



Pondering Puzzles

BY SUE LISK

IF SOMEONE WERE TO TURN ME AROUND IN CIRCLES A FEW TIMES WHEN I'm in an unfamiliar place, I would stand very little chance of finding my way, unless I had a map in hand. I am "geographically challenged" in that sense.

In researching how I could improve my ability to orient myself in space, I learned that doing puzzles can be helpful. Reluctant to purchase dozens of jigsaw puzzles, I found several online puzzle sites that offered me the chance to improve my ability to figure out where I am.

As I familiarized myself with these online challenges, I came to realize that they presented me with various types of situations reminiscent of those that genealogists encounter.

I'd like to share some of them here and suggest a few things to keep in mind and strategies to employ when working on your own family history puzzles.

Level of Difficulty

Online jigsaw puzzle sites allow users to decide whether they'd like to do an easy puzzle, a hard puzzle, or a puzzle at an intermediate level. A puzzle that lies on the easier end of the spectrum generally has fewer pieces. The final images to be assembled show distinct items with clear borders and definite color contrasts. To improve one's "puzzling" skills, it's wise to begin with easy puzzles and then gradually progress to more challenging ones.

And in the world of genealogy, some kinds of family history questions are usually easier to solve than others. Starting with yourself (provided

you're not trying to determine the motivations for all your actions!) is like beginning with an easy jigsaw puzzle. You know more about yourself than you do about anyone else. You don't have to guess where the facts of your life up to this point should be placed. Then you should work backwards in time, generation by generation, progressing to your parents, your grandparents, and so on. Each generation will be a bit more difficult to "assemble" than the previous one.

Online puzzle sites routinely offer users hundreds of puzzles from which to select. Likewise, when you begin researching your family history, you'll choose which lines of the family you'd like to tackle first. You'll need to decide whether you'd like to work on a family line you're quite familiar with or whether you'd prefer to study one you know little or nothing about.

But even if you choose a more "accessible" line, you'll need to be careful to avoid making assumptions from the outset. Remember that your ultimate goal is to support your proposed facts with evidence consistent with the Genealogical Proof Standard. You'll want to be sure your puzzle pieces click into place and truly fit where you've placed them.

Expectations

Online puzzle-solvers can sometimes choose whether or not to make the final images visible within the frames of their puzzles as they work. Even when they want to be able to see a faint image within the workspace, it's rarely possible to view the details clearly.



In any sort of puzzle, it's easier to find hidden figures if you know what to look for. "The puzzled fox", Currier & Ives, c. 1872 (Library of Congress)