The Pros and Cons of Building Your Family Tree on the Internet.

R.E. Butler, June 22/2010

Introduction

PC family history programs are all built around data bases, with tools to add individuals, link them into families, and prepare charts and reports.   Early data bases included plain text only, but many now include scanned photographs and documents, stories, and other files. These programs are much more effective than home grown systems based on spreadsheets for example.

The author has been building his family tree using PC programs for several years.   He has had long term objectives of publishing his tree for future descendants, and of contacting distant relatives.   However, like many people, he has not been thorough enough in documenting sources, so his tree was not fit to be published.

Recently, he has been rebuilding his tree on the internet.   This has several advantages.
- It provides a convenient method for searching many of the resources now on the internet.
- It provides a convenient method for documenting sources, which makes it easier and more likely that they will be documented properly
- The tree can be made public, which means that it is published incrementally as it is developed.
- The ability to search other trees as well as historical records provides a method of finding distant relatives.
- On-line trees facilitate collaborative projects.

There are, of course, a number of disadvantages:
- There is an ongoing subscription fee.
- PC backup is required, to provide a free standing copy.   This is needed for the day when the subscription fee is no longer justified, or if the published version is lost.
- Privacy for living people is an issue.   It is necessary to depend on the service provider for privacy, or to leave living people out of the data base.
- Trees can be built by adding individuals, but not by merging other branches of the family using separate GEDCOM files for each branch.
- There are concerns about uncontrolled, unacknowledged copying, and the large number of poor quality trees on the internet.

Internet searching is available with some PC programs, but they do not have any of the advantages related to publication.

The following sections of this paper provide examples of these advantages and disadvantages. The examples are based on the author's experience with Family Tree Maker and Ancestry.co.uk.   There may be other programs and services which are as good or better.

Searching Historical Records – Documentation of Sources.

For trees built on the internet, searching historical records is only a matter of selecting individuals and clicking on a search button. Search parameters can be modified to either increase or decrease the number of possible record matches. Once a match is found, the source record can be attached to the individual. When a record is attached, the data and source description is copied into the tree, but the image is not. An icon is added to the tree, which when clicked retrieves and displays the source image. For example, if a match is found in Ontario birth records, then the birth date and location, and a description of the Ontario record is copied into the data base. An icon/button/pointer is provided so that the original image can be displayed. The source record documentation is thus provided by simply clicking on the attach button which is easier than finding the record. In the case of English birth records for example where the on-line record is only an index, then only the index can be attached. If a birth certificate is ordered, a scanned copy of the birth certificate can be uploaded to the tree.

Family Tree Maker (FTM) and Ancestry are provided by related companies. FTM users with their PC connected to the internet can search the same historical records through Ancestry, and attach the same data and sources to their tree.

There is an important difference. If a tree is built on Ancestry, then Ancestry automatically searches for matching records for everyone in the tree, when the user is not connected. If it finds a possible match, it sends an email to suggest that the user log on and inspect the record. "Hints" of possible record matches are attached to individual profiles, and are displayed until the user accepts or rejects the record. The author originally signed up for 14 day free trial on Ancestry, built a test tree with about two dozen ancestors, and then let the trial lapse for several months. When he signed up for an annual subscription several months later, the test tree was still on line, most of the individuals in the tree had hints attached, and many of the hints were indeed matching records. The search criteria for automatic searching seem to be fairly tight because a large proportion of the hints are usually matches.

Searching Family Trees - Contacts with Distant Relatives

In addition to searching historical records, Ancestry searches other family trees which are on line. The hints do not just suggest matches in historical records, they also suggest matches in other trees. If there is a possible match on a tree which has been designated as public, then it can be inspected to judge if it was likely prepared by a relative, or if it is just a very large tree prepared by an enthusiast. Source records can be inspected in the other tree, to help judge the quality of the tree. If the other tree is accurate, individuals, data and sources can be copied to the user's tree. Even if poorly documented, other trees often provide some clues about where to search.

Ancestry also provides an email facility which allows communication with the owner of the other tree. The author has found and communicated with several distant cousins in this way. In contrast, he has had much less success using other methods of finding people with common interests. Ancestry acts as an intermediary with the first email sent to the owner of another tree, so that the users email address is kept private. Users can subsequently exchange email addresses to establish direct communication.

If the other tree with a possible matching record has been designated as private instead of public, then it cannot be inspected directly.   However, it is still possible to send a message through Ancestry to the owner of the other tree, to ask about sharing information.

Ancestry also provides a list of records which have been copied from the user's tree to other trees, and identifies their owners.   These other trees can be inspected directly if they are public. The owners can be contacted regardless of whether they are public or private.

