

Community Outreach

1940 Newspaper Article

Historic Census to Shed New Light on the Greatest Generation

What do General George Patton, John F. Kennedy, Dan Rather, Betty White, and Jesse Owens have in common?

They can all be found in the 1940 U.S. Census, newly released by the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. The challenge, of course, will be finding them in the hundreds of thousands of digital images of the census pages online until a searchable name index can be created. Unless you know the state, county, and street address where they were residing in 1940, locating them without a name index will be daunting. Fortunately, that challenge is being resolved by thousands of good-hearted volunteers online at the1940census.org. If you are looking for a meaningful project for your next act of community service, [The 1940 US Census Community Project](http://The1940USCensusCommunityProject.org) is a great one.

Supported by genealogy giants archives.com, FamilySearch.org, and findmypast.com, and local and national genealogy and historical societies, the project is trying to rally tens of thousands of individuals to join an online community of volunteers to create a free, high quality, searchable index online of every single name found in the 1940 census. Volunteers use an Internet application found at the1940census.org to look at digital images of 1940 Census pages and type in the names and information highlighted on the screen. About 30 to 40 minutes is all that's required to do one census page. The data extracted by volunteers is saved online immediately and ultimately made available as a free, every name, searchable index at FamilySearch.org. With enough volunteers, the project aims to complete the index before the end of the year.

Researchers and family historians will have a heyday with the census once the index is completed by volunteers and made freely available online. Volunteers have previously indexed the 1790 to 1930 U.S. Censuses. Those free indexes can already be searched online at FamilySearch.org. "The 1940 U.S. Census is significant because practically everyone knows a family member—parent, grandparent, aunt, or uncle—who was alive in 1940," said David Rencher, Chief Genealogy Officer for FamilySearch, a nonprofit organization sponsoring the online community project to index the 1940 Census.

"Once you've found a relative in the 1940 Census, it can be fairly easy with that information to then find them or their parents in the 1930 U.S. Census index already online at FamilySearch.org, then the 1920, 1910, 1900, etc., all the way back to the 1790 U.S. Census. Before you know it, without ever leaving your computer, you've

traced your family back multiple generations over 100, or maybe even 200, years,” Rencher added.

Can you imagine the gregarious Betty White as an 18-year-old? Wonder what she was like or doing at that time! Or how about Olympic gold medalist Jesse Owens (birth name James Cleveland Owens)? He would have been 27 years old in 1940. Then there’s stoic General George Patton, who would have been 55. He would pass away 5 years later in 1945 at the age of 60. Dan Rather, popular news anchor today, was just 9 years old, and his family might not have even owned a TV in 1940.

Think about it. The 1940 Census provides a snapshot of 135 million people living in the United States at the time. It is nestled in between the Great Depression and World War II in our country’s history. Hidden in the census’s pages, until now, are the people that have been so fondly and appropriately coined as “The Greatest Generation ever known.”

As a nation, these individuals survived the Great Depression, would soon fight in the Second World War, innovated technology (TV, Microwave), practiced thrift and compassion, and understood hard work and industry. They inspired Tom Brokaw, popular national TV newscaster, to later author a book about them, *The Greatest Generation*. Ironically, Tom Brokaw was an infant himself when the census was taken, born February 6, 1940, in Webster, South Dakota.

Many are all familiar with the 2010 Census just completed, but it will be of little use to family historians until 2082, when the 72 years privacy right expires. The 1940 U.S. Census, however, is now available, and family researchers can’t wait to unlock its long held mysteries. In addition to name, age, gender, race, education, and place of birth, 1940 census takers also asked individuals for their place of residence 5 years earlier, their level of education, occupation, and income.

Coupled with the earlier census indexes (1790 to 1930) now available online for free at FamilySearch.org, it will be easier than ever for family historians to extend their genealogical trees beyond their living memories. The 1940 U.S. Census index online will most likely become the most searched online database for the next decade, and a boon to growing consumer interest in genealogy.

The Greatest Generation would be proud of [The 1940 US Census Community Project](#).

To participate, please attend a training session at the West Iron District Library on Thursday, March 15, at 1:00 p.m., or go to the1940census.com/society and register to participate with the project team in your area, Iron County (MI) Genealogical Society. Simply select Iron County (MI) Genealogical Society on the profile screen when creating your account. You’ll be on your way to contributing in an impactful way to this national service project.