



# RESEARCHING COMMUNITY HISTORY: TIPS AND TRICKS

## Understanding the lingo.

When researching a personal or community history, you are going to encounter some jargon and terms that you may not be familiar with.

- Primary source material: Material that contains firsthand accounts of events and that was created contemporaneous to those events or later recalled by an eyewitness.
- Secondary source material: A work that is not based on direct observation of or evidence directly associated with the subject, but instead relies on sources of information. Also a work commenting on another work (primary sources), such as reviews, criticism, and commentaries.
- Citation: A citation is a reference that allows you to acknowledge the sources you use in a document or project, and enables a reader to locate those sources through the key information it provides.
- Rights and permissions: Control over the use of materials (such as in quotation or copying) based on a variety of rights involved. This includes both physical and intellectual property rights. Permissions are often tied to conditions of use, such as the requirement that any reproduction of material include the name of the repository.
- Oral history: An interview that records an individual's personal recollections of the past and historical events. This can refer to audio or video recordings, transcripts, and other materials that capture and are associated with such an interview. Oral histories can range from personal reminiscences to structured interviews to recordings of contemporary thoughts or events saved for posterity.

## Your thesis matters.

It is important to begin with a simple statement: what exactly are you researching and what is your goal? In other words, create a thesis statement. This will help you stay focused and collect what is appropriate for this project.

Some examples could be:

- The social culture of Jewish Flint pre-1950.
- The family history of the Sarah Smith family (beginning with her parents and progressing through her death in 1965).
- The contributions of Sarah Smith to the Grayling community including her career as an educator and volunteer with Jewish organizations.
- The first Jewish residents of Traverse City (1880s – 1925).
- The Jewish Second Wave feminists of Michigan.

## Be as specific as you can be.

The more factual information you can begin with the better (see JHSM's biography form):

- Date of birth, date of death
- Place of birth, place of death, location of burial
- Full given name (maiden, name of origin)
- Date of arrival to the U.S., to Michigan
- Addresses
- Birth parents' names, residences
- Spouse's name (if multiple marriages, list all spouses), residences
- Education, including school names and dates of graduations/degrees
- Activities and organizations in which she/he was involved

## Be broad, be open to ideas.

Once you know the biographical basics, your search can broaden, especially if you are using on-line resources. For example, if the person you are researching lived in Detroit and was active in Hadassah, there may be records of her in the Detroit Jewish News archives, in her temple or synagogue records, in the Detroit Free Press archives, or through the national office of Hadassah. But, she may also have been active in other organizations. So, some search ideas for her would be:

- *Sarah Smith Hadassah Detroit*
- *Sarah Smith 1902*
- *Sarah Smith feminist*
- *Sara Smith teacher (note the lack of the "h" in her name)*
- *Sara Smith*

Be sure to search under all names that this person used and alternate spellings.

## Write down everything, especially where you located a fact or bit of information.

The task of researching someone's history or biography, is exciting, tedious and time consuming. You can get lost in myriad documents, libraries, photos and stories. More likely than not, something that you think – at the time – is not relevant, will become a fact you want to re-check or verify. If you have lost the original source, it could take hours to relocate. Citations and bibliographies are also important (and often required) for printed publications.

Where possible, you want to attribute your research to:

- Website, book, or publication name
- Specific page or web address
- Date of entry, publication
- Archival collection, including box and folder numbers. Often archives have specific language that they require in citations.

If you have a memory or have the family-lore of this person or place, write down as much as you can possibly remember. As you record the story, try to find specific dates/locations/events that add time and perspective into the story. Be sensitive to what is “memory” versus “fact.” Memory creates the “color” behind a story and provides a vital narrative. Fact supports the details.

- Here’s an example of a blend of memory and fact: On the morning of September 11, 2001, at the moment of the World Trade Center bombing, my mother was in her kitchen cooking up a batch of her famous chicken soup. Our large family always clamored for a jar of the soup that was filled with chunks of chicken, fresh carrots and had a taste like none other.

That evening there was a scheduled board meeting of the Hadassah Greater Detroit Chapter. She served as president of the chapter from 2000 – 2002. She immediately got on the phone to her fellow board members and discussed whether to proceed with the meeting or not. They decided that, rather than meet, they would gather for a moment of reflection and comfort and take batches of her chicken soup to the area fire department. She told me, “I didn’t know what else to do.” That act led to the creation of the chapter’s Friday Night Chicken Soup for Firefighters, a program which lasted until 2015.

## If it’s on the internet, it must be true.

As tempting as it is to trust every detail, it is helpful to remember that many sites on the internet are not considered reliable “primary” sources. As with published materials, it is helpful to know your source. Which would prove to be a more trustworthy source: the *New York Times* or *The Enquirer*?

- Wikipedia is a very popular resource that is assembled by contributors to the site. By its own definition, the site is not always accurate, and usually such details are disclosed. It is tempting to trust Wikipedia, but be sure to check the sources cited in the article and try to find corroborating information from a different source.

## Don’t be intimidated.

Just because you are not a “Historian” doesn’t mean that you cannot write and record an accurate history. A chef may be able to create a feast of original dishes and blend ingredients in perfect harmony. A dedicated cook can do the same, without as much fanfare, perhaps.

- Stay focused on your primary objective. The more you dig, the more you will find what fascinates you. Stay on track.
- You have limitations. It could be time, funds, brain space. Remember that if you began with nothing and have developed a few paragraphs of a person’s story, then you have created more than what previously existed. You have helped to preserve and record that story.