Cleaning House: Decluttering Your Digital Family Tree

Many genealogists have embraced the digital revolution, creating online family trees or transferred their paper genealogy to a computer program. Electronic trees have advantages – because they physically link ancestors to a wider range of family and records, we can literally see these connections. But digital trees also can have a downside. Unfortunately, as we grow and share our digital trees, we discover they may not be as structurally sound as we would like. As with anything electronic, they are only as good as the information going in.

What is Genealogy Clutter

What's the difference between decluttering and organizing? Decluttering is removing the clutter. Organizing is putting everything in a specific place (and should mean you know where to find it, later). Some have defined clutter as anything unnecessary. Genealogical clutter is not limited to managing piles of physical papers or figuring out how to name electronic files or how to name folders. Digital clutter also is the tangled web of unnecessary items of which we have multiples – duplicate people, duplicate facts, duplicate relationships. Often, these issues are related to technology skills or genealogy skills -- it may be one or the other, both, or neither.

Digital Family Trees

Online trees are those trees that are built and maintained on such web-based genealogy platforms as *Ancestry, FamilySearch, FindMyPast*, and *MyHerritage*. Digital trees also include those maintained in genealogy software programs (such as *RootsMagic, Family Tree Maker, Legacy Family Tree*) on our computers.   All of these platforms have grown and matured over the decades. In addition to expanding data collections and improving the tools, all have made a good effort to clean up programming issues that had resulted from a disconnect that left some things to be desired in the user interface.

Digital Clutter

Look at your tree. Do you see multiple husbands for the same wife? Are they different men or ghostly images of the same person to which different records are attached? A significant number of online trees have duplicates and even triplicates created inadvertently when events such as a census is added to a person's timeline.

Ghosts prevent you from seeing the whole person, her family, or the events and associated records documenting her life. Ghosts can cause you to repeatedly look for records that seem to be missing. They can hide gaps in a person's timeline, convincing you that you've exhausted a line of inquiry and no records exist.

Cleaning House

Decluttering is simple but can be time consuming, particularly if your tree is large or you've merged individuals from other online trees. As with any large task, break it down into manageable pieces. Consider:

- ☐ **Slow down and pay attention to the details**: Sometimes in our excitement over a find, we slip into auto pilot mode and don't always pay attention to the technology of the save

- ☐ **Consider whether to use one single tree or multiple trees for different branches of family.** These branches overlapped in ever increasing ways, creating many duplications. Some people show up in three or more trees. Add to that the duplication of individuals within specific trees and you have created a nightmare. One tree is enough, unless you are sure the trees likely will not overlap.

- ☐ **Focus on one family at a time**. Look at the how individuals are connected – Ask yourself Did Aunt Margaret really give birth to 3 sons named Joseph and 2 daughters named Sarah by 3 men named James? Are all the children assigned to the proper parents? Are any children born to a parent who died a year or more before that birth? If so, it could signal a subsequent marriage or reveal that the child does not belong to that family grouping. Were any children born before the mother turned 12? If so, this could signal a prior marriage for the father.

    - o Merge duplicates/triplicates
    - o Remove mismatched spouses and children
    - o Check for inconsistent patterns in surnames

Spring cleaning and decluttering go hand-in-hand. But unlike decluttering your home, decluttering your tree is not about purging your precious treasures. Rather, it's about stepping back and really seeing what you've built and assessing whether the structure is sound.