of evidence such as fingerprints and eyewitness accounts, but make use of large reference libraries of plants, carpets, shoes, string, wrapping paper, chemicals and anything else that can be critical to a successful investigation's conclusion.

Likewise, a good **forensic genealogist** makes use of the wealth of information available on the Internet along with any hard copy, digital and microfilmed reference materials that might be at her disposal. She realizes the value of **all sources of information**, not just conventional records such as birth, marriage and death. **Dr. Colleen Fitzpatrick's** investigations have led her to examine five hundred year old weather records, information on the breeding cycle of mosquitoes, old almanacs, how babies were delivered in the middle ages, old hospital admission records, the 1909 National Cash Register catalog, the history of the railroad in Canada, the backs of photographic prints from the 1950s, the history of the Spanish Armada, and many other unconventional reference materials--resulting in intriguing family insights and better information.

Forensic scientists and genealogists share the same goals--to find out who was who, and who did what, where and when. Whether we are investigating a crime or researching our family tree, photographs, databases and DNA analysis are the three most important resources that we can use for answering these questions. For that reason, she devoted the major sections of her book to how to use these three kinds of sources to our best advantage. In explaining how to analyze photographs, to delve into databases, and to use DNA analysis to reveal family history, she emphasizes the creative parts of an investigation over the mechanics. For example, have you ever thought of looking at the edges of old photographs to find out if they are from the same roll, or their reverse sides to place them in chronological order? Have you considered looking at a city directory to figure out if your ancestor and his wife had lost any children? What about using DNA analysis to tie your family to the history and politics of a religious conflict? Huh?

Using the forensic investigation techniques presented in this book can:

- ~ make unconventional discoveries from surprising sources
- ~ gain an understanding of how our ancestors lived
- ~ develop fascinating insights into our family histories

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Forensic Genealogy will give you a sense of coming from a long line of real people who are not just names on a page or rows on a tax table.

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Here are some samples of the suggestions and insights I found when reading **Forensic Genealogy**:

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1~ Many articles on identifying old photographs don't go beyond suggesting that you should ask older relatives if they recognize anyone in a picture. Although this is a great start, it's a mistake to believe that this is *all* you can do. Since many early photographs in our collections date from the late 1800s to the early 1900s, those who could have identified the people in the pictures are deceased. Even older relatives who do have memories to share are sometimes confused about events that happened decades in the past. While talking to elderly relatives remains the first place to start when researching old photographs, there are other powerful tools to use for this purpose. Is there a house number in the picture? Why not use the city directories to find out which family lived at that address and when? Her *Digital Detective* chapter gives many more suggestions for investigating old photographs.

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2~ You cannot accurately date a photograph by the clothing or hairstyles, except in rare cases. Why? Well, how often do you buy new clothes? Because of availability and cost, past generations were less likely to buy new clothes than people today who can shop at the nearest mall. Hand-me-downs to younger children in a family were much more common then. Nineteenth century *photographers often had wardrobes available for customers so that someone in an old photograph might not even be wearing his own clothes!*

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3~ To date a photograph, what can the position of the brand name on the reverse side tell? Are there clues to geographical location in the picture? Can you tell what camera was used to take a picture and when it was in use? How can knowing this tell you who is in the photo? What resources can you use to match items in the picture with a particular time period? These are just some of the questions you might ask when investigating a photo.

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4~ When looking for specific data such as an address or a birth date, you may be tempted to record only that piece of information. But in doing so, you may lose important insights by focusing too tightly on individual facts and not looking around at neighboring data. If your great grandfather was Johann Schmidt, it pays to research all the Schmidts from all the city directories you have available, not just old Johann himself for the year you know he lived on Hamilton street. Several years earlier Johann might have lived with other Schmidts, cousins, aunts, or uncles on Hamilton street, too. Knowing who lived with whom and when can reveal interesting family dynamics. Expanding your efforts to include variations in spelling like Smith and Smidt will also greatly increase your chances of finding something. The *Database Detective* chapter gives more tips in this area.

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5~ General information can point to specific facts. For example, knowing the legal age of marriage in an area and timeframe can predict a birth date, or lead you to investigate the documents needed to license the marriage of an underage couple. Knowing that it was the practice in some cultures to have children early and often can reveal gaps in the birth dates in

a family, leading to the discovery that children are missing from the known birth line-up, either because they were left behind when a family emigrated, because of a child's death or a miscarriage, or because daughters might not appear in civil or legal records like sons do.

