

1940 Census Released

by Dee Gibson-Roles

For genealogists and historians alike, April 2 was probably the most exciting day of 2012: the 1940 Census was released at 9 AM (DST) this morning by the National Archives (and promptly jammed the internet!) “The 1940 U.S. Census is significant because practically everyone knows a family member—parent, grandparent, aunt, or uncle—who was alive in 1940,” said David Rencher, Chief Genealogy Officer for FamilySearch, a nonprofit organization sponsoring the online community project to index the 1940 Census.

We will discuss first the 1940 Census itself and what it contains, then cover the indexing project that will get underway in just a few days.

Any of the US Censuses are meant to provide a “snapshot” in time of the entire population of the US. Enumerators on all censuses were instructed to record the household as it existed on “Census Day” rather than the day the household was actually enumerated, which was typically several days, weeks, or even months later after “Census Day”. In 1940, “Census Day” was April 1. Each census remains sealed for 72 years due to privacy issues. Technically it should have been released on April 1, 2012, but since that day fell on a Sunday, it was necessary to move the release forward one day to April 2.

It is appropriate to first consider the generation that was enumerated in 1940. This generation had survived the Great Depression and would soon face World War II. They understood hard work, sacrifice and industry. Some had seen the country move from WW I into the “Roaring Twenties”, then into the Great Depression. Many of them would live to see innovations such as the microwave, TV and even the advent of computers. On the other hand, this would be the last census for those thousands of men and women who gave their lives in WW II. This generation has been fondly and very appropriately called “The Great Generation.”

What can researchers expect to find in this census? For genealogists, one of the most important questions asked was the place of residence of each person on April 1, 1935. That question alone is one of the most valuable sources of information on this census. For those who have family who could not be found on the 1930 Census, this question may provide the clue needed to locate the family. The information may help establish migration patterns for the family also.

Other information includes household data, which will include the street name and number, whether the home is owned or rented and the value of the home or the amount of rent paid, and if the place was a farm. The answers to these questions can provide clues as to the affluence (or lack thereof) of the family. In addition, by knowing the street name and number, one can find the exact location of the residence on maps of that time period, and in turn determine what is on the same land today.

The enumerator next recoded the name of each person in the household, including those who were temporarily absent. The enumerator was instructed to place an “x” by the name of the person furnishing the household information. This will make the task of evaluating the accuracy of the information much easier for the researcher.

The usual general questions of gender, race, age, marital status, school attendance in the recent past were asked, and nativity of each person. Finally, for every person over 14 years of age, detailed information about employment (or lack thereof) and income was recorded.

Several websites offer free blank 1940 Census forms that can be downloaded. Once such site is <http://www.archives.gov/research/census/1940/1940-census-form-fillable.pdf>. The bottom portion of the form gives abbreviations and explanatory notes for the enumerator’s use, and which enables the researcher to better understand the meaning of the information given for each person.

Unlike previous censuses, the 1940 Census will not be microfilmed. Access will be by digitized images of each page.

Many folks have the mistaken idea that at 9 AM (DST) on April 2, 2012, one has only to log onto the National Archives website, go to the 1940 Census pages and find their family in one short search. Unfortunately, this is NOT the case. While the census images will be available, there will be no index at this point. It will be extremely time consuming and difficult to find one's family by simply "browsing" the images until the family is found. (This is reminiscent of the days of scrolling though page after page on microfilm in the years before advent of the Internet.) Knowledge of the state, county, and enumeration district (ED) will be necessary to find ancestors and family in this census. Fortunately, the information regarding the EDs in each county is available online. Images of the pages which list and describe the location each ED as well as ED maps are provided by the National Archives website. We prefer to use Steven Morse's one step website tool, which simplifies the search process considerably (http://www.1940census.net/finding_1940_census_enumeration_districts.php for the ED list and description and <http://stevemorse.org/census/xml1940edmaps.html> for the ED maps.) For an overview of the 1940 Census, visit http://www.1940census.net/1940_census_overview.php.

Researchers should expect the NARA website to be inundated by folks trying to view the census as soon as it is released, and must realize that this will most likely result in the website being slower than normal to respond.

Fortunately, an indexing project has been created. The 1940 U.S. Census Community Project is recruiting volunteers who will be indexing this census in the next few months. Archives.com, Find My Past and Family Search have "joined forces" to create this monumental grass roots effort. Several of the area genealogical societies (including OBCGS, Madison County Genealogical Society and Jackson County Genealogical Society) have signed on with Family Search (www.familysearch.org) to participate in Project, which will begin making the images available to volunteers as it receives them, beginning April 4 and continuing through late April. The goal is to complete the index by late summer, possibly earlier. Access to this index as well as the images will be completely free at these sites.

Indexing provides a rewarding experience. Volunteers may sign onto the project by simply going to <https://the1940census.com/society/>. Once there, view the 3 brief tutorials, and then click on "download the software and get started" to begin the process. Those who already have a username and password with Family Search may use that same pair for this project. New folks will need to create a new account (which is completely free). Follow the instructions given on each page and in the tutorials. Special note: During the registration, a window entitled "Profile Information" will appear.

Registrants will need to click the "Another Group" radio button to access the list of participating societies, then select a society from the drop down menu entitled "please select a group". This will place the volunteer in the group for that society, and the group administrator will contact each new volunteer within 24 hours with further instructions and information. Participants can begin "practice indexing" with one or more of the sample projects given. There is no minimum requirement for indexing; volunteers may do as little or as much as they wish. There will be incentives offered to societies such as laptops and subscriptions to paid genealogical sites. In addition, incentives will be offered to individuals such as iPads, printers, T-shirts, etc.