

Finding Your Roots - Beyond the Names

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Dr. Sharon Tosi Lacey: Hello. Thank you for joining us today, as we discuss Finding Your Roots going Beyond the Names, using the Ingalls Family of 1880 as an illustration.

My name is Dr. Sharon Tosi Lacey, and I am the Chief Historian at the Census Bureau. While the census is crucial for determining the apportionment of the House of Representatives and the allocation of federal money, its usefulness actually continues far beyond that time. It can be used to find out more about your ancestors and how they live, or even to find out information about famous historical figures!

Now, please take a look at this disclaimer. The Census Bureau values your privacy, and will never release your personal information. However, the National Archives may release this information to the public domain. Please understand that when discussing historical material, this must be viewed through the context of the times in which the information was collected and produced.

What happens to your records? Well according to Title 13 of the U.S. Code, The U.S. Census Bureau will never release your individual information. After collecting and analyzing all of the data during a census, the Census Bureau then turns the original forms or their facsimiles over to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). In accordance with the [law](#), NARA has the authority to release the decennial census records to the public after 72 years. Currently, all existing records from 1790-1940 are available to the public. NARA will release the 1950 records in 2022.

These records were [microfilmed and transcribed](#), and can also be found at genealogy sites such as [Ancestry](#) or [FamilySearch](#). Local libraries and historical societies also often have microfilms

or books containing the schedules for their states, although researchers will have to know the town, and possibly enumeration district, to find a family or individual.

Unfortunately, not all of the records survived. The British destroyed many of the 1790-1810 records during the War of 1812, and a fire in January 1921 destroyed all but a few of the [1890 census records](#).

So, what will the census records show you? Each census collects different information based on the needs of the federal government at that time. So, the information collected has changed and evolved over the years.

From 1790-1850, the census only recorded the name of the head of household. In 1850, the unit of enumeration changed from the household to the individual, and the record contains the names of all free people. It was not until 1870 and the end of slavery that the census recorded the names of every person residing in the United States. Therefore, the early census records require some extrapolation to find an individual. However, over the years, the census has also collected information on the economy, vital statistics and other aspects of society.

And while the decennial census schedules are the best source for information about a particular person or family, other information gathered during the census allows the researcher to find context for how these people lived and where they fit into their community. In the early years of the census (1790-1840), the census tables were simply tabulations, with no statistical analysis. This began evolving with the development of statistical science and the emergence of mechanical tabulation machines, which replaced the laborious and time-consuming hand tabulation. These resulted in the creation of more detailed tables that were able to analyze every aspect of the population and economy.

It can be daunting to start this manner of research, so by examining the information of a well-known person, it is possible to create a roadmap to assist someone in tracing their ancestors and to illustrate how to use all forms of census data.

And in order to illustrate this, we will use the 1880 census and a well-known family, the Ingalls family, of the Little House on the Prairie fame, to demonstrate some of the additional data that you can find.

Let's talk a little bit about the 1880 census. Rutherford B. Hayes was the President. There was no permanent Census Bureau at this time, just a temporary census office that was stood up about a year before the census and closed when all of the data was finally tabulated and published. Francis Amasa Walker was the Superintendent of the Census, as he had been in 1870. He would be succeeded in 1881 by Charles Seaton. Who would complete the tabulation of the 1880 census. In 1872, Seaton had invented a simple tabulating machine that made tabulation easier by keeping the lines on the large sheets isolated and organized. The Census Bureau used the Seaton Device for the 1870 and 1880 censuses. The world was also in the midst of a statistical revolution, and the Census Bureau was at its forefront. No longer would a census simply be a tabulation, the data could now be analyzed and used to understand our people and our economy.

The 1880 census was also the first to use specially trained enumerators. Prior to this, U.S. marshals conducted the census. Because the Census supervisors hired locally, on the theory that not only do they need someone who knows their territory, but that people would respond better to someone from their neighborhood. A former Union colonel, Francis Amasa Walker made a concerted effort to hire disabled Union veterans, freed slaves, and widows of Union soldiers. While the 1870 Census had a number of African American assistant marshals, the 1880 census was the first time we saw women enumerators. The numbers were not large – just 200 out of 31,382 enumerators. However, women and minorities were also hired as tabulators. And when the Census Bureau finally became a permanent agency in 1902, more than half the permanent workforce was women.

This was also the first census where enumerators were subject to privacy laws although it was not codified into federal law, it is in the census legislation.

The enumerators had five schedules or collection forms: population, mortality, agriculture, social statistics, and manufacturing.

The census act also provided for the collection of detailed data on the condition and operation of railroad corporations, incorporated express companies, and telegraph companies, as well as of life, fire, and marine insurance companies, using Schedule No.4 - Social Statistics. And fines were to be imposed on officials of "every corporation...who shall...willfully neglect or refuse to give true and complete answers to any inquiries authorized by this act."

