

# Use Caution when using Census Records

By Joe Petrie

Professional genealogists always try to have at least two sources for every record. For years, I have been using Census records knowing that there are possibly errors - because very often there is nothing else available.

My advice about using Census records is to be cautious because there may be errors. For many years in Canada and in the United States, Census Takers were employed to collect the data on worksheets and to transcribe it for the final Census record. It is easy to blame them.

In Canadian Censuses, surname and age trouble me. I produced the following table from three Censuses for my great grandmother, Lucy Boutilier Camus of Little Bras d'Or and North Sydney. Lucy was born in 1827. The 1871 Census was the first nominal census.

Census Year	Name	Age
1871	Lucy Cames	38
1881	Lucy Camus	53
1891	Lucy Camess	63

In the 1871 record, the surname and age were incorrect. The correct surname is Camus. She was 43 not 38. In the 1891 record, only the surname was incorrect.

The following is a table for my Petrie grandparents (Edmund and Esther) from the 1921 Census of Canada inAncestry.ca:

Name:	<b>Edward Petrie</b>	
Household Members:	Name	Age
	Edward Petrie	49
	Hester Petrie	39
	Edward Petrie	18
	Hazel Petrie	17
	Leo Petrie	15
	Russel Petrie	12
	Ray Petrie	8
Dorothy Petrie	3	

Edmund was grandfather's correct given name.

Esther was grandmother's correct given name. She was 42 in 1921. She did prefer to use Hester.

Uncle Eddie's correct given name was Charles Edward. Uncle Russell's and Uncle Roy's given names were spelled incorrectly. Also, in the Census of 1911, the surname was incorrectly spelled Peterie.

In US Censuses, surname and age also trouble me.

The following record is part of my US Census record for 1940 in FamilySearch.org:

Joseph Petrie in household of Leo Petrie, "United States Census, 1940"

Name:	Joseph Petrie			
	Household	Gender	Age	Birthplace
Head	Leo Petrie	M	40	Canada
Wife	Ethel Petrie	F	38	Canada
Son	Leo Petrie	M	6	Massachusetts
Son	Charles Petrie	M	4	Massachusetts
Son	Joseph Petrie	M	1	Massachusetts

For Dad's record, his age is incorrect. He was 34 not 40. He was born in 1906 in the Gardiner Mines section of Bridgeport NS.

For Mom's record, her given name is incorrect. She was raised as Loretta Elizabeth. She was christened as Elizabeth Loretta in St. Anne's in Glace Bay. As a youngster in Glace Bay, she was called Ethel. She preferred Ethel. She learned of the difference in the christening record when she applied for Naturalization. After the Census of 1940 and Naturalization, she legally changed her name to Ethel Tobin Petrie.

Mom's age is also incorrect. She was 36 not 38. She was born in 1904 in Glace Bay, NS.

How do I handle name and date issues due to censuses? My preference is to copy and paste the Census information into the Notes portion of the genealogy record.

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