THE 1940 CENSUS: Searching without a Name Index

Stephen P. Morse (steve@stevemorse.org)

Opening Day

The census day was April 1, 1940. The census is sealed for 72 years for privacy reasons. So opening day should have been April 1, 2012. But it will be delayed to April 2 since April 1 falls on a Sunday.

Unlike previous censuses, the master census microfilm will not be copied and distributed to various archives and libraries. Instead it will scanned and placed online for free. But a complete name index will not exist until at least six months after opening day. That means that the only way to access the census initially will be by location. But the census is organized by Enumeration Districts (EDs), so to access the census you will need to convert the location to an Enumeration District.

Enumeration Districts

An Enumeration District is an area that can be canvassed by a single census taker (enumerator) in a census period. Since 1880, all information in the census microfilms is arranged by Enumeration District. If you do not know the Enumeration District, you cannot access the census by location!

Each Enumeration District within a state has a unique number. In 1930 and 1940, the number is of the form XX-YY where XX is a prefix number assigned to each county (usually alphabetical) and YY is a district number within the county. In 1940 (but not in 1930) some of the larger cities have their own prefix number. Such city prefix numbers come after the last county prefix.

As an example, in 1930 the prefixes in California in 1930 went from 1 (Alameda County) to 58 (Yuba County). Los Angeles County was somewhere in the middle with prefix number 19. Long Beach City is in Los Angeles County, so in 1930 it too had prefix 19. But in 1940 it was given its own prefix, namely 59. It was followed by Los Angeles City (60), Oakland City (61) and San Diego City (62).

Finding your Family's Location in 1940

Before you can use the location tools to determine the Enumeration District, you need to know your family's location. If you don't already have the address, there are several ways of finding it:

address books	naturalization records
birth/marriage/death certificates	photographs
city directories	relatives
diaries	school/church records
employment records	scrapbooks
letters	social security applications

local newspapers/books WW II draft registrations

Information on the Census

What can you expect to find in the census? For the most part, it will be the same sorts of things that you are probably familiar with from previous census years. That includes things like street and house number, house owned or rented, house value or monthly rent, name of each person in household, relation of each person to the head of household, sex, color or race, age, marital status, place of birth, citizenship, current occupation, and industry.

In addition, there are several new and interesting questions for 1940. Some examples are name of informant (so you can see if the information was provided by someone knowledgeable or not), highest grade completed (to see if education level affected whether or not person had a job in this recessionary period), country of birth as of 1937 borders (because the borders of Europe were changing fast and furiously in 1940), place of residence in 1935 (to see how migratory the population was due to the recession and great dust bowl of the 1930s), and income.

Furthermore, sampling was used for the first time on the census. Those people who happened to fall on two designated lines (out of a total of 40 lines per page) were asked about the birthplace of their parents, their mother tongue, whether they were a veteran and of which war, whether they had a social security card, and their usual occupation and industry. Those last two questions differed from the current occupation/industry question asked of everybody, and was intended to see if people were working at jobs other than what they were trained to do because of the recession. And if the person sampled happened to be a married woman, she was asked if she was ever married before, her age at first marriage, and number of children born alive.

There were many more questions that were considered for the census but were rejected. Examples of some of the rejected questions are whether you owned a bible, whether you are over six feet tall, your hair color, whether you owned a burial plot, and how many dogs you had.

The Tutorial Quiz

There are many 1940 location tools on the One-Step website, and knowing which one to use can sometimes be daunting. To simplify things, a tutorial quiz was developed whereby you will be asked a sequence of questions, and based on your answers you will be directed to the most appropriate tool or tools for your situation.

As an example, if you indicate that the family you are looking for lived in a large urban area, you will probably be directed to the One-Step Large City ED Finder. If they lived in a rural area, you will probably be directed to the One-Step ED Definition Tool. If the family hadn't moved since 1930 and you have the 1930 ED, you will probably be directed to the One-Step 1930 /1940 ED Converter.

In addition, you might be directed to other One-Step resources to get a second opinion to make sure that the ED number that you found is correct. Some of these additional resources include the One-Step Street List tool, the One-Step ED Maps tool, the One-Step Census Tracts Tool, the

ED descriptions as appearing on the NARA microfilms, the One-Step Changed-Street-Names Tool, and the One-Step Census Images tool.