In addition, the superintendent of census was required to collect and publish statistics of the population, industries, and resources of Alaska, with as much detail as was practical. An enumeration was also made of all untaxed American-Indians within the jurisdiction of the United States. And "untaxed" American-Indians were those living in tribal relations, on tribal lands or reservations, which were considered a separate country from the United States.

Now, please keep in mind, these are historical documents that may contain outdated or offensive terms, as we look to the questions of the 1880 census.

Enumerators were to mark "W" for White, "B" for Black, "Mu" for Mulatto, "C" for Chinese (a category which included all people of Asian descent), and "I" for American Indian.

For the question if the person was widowed or divorced, they would to mark "W" for widowed and "D" for divorced.

Now remember census questions change based on the information needed by the government agencies at that period of time. The questions also expanded as the use of professional enumerators and mechanical tabulators made it easier to process large amounts of information. In the past, hand tabulation could take up most of the intercensal period. In fact, even with the Seaton Device, it still took nearly 10 years to tabulate and publish the census information. In 1890, the electronic Hollerith Machine (a precursor to the modern computer) was able to tabulate the data in a fraction of time.

After tabulating the data, the census office published the information in a series of bulletins, over 300 of these, and a 22-volume final report, plus a compendium, annual statistical abstract, and a statistical atlas.

Today, we see fewer questions because we have many more surveys and censuses that collect this data, so there is less burden on the decennial census.

So, with that in mind, let's look at the 1880 census using one family.

Author [Laura Ingalls Wilder](#) documented her family's travels in the popular *Little House on the Prairie* book series. These books traced their moves around Wisconsin, Missouri, Kansas, and Minnesota, although the family also lived in Iowa it's not covered in the books, before they finally settled in De Smet, Dakota Territory in 1879. Although Laura and her two younger sisters would eventually move elsewhere, her parents and oldest sister, Mary, remained in De Smet in for the rest of their lives. So important is De Smet in the lives of the Ingalls family, that four of her nine books are set here.

As always, the best place to start the exploration is through the family's census record. The Ingalls family consisted of their parents, Charles and Caroline Ingalls, and four daughters: Mary, Laura, Caroline (also known as Carrie), and Grace.

Here we can see ages, race, birthplaces, and more. For example, Charles Ingalls was a 44-year-old farmer. He was born in New York, as was his mother, but his father was born in Vermont. His wife Caroline, was 40 and was born in Wisconsin, while her parents both came from Massachusetts. We know that Mary Ingalls is blind, as anyone who read the books knows, but, interestingly, only 9-year-old Carrie is listed as having attended school in the past year, and we discuss that further, later.

Now, anyone who has read the books will recognize the names of their neighbors on the page – Fuller, Harthorn, Woodruff. But other pages of De Smet/Kingsbury County we will find Boast, Power, and Johnson.

You will also find Laura's future husband, Almanzo Wilder...twice! Once on his claim in Kingsbury County as Almanzo J. Wilder. You will also find the 23-year-old as A.J Wilder living as a hired hand in Beadle, Dakota Territory this happened occasionally in the 19th century as enumerators had no way to cross check names with other enumerators. Also you will find his brother, Royal, and sister, Eliza Jane, both on homesteads in Kingsbury County. However, one name you will not find is Laura's nemesis Nellie Olsen, who was a composite of three real life girls: Nellie Owens, Genevieve Masters, Stella Gilbert. These latter two did live in De Smet at different times but not 1880.

And while this schedule gives a plethora of information about the Ingalls family, the [final report of the 1880 Census](#) reveals more details about the life that they had in Dakota Territory and how their demographics and lives compared to those of their neighbors.

The Ingalls family were some of the more than 120,000 people who had emigrated to Dakota Territory after it was formally organized in 1861. This rapid population jump, called the "Great Dakota Boom," was due in part to the combination of the [Homestead Act](#) and railroad construction. This migration steadily forced the center of population west, as families took advantage of the promise of 160 acres if they farmed the land for five years. In 1790, the center of population was near Baltimore, MD, while by 1880 it had moved to outside of Cincinnati, Ohio.

Their county, Kingsbury, was organized in 1879 and counted 1,102 residents.

In 2019, it had an estimated 4,919 people, so it is still relatively small.

The Ingalls were six of the 116 people living in De Smet on Census Day, which was June 1, 1880. This was the first census for the town, which had just been founded earlier that year, and is the county seat of Kingsbury county. As one of the first families to settle in the town, the Ingalls

literally watched the town grow up around them. Even today, De Smet is a small town with an estimated 1,052 people.

The population density of Dakota was .92 people per square mile. Contrast that with the District of Columbia with 2,960.4 people per square mile! Dakota had the sixth lowest density – only Arizona, Idaho, Montana Territory, New Mexico, and Wyoming Territories were lower. However, this was a huge improvement over 1870, when it only exceeded Arizona and Wyoming Territories. All of this contributed to the Census Bureau declaring the End of the Frontier in 1890. Not only was there no space for westward expansion, but no states or territory had fewer than 2 people per square mile.