FTM also can be used on line to search other people's trees. The difference is that if your tree is built on line, then other people can find you.   If your tree is on line, you can see the list of people who copied information from your tree.   Of course this increases the possible contacts.

Collaborative Projects

Ancestry provides a facility whereby several users can contribute to the same tree.   This is of dubious value, because there is no control over the quality of information added by the other person.   However, users can have multiple trees, so a primary tree could be totally under the user's control, and a secondary shared tree could be just a collaboration tool.

Collaborative projects are enabled just by being able to see other trees.   The author and two distant cousins were able to track down a missing relative who did not show up in Ontario records with the rest of his family.   Each cousin contributed part of the puzzle, and eventually the missing relative was located in Wisconsin..

Disadvantages

Subscription fees may not be justified for infrequent users.   However, for researchers who spend a few hours a week on genealogy, they are less expensive than travelling around to libraries.

It is necessary to maintain a free standing copy on a PC.   This is needed for the day when the subscription fee is no longer justified, or if the published version is lost.   The author intends to give a free standing copy to his children, as part of the family legacy.   For backup, Ancestry provides a plain text GEDCOM file, which can be readily downloaded.   However this method of backup does not download the images (scanned photographs or documents), or the stories attached to the tree.   It would usually be a prohibitive amount of work to manually download all the images and merge them into a backup tree.   This problem was solved with Family Tree Maker 2010 which downloads all the data, scanned images and stories and keeps them together.

Obviously it is good practice to maintain a backup of family trees whatever program and methodology is used.   Having one copy on a PC and another on Ancestry means that both information storage and access programs are independent, and the tree would survive either PC or Ancestry failures.   Now that FTM 2010 does a complete backup from Ancestry, the backup technique can be seen as an advantage rather than a disadvantage.

There is a problem with marriage records in the Ancestry GEDCOM files.   If a historical marriage record is attached to an individual before the marriage link to a spouse is defined, then the historical record is not included in the GEDCOM file.   Apparently the historical record is

attached to the link.   This is not a serious flaw, but it imposes a specific sequence for dealing with marriage records.   Users need to get in the habit of defining the marriage link before attaching the historical marriage record.

Privacy is a serious consideration.   The author does want to have a public tree, but wishes to protect the privacy of living people.   Ancestry does block access to records of living people, but this is not fully effective.   For example, you might see a record called "Living Smith", and if you suspect his name is George and search on "George Smith", Ancestry may present "Living Smith", which confirms "Living" is George.   The author has chosen not to include living people, except for his immediate family and a couple of 80 and 90 year olds.   This has led to the problem of not having all the family in one tree.   A separate tree with living people and minimal connections could be maintained on the PC and merged with the backup file.   This is workable although cumbersome.   Any suggestions for an improved technique would be more than welcome.

Since the author was rebuilding an existing tree on Ancestry, he originally planned.to upload several GEDCOM files each of which contained one branch of his tree.   The idea was to check all the data on one branch at a time, and then upload that branch to Ancestry. However this cannot be done.   Ancestry does provide the facility to upload one GEDCOM file per tree, but it does not provide a facility to merge another GEDCOM file into an existing tree.   The Ancestry help desk advised that merging could be done effectively using Family Tree Maker on the PC. So, instead of uploading a branch at at time, the author has been checking and adding one individual at a time.   This is not a serious deficiency as much as it is another nuisance restraint on usage habits.

Ancestry does not provide nearly as many graphs or reports as FTM 2010.   However, the PC backup copy and FTM 2010 can be used for this purpose.   Usually this requires adding living people, which could be done manually for the few living people in a pedigree chart, but would have to be done automatically for the potentially large number of people in a descendant chart.

Some people are concerned about uncontrolled, unacknowledged copying of trees.   However the same problem exists with older paper copies of trees in public libraries.   The fact that the internet disseminates information more widely means that both good and bad usage is facilitated.

There are indeed a great number of inaccurate or sloppy trees on the internet.   However, with Ancestry it is possible to judge the quality of trees by checking sources.   If a search program finds part of the author's tree copied without sources, it will also find the author's tree with sources.   Future generations will be able to identify quality information and researchers.

Conclusions
Family history research is much faster, and of higher quality if internet searching and source attachment is used.   This can be done with both on-line trees, or with off line trees and suitable search facilities.

However, the author is of the opinion that the advantages of incremental publishing and automatic searching of an on-line tree far outweigh the disadvantages. The most serious

drawback of internet publication is the issue of privacy for living people, but perhaps this more a matter of trust, than a real problem.

The author will continue to build his tree on Ancestry, and back it up using FTM 2010.

The author would be pleased to receive any comments at: rebutler@storm.ca