Online Query Boards Can Yield Treasure Trove

by Dee Gibson-Roles

At some point in researching one's genealogy, almost every researcher feels the need to place a query on an online query board or in a genealogical journal published by a society in the geographical area of his/her research. When well-constructed, such a query can yield great results.

First we should discuss the various media options for posting queries. Prior to the advent of the internet, a researcher had only a few options. Many genealogical journals accepted queries about families of their area from folks both local and those who lived at a distance. Sometimes a fee was charged while others posted the query at no charge. Some state genealogical societies also offered to post queries from their members. Finally, there were a few genealogical publications serving researchers nationwide which printed queries also. In addition to journals, one could attempt to locate information by sending in inquiry to the local newspaper. While this was not nearly as common as journal queries, most newspapers would willingly print such a query. Those newspapers which carried a genealogical column (usually weekly or monthly) would often offer researchers the opportunity to place a query in that column.

Needless to say, placing a query in this manner resulted in a rather long wait for an answer. The publication date might be anywhere from a few days to several weeks after the query's submission. In addition, the responder would usually have to take the time to send a written reply via mail unless the inquirer included his/her telephone number. However, much of the time researchers gleaned much valuable information and met new cousins who were researching the same family. Printed queries are still a great way to contact those researching the same family. Check with the organization or newspaper to determine if written queries are accepted and the requirements for submission.

Just as today's young folks have never experienced a world without cell phones, computers, the Internet, etc., those who have become interested in their family history and started researching in the last few years have no knowledge or experience in posting queries the "old-fashioned" way just described.

Enter the Internet. With the advent of this media form, a whole new world was opened to researchers. In the early years of the Internet, there were few digitized records available and many of the family trees posted contained numerous errors. However, the query boards soon appeared and became instantly popular with researchers everywhere.

As genealogical societies built websites to share information about their society and area, they often included both a query board and a "surnames of interest" page. Researchers now had a means to which they could turn for a much faster response. Some societies still offer this method of inquiry, and great results can sometimes be obtained for those which do.

Almost as soon as the "Internet" became a household word, other board or "forums" (as some were called) began to appear. Three of these that come to mind immediately are the GenForum, RootsWeb and Ancestry.com message boards. The number of these message/query boards and forums has grown to thousands upon thousands of surnames or localities. It is now very unusual to find a surname for which there is no query board available from any source. Most also include a listing for every state in the union, and every county in each state. Many countries are included with boards for each governmental division within the country (such as states). Most boards have also grown to include boards for specific topics, such as DNA, ethnic groups such as the Melungeons and even research helps and tips. Cyndi's List (www.cyndislist.com) offers an extensive list of boards of all descriptions. One can also "Google" genealogy message boards or genealogical query boards, which will produce many choices.

Once a researcher locates a board of interest, the messages/posts of the last several years can be searched or browsed to do determine if there are any posts of interest. If so, the post can be answered on the board itself, and the post and answer(s) can be seen by everyone using the board. There is usually an option to request notification via e-

mail if an answer is placed in response to a query. E-mail addresses are available for those posting on most boards, but are composed in such a way that they cannot be copied and pasted or harvested for spam purposes.

There are two ways to use these boards. One method is to post a query and ask for information. Another is to use the search engine available on almost every board to search for the names or places of interest in messages or queries that have been previously posted. For example, on a surname board, one would search by the first name and surname and/or a specific location. In this way the thousands of queries and replies will be narrowed to those of particular interest without having to sort through all the messages on the board. Once a message is found that appears to contain information on the family or subject being researched, one can reply to the message. The reply will appear to all who check the board, increasing likelihood of making contact with another researcher with information to share.
The importance of constructing a good query cannot be stressed strongly enough.

First of all, it is important to include the surname(s) and possibly the first name in the subject line of a surname inquiry and the locality and surname in the subject line of a locality inquiry. For example, one posting a query on the Buncombe County board and/or the surname board might list "Alexanders in Buncombe County." If the surname is very common, as is Alexander in Buncombe County, it is wise to also list a given name and time period such as "James Alexander in Buncombe County 1790s." Information in the subject should be specific, such as the example above. Vague wording such as "needing help" or "missing ancestor" is far too hazy for most researchers to even bother to read the body of the query.

The same information may be reentered in the body of the query, along with additional information as indicated below. Including a time period will increase the likelihood that useful responses will be returned. Include information being sought such as who, what, when and/or where. Keep in mind that too little information and or vagueness usually results in replies that are irrelevant or even few or no replies, while asking for too much information can result in readers skipping over the query because it is too lengthy. Limit the query to one surname or question to achieve the best results. Most boards and lists have a moderator or person in charge to assure that appropriate posts and replies are being made and inappropriate posts, replies and/or language will result in the message being removed.

The facts that are already known by the posting researcher should be included as well, but again, be brief and specific. Names, dates, spouses and children are important to anyone reading the query, but it is not necessary to include every minute detail one knows about the family. Too much information may create confusion in the mind of the reader. It is wise to include an e-mail address so that the responder can respond "off board" he/she desires.

There are also "mailing lists" which are very similar to the boards. One must subscribe to a "mailing list" to receive new posts via e-mail. The posts can also be answered by e-mail. Past messages on mailing lists are usually "archived" so that the thread can be following back through the preceding months or years.

Above all, it is important to be courteous and kind. Posting rude or distasteful messages will result in being banned from posting anything on many of the boards or mailing lists.
One other source of contacting other researchers is the "surname list" or "families of interest" page on many genealogical websites. Some of the GenWeb sites include these pages as do most genealogical society websites. These are very easy to use. The researcher simply sends an e-mail to the contact given on the page requesting to have his/her name and e-mail address listed under the surname(s) he/she is researching. (Most of these pages now have the researcher's name "linked" to an e-mail address for ease in contacting that person.) If the surname is not listed but is common to an area, a request may be sent to add this surname to the page. One word of caution here: E-mail addresses may change often. It is extremely important to notify the manager of the page of any change in e-mail addresses so contact info can be updated to be assured of being contacted by other researchers. The same applies to messages on query boards as well. It is very disheartening to find a query about the very ancestor being researched only to find that the contact information is no longer valid!