

EXPOSING OUR FAMILIES ON THE INTERNET

By Myra Vanderpool Gormley, CG, ©1998, 2011

Have you invaded the privacy of your living relatives by passing along genealogical data about them to someone else without their expressed written permission? You may have — if you have shared your genealogical databases or research notes with a third party. While the dead do not have a right to privacy, the living certainly do.

Is private personal information about you, your children and living relatives posted on a web page where any kook can find it? It may be if you have shared your genealogical data via GEDCOM, pedigree charts or family group sheets with others. Use any search engine and look for your names.

What you find may surprise you. One genealogist found her entire working database posted — errors and all — on another's website. The material had been passed along via a cousin of a cousin, without her knowledge or consent.

Genealogists are sharing, caring people, and most of us think nothing of handing over all of our genealogical data to distant cousins, even strangers. However, we should start thinking about the ramifications of our actions.

The idea of sharing genealogical information is good, and technology has made it easy. However, technology is not an exclusive tool for honest people. If detailed personal private information about you and your living relatives is on the internet some scam artist might use it to hoodwink your grandmother into giving out the secrets that will open her bank account. It has happened.

Remember your living relatives have the same rights to privacy that you do, and among these rights are: The right to be free of unreasonable and highly offensive intrusions into one's seclusion, including the right to be free of highly objectionable disclosure of private information in which the public has no legitimate interest. Publishing private genealogical information about a living person without their consent —putting it on a GEDCOM, chart, or the web— may involve any or all three aspects of their right to privacy. They may be able to seek legal relief through a civil lawsuit.

What can you do? If you find someone has posted private personal information about you or living relatives on the internet, without your permission, ask them to take it down. Be as forceful as is necessary. If you are a webmaster, do not put others' genealogical data on your site without their written permission, and never include information about living persons.

Exclude information about living persons from your GEDCOMS and charts before sharing them with anyone — to protect their privacy. Most genealogy software will allow you to exclude all persons born after a particular date, which you can pick such as 1930, 1920, 1910 or 1900, for example.

Educate yourself about privacy issues on the internet. Share your genealogical data on ancestors. However, do not intrude on the privacy of your living relatives, and do not allow them to violate your privacy. Privacy, identity theft and copyright issues are different matters, but today's genealogist needs to be informed about all three.

Copyright and Genealogy

<http://freepages.computers.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~pasher/copyrtfaq.htm>

Identity Theft and Identity Fraud

<http://www.justice.gov/criminal/fraud/websites/idtheft.html>

Identity Theft Hysteria Overblown, Watch your Debit Card Instead

<http://consumerist.com/2009/07/identity-theft-hysteria-overblown-watch-your-debit-card-instead.html>