

Finding LDS biographical sketches

There is a relatively good chance that if you have LDS ancestry someone among your multitude of relatives has written a biographical sketch regarding your common ancestor.

About 100,000 biographical sketches have been collected and filed at the Daughters of Utah Pioneers Museum (300 N. Main Street, Salt Lake City; phone: 801-532-6479). Their collection (along with their extensive photograph collection of thousands of LDS pioneers' photos) is indexed online at their website: www.dupinternational.org. Once you have reached their home page, search under "History Department" and "Photo Department" as menu items on the left side of the screen.

Another vitally important source to search for LDS biographical sketches—and for sketches of non-Mormons living in the inter-mountain west—is *Mormons and Their Neighbors*, a two volume work compiled and published by BYU librarian Marvin E. Wiggins. In the preface to the volumes, Wiggins explains:

Mormons and Their Neighbors is an index to 75,734 biographical sketches appearing in 194 published volumes. These sketches include persons living between 1820 and 1981 in northern Mexico, New Mexico, Arizona southern California, Nevada, Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, and southwestern Canada.

Until now, biographical information on Mormons has been difficult to locate. Although a few basic biographical reference works had been compiled, their coverage fell far short of meeting the needs of researchers in locating biographical information on Mormons. To bridge that gap, the compiler, with the support of the Harold B. Lee Library, began in 1970 to index Mormon biographies in published works in the Harold B. Lee Library. The objective was to find as many Mormon biographies as possible. Since people of other faiths have lived side-by-side with Mormons, all names in sources covering geographical areas even sparsely populated by Mormons were included. However, no attempt was made to verify the religious affiliation of each person.

This index includes information exactly as it appears in the original source. No attempt was made to verify conflicting dates or spellings. The laborious task of verification remains with the researcher. Since this work is not a name index, only published works containing actual biographical information were indexed. If no biographical information of a person appeared, the name was not included. Names of parents and/or children listed in biographical sketches were not indexed unless additional biographical information on them was provided.

Entries list the name, birth and death date information as they appear in the source being indexed. The sources are indicated by an abbreviation followed by a volume and page number indicating specific location of the biographical sketch. Abbreviation codes are listed following the preface of this index with full bibliographic information on the book the abbreviation stands for. The “@” sign indicates that only sketchy biographical information is available in the source. “Photo” is listed when a photograph is available and the appropriate page number for the photograph is given.

Wiggins’s original two volume work has been supplemented in recent years with an additional 25,000 sketches! The total number of sketches now indexed exceeds 100,000--from 236 published local histories. This expanded and updated index is available online at: www.lib.byu.edu/Ancestry/.

Researchers should also check the archival and published holdings of major institutions such as the LDS Church History Library that houses thousands of biographical sketches and diaries, as well as photograph collections. Other institutions such as the Utah State Historical Society and special collections at local public libraries often house significant numbers of biographical sketches and photographs. Researchers would also be well advised to check with university libraries’ special collections, such as Utah State University, Weber State University, University of Utah, Brigham Young University, and Southern Utah University, etc.

The information in life sketches tends to come in varying degrees of reliability. Because the sketches were not written by the person they concern and most sketches do not include footnotes, one needs to be alert to potential factual and contextual errors that may have crept in from the writer or compiler’s faulty memories or lack of knowledge or understanding of specific historic or family events, situations, or relationships. Many situations mentioned in biographical sketches can be verified and/or clarified if the researcher is willing to spend time examining primary sources such as membership records, minute books, immigration records, land and property records, naturalization records, court records, probate files, etc.

If you are unable to find a biographical sketch regarding your ancestor, consider and take on the challenge to create one so that your ancestor will be appropriately remembered for future generations! Archivists and librarians can guide you to sources that will help make your compilation more specific, reliable, and interesting to read. Be sure to donate a copy of your finished work to an institutional archive or special collections so that the information will be more apt to survive the ages.

(Information contributed by Jay G. Burrup, Archivist and Information Specialist, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.)