Family histories are created using facts such as dates, places, and names. If you are writing your own history (and we will address that in a later article), you can record these details based upon your personal recollection. While you were there at your birth, you can’t actually testify to the date, but those around you have been celebrating your birthday long enough that you are pretty sure about it. You were there, however, when you got married and when each of your children were born. If you paid for your daughter’s wedding, you remember its date for sure. You know where you lived and what your occupations have been. You likely know who your parents are and probably even your grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. You know where you went to school and what degrees you have received. You have attended funerals and visited cemeteries, so you have death information. You are an absolute fount of knowledge that genealogists love.

However, most family histories are written by those who must rely on information gleaned from sources other than those with direct knowledge of the events. And that’s where the problem begins. How do you know what the facts are? Credibility becomes the issue.

**Understanding Credibility**

For genealogist (and that’s what you become as soon as you ask the first question about your family) the question “Is it accurate and how do you know that it is?” is enormously important. Genealogists of an earlier era recorded information that was called family history but was more often just family myth. For example, Aunt Bertha had said for years that their ancestors came over in 1614 from England, so that was dutifully recorded. Unfortunately, no one has found any information to back up this story. Myths such as this are great if you are writing fiction. They don’t have a place in a genealogy unless they are included as interesting notes with no verifiable sources.

“But my great aunt Bertha wouldn’t lie,” you say. You are correct, she’s not lying. She’s just passing down what she has heard. That’s called hearsay in court, and you are now the judge. When creating a family history, you are called upon to determine what information is factual. Facts need sources that can be verified. Aunt Bertha has no facts. What she has is a memory of what someone told her who had been told by someone else.

We’ve all seen the classic school game of gossip in which one person whispers in the ear of another who passes it along to the next person. After five or six such exchanges, the last person says aloud the message. Everyone laughs because the garbled passage hardly resembles the original. That, unfortunately, happens in families. A grain of truth remains in the story, but the details hardly resemble the original event.

I’m not suggesting, though, that you discard such tales. Never. Record every story carefully documenting who told it to you, when they recounted it, and where you were when you heard it. It’s also important to ask who told them. If that person is still alive, you can track back to that source seeking additional information. Remember the gossip example. Something probably got garbled or lost along the way. No matter how distorted the story has become it will likely contain
a tiny grain that may give you a clue you will find in no other way. Just remember to treat the information as myth not fact until you have verified it.

Seeking Clues
Along the same lines as family oral myth, keep in mind that just because information has been put into print doesn’t mean it’s a fact. I have a lovely letter written by a family member in 1946. The author describes to his granddaughter the family’s role in the war between Mexico and the U.S. that had occurred 100 years before (which is now more than 150 years ago). Its two pages of single space type outline specifics that any genealogist would be thrilled to find. Most researchers would call it a gold mine of information except that I can’t verify the parts that I’m most interested in. I’ve spent hours trying to document the details that apply to our family. For the moment, it’s beginning to look like fool’s gold rather than the real thing.

To begin with there is a line that states, “When great grandfather Rentch was a boy in Kentucky, he lived on adjoining farms with Kit Carson…” Aha! That one will be easy to prove. Great grandfather Rentch was born about 1803 in Nelson County, Kentucky. So Kit must have been born in Nelson County too. Nope. Not according to any of the histories I’ve been able to find. According to those sources, Kit Carson was born in Madison County which is at least two counties and 50 miles away. Not exactly adjoining properties. So I went to the 1810 census records where I can find my Rentch family. Perhaps the historians are wrong. Maybe there is a Carson in that county. Again, not that I can find.

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Okay. So that’s a small oversight. Other details must surely be more accurate. There’s the line that reads, “grandfather was educated for a doctor and surgeon …” Well, if he were, it isn’t recorded in the 1850, 1860, or 1870 census where his occupation is listed as miscellaneous, grocer-merchant, and none.

Then there’s the next line that says, “About 1825 Kit Carson, Grandfather Daniel E. Rentch, and his two first cousins left Kentucky, overland for St. Louis …” Hmm. Now that’s a problem because Kit moved to Franklin, Missouri as a small child while the Rentches stayed in Kentucky. However, in 1826, Kit did join a merchant caravan heading toward Santa Fe. Maybe there’s a connection here.

So you see my problem. I have a wonderful piece of family myth that doesn’t seem to match information I can verify. Do I think Grandfather Lake, who wrote the letter, is lying? No. Do I think he made this up? No. Do I think this document is a waste of paper? Not at all! I am convinced that there are clues here that will eventually unravel many mysteries. I just have to find them.

**Determining Facts**

Changing myth into fact is nothing more than verifying information so that it can be considered a reasonably conclusive detail. There are lots of ways to verify the information you receive. Just think about how you establish belief in other areas. If you see a tornado yourself, then you can call it a fact. (We aren’t going to go into more existential questions about whether we actually “see” things.) If your neighbor says she heard that there had been a tornado in the area, you need to know who she heard it from. Was it the weather station who had spotters out on the road? Was it third or fourth hand accounts that perhaps started with someone who had seen an ugly cloud? One source may have more credibility than another. And then there’s the relative who lives hundreds of miles away who saw a newspaper account of a tornado. The dateline was Big Spring which seems to make it a credible source. But you may know that actually the tornado was north of Ackerly nearly to Lamesa. It’s just that the AP folks assign to Big Spring any event that happens within a 50 mile radius of the town because it’s the only name they recognize. Now you are getting the picture.