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In the ***Database Detective*** chapter, Dr. Fitzpatrick shows that knowing how city directories were compiled can reveal the birth and marriage years of the sons in a family, but not necessarily the daughters.

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6~ Do not ignore the historical context of your family in your eagerness to populate names on your family tree. The time you spend studying seemingly unimportant background information may prove most rewarding. Knowing how your ancestors lived can offer more insight to family history than discovering that Great Great Uncle John worked for the gas company in 1875. Wouldn't it also be interesting to know that he survived a yellow fever epidemic that year?

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7~ Look for a name change on immigration only if your family came to the U.S. before 1906. After the immigration station at Ellis Island opened in that year, immigration officials were required to record immigrants' names as they appeared on ship manifests created at embarkation points. The language barrier between arrivals and station officials was virtually non-existent. All Ellis Island immigration officials were fluent in at least three languages, and good interpreters were on call 24 hours a day to cover rare dialects, so that even spelling variations were uncommon. From 1906 any name changes or variations in spelling probably occurred **after** an immigrant's entry into the U.S.

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8~ In DNA analysis, mismatches can be far more interesting and revealing than matches. In reviewing the implications of two startling mismatches in Colleen's own Fitzpatrick DNA study, she came across a possible link between members of her surname group and the sinking of the Spanish Armada! DNA can be a useful tool for more than estimating a date for a Most Recent Common Ancestor (**MRCA**) or for determining which 50,000 year old clan mother we descend from. DNA can tie us to world history, it can be used to give us the geographical location from which our ancestors came in recent centuries, and it can reveal unsuspected liaisons between seemingly unrelated families through nonpaternity events. There is as much information as you probably will want to know about this in the ***DNA Detective*** chapter.

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9~ In estimating the date for the Most Recent Common Ancestor (**MRCA**) of two people in a DNA study, the math reduces to the binomial expansion, or equivalently, the Poisson distribution. (And don't let anyone tell you otherwise.) The ***DNA Detective*** chapter gives easy-to-use charts (in Excel on the included CD-ROM) for looking up the MRCA of two people based on how many markers they are tested on and how many mismatches there are between them. This chapter also has spreadsheet skeletons you can use to perform your own MRCA calculations, as well as the underlying formulas for those of us who like to dig deeper.

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10~ A Y-chromosome cladogram is more than a graphical representation of a surname's genetic structure with a time axis. The complexity and arrangement of groups within a cladogram are tied to family history and can indicate the diversity of a surname's origins and can be used to identify the main branches of a family. For example, I created a cladogram

from my pedigree with the surnames Gernryk, Kernryk to Canright. Having a cluster of genetically similar individuals that is well separated from other members of a study often indicates that this cluster has a unique history and geography. As the number of name studies grows and online databases of DNA profiles become larger, it will be interesting to combine the DNA results of many surname studies into a single cladogram to identify common genetic histories. Her second book ***DNA & Genealogy*** covers this subject in much more detail, yet remains very readable. You will enjoy finding out more about how to create and interpret cladograms in the ***DNA Detective*** chapter, too.

This book was meant to start every new forensic genealogist on a path of discovery. I hope that each mystery that is solved by using the techniques in this book leaves ten more in its place. A good forensic genealogist realizes that ten new mysteries can only be regarded as ten new opportunities for exciting new genealogical detective work.

Using numerous examples, Fitzpatrick demonstrates how to create your own databases from the given material, and how to process them (sorting by different criteria, rearranging the data, *etc.*). She also offers advice on creating a database of databases, that is, a database in which you may register which databases you have researched for each surname of interest.

Genealogy Gems has a podcast interview with Colleen Fitzpatrick, PhD., about this book. It is well-worth a listen, too. Also, check out Dr. Fitzpatrick's site at <http://www.forensicgenealogy.info/index.html>. It has the link to the podcast. LibraryThing.com rates the book at 4 out of 4 stars.

If my review doesn't prompt you to get your hands on ***Forensic Genealogy***, then one of us has wasted the time here.

Amazon.com is currently out of stock, but you can get it at the Family History Store: http://www.thefamilyhistorystore.com/product_info.php?ref=206&products_id=2707&affiliate_banner_id=1

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