

Family Heritage Fact or Fiction?

“Great grandma’s maiden name was Brody”, so says your aunt.

Is she right? Maybe. If you’ve been researching your family history very long, no doubt you’ve had an unnerving discovery that what you thought was a family fact subsequently turned into family fiction. Nothing should be taken for granted. So be on your guard for these fact or fiction traps:

- *“I found it online, so it must be right”* Unless it’s a recognized database, like a census record, be leery. Family trees that people put online may not be well documented – you have no idea how they created that family tree. Use the information as a starting point, but you may want to verify it independently if it’s a fact your going to “brag about” or rely upon.
- As a corollary *“I found it at the local genealogy library, so it must be right.”* Just like the online data, how was the information in that family group sheet researched?
- *“It was on his grave marker”* A friend’s father has the wrong birth year on his tombstone. Seems the second wife remembered it wrong. Oh well...
- *“Grandma always said...”* Beware of stories! By all means document and save your family stories - they give colorful insight into the family. But never assume they are fact. While growing up, a fellow researcher often heard the story that his great-granddad was in Sherman’s march to the sea during the Civil War. Well... a little research revealed that he was in Sherman’s army alright, but he guarded railroad tracks in Tennessee and never saw the ocean!
- *“I found it in a local history book”* Local histories of cities and counties are commonly available. Much of it is factual, but family lineages should be viewed with some skepticism. Most often the author did not research a family tree, rather, they relied on information the family may have provided, or even local lore. (Refer back to the previous bullet!)
- *“Just the facts, mam.”* This classic cliché of Dragnet’s Sgt. Joe Friday was often used when a witness embellished their story. It also implies that if the witness said the bad guy wore a red shirt, then it must be true. It may not! Over time, people’s memories can get fuzzy. Even if they were at the event, time changes perceptions. Document the embellishments of people’s recollections, record their facts, but always remember that it’s their perception and subject to the fading of time.

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Just because dad said his grandma lived in a house with a white picket fence, does not make it so.

So the bottom line to all this is that to believe anything as a fact and not fiction, it should come from a primary source - such as a birth certificate, census, or marriage license – or if that's not possible, at least corroborate it with another independent source. If both dad and uncle Jim say that great grandma lived in a house with a white picket fence, then its reasonable to assume it's a fact.

Also remember to document the sources of the family facts you use. That way, its reliability can be put in perspective. Its ok to use your aunt's recollection, just make sure to say that she is the source. We like what General William T. Sherman said, "These are *my* memoirs, if you remember it differently, write your own."

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