Using Obituaries to Learn About Our Ancestors and to Connect With Living Relatives

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Obituaries provide researchers with an accessible means to identify family relationships and expand knowledge of their family. They show connections among and between self-identified family members alive at the time of publication. The ongoing newspaper digitization process makes obituaries available to anyone with an internet connection.

Definition of terms
The late Keith Zimmer of St. Louis Public Library began indexing death related items found in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in 1992. As he studied the data in the newspapers, he identified and defined four different categories: Obituary articles, death notices, burial permits, and due notices. Over the years, these have become standardized terms in the St. Louis Genealogical community. Similar items exist in other newspapers around the country, and they may go be different names, but we will use them in our discussion. Therefore we must understand what each of them means.

The first three of these definitions come from the website of the late Bob Doerr, who indexed deaths in the Post-Dispatch for the years 1975-1977[1]. The clarity and ease of understanding his definitions makes them ideal for our purposes here.

> **Obituary articles** usually include detail about a person, including occupation, brief biography, relatives, etc. [The paper typically writes these for well known or important people] [You might also find] News articles tell of the causes of (usually violent) deaths and thus provide family history information and may relate to family health history.

> **Funeral Notices [or Death Notice]** usually include the date of death; names of spouses, children, and parents; place of the funeral; and place of interment. In a few instances, depending mainly on the funeral home, the age is included, but ages are unduly rare in funeral notices in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. [Note: these are placed and paid for by the family.]

> **A Burial Permit** entry includes the name, and (usually) age and address of the deceased. In some instances, one can learn a decedent's middle initial from the burial permit entries. Lists of burial permits are not published daily in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, but appear to be groupings that cover several days or weeks; most are not alphabetized. Some groups of permit listings appear to be duplicates. [Note: these entries do not contain copies of the actual burial permit, but are rather a notification that the governing body issued one.]

A Due Notices results when the family publishes a funeral notice before the arrangements have been completed. They differ from a standard death notice in that they typically lack information abut the funeral arrangement and burial. Typically a complete notice appears a day or two later, possibly in a different newspaper. [Note: these are placed and paid for by the family.]

With the exception of the burial permit, most people refer to all of these colloquially as obituaries. All four of them have uses from a genealogical perspective.

Information found in a Death Notice or Obituary
Typically, these notices contain information about the deceased person and their living relatives. Occasionally, another deceased person might be mentioned, but that happens far less likely than most genealogists would prefer.

So what information can we expect?
- Name of the deceased
- Date of death
- Date, time and location of funeral service
- Place of burial
- Names of spouse, children (usually listed in birth order), grandchildren (usually listed in birth order), and possibly the names of spouses of children and :grandchildren

You might also find:
- The deceased's religion
- The deceased's date of birth and/or age
- The deceased's birthplace (especially if it was in a different state or foreign country)
- The deceased's residence at time of death
- The deceased's former occupation
- Residence of relatives (town or city)
- Photo (more common beginning in the 1980s and 1990s)

Death notices in small town newspapers tend to have more information that those in larger cities. These papers tend to make more space available when covering the deaths of local people.

Death notices in foreign language papers (in the US) often have more details than those in English language papers in the same city. There seems to be two reasons for this. First, in essence, a foreign language paper acts more like a small town paper. Its readership coming from a subset of the total population of the larger area. Secondly, the people reading it probably come from the language's home country. Thus, they likely know the towns, cities, and families of that place much more than would their English speaking neighbors. As a result, towns of origin appear much more often in the foreign language papers.

With the advent of the internet more and more funeral homes began posting obituaries on their website. These can typically be found by making a Google search using the name of the individual and the term obituary. If the person has a common name, add additional search terms such as the year of death and the place.

Indexes and Finding Aids

As technology improves it is becoming easier to find death notices in online databases. That said, sometimes they prove illusive. Indexes and finding aids can help with that. In the St. Louis Area, the *St. Louis Public Library's St. Louis Post-Dispatch Obituary Index* [2] the first and most well know of these. As discussed above, Keith Zimmer began this project in 1992 by indexing the obituaries from that year and 1880. The library has continuously updated this resource since that time. It now includes the years 1880-1931, 1942-1945, 1960-Jun 1971, and 1992-present. In addition, the index includes obituaries from the *St. Louis Argus* for the years. 1918-1922, 1930-1931, and 1942-1997.

