JFMF – WHAT NOW?

Pennington Research Association

Submitted by Gene Pennington, Research Director

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Introduction

I have been working for some time on this issue (since 1998) and at the request of the Board at our July 2002 meeting, I am submitting this report on the JFMF, the problems associated with it and recommendations.

I sent a draft of this document to all of the Group Leaders on January 15, 2003. We had a very good response (12 of 24 Groups with a Leader responded). I have modified my draft report based on their comments and suggestions. This is the final report and makes specific recommendations.

Recommendations

1. The PRA adopt a new version of what we (PRA) are trying to accomplish with the JFMF.

New Purpose for the JFMF: The JFMF is a working database for research purposes -- not a database that we will try to keep as up to date and as accurate as possible.

Reason:

- We think this will give us a better chance to be successful and meet our mission statement, goals and objectives.

2. We place the JFMF on the MyFamily.com website and make it available to PRA members only.

Positive Reasons:

- This will make the JFMF available to all PRA members by sharing the genealogical information contained in the files.
- Group Leaders will be responsible for the data in their own Family Group. It will be up to them to solicit data and information from their Group and to evaluate the information and then to add it to their gedcom file.
- Group Leaders can work at their own pace to examine their own gedcom file and when an error is spotted, or when a source has to be added or corrected, or some other comment noted, they can immediately add it to the file.

- This will speed up the process of making changes, additions and deletions to the JFMF – no petitions will need to be submitted **EXCEPT** for Group name changes, merges, etc.
- This will be easier and simpler
- Members can search all of the JFMF, however, they will have to search each individual gedcom file themselves to do a complete and through search. Now when I do a search of the JFMF, I can search the entire database.
- Members can create reports themselves
- Group Leaders will be able to upload and download gedcom files to share with other members.
- Members can post information, have discussions (chat) online, use an address book and post calendar events.
- The Board can charge a fee for members who wish to use the website. This could help generate funds to offset any potential costs (see below).

There are three (3) types of members for the MyFamily.com website.

1. Site Guests: Guests can log into the site and view all content but they are not allowed to add or change anything. This will be the category for most PRA members.

2. Site Users: These members have login privileges as well as access to add content and files to the site. This will be the category for Group Leaders.

3. Site Administrators: Administrators have all the above privileges, and the responsibility for management of the site. You can allow other members of your site to have administrator status. This is my category now but if the site is moved to a new location and setup exclusively for the PRA, then we can, if the Board approves, add other site administrators.

There may well be some problems associated with this change. I've tried to identify some of the more serious ones.

Potential Problems:

- A PRA member must have Internet access in order to use the MyFamily.com website.
- I will have to break the JFMF into several gedcom files. Each file will be for a specific Family Group. I will have to learn how to then put the other individuals who are not associated with a

Family Group within the JFMF into a separate gedcom file and upload it to the website.

- o The only other way to do this is to create one big gedcom file containing ALL the persons and upload it to the website. This is not, in my opinion, a good idea for a number of reasons, some of which are listed below. These potential problems will be greater and have more negative impact if we put just one big gedcom file on the website than if we put several smaller gedcom files there.

- Cost – Right now the website on MyFamily.com is paid by me for my subscription to Ancestry.com and MyFamily.com. At the moment, I have used about 3% of the 102.1 MB available (personal and PRA data). Given the size of the gedcom files I'll have to upload for all of the JFMF, I estimate we will need about 300 – 400 MB of disk space. This year MyFamily.com charges $109.50 per year for 500 MB. This includes other features which would be of value as well. I can increase the size of the storage space available on my site in smaller increments as needed until I feel the cost has exceeded the amount I am willing to donate to support the website.

- There will not be any checks and balances in place for any data added and/or uploaded to the website. Somebody can add data that is inaccurate, or worse yet, fictional, and we may not discover it before it is viewed and/or distributed to our members.

- We will not be able to enforce any type of standard for the submission of data. This includes adding sources and/or evidence as well as the format of new data added or for changes made.

- There will not be any checks and balances in place for any data deleted from the website. We will probably never know if someone had deleted the data. I can setup some type of backup of the data files but that will add more time and expense.

- The possibility exists that at some time we may want to move all of the data from the MyFamily.com website. This will present us with issues that will become a greater problem than we now face. For example:

  - o Size of data to be moved will take a long time to move from one web server to another.

  - o Ownership of the data that has been added and/or changed. We will NOT have a method of ensuring we have consent to publish forms for everybody who can add/change/delete data. We might be able to devise some sort of consent form and require the Group Leaders to sign it before they are given the ability to make those changes.

This is not an issue on the MyFamily.com website because a user has to accept the terms and conditions before they are allowed access.