Expect the Unexpected

There are several anomalies in the 1940 census that were not present in previous census years. You'll need to know about them so that you don't get confused when searching in the census. These are the so-called Census Minute, and the Page Numbering gaps.

The Census Minute: In previous years, there was an enumeration day and a census day. Enumeration day was the day the census taker rang the bell. Census day (April 1 in 1940) was the day for which the answers were to apply. Assume the census taker arrived on April 5. A person born on April 1 was to be counted, and a person born on April 2 was not to be counted. Similarly a person who died on April 1 was to be counted, and one who died on March 31 was not to be counted.

In 1940 there was a census minute instead of a census day. That was the minute from 12:00 to 12:01 AM on April 1, 1940. A person born on April 1 after 12:01 AM was not to be counted.

Page Numbering Gap: In previous years all pages were numbered sequentially starting with 1A, 1B, 2A, 2B, etc. If second set of visits was needed, because some people weren't at home when the census taker made his first visit, those visits started sequentially after the end of the first set of visits. There were no page gaps. But in 1940, the second set of visits started on page number 61A. And transients (residents of hotels, flop houses) were enumerated on pages starting at 81A. Assume that the first set of visits ended on page number 40B. It will appear that the pages from 41A to 60B are missing. People unfamiliar with the new numbering scheme might erroneously assume that the family they are unable to find is on one of the missing pages.

The Long Awaited Name Index

Although no name index will exist on opening day (because the commercial websites will have no advance peek at the census pages), it's a certainty that the commercial sites will have a name index sometime thereafter. How long it will take for a complete index is not known for certain, but a good guess would be at least six months (although parts of it might be ready sooner).

So the question comes about as to whether the location tools presented here will be obsolete when the name index appears. The answer is NO. And that's because not everyone can be found from a name search. Let's think about it. Your ancestor might have come from a foreign country and spoke with a heavy accent. Your ancestor didn't write his name directly into the census book but rather told his name to the census taker who in turn wrote the name. So the census taker would have to make his best guess as to what your ancestor said with his heavy accent. Seventy-two years later the commercial websites are going transcribe the census and produce a name index. They do so by reading the names that the census taker wrote down. And of course the census takers were not known for having great handwriting. So the transcribers will need to make their best guess as to what the census taker wrote down, which was the census

taker's best guess as to what your ancestor said. It's like the game of telephone, and the chances of getting it right get lower and lower.

However it's not as bleak as all that, and in 90% of the cases you will be successful by using the name index (although I hate to give numbers like that because you know that 87% of statistics are made up). But there will be that non-negligible number of cases in which a name index will fail you and you'll have to do a location search. For this reason, the One-Step location tools will never be obsolete.

Next question is whether the One-Step site will provide support for the eventual name index. The answer is YES. It already supports one of the commercial website's name indexes for the census years up to 1930, and that will be extended to include 1940 as well. But since the commercial website itself will have the name index, it will of course provide a means of using that name index totally on its site. However there are several advantages to using the name index through the One-Step site. Specifically the search form for One-Step name index will probably contain more search fields than will be present on the commercial website's search form (it already has more fields for the earlier census years). The One-Step search form will make it easy to switch between different census years. For example, suppose you just found your grandfather in the 1940 census and now would like to look for him in the 1930 census. His name hasn't changed. His year and place of birth hasn't changed. And there are probably several other attributes about him that haven't changed. Yet if you found him using the search form on the commercial site for 1940, you then have to navigate away from that form, got up a few levels, select 1930, come down a few levels, and then fill in the 1930 form from scratch. On the One-Step form, all you have to do is change the year (it's in a drop-down box) and never leave the search form. A final advantage to doing the name search on the One-Step site is that you will have both the location tools and the name-search tool on the same site.

Where is the One-Step Site?

It's at http://stevemorse.org. Note that's ".org" and not ".com". Someone else has the ".com" domain and claims to be the "Official Steve Morse Website." Don't be fooled – he is not the Official Steve Morse – I am of course. ;-)