As also mentioned, Bob Doerr created a death index for the *Post-Dispatch* covering they years 1975-Jun 1977. Unfortunately the website hosting it no longer exists. Fortunately, it can still be accessed using the Wayback Machine, an archive of old web pages.[3]

The genealogy staff at St. Louis County Library created a number of newspaper indexes on their website.[4] These papers include the *Carondelet News*, St. Louis French Newspapers (*Le Patriote* and *La Revue de l'Ouest*), the *St, Louis Globe-Democrat*, the *St. Louis County Watchman-Advocate*, the *St. Louis Sun*, and the *Westliche Post.*

You can find some of death notices from the *Anzeiger des Westens,* a German Language St. Louis Newspaper published from 1835 to 1898, transcribed and translated in the *Missouri State Genealogical Association Journal*. A discussion of these and a link to the journal online appears on the St. Louis County Library website.[5]

On a related subject, a researcher looking for a death notice in newspaper that has not been digitized can often get a copy by contacting the local library. Both St. Louis Public Library and St. Louis County Library offer lookup services.[6] If a notice exists, they can often find it even if the paper does not have an index or if it has not been digitized.

The 1890s through the early 2000s seem to have been a golden age for obituaries. During that time a significant number of people published a notice in at least one paper. Over time, the most popular paper for them may have changed. A study done in 2011 found significantly more death notices in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* up to the year 1915. After that time, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* became the dominant place for obituaries.[7]

Finding Living Relatives Named in a Death Notice

Finding distant cousins may offer the opportunity to further your genealogical research. Different branches of the family might have different memories of stories about our ancestors. They might also possess different documents or family artifacts, perhaps even one that will name an overseas town of origin. You might also find a genealogy buddy.

There is one caveat to remember for all of these search tools. Common names will likely generate many results, and it will be necessary to winnow them down by adding additional search terms.

In days past, finding someone's telephone number and/or address was pretty straightforward. A telephone book in the family home provided all the information we needed. Unfortunately the phone companies quit publishing phone directories. For a while after that, free online directories filled the bill. Now, the process has become a lot more challenging. Most of the websites these days charge a fee to view the information.

As of this writing, two websites have been identified that appear to provide reasonably current contact information about living people at no charge. While not perfect, these websites can provide contact information in many cases. Fast People Search[8] and Official USA.[9] both have intuitive, easy to use search pages. The information appears to be reasonably accurate on both, but it may be outdated. Neither provides a solution that will work one hundred percent of the time.

Facebook presents another option that we may fail to recognize. About 68 percent of of the US adult population uses Facebook. Middle-aged and older individuals make up the majority of users, and significantly more women than men use the platform. A quick search could lead you to a long lost 4th, 5th, or even 6th cousin.

A final option comes from the various online genealogy platforms. Most of them allow members to message each other. Finding a distant cousin on one of them might be the easiest and most direct way to contact them.

Final Thoughts and Conclusions

Obituaries provide researchers with unparalleled access to information about their families. This information typically comes directly from the family members themselves. Using Obituaries in conjunction with other easily accessible records such as the census can help a researcher expand their knowledge about their family, and make connections with other researchers.

Notes:

1] 1975-1977 *St. Louis Post-Dispatch Death Index* www.rollanet.org/~bdoerr/P-D/PD75-77.htm accessed 2 Mar 2015.

[2] St. Louis Public Library's Obituary Index https://cdm17210.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p17210coll9 accessed 4 Jul 2024.

[3] The Wayback Machine, https://wayback-api.archive.org/ accessed 4 Jul 2024.

[4] Newspaper Indexes at St. Louis County Library. https://www.slcl.org/research-learn/genealogy/newspapers accessed 4 Jul 2024.

[5] St. Louis County Library Page referring to the Anziger des Westens obituary transcriptions and translations in the Missouri State Genealogical Association Journal https://www.slcl.org/research-learn/genealogy/newspapers/westliche-post-death-notice-index/anzeiger-des-westens-death-notice-transcriptions accessed 4 Jul 2024.

[6] St. Louis County Library lookup services: https://www.slcl.org/research-learn/genealogy/lookups-other-services. Accessed 4 Jul 2024
St. Louis Public Library's lookup services:
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSefh_7R_s5d5TCkUqaRbeuqIfpMmWta3ke23-yFY03TXmBPmQ/viewform accessed 4 Jul 2024.

[7] See *PastPorts*, "Obituaries in St. Louis Newspapers: A Comparison," April 2011 pp3-10 https://slcl.libguides.com/ld.php?content_id=73074029 accessed 4 Jul 2024.

[8] Fast People Search https://www.fastpeoplesearch.com/ Accessed 1 July 2024.

[9] Official USA, https://www.officialusa.com/ Accessed 1 Jul 2024.