

What I learned at the Genealogy School of Hard Knocks – Being self taught, there are many things I have learned by trial and error about how to do genealogy. I will share some of those things so that others do not have to make the same mistakes I did.

What I have learned over the years.

1. Write down what you know. This will give you a clearer picture of where you stand then help you decide what records to look at next. I am a very visual person. I like to see things in black and white. For census work, I have a worksheet that lets me see every census that I found the person in. It helps me to make sure that I have the right person, that they are getting roughly 10 years older each time. I can see if they stayed put or moved around a lot. Once I know where they lived, I can then use that information to find other records like civil, church and land records. I like to use maps too. This helps me to see if there is a pattern to moves that have occurred.
2. Trust but verify. With computers, the Internet and email, sharing our research with others has become so much easier. Information obtained from family members or other researchers can be very helpful. Take the family stories with a grain of salt. Good research techniques and careful evaluation of the results can break through those romantic stories. Any information obtained from research other than your own should be verified.
3. Misspellings were common. Many people either did not know how to spell their names or did not care. Be flexible when looking for variations of your name. My Eder family was found under many different spellings: Eder, Ederer, Etener, Etter, Ader, Adrall, Oeder, Oether, to name a few. I thought locating George's civil war pension file would be easy because I knew which unit he was in. I was frustrated when the National Archives could not locate a file. Looking at the unit roster, I discovered his name was spelled George Ader, and the pension file was then found.
4. Don't just look for your direct line. Sometimes searching for siblings, other relatives and even friends can net you the results you are looking for. It would have taken me a lot longer to find the Ederer's in the 1850 census if I had not looked for their good friends, the Dreschler's.
5. Doing family history is a lot like being a private investigator. We need to examine the clues and sometimes make a leap to get to the next step. Then we need to prove that the step was either correct or not. Once I found the Ederer family in the 1850 census, I knew within 2 years, when they had arrived in America. Having found the ships passenger list with Michael, Margaret, John (Johan) and George Dreschler, within that 2 year time frame, confirmed that the family in the 1850 census was mine.

6. Research is a dynamic thing. When I teach family history classes, I give my students a starting point for their research and teach them different tools that they can use to find their families. You may come back several times to the same type of source as you gather more information. I started with the census, then civil and church records then back to the census, more church records, etc. Eventually I brought in records for land, military, cemetery, obituaries, to name a few.
7. Keep an open mind – Don't discount something just because it is not familiar to you. Be willing to consider that results can be found with more than one spelling (see #2) or in more than one place. I found many church records for the same family spread out among several different catholic churches. The priest traveled among several congregations. He simply recorded the events in the book where he was, not necessarily where the event took place. Also, over time organizations and boundaries merge, split, change names, or cease to exist. Look nearby and you might be surprised at what you find.
8. No research method is too strange to try. Out of the blue I decided to send out a dozen emails to people with the name Ederer in Bavaria. I received only one reply from a college professor named Michael Ederer (how ironic). He received help from a George Eder (also ironic), who is an expert on genealogy in that area. George told him that most Ederer's live in one of three main areas: Waldersheim, Posen and Falkenstein. He researched the Waldersheim area and found one possible match in the census. He did not find any marriage record or permission to move. You never know what may develop down the road. Another thing I tried was the website Geogen Map. They map out surnames based on the number of times and location that they appear in the German phone book.
9. Don't give up. I have been researching this line for more than 15 years. When I run out of ideas, I stop and find another family to work on. In the mean time, I may learn new techniques, discover new websites or new records may become available. When I come back to this line again, I'm always refreshed, and ready to try new things.

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