Death by Waterpik, or In Search of the Cause of Your Ancestors's Passing

Sue Lisk looks at sources that may help in revealing the cause of death of an ancestor

S HE OPENED THE BOX, REMOVED ITS CONTENTS, AND PROCEEDED TO read the instructions. About nine lines down, she stopped. She had reached a warning stating that people who were required to take antibiotics prior to dental work should consult their dentists before using the product. Although the item seemed harmless, even her dentist had some doubts as to whether or not it would be advisable for her to use it.

For family historians, knowing the time and place of an ancestor's death is never enough. We also want to know the cause of death. Funeral in a private home, ca. 1880. (Library of Congress)

Confronted with this aura of professional doubt, she decided to play it safe and stick with the good ol' dental floss. She didn't want her friends running across an obit that read "Death by Waterpik".

Admittedly, such strange causes of death are relatively uncommon. But as genealogists, we want to know how our ancestors passed and the circumstances surrounding their deaths.

How might you satisfy your curiosity?

The State (or Province) of Death

If you know that your ancestor died in a particular state in the US and can estimate the general time period when the death occurred, the FamilySearch Wiki can help direct your search for death records in the US for every state and the District of Columbia. Begin by consulting *www.familysearch. org/wiki/en/United_States_Death_ Records*. Although death records may include many valuable details, one of them will likely be the cause of death.

Let's take Pennsylvania as an example. If you click on "Pennsylvania" from the Wiki page given above, you'll be directed to a page titled "How to Find Pennsylvania Death Records". You'll learn that the state did not require registration of deaths until 1906, so prior to this date you'd need to search at the county level. Unfortunately, even the counties didn't begin keeping death records until 1893.

But the Wiki does provide guidance for searching for deaths that occurred in the state prior to these dates.

If your ancestor or relative died before 1852, church records and cemetery records would be the best sources to check. But newspapers, Bible records, probate records and tax records are alternatives