
Chasing Uncle William through the Wilds of Cyberspace

Annette Burke Lytle

annette@heritagedetective.com

Our ancestors should be more alive to us than names and dates on a chart. The amazing life of William Crout, Civil War veteran, hotel owner, rancher, and local character, shows how it's possible to reconstruct life stories in surprising detail with resources available online. This case study deals with research in Wyoming and Michigan, but the principles we'll talk about can be applied to research anywhere.

Possibilities and Limitations of Cyberspace

We can find so many answers in that huge library that is the Internet, and more information goes online each day. The fact is, however, that cyberspace can't yet answer all our questions. Sometimes it can only point us to physical records that we have to chase down in the real world. In following the life of William Crout, my third great grand uncle, we'll see examples of how online resources can help us create an amazingly rounded picture of his life, and we'll also see where cyberspace only points us to other sources of information.

Start with What You Know

I came to research Uncle William indirectly. He was the brother of my three times great grandfather, Edwin Crout. They were born in New York state, and the family migrated to Michigan in the 1830s when William and Edwin were boys. The brothers were Civil War veterans who migrated to Laramie, Wyoming, after the war. Edwin had been badly wounded in the war and died in Laramie in 1879, at the age of 48. His wife and daughters moved back to Michigan after his death, but William remained in Laramie. I was intrigued by what William's life was like in the Wild West, so I began researching him in earnest.

Formulate a Research Question and a Plan

There was so much I wanted to know about Uncle William that it was hard to decide how to focus my research. I decided to focus on two research questions:

- What was Uncle William’s occupation in Laramie?
- How many times did he marry?

My initial research plan was pretty simple. I needed to find out more about research in Wyoming. And even if you never have a need to do research in Wyoming, the process is the same no matter where you’re researching.

Head for Cyberspace....

A word of warning, of course. Cyberspace is full of errors and misinformation. That said, it’s also full of accurate and useful information. Sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference, but if you analyze the sources you find in Cyberspace the same way you would analyze any other source for accuracy and reliability you’ll be able to tell the difference.

Get as Much as You Can from Ancestry, FamilySearch, and Other Databases

To make sure I was on as solid a footing as I could be in understanding William’s identity and relationships, I began by searching for documents on genealogy databases. Census and military information confirmed that he was born in 1826 or 1827 in Wayne County, New York. The 1890 Veterans Schedule and two Civil War pension index cards confirmed his Civil War service. (Reminder to self: obtain the full pension applications.) And I found one original marriage record and four index records for additional marriages (also reminder to get the originals). I thought five marriages was pretty intriguing. From Find A Grave, I learned that he died 23 August 1894.

The Wikis

The FamilySearch Wiki and Ancestry Support Center are good places to learn about potentially useful resources in Cyberspace. Searching for the state genealogy and history wiki pages and for the county genealogy page will connect you with lots of information and tools.

“Wyoming, United States Genealogy.” *Family Search Wiki*.

https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Wyoming,_United_States_Genealogy

“Wyoming Vital Records.” *Ancestry Support Center on RootsWeb*.

https://wiki.rootsweb.com/wiki/index.php?title=Wyoming_Vital_Records&cj=1&netid=cj&o_xid=0001029688&o_lid=0001029688&o_sch=Affiliate+External

“Wyoming History.” *FamilySearch Wiki*.

https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Wyoming_History

“Albany County, Wyoming Genealogy.” *Family Search Wiki*.

https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Albany_County,_Wyoming_Genealogy

Cyndi’s List

Checking the state page on Cyndi’s List will also give you a wealth of resources. Here are the categories for the Wyoming page:

- Birth, Marriage, Death
- Cemeteries & Funeral Homes
- Census
- Counties
- Directories
- General Resources
- Government: City, County, Province, State
- History & Culture
- How To
- Immigration, Emigration & Migration
- Land
- Libraries, Archives & Museums
- Maps & Geography
- Military
- Miscellaneous Records
- Newspapers
- Obituaries
- Occupations
- People & Families
- Photographs & Memories
- Prisons, Prisoners & Outlaws
- Professionals, Volunteers & Other Research Services
- Publications, Software & Supplies
- Queries, Message Boards & Surname Lists
- Religion & Churches
- Schools
- Social Networking
- Societies & Groups
- Taxes
- Voters, Poll Books, Electoral Records
- Wills & Probate

“United States >> Wyoming, Category Index.” *Cyndi’s List*.

<https://www.cyndislist.com/us/wy/>

More Background

A Google search for state and local historical societies also produces more information.

“Albany County, Wyoming.” *Wyoming State Historical Society*.

<https://www.wyohistory.org/encyclopedia/albany-county-wyoming>

“History of the City of Laramie.” *Laramie Plains Museum at the Historic Ivinson Mansion*. <http://www.laramiemuseum.org/historyofthecity.html>

“Laramie Photos.” *Wyoming Tales and Trails*.
<http://www.wyomingtalesandtrails.com/photos6.html>

Crowd Sourcing

Online trees and websites maintained by local genealogical groups can be very useful in our research, even if their sources are not cited. We just have to go out and find the original documents and satisfy ourselves whether the information is reliable and accurate or not. Undocumented information—maddening as it is for us—can still be true. It just takes more work for us to figure out whether it is or not.

If you're one of those genealogists who scorns online trees, take a look at this article by Tom Jones in which he says, “Genealogists who categorically disdain certain sources risk overlooking the information they seek or references to that information, thus blocking their research.”

Thomas W. Jones. “Perils of Source Snobbery.” *OnBoard* 18 (May 2012).
<https://bcgcertification.org/skillbuilding-perils-of-source-snobbery/>

Digitized Books

Search sites like Google Books, Internet Archive, and HathiTrust for county histories and military unit histories. It's also good to search for your ancestor by name, as some interesting results can come up. I learned Uncle William was interviewed in 1885, along with several other Wyoming pioneers, and the transcription of his interview is in the manuscript collection of the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley—another case where I have to go searching for the original in a physical place, but in this case I was able to contact the library and they copied the interview notes and sent them to me. If not for Cyberspace, I would not have known those interviews existed.

Newspapers

More and more newspapers are being digitized, and I hit the jackpot with Uncle William on the *Wyoming Newspapers* website (<https://newspapers.wyo.gov/>). Do a Google search for the state you're interested in and “historic newspapers.” Here are three resources you can also use to see if newspapers containing your family stories are online:

Library of Congress. *Chronicling America*. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

“List of Online Newspaper Archives.” *Wikipedia*. Database.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:List_of_online_newspaper_archives

The Ancestor Hunt. <https://theancestorhunt.com/newspaper-research-links.html>

The Answers to My Research Questions?

William was a hotel owner, a building contractor, a rancher, and a postmaster. He was married about six times, give or take. I'm still working on pinning down all the evidence on his marriages! Reconstructing his life story has been a fascinating experience and, I believe, a good model for you to use in reconstructing the lives of your own ancestors.