



## Historic census records are a valuable research tool

John Willard | Posted: Saturday, March 20, 2010 9:45 pm

The 160-year-old handwritten list of names on a microfilmed document at the Davenport Public Library reveals a sobering fact about the Smith family.

The document notes that John B. Smith, of Davis County, Iowa, and three of his children all had died of “flux,” a form of dysentery, within a two-month period.

The deaths are recorded on a mortality schedule from the 1850 census. The census taker wrote down the facts about the Smith family and other residents of his assigned district as he went door to door, helping to create a picture of who Iowa’s residents were and where they lived 160 years ago.

That information can be useful. Knowing the fate of Smith and his three children, for example, could prove invaluable to a researcher trying to uncover the family’s history.

“The census is important because it puts people in a specific place at a specific time,” said Amy Groskopf, associate director of resource services at the Davenport Public Library.

Kathleen Seusy, an author and volunteer at the Rock Island County Historical Society, used census records in researching the life of Gottlieb German, who, in 1899, founded Bethany Home, Rock Island, which evolved into Bethany for Children & Families. She found a 1901 reference that German, a harness maker at the Rock Island Arsenal, had appealed for better coordination between relief agencies but his trail ended there.

She wondered what happened to him and whether he ever adopted the baby boy he found abandoned in his barn. It was the incident that prompted him to establish a kindergarten where single mothers could take their children while they worked.

By checking the 1900 and 1910 censuses, she found additional information about German and his wife, Annie. She learned that both were immigrants who could speak, read and write English and that they were living in Cook County, Ill., at the time of the 1910 census. She also learned that the couple had three natural children and three adopted children. Based on the age of one of the adopted children, he likely was the baby boy that German found in his barn.

“I find censuses a remarkable source of information, sometimes revealing the one clue needed to open up a whole new avenue of research and exploration,” Seusy said. “They may provide the names of unknown family members, or, by listing a servant or servants, give an idea of social or financial status or list an occupation. With easy access through Web sites such as [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com), available through local libraries, researching the census is quick and easy and often rewarding and exciting.”

The Davenport Public Library has census records dating to 1850, the year census takers began gathering “social statistics” as well as listing the names of all free persons, not just the names of heads of households.

The library’s census material includes statistical summaries published in bound volumes and containing a variety of statistics that give a detailed look at what the nation was like at a given point in time.

Other useful census tools are population schedules handwritten by census takers and on microfilm. Also on microfilm are agricultural schedules that provide detailed information on farms such as the land owner, cash value of land, value of equipment, crops produced and animals owned.

Census data often is the only source of information on people who might not have merited a death notice or obituary in a newspaper, Groskopf said. Census information also predates many other sources of information such as county birth and death records, she said.

She notes that census information is kept confidential by the U.S. Census Bureau for 72 years, all the more reason why people should return their completed census forms to help future generations without worrying about privacy issues.

“Your descendants will thank you if you fill out your forms,” she said.