

# Following the Trail . . .

BY SUSAN WEINBERG

WE OFTEN LEARN of our ancestral town through oral history, but we also can follow a document trail. Most people begin their search with the span of their memory, the names of their grandparents and perhaps a generation prior. You can go a surprising distance with those few details.

We carry that information to where the trail begins — with census records. The most recent census available to researchers is from 1940 with the 1950 census scheduled for release in April 2022. The federal census is done each decade but is not released until it's 72 years old. Since 1840 it has listed the members of the household with details on age, address, profession, and marital status. Sometimes you will find an elder family member, perhaps the wife's mother, which will reveal a maiden name and an earlier generation. One of my favorite discoveries was a newly arrived brother living with his sister's family; a sister we didn't know existed.

Don't forget state censuses that can supplement federal ones. Since Minnesota became a state, census data has been collected every 10 years, from 1865 to 1905. You can access the state census records online at the Minnesota Historical Society ([mnhs.org/people/statecensus](http://mnhs.org/people/statecensus)). You may also find information in territorial censuses that began in 1849.

Each census asks somewhat different questions, but in 1900 the federal census focused on immigration, asking the year of immigration and continuing to report on that through 1930. The 1920 census is especially important because only this census will tell you the year the person was naturalized.

Don't expect precision or even accuracy in the census. Birth years were not as important to our ancestors as they are to us and can vary from document to document. Also, because we are relying on the memory and knowledge of respondents, the years of immigration may vary between census records. Imagine the conversation a wife may have had with the census taker, taking her best guess at her spouse's history. You will want to look at several census records to determine a date range in which to search. Given names may not be entirely consistent either. They too varied as these new Americans tried on and often discarded names as part of their Americanization. I've found "Harry" under "Herman" and "Esther" under "Ernestine." "Abraham" became "Arthur" and "Isaac" became "Isadore." By looking at a family grouping you can verify the person is the same person throughout multiple documents.

With names and likely years of immigration and naturalization, you can now search for immigration and naturalization records. Naturalization records provide much greater detail if the person became a naturalized citizen after 1906. Those records will often provide the ancestral town, date and port of immigration, and the ship your ancestor sailed on — allowing you to search for the immigration manifest.

You can begin your search on [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com), free at local libraries and available for use at Hennepin History Museum by appointment. You may also have success searching on [familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org) and one of my favorite search engines, [stevemorse.org](http://stevemorse.org), which will link to Ellis Island records.

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Family number	Name of every person whose residence on the 1st of May, 18...
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4	Keaman M.
5	69 Davidson J
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7	R
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10	P

STATE										1940 F									
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TOWNSHIP OR OTHER DIVISION OF COUNTY																			
INCORPORATED PLACE																			
WARD OF CITY										BLOCK NO.									
Line No.	LOCAT-ION		HOUSEHOLD DATA				NAME			RELATION		PERSON-DESCRIP							
	Street, Avenue, road, etc.	House Number	No. of household in order of visitation	Home owned (O) or rented (R)	Value of home or Monthly rental if rented.	Farm? (Yes or No)	Name of each person whose usual place of residence on April 1, 1940, was in this household.			Relationship of this person to the head of the household, as wife, daughter, father, mother-in-law, grandson, lodger, lodger's wife, servant, hired hand, etc.		CODE (Leave blank)	Sex	Color or Race					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	BE SURE TO INCLUDE: 1. Persons temporarily absent from household. Write "Ab" after names of such persons. 2. Children under 1 year of age. Write "Infant" if child has not been given a first name. Enter (C) after name of person furnishing information.					A	9	10					
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Line No.	Was this person AT WORK for pay or profit in private or nonemergency Govt. work during week of March 24-30? (Y or N)	If not, was he at work on, or assigned to, public EMERGENCY WORK (WPA, NYA, CCC, etc.) during week of March 24-30? (Y or N)	If neither at work nor assigned to public emergency work ("No" in col. 21 & 22)	For persons answering "No" to questions 21-24.	If at private or nonemergency Govt. work. "Yes" in col. 21	If at private or nonemergency Govt. work. "Yes" in col. 21	Number of hours worked during week of March 24-30, 1940.	Duration of un-
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