

Be Cautious when using Ancestry's Public Member Tree Database

By Joe Petrie

The path to the Public Member Trees is through Ancestry's New Collections link. Left Click on the Link. Pause to Select the Public Members Trees selection software. Supposedly, there are over 13 billion records in the database.

Ancestry describes the database as follows:

"This database contains family trees submitted to Ancestry by users who have indicated that their tree can be viewed by all Ancestry members. These trees can change over time as users edit, remove, or otherwise modify the data in their trees. You can contact the owner of the tree to get more information."

In another document, there is the following usage hint (which I initially thought was from Ancestry):

"These trees are easy to upload, easy to copy, easy to source with bad information, and do not include a user's original sources or notes (the linked sources are only those Ancestry.com databases a user individually adds to each person, a time-consuming and error-prone process). As such they are often of poor quality, and even those of good quality lose most of their supporting documentation upon upload and are therefore of limited use to later researchers. In addition, as they can only be viewed by Ancestry.com members, they are of limited use to the community as a whole."

One reviewer tested the database for an ancestor – his great grandfather. The search results were so large that it appears that he stopped reading the results. Another reviewer calls the records "rubbish".

I decided to search for my Petrie grandfather, Edmund Ernest Petrie, (born in Glace Bay on June 22, 1872 – died in Glace Bay on January 31, 1948). I found 24 results. The good news was that there were 2 records without an error.

For the other 22, the errors were in:

- (1) the date and or year of birth – the correct date was June 22, 1872;
- (2) year of death – the correct date was January 31, 1948;
- (3) errors or no information or missing information on grandfather, grandmother or their children (including a typo of Edmond – the correct given name was Edmund; and
- (4), on a location for grandfather for 1952 in Indiana, USA – he died in 1948 and is buried in Immaculate Conception Cemetery (Ocean Av) in Dominion.

The following are the Public Member Tree records with errors. The bolded items in the three columns on the right identify the errors.

Name of Family Tree	Owner	Birth	Death	Other
1. Brake Family Tree	Rachelle Mamela	Oct 1872	1949	
2. Doran1_2012-05-08 ... Conflicted Copy	CDGirard	Oct 1872	1949	
3. Douglas Family	Douglaskevin_1	Oct 1872	1949	
4. Park and Mark Family Tree	Carolyn Johnson	Oct 1872	1949	
5. c.2013-Ancestral Main Tree--Family Tree Maker, Ancestry	ljuh1234	Oct 1872	1949	
6. This Is My Family	nbcleary		1949	
7. Haley Family Tree	Joan Daigle			Residence 1952, Fort Wayne Indiana 2 Children Missing and 2 Birth Date Errors
8. MacInnis Family Tree	Karla MacInnis			2 Children birth dates
9. Boutilier Family	sharndt			
10. Descendants of Michael C. O'Brien	RickWetmore	Oct 1872	1949	
11. William Malone Family	franmalone39	Oct 1872	1949	
12. Derek Anderson Family	Derek Anderson	Oct 1872	1949	
13. The Ogle Family	jaogle			No Spouse and no Children
14. Warburton Family Tree	melissawarburton			No Children
15. Sullivan, Ley, Petrie ... Family Tree	LeonardSullivan62			Grandfather's given name was Edmund
16. Descendants of Andrew Park and Agnes Irvin	CEngesser			3 Children Errors
17. Derek Anderson Family (Second set of records)	Derek Anderson		1949	Residence 1952, Fort Wayne Indiana
18. Karyn Zielasko	kzw2007	Oct 1873	1949	Children records mostly incorrect
19. Petrie Family Tree	seejay65	Oct 1873	1949	No Spouse and no Children
20. Walsh Family Tree	Nromiglio	Oct 1873	1949	No Spouse and no Children
21. The Ogle Family Tree	jaogle	None	None	Birth Place, No Spouse and no Children
22. Derek Anderson Family Tree	Derek Anderson	None	None	Birth Place, No Spouse and no Children

I used the following table to determine how the various owners were related to my grandfather. I also found that a couple of the owners are related to my grandmother. (It surprised me - but it should not have.) Some owners are simply unknown to me.

