BEWARE! The Enchanted Forest: Perils & Pitfalls of Online Trees

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> Note: Information provided here was accurate as of 26 Dec 2023

QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED HERE

- What are online trees?
- Where are the trees found?
- Are all trees created equal?
- How can a tree be assessed for quality?
- Should we even look at online trees?
- Should you put YOUR tree online?

WHAT ARE ONLINE TREES? THEY . . .

- Are posted online by a person or family
- Require Internet access to view
- Are not supposed to have any living people listed (with the possible exception of those who have given permission for that listing)
- Usually cannot be altered by anyone but those authorized (with the exception of wikis)
- Can be viewed by anyone (if made public)
- Can have data "lifted" and placed on others' webpages or their genealogy software (if public)

WHERE ARE THE TREES FOUND?

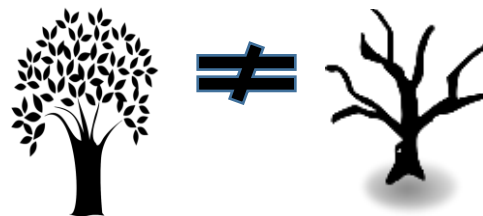### MOST POPULAR SITES . . .

Ancestry.com
MyHeritage
FindMyPast

AND WIKI SITES . . .

WikiTree
GeniTree (world tree)
FamilySearch (world tree)

ALL TREES ARE *NOT* CREATED EQUAL

AND PRIVATELY POSTED TREES

Public
Private, by registration (and sometimes fee) only
Some, though not all, created with genealogy software

WHEN CAN ONLINE TREES BE USED AS SOURCES?
- When you have carefully assessed them
- When citations and other obvious indications (attached documents) are included
- When you can contact the tree's owner
- Best course of action: Check the links and attached documents for yourself

AVOID USING TREES THAT . . .
- Use only other trees as sources
- Have no credible sources
- Provide inconsistent, contradictory, or obviously incorrect information (e.g., birth occurring after the person's death, etc.)
- Are posted by someone you cannot contact (verify accuracy of contact info on website)
- Have non-verified citations or don't suggest references to be checked
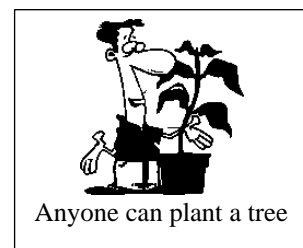
HOW CAN A TREE BE TESTED FOR QUALITY?
- Compare it to information you already know
- Investigate the sources provided (sometimes people use incorrect sources or make errors; sometimes links to evidence are "broken")
- Make certain that the tree owner is someone who can be contacted

WIKI TREES
- Can be added to or deleted from by anyone (though some require "membership")
- Can foster an interaction with a family member
- Should include clear source information to clarify your accuracy
- Might not even be recognizable when others are done grafting on branches to your family

Anyone can plant a tree

FamilySearch World Tree Wiki
- Is open to the public as a Wiki (positive and negative)
- Permits open dialog with others working on same line
- Provides hints for records at FamilySearch and other locations
- If alerted, fixes errors
- Optional opportunities to email contributors
- Adds computer-generated claims independent of an individual (positive and negative)
- Electronically monitors a family name or tree; sends you notification if someone alters the data (this, if you request that communication)
- Only the people who put up the information can see themselves (privacy for the living)
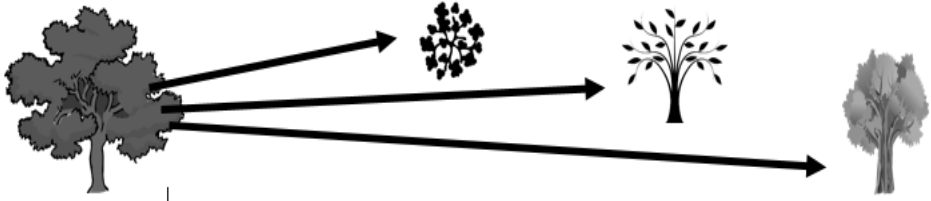
HOW DO WE KNOW IF WE CAN TRUST AN ONLINE TREE?
1. Assess the sources that are provided
    - Check them for yourself! – Are they credible?
    - Cite the sources that YOU have viewed
2. Make certain that there is some way to contact the tree-owner
    - Understand that quoting someone else's tree is even more uncertain if you don't know who created it

THERE ARE LOTS OF ONLINE OPTIONS FOR PLACING YOUR TREE
- It is up to you to make certain all the data is included and accurate
- Check the online locations before choosing where to post your tree (and check again after you have posted it)

What starts on a public on-line tree often finds its way to other sites:

often with citations omitted, credit missing, and changes made.

You may not even recognize your own family!

NOTE: Not all family tree websites HAVE places for citations.

WHEN CITING AN ONLINE TREE, INCLUDE
- Title of the tree
- Author of the tree (include contact info, but in a "private" notation)
- Date tree was created (if available)
- Where it is found online (Ancestry, FamilySearch, etc.); recognize that URLs often change
- Date you accessed the tree
- Reason to use the tree ("Smith family")
- Clarify if the tree is "documented" or "undocumented" and, in the comments section, identify why you believe the tree is credible

IF YOUR ONLY TREE IS ONLINE, WHAT IF
- You need/want backup copies?
- The Internet is "down" or not available?
- The host company/platform goes out of business?
- You want privacy to list all the children/grandchildren?
- Your WIKI tree is hijacked & your data is altered or gone?
- You want to show it to someone or work on it yourself where there is no online option?

Don't let an online tree be your ONLY tree; be sure to use non-Internet-dependent genealogy software to secure your data & list living family members. These should be maintained with up-to-date backups in different media.

A (Very) Few Online Resources for Additional Opinions and Thoughts
(sources accurate as of 26 Dec 2023)

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Note: This is an updated listing from materials located from 2015-2023, and reconfirmed 26 Dec 2023. There are many, many more articles, blogs, and information (pros and cons) about online family trees. Consider the above to be just a starting point. Google "Family Trees Online" for state-of-the-art information.

For more information on where to post or access trees, check Cyndi's List: https://www.cyndislist.com/family-trees/ (this will represent the most up-to-date information)

> A not-so-obvious advantage of having an online tree is that, with certain directives and "passwords," constructing the data as a collaborative tree – with children, cousins, or others – is fairly easy to accomplish. And you might meet a relative.