- It is possible during a gedcom file upload by a Group Leader for them to "accidentally" check a box to allow their gedcom file to be uploaded into the "public" domain area of MyFamily.com and Ancestry.com websites (they refer to it as "Ancestry World Tree". This could be cause for concern but there is no way at this time to prevent this from occurring.

If you're interested in seeing how this works, let me know and I'll add you to the PRA's MyFamily.com website members list.

Background

As stated in my report to the Board and Membership at our July 2002 meeting, "The John French Master File (JFMF) has continued to be a major hurdle. While it is true the JFMF has the potential to be of great value to our members and other Pennington researchers, it has certainly been the most challenging."

Since that meeting, I have held several meetings and had many communications (phone, e-mail and online meetings) with Carmen Johnson (ARD responsible for the JFMF) and Rene'e Davis (ARD responsible for our Family Groups and Group Leaders).

I continue to believe that the best method to address all of the problems associated with the JFMF is to meet with as many of our Group Leaders as possible and have a through discussion and to identify some positive solutions. However, I don't think such a meeting will happen given all the other problems associated with having such a meeting (travel costs, time, etc.).

I also believe we could use the Internet to discuss the JFMF and its' problems by holding online meetings. While some of us (such as Carmen and Rene'e) have been able to do this, the majority of our Group Leaders have not "signed on" to participate in these online meetings. There are many problems associated with online meetings and they are not easily solved so I no longer hold out hope that we will see a much expanded use of online meetings as a method to discuss the JFMF and to develop solutions.

So, where are we today? Rather than take up lots of space summarizing what's happened to date, please visit the PRA's website and review the pages containing the Research Committee's reports (since 1998), our plans, the pages on the history of the JFMF and the pages on how to make changes to the JFMF.

What Are the Problems Today with the JFMF?

I think we can put our problems into a few specific sections:

1. We use volunteers to collect, retain, submit and review genealogical data. We rely heavily on volunteer Family Group Leaders. Very few of our volunteers are trained genealogists and the information submitted frequently lacks

sources and/or evidence. Their skills in performing computer data entry and working with databases are limited.

2. We have seen many Group Leaders "fade" from the picture and their participation has been very little compared to some of our more active Group Leaders. It is my opinion, and that of some Group Leaders, that this lack of participation and dedication by some of our Group Leaders has perhaps been one of the biggest reasons we cannot successfully resolve some of these problems associated with the JFMF.

3. Some Group Leaders have an attitude of "Give me everything you (PRA) have but I'm going to be very selective when it comes to sharing anything with the PRA or other researchers". This is not, in my opinion, a willingness to share. To share successfully, it has to work fairly for all parties. When there is a specifically expressed commitment to share when a Group Leader accepts the job, they must honor that commitment.

4. We have set a high standard in our mission statement of "We strive to be the most comprehensive source of accurate genealogical information, material and events concerning the Pennington Family." While this is not impossible to achieve, we've found that to date it has been very difficult for us to achieve or even come close.

5. At the direction of previous PRA Boards, we have kept the genealogical information in the JFMF from being widely disseminated to the general public. Yet at the same time the Boards wanted to share the JFMF as much as possible with our members. This debate of keeping the JFMF to "ourselves" vs. making it open to the public has gone back and forth with no one argument being overwhelming accepted by the Research Committee and by the Board.

What are Some Solutions and/or Options?

1. We can continue with the current process and procedures and work to make them better. Exactly how we can make it better is not clear to me at this time. Without more effort by our Group Leaders and support to do the data entry of new information as it is approved to be added to the JFMF, I don't know how this solution will be successful.

2. We can raise funds and hire some college students to do the data entry for the PRA on all of the pending information as well as any future data entry that will have to be completed in order to keep the JFMF current.

3. We can stop trying to update the JFMF by changing the existing data. Rather we can add any new gedcom files directly into the JFMF and try to "clean up" duplicate entries as they are identified.
4. We can make the JFMF available to the public by posting it on our website (I'm not sure what this would accomplish but it has been suggested).
5. We can make the JFMF available to our members only by posting it on our website but in a restricted member's only section. Then add any new information by using the process identified in #3.
6. We can make the JFMF available to our members only by posting it on a website that is restricted to members only but Group Leaders are able to modify (edit, add, delete) the information and to upload and to download gedcom files whenever they wish. These new files will then be accessible by the other Group Leaders and our members who can also post information and have discussions, etc. This has been tested on the website called MyFamily.com and it does work.

Carmen's preference is to leave the JFMF as it exists today and to use it strictly as a research file. Any new information (family reports, gedcom files) will be held and sent directly to the Group Leaders for their action. We would then set time limits on when they have to review the new information and then to return it to her for addition to the JFMF.

