

## Yes, Online Memorials and Family Trees Can Provide Direct Evidence

By Jan Joyce, DBA, CG, CGL, AG

Direct evidence in memorials and trees and genealogies, oh my!

Picture Dorothy, cowering with the Tinman and the Scarecrow as they walk through the forest in the *Wizard of Oz*, frightened that lions and tigers and bears (oh my!) might attack.<sup>1</sup> That image mirrors the response of some genealogists when they question whether an online memorial at *FindaGrave* or an online tree at *Ancestry* can contain direct evidence (oh my!). What is the truth about these types of sources and the information they contain?

### Definitions

Sources contain information. Sources can be original, derivative, or authored. Original sources report an action, observation, utterance, or other event, often created at the time of the event or soon after. Derivative sources are created from prior records by transcribing, abstracting, translating, or reproducing them. Authored works derive from a variety of sources and include the writer's thoughts.<sup>2</sup> Genealogies, online family trees, and *FindaGrave* memorials are types of authored sources.

### Evidence Only Exists in the Presence of a Research Question

Information items within sources are not evidence unless they help answer a research question. For example, one cannot look at a death certificate and state "this is evidence" unless there is a research question such as "When did John Doe die?" Within the context of that research question the 15 July 1905 death date on the death certificate is direct evidence.

### Inferred Source Quality Has No Bearing on Whether Information Is Direct Evidence

Direct evidence can be present in any source. A source is a source. Source quality and information accuracy are irrele-

vant to whether an information item provides an answer to the research question.

Generally, original records are considered more likely to be reliable than derivative or authored sources. Records created for official purposes and those with legal or financial implications tend to be higher quality. Genealogists often consider more worrisome the authored sources, such as online family trees, online memorials, and genealogies. However, their information can be direct evidence. If the research question is "When did John Doe die?" and a *FindaGrave* memorial provides a death date, that information provides an answer to the research question. Further work will ascertain the reliability and accuracy of this direct evidence.

### Direct Evidence Need Not Be from a "Record"

Sources can be original, derivative, or authored. Some persons hold the misconception that direct evidence must be from an original or derivative record such as a census, a passenger list, or a marriage certificate. Authored narratives are also sources and evidence can be garnered from them just like from records.

### User-Contributed Material Is Categorized as a Source

User-contributed sources like online trees and memorials scream "caution" (oh my!) to genealogists. We know errors might be present, which then are likely copied by others to magnify the situation. However, these online tree and memorial sources usually fall into the authored narrative source category.

Consider the similarities between online trees or memorials to family letters, captioned photographs, diaries, and embroidered family tree samplers. All of these are sources. They include infor-

mation from one or more family members based on their knowledge or experience. They can provide information items that are direct evidence.

### Direct Evidence Does Not Equal Accuracy

Direct evidence does not mean an information item is accurate. If a relevant information item provides an answer to the research question, then by definition it is direct evidence regardless of the information item's accuracy or the source's reliability. Information items can be accurate, somewhat accurate, or inaccurate regardless of the type of source or the source's quality. The takeaway is that any direct evidence still requires analysis, correlation, and evaluation as it is assessed in connection with all other evidence.

Online memorials, genealogies, and family trees are sources. These sources hold information items. These information items help direct research but can also constitute evidence in their own right. They are evidence in context with a research question. The evidence might be more or less reliable depending on the source. It might be accurate or inaccurate. That does not matter. It is evidence.

### Endnotes

1. "Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh My! —'The Wizard of Oz' (1939)", video clip, uploaded 27 October 2016 to "Best Moves By Farr," *YouTube* ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrfbV16-EQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrfbV16-EQ)).
2. For complete definitions, see Board for Certification of Genealogy, *Genealogy Standards*, 2nd rev. ed. (Nashville: Ancestry.com, 2021), Appendix D—Glossary.