

Marriage Records *by Carol Coley Taylor*

Recently I was helping a lady find her female ancestor's maiden name. As most of you know, marriages can be the most difficult problem in genealogy. I am not only talking about the spouse who doesn't understand why you are so wrapped up in all those dead people, but also the task of trying to find the maiden name of a woman.

Marriage records are the oldest vital records known to man. They were originally used to prove the legitimacy of an heir as an illegitimate one was not able to inherit royal property. But since our ancestors had no idea someone two hundred years later would be looking for that particular document, they hid marriages in funny places. In the Middle Ages, marriages were within the realm of the Church. Later, both civil and religious records were required for commoners as well as royalty. Today, only civil records are required, even though the marriage may have occurred within a church by the clergy.

That really sounds fairly simple until we get to a church that was burned, destroyed by war or abandoned when all the parishioners became too old or moved away. Burned churches are like burned courthouses. All were not the act of arsonists. Many time wood stoves were the culprit as were storms, floods and other natural calamities. Wars are a genealogists' worst nightmare, although General Sherman did not burn all the courthouses and churches that have been destroyed by fire in the southern United States.

Abandoned churches are more of a twentieth century phenomenon. As cities spread to the suburbs, inner city churches died out. What happened to the records? What happened when a new facility was built? Where are your church's old records stored?

Could they be published and are you willing to do the transcription? Just an idea you might want to consider.

Another reason marriage records are hard to find has to do with the way many rural churches operated in the 19th century. One minister would serve more than one church. Where did he leave his records? You looked and looked all over one area here in the county and couldn't find a record. Let's say, the minister also served the church at Black Jack Grove. Never heard of it? Today, it is named Cumby and you might find the records over in Hopkins County. This is especially important if your ancestors lived near the county or state line. Try looking in the next county of the county across the state line.

Another problem concerns ownership of minister's records. Do they belong to the local church, the minister or the regional conference or district of the church? Start by asking the local minister what that denomination's rule is.

Once the minister's records are found, they can be very interesting. They are worth all the trouble to find them.