Ancestry Family Tree Owner and Relationship
1. Rachelle Mamela - UNKNOWN
2. CDGirard – A Park Cousin
3. Douglaskevin_1 - UNKNOWN
4. Carolyn Johnson -- A Park Cousin
5. ljuhl1234 - UNKNOWN
6. Nbcleary – Grandmother’s Cummings Cousin
7. Joan Daigle – A Petrie Cousin
8. Karla MacInnis – Edmund’s and Hester’s Great Granddaughter (My first cousin once removed)
9. Sharndt – Grandmother’s Boutilier Cousin
10. RickWetmore – An O’Brien Cousin
11. franmalone39 -- UNKNOWN
12. Derek Anderson – A Petrie Cousin
13. jaogle- UNKNOWN
14. Melissawarburton – A Petrie Cousin
15. LeonardSullivan62 – A Petrie Cousin
16. CEngesser – A Park Cousin
17. Derek Anderson – A Petrie Cousin
18. kzw2007 – A Petrie Cousin
19. seejay65 – A Petrie Cousin
20. Nromiglio - UNKNOWN
21. Jaogle - UNKNOWN
22. Derek Anderson – A Petrie Cousin

The Public Member Tree software allows an Ancestry user to comment on a record. I surmise that the software forwards the comment to the owner’s Email address. (I really could not find out because HELP is limited.)

On June 12, 2014, I wrote comments on the 22 records to indicate that there were typos, errors in individual or in family group’s records. Essentially, I advised the 22 to retrieve the Genealogy Basics article on the Family Group Sheet which contained my Petrie grandparents’ Family Group Sheet. That article is on the Publications Link on the Friends of Irish Research web site. I suspect that because of people changing their Email addresses, some will never reply, (because they’ll never receive the Email.) Supposedly, the software allows the owner to edit the record(s) or to delete the records.

To date, Fran Malone is the only one who replied to my comment. Essentially, Fran had added records for his wife's family's extended family. The extended family included Marion MacDonald, the only daughter of grandfather's sister Annabelle (my Dad's Aunt Ann Petrie MacDonald). Marion married Andrew V. Calevro of Barre, Vermont. Fran's database included Marion's 3 children (Andrew Jr., John and Cyndy). It also included records for Andrew Jr's late wife, their son and the son's family. In addition, it contained a record for Cyndy's husband. Fran's database had obituaries for Marion and Andrew Jr, WOW! Amazing information!

About the errors in grandfather's dates: Frankly, I believe that I am the original source. Over the years, I instructed all recipients of my data not donate it to commercial sources – principally because dates were not validated etc. I suspect that my cousin Karyn Zielesko, (KZW2007) was the first to donate. When grandfather's birth and death records appeared in www.NovaScotiagenealogy.com, it was obvious that my information from other sources (like Census information) was incorrect, I changed my records.

Also, I believe that the errors in the dates for Ed and Hesters' children were not my errors. I have been gradually filling-in dates from sources like www.cbgen.org and www.novascotiagenealogy.com.

Finally, about Ancestry: Because Ancestry is generally a subscription service, the monthly cost as simply another good reason not to use its Public Member Tree software. (I use the Ancestry Library free version at my local library.)

In summary: my work on my grandfather's 24 records shows only 2 records that were correct (about 4 percent). In addition, because of the time lag between data entry and error discovery can be great and because Email addresses can change often, it is likely that many of the 22 erroneous records will never be fixed. Finally, why pay for or use a service that the provider admits is error prone.

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Joseph F. Petrie

Founding Member, Friends of Irish Research (FIR)
Member, Cape Breton Genealogy and Historical Association (CBGHA)
Member, Family History Society of Newfoundland and Labrador (FHSNL)
Member, New England Historic Genealogical Society (NEHGS)
Member, Association of Professional Genealogists (APG)

Email address: joe-apg@norwoodlight.com (your comments are appreciated)