After 1889, Dakota Territory split into present day North and South Dakota, with De Smet remaining in South Dakota. Today a little more than 884,000 people call South Dakota home, with more than 752,000 live in North Dakota. North and South Dakota were the 39th and 40th states admitted to the union. Although they are numbered alphabetically, President Benjamin Harrison, shuffled the statehood papers before signing them, so no one actually knows which became a state first.

Now, let's look at the Ingalls in the context of their neighbors. It is important to understand who was migrating west. Of the people in Dakota, 83,382 were native born, while 51,795 were immigrants.

So where were these people coming from?

Since De Smet sits on the eastern edge of the territory, not far from the Minnesota and Iowa borders, it makes sense that many people would come from these states. In fact, almost 40 percent of native-born resident, 37,459, came from just four states: Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and New York. In Kingsbury County, these percentages are even more startling as 519 of the 1,102 residents (47 percent) came from one of these states. Laura's family reflects this: her father, Charles, had been born in New York, and her mother, Caroline, was born in Wisconsin.

Laura and her older sister, Mary, were born in Minnesota, while her youngest sister, Grace, was born in Iowa. Only her sister Caroline, born in Kansas, is the outlier.

However, the native population is only part of the story. As the immigrant population was a huge part of the settlement of the West. Dakota had the second highest percentage of foreign-born residents, exceeded only by Nevada. In fact, it also had the largest relative increase of immigrants of any state or territory from 1870 to 1880. So where did these immigrants come from? As we can see from the table, over 65 percent of the immigrants in Kingsbury County came from British America (Canada) or Sweden/Norway, and the Ingalls have neighbors from both countries.

What this tells us is that the burgeoning town of De Smet, and indeed all of Dakota, was relatively homogenous. Therefore, the Ingalls lived among people with whom they would have been relatively comfortable, given their similar backgrounds.

While Dakota Territory was overwhelming white, it did attract a sizeable number of black and Chinese citizens...many of whom would have come to work on the railroads. It also had a number of American Indians "living in Civilizations" which means living outside of tribal lands. The newly formed Kingsbury County, however, was 100% white.

The American Indian population, primarily Lakota, mainly resided on the Standing Rock Reservation. Unfortunately, I was unable to find the final number from the 1880 special census but do know there were approximately 672 families living on the reservation.

As for Sex – the 1880 Census did not tabulate this down to the county level, but the Dakota Territory had 82,296 men to 52,881 women. This is something to be expected in a newly settled territory, as often, single men would settle the territory or men would go ahead of their families. As we dig further, we can find even more information as the 1880 Census also collected on a variety of social statistics. For example, we know that everyone in the family over the age of ten could read and write. As per the enumerator instructions, this was not asked of children under

ten. We also know that Caroline Ingalls was a school teacher before she was married, and that the family highly prized education, and ensured that their daughters were able to attend school wherever the family was living.

Dakota as a whole compared favorably to the rest of the United States, Dakota only had 3.1 percent unable to read and 4.8 percent unable write, while the percentages for the country as a whole stood at 13.4 and 17 percent respectively.

Dakota had 508 public schools, and we know that Carrie, age 9, was one of the 6,661 white females who attend one of these public schools during the prior year. It is odd that Laura is not listed as having attended school in 1880, as we know from school records and her books that she was a pupil during this time. The 1880 census also collected vital statistics such as births, sex, and information on the blind deaf and mentally ill.

We know that Mary Ingalls lost her sight due to a disease (which exact disease is disputed) and she was one of 63 blind residents in the Dakota Territory. She would eventually go to a College for the Blind in Vinton, Iowa and census information on disabilities was used to determine where to place various schools and institutions to best serve the population.

Finally, we know that Charles, Pa Ingalls, was one of the 28,508 people in Dakota Territory engaged in agriculture, along with a bit more than a quarter of the population over the age of 10. So, what can we surmise from this? The Ingalls family typified those that were moving west and settling the newly opened territories.

So many people would move west between 1870 and 1890, that in 1890, Robert Percival Porter, the Superintendent of the Census Bureau declared “The End of the Frontier” – as we said, it meant there was no longer any land to the west, nor was there any large unsettled tracts of land. Railroads stretched from coast to coast. Families, such as the Ingalls, settled down to farm and build towns.

So, what does this all mean?

This was just a small example of the rich statistics available in the final reports. There are many other tables and maps to guide you through the time. Remember, the Census is a snapshot of America at a particular moment in time. While the individual census sheets may give you personal details about the people, the statistics allow you to put that information into a context. You can learn how your ancestors lived, and perhaps understand why they made some of the choices they did on where to settle and what work to do. By studying the final reports – particularly from 1870 forward, when the Bureau really led the statistical revolution and numbers became more than a simple tabulation – you may see a pattern and story emerge.

Remember – the Ingalls family lived in a tiny town in a new territory – there's much more information and statistical Analysis done in the bigger towns and cities, and I hope this helps you in your quest to understand our collective past, and your family's past.

As always, if you have further questions or need assistance, please feel free to contact me. My staff and I are here to help you!

Thank you!

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