A general rule of thumb is that every piece of information should be verified in at least two ways with each one representing a different source. Three or four is even better (a two-legged stool is rocky, a three-legged one can stand on its own, and a four-legged chair is stable). However, don’t fall into the trap of cookie cutter genealogy. Too often, information from the same source is duplicated many times. If the same record is published by five different people, it only counts as a single source.

Any deviation should also be recorded as an alternate possibility. Just because information doesn’t “match” is no reason to discard it unless you know for absolutely sure that it’s an error. Even then it’s better to keep the information along with the error notation. If you have found an error in a document, others may be using that same source. Your notation may help stop the proliferation of that inaccuracy.
So what counts as a different source? Lots and lots of things. The list is huge and much longer than the one I’ve included here:

- census records
- birth certificates or records
- death certificates or records
- family letters
- family bibles
- government documents such as pension applications
- photographs and the notes on the back of them
- other genealogies
- newspaper accounts
- cemetery records
- passport applications
- military records
- personal accounts
- ship records
- cemetery headstones
- probate records
- wills
- sale of land records

Why do you need more than one source if information is found in an official document such as a census record? Because mistakes happen all the time – even to you [misspelling intentional] and me. Anxiety over a visit by a government official (the census taker) can rattle anyone. And if you are asked a question you can’t answer, you might make one up or guess just to be cooperative. Or you might just not be remembering correctly. In 1850 there were no readouts in automobiles telling you the current date and time, so the year might have been a little hazy. A child might be six or seven – who knows. A wife might not have wanted to be forthcoming about the fact that she is older than her husband. We won’t even address the problem of handwriting – the three that looks like a five, for example.

So as a result of human fallibility, verification of information using multiple sources is necessary. If a census taken in 1850 shows grandfather Rentch was 47 and the census in 1860 shows that he is now 57, then we can make a reasonably confident statement that he was born about 1803. If the 1870 census says the same thing, then we have excellent evidence to back up our record. Each additional different source merely adds to the verification process.

Unfortunately, however, seldom do records work out so neatly. You may have two records with one statement and two more with a different one. That’s where you have to measure the strength of each record. Who provided the information and how reliable are they likely to be? In a census record where a child is recorded as being two years of age, it is probably the father or mother who supplied the age and they were likely at the birth. In a census record where that same child (now an aging grandfather) is listed as 85, the later age is slightly less credible. The person supplying this information may be a grandchild who just knows that Grandpa is old – just not sure how old. Given the two sources, I’d go with the younger age of 82. Remember, as a genealogist you are judging – making choices about what information to declare as fact.
Relishing the Aha Moment
So let’s get back to my problem source, the letter from Grandpa Lake. In it he says that Grandfather Rentch was born in 1800. My census records say he was born about 1803. The date in the letter is not too far off, and I can probably figure that 150 years after the birth event that family members “rounded off” the date. I’ll keep the date of “about” 1803 but assign this letter as a verification source.

That discrepancy regarding Grandfather’s occupation as a physician bothers me. It’s such a big “mistake” considering what the census records show. And then the aha moment arrives late one night. Reading through a newspaper account written from an interview with Kitty Rentch (daughter of Grandfather), I come across the statement, “Her father was a doctor and a prominent man and large land owner.” Now that’s credibility! If anyone would know, she would. Suddenly, the letter also becomes more believable.

With a stronger trust in the letter, I go back to other details and start digging. There’s a line that says, “Grandfather Rentch and Kit Carson took a river steamer to Arrow Rock, Missouri. They stayed there awhile. Grandfather set up the medical practice and surgery at Boonville, which was near Arrow Rock. Kit wanted him to go on west with him but they parted company there and Kit went onto Westport and from there went on ox-train caravan to New Mexico.”

While looking on the Internet for Arrow Rock, I discover an article on the Santa Fe Trail that begins to fill in some gaps (http://www.santafetrailresearch.com/missouri-river/outfitters.html). In this article I learn several interesting facts.
1. Franklin [home of Kit Carson] is located across the Missouri River from Boonville [where Grandfather Rentch decided to set up practice].
2. Beginning in 1811, traders outfitted wagon trains to go to Santa Fe starting at Arrow Rock Landing [river steamer stopping place for Carson and Rentch].
3. September 1, 1821, William Becknell of Franklin, Missouri took a party starting from Arrow Rock to go "westward, for the purpose of trading for horses and mules and catching wild animals of every description." The group returned with substantial profits heralding the opening of the era of the Santa Fe Trail. They arrived home with their rawhide bags full of Mexican silver coins. Excitement rose to an all time high.

Suddenly, some of the information in my letter begins to fall into place. Tales of easy money have driven young men to leave their homes to seek their fortune many times. It’s beginning to look like the Santa Fe Trail is just such an adventure. In 1825, young Grandfather Rentch was an ambitious 22 year old succumbing to the lure. He took a steamboat heading to the start of the Santa Fe Trail where fortune tempted him.
Looking at the map, I believe (but cannot prove as fact) that Kit Carson joined the steamer about Booneville and rode it as far as Arrow Rock. On that part of the trip, he met Daniel Rentch who was from his part of Kentucky and struck up a conversation. Kit Carson went on, but Grandfather Rentch stopped and returned to Booneville. The dates and places fit the history that others tell. While I won’t establish my history from this letter alone, I can use it as one of my three points. It has turned out to be a gold mine. And I’m well on my way to establishing facts not myth.

Remember, I warned you. The hunt for such facts is what drives genealogists and keeps them awake at night while others are resting. The lure of the next source that will answer your questions is greater than any wealth to be found on the Santa Fe Trail.