

# Chasing Uncle William through the Wilds of Cyberspace

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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—can show us how it's possible to reconstruct life stories in surprising detail with resources available online. This case study deals with research in Michigan and Wyoming, 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 points us to physical records that we have to chase down in the real world. But the good news in that case is that it makes it much easier to find those resources. 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 can help us by pointing 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.

Our first step when we begin a new research project is to gather together all the information we have on our target individual. We evaluate that information for reliability and accuracy and use it as the basis for our next step in research planning.

## **Formulate a Research Question and a Plan**

In order to make sure we're researching in records that are most likely to be useful to us, we need to formulate a research question to guide our research and put together a research plan to make sure we're looking at the most useful records first.

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 wives did he have?

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 travel the wilds of Cyberspace routinely, you'll get a feel for what's useful and what isn't.

## **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 start learning 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](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](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](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](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Albany_County,_Wyoming_Genealogy)

### **Cyndi's List**

Checking the state page on Cyndi's List will also give us 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 background 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 originals 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, HathiTrust, and the Digital Library of America 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 many 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.

Morgan, Dale L., and George P. Hammond. *A Guide to the Manuscript Collections of the Bancroft Library*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963. Preview accessed on *Google Books* [https://books.google.com/books?id=-xJpYO95S54C&pg=PA254&dq=william+crout&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwil2Ov1jMTOAhWF1h4KHX2\\_Cx84ChDoAQhLMAk#v=onepage&q=william%20crout&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=-xJpYO95S54C&pg=PA254&dq=william+crout&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwil2Ov1jMTOAhWF1h4KHX2_Cx84ChDoAQhLMAk#v=onepage&q=william%20crout&f=false)

## **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 two 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](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:List_of_online_newspaper_archives)

## **The Answers to My Research Questions?**

William was a soldier, 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 hope, a good model for you to use in reconstructing the lives of your own ancestors.