

My Favourite Genealogy Record and How I Found It

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In the early 1980s my mother received a letter from her Sydney relatives. There was nothing unusual in this, as the families kept in regular contact. What was unusual, the letter contained four pages of family history of my mother's SPARKES maternal line. At the time no-one was really interested, but my mother said she would keep it just in case it came in handy one day.

Time passed and a friend, who had recently begun researching her family history, asked if I would like to accompany her to the State Library which in those days was in William Street, Brisbane. I said "yes", but thinking about it later, I wondered what on earth I was going to do while my friend was doing her research. Suddenly I remembered the letter with the family history. A quick telephone call to my mother, and yes, she still had the information. We went through it together. "It says that your cousin asked the *Queensland Times* newspaper¹ to check for an obituary notice when your grandfather died, but they couldn't find one." This was something I could check at the State Library as I knew it held newspaper records.

So off my friend and I went to the State Library. Not being used to microfiche or microfilm readers and printers, I had to be shown how to use them and, after a while, I was able to load a film and not have it whiz off the spool on to the floor (how embarrassing).

My great-grandfather had died on 10 August 1919² so I had requested the *Queensland Times* film covering this period. I must admit I got side-tracked as I slowly wound the film on. It was so interesting reading events of yesteryear, and the language used by the reporters, or correspondents as they called them, was so fascinating. For example, an obituary notice just didn't say "Mr William Brown died last Thursday." It said "Just as the sun was setting last Thursday evening, so too the life of Mr William Brown ebbed away..." Reports of marriages – "Orange Blossoms" they were called – listed the guests and the gifts they gave the happy couple. That might have been a little embarrassing if you had not spent as much on your gift as other guests!

I didn't notice the passing of time, I was so captivated by what I was reading. 'Time for a lunch break,' said my friend. 'Have you found anything yet?' Well, of course I hadn't so far, so I had to make a concentrated effort after lunch to look for my great-grandfather's obituary notice.

Perhaps the newspaper people were right after all and there wasn't one. How soon after his death would it appear in the newspaper, a week, two weeks? Nothing. "Think," my brain said, "start with his death date and work forwards." And there it was, *Death of Mr Joseph Sparkes*³, two days after his death. I couldn't believe it. I wanted to shout 'Eureka' but it was a library and not the place to show one's exuberant feelings.

I read it through once, then again, and again. This printed page was telling me about my great-grandfather, when and where he was born (Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, 15 July 1836), how he had come to Australia, even naming the departure date from London (New Year's Day 1855) and arrival date in Sydney (Easter Monday 1855), what work he did and for whom, including prospecting for gold at Tooloom. Where was Tooloom? Did my mother know that? It certainly hadn't been mentioned in the family history details.

Great-grandfather SPARKS, who was a tailor by trade, eventually had his own tailoring business and, from photographs I had seen, was a well dressed gentleman. I couldn't imagine him digging for gold, but then, lots of men from all walks of life were drawn to the goldfields in search of a fortune. I would have to follow this up! My mother had told me her grandfather, in the years before his death, lived with each of his married daughters in turn, and she remembered him as a small man with a quick temper (no doubt his daughters took it for a time, then it was a case of "move on to the next one"), who always wore a pith helmet when he went out.

Slowly, I scrolled through the columns of the newspaper, finding his funeral notices⁴ and, in a much earlier newspaper, an advertisement⁵ relating to his tailoring business:

¹ *Queensland Times* newspaper, established 1861, and currently daily newspaper of Ipswich and District

² Queensland Death Certificate Ref No 4636 Joseph SPARKS 10 August 1919

³ *Queensland Times* newspaper 12 August 1919, Obituary Notice Mr Joseph SPARKES

⁴ *Queensland Times* newspaper 11 August 1919, Funeral Notices Mr Joseph SPARKES

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J. SPARKS – TAILOR

J. Sparks, Tailor, Begs to inform his Customers and the Public generally, that his STOCK for the season is now COMPLETE, consisting of WORSTEDS, SERGES and TWEEDS, all of Beautiful Patterns and Good Quality; so that all who are in want of a Summer Suit will do well to give him a Call, where they will find

GOOD MATERIAL

GOOD FIT

GOOD WORKMANSHIP

at

MOST MODERATE CHARGES

Jos. Sparks, Nicholas Street (next to Harding's Horse Bazaar)

A helpful library assistant showed me how to print out the information I wanted, and in a matter of minutes I had the previous extracts in my folder.

I was so excited by what I had found and my friend, who had had a bad day (research wise), was happy for me too. Even at that early stage, I think she knew that genealogy had claimed another victim. Twenty-five years on, we still work together sharing our knowledge. I still have that now fading photocopy of my great-grandfather's obituary notice to remind me of how I began my research, and I treasure the original details compiled by my mother's cousin. I went on to expand the information contained in the original documents, adding to and correcting where necessary, over the years.

To me, newspapers are an important source of information. It has been said that "newspapers are a shop window of our times"⁶. At times, there are errors in a report, however, after all, reporters are human, and selling newspapers is the name of the game. Like all genealogical sources, they must be checked for accuracy. Sometimes the filming of early newspapers leaves a little to be desired. Some papers are difficult to read, or the item you want is in a fold of the paper or, worse still, missing altogether! Nevertheless, we are fortunate to have these records.

On one occasion, again at the State Library, I was able to view the original copy of the *Western Star* newspaper⁷ which was a thrill for me to be able to actually turn the pages, wearing gloves, of course, to minimise damage. Great-grandfather's parents, William and Ann, and his siblings, John, Louisa, Emma and William Henry, arrived in Australia in 1857 and some of the family settled in Roma, Queensland, hence my interest in that newspaper.

The newspapers have given me many valuable insights into my family's life – from birth notices, marriages, obituaries, birthday celebrations, church and lodge functions, social jottings, etc. I even have a report on a pantomime at our local church in which I played a leading character!⁸ Our children and grandchildren also received a mention in the local newspaper for their scholastic and sporting achievements and, whilst they may not be particularly interesting now, at some time in the future a family researcher may find these references valuable.

My involvement in my Family History Society's various publications and, in particular, *Citizens of Ipswich 1904*⁹, required a careful study of the *Queensland Times* newspapers for the year 1904 and extraction of birth, death and marriage details, as well as obituary notices and 'Orange Blossoms'. On many occasions we would

⁵ *Queensland Times* newspaper 25 November 1890, Advertisement J Sparks, Tailor

⁶ *Two Hundred Years – A week by week historical count down to Australia's Bicentennial*, Bay Books, Kensington NSW, 1988

⁷ *Western Star* newspaper, Roma Queensland, commenced 27 March 1875

⁸ *Queensland Times* newspaper 27 July 1962

⁹ *Citizens of Ipswich, 1904* published by Ipswich Genealogical Society Inc. 2004, ISBN095781741X

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stop and say, “Just listen to this!” and read out some interesting news item which had no particular relevance to the information we were extracting, but had simply “caught the eye”.

Also, as a Research Office for the Ipswich Genealogical Society Inc, the newspapers were consulted if we felt they could add further information to the person or family being researched. The local newspapers have been used on several occasions to seek “lost” relatives for interstate or overseas researchers, and by this method more than one researcher has been put in touch with other family members.

Obtaining the names, dates and places of birth, deaths and marriages of our ancestors is often referred to as being “the skeleton”. Newspapers are one source that can put “flesh on the bones” and should not be overlooked.