It is not clear to me what this would solve, nor how it will work any better than the process we currently have in place but I wanted to be sure and include her suggestions so you can read her suggestion.

I believe the future of the Pennington Research Association is very bright. We know there will continue to be challenges to face and obstacles to overcome, but with hard work and dedication, we can overcome these challenges and obstacles.

I continue to believe strongly that we must continue to explore new ways of making our information available in printed and electronic media and on the Internet.

This will pose a number of significant challenges.

- Security of the data
- The ability to make it available to members only

- The cost to provide this service
- How to make it available for updating by Family Group Leaders

All of these challenges and others yet to be identified must be carefully examined.

The purpose of an association such as the Pennington Research Association is to foster the exchange of genealogical information and to embrace others in our extended family.

As an added comment to help give you a broader perspective, I've copied a section which discusses online genealogy information. It came from Dick Eastman's Newsletter. This is posted at the end of this document.

I have added comments and suggestions made by the Group Leaders at the end of this document. I think you will find these insightful and of value. I have edited them as needed.

Accuracy of Online Genealogy Information

The following article is from Eastman's Online Genealogy Newsletter and is copyright 2003 by Richard W. Eastman. It is re-published here with the permission of the author. Information about the newsletter is available at http://www.RootsForum.com.

This week a newsletter reader asked if I might comment on a series of messages posted to a mailing list server that attacked Ancestry.com. I read through the mish-mash of statements and found a number of comments painting Ancestry.com in a negative light. The various messages all claimed that you couldn't trust the information found on the company's Web site, and that you still had to verify the information elsewhere. The general theme was that this particular online site was not a good place to find genealogy information.

My favorite line was, "Searching the records at NARA is more reliable and still necessary."

Duh! Where have these people been? Of course you still have to verify information elsewhere. You always do that with every piece of genealogy information you find, whether it is from an online site or from a published book or other printed genealogy publication. That is a basic in Genealogy 101: "Always check your sources."

Anyone who thinks that this is an issue only with Ancestry.com or only with another online genealogy database is misguided. The same issue applies to Ancestry.com, RootsWeb.com, Genealogy.com, FamilySearch.org, GenCircles.com, OneGreatFamily.com, books you find at the library, messages receive in e-mail, and even this weekly newsletter. It is true of all secondary sources and even occasionally of primary sources. Whatever you read, check it out!

I consider Ancestry.com to be valuable. I consider the other online resources I mentioned to be valuable. I also consider genealogy books to be valuable. I also solicit e-mail assistance from other genealogists. But I never, ever believe anything I read until I can verify the claims.

I also hear people moaning and groaning about the quality of genealogy information to be found online. There are claims that much of the online genealogy data is worthless. These comments seem to insinuate that people shouldn't place information online until they have verified it.

You know what? I don't care. I want to see the claimed information anyway. Yes, I even want to read the inaccurate information. When I am looking for the unknown parents of one of my "end of the line" ancestors, I want to see every possible clue, accurate or not. If someone else thinks he or she knows the parents of Washington Harvey Eastman, I want to know what that person is thinking. No, I don't care if their information is accurate or not because I am going to check it out anyway. If possible, I'll contact the person who created the information and ask, "Where did you find that?" I'll find out later if the information is accurate or not when I verify it in primary records. All I want is ideas and hints of possibilities.

In fact, this is all you ever find online or in print: ideas and hints of possibilities. Remember that nothing is ever a "fact" until you personally prove it.

I will also point out that genealogy information found online today is no different from information published in books before the invention of the Web. Walk into any major genealogy library and grab a bunch of books written 50, 75 or 100 years ago. You will find some books that were carefully researched, while others were not. I can show you some old genealogy books that are true fairy tales. In short, the same is true of the data you find today on the World Wide Web. The only things different about the Web are speed and convenience: it is easier and faster to publish accurate and inaccurate information alike. However, the percentage of inaccurate information doesn't seem to have changed much in the past 100 years.

In summary, the e-mail messages attacking one particular online database missed the point. This is not an issue with Ancestry.com, nor is it an issue with RootsWeb.com, Genealogy.com, FamilySearch.org, GenCircles.com, OneGreatFamily.com, or the information found on some distant cousin's personal home page. It is an issue dealing with conducting genealogy searches.

Quoting from Ancestry.com's own site at http://www.gale.ancestry.com/learn/learning/gedcoms.htm: "You verify and corroborate every single detail. Never assume that someone else did all the research and did it correctly. Even if their research is documented with sources and citations, recheck every detail before you accept it as fact."

To discuss this story further, please visit the newsletter message board at http://www.RootsForum.com and click on "Message Board."

Group Leader Comments & Suggestions

I have prepared a summary of the comments and suggestions sent in by the Group Leaders. If you would like to read them, please let me know and I'll send them to you.