

## Highly Relative Literature: Four Notable North Carolina Genealogy Journals

by Thomas Kevin B. Cherry

In a 1990 issue of the *Rowan County Register*, editor and nationally known professional genealogist, Jo White Linn, encouraged potential writers for her journal to have their pieces read by another genealogist and "a retired college Freshman English teacher" before mailing them for her perusal.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, not every genealogist has access to a former red-ink splasher from academe.

Most genealogical journals are produced by volunteers working for local societies from articles submitted by individuals to whom the rules of grammar, punctuation, and documentation of source are considered a little less than mere suggestions. As a result, the quality of genealogical periodicals varies widely, leaving those librarians who must judge what will grace the shelves of their genealogical collections with a small puzzle. It is hoped that a general checklist of attributes will help in evaluation.

### Rule #1. Geography rules this evaluation process.

– **Locality.** All of us know that no matter how awful the hometown publication might be, it is essential for the local library's holdings. It follows that, if a neighboring county's publication routinely misspells the word "genealogy" and contains frequent family lineages charting ancestors back to characters prominently discussed in Genesis, it is still more valuable to a local collection than an award-winning journal from the other end of the state.

### Rule #2. If it lacks an index, it will gather dust.

– **Indexing.** Scanning lists of names is the family historian's hobby and physical exercise. Proper name (first and last name) indexes, of course, are what is hoped for, but surname only indexes seem to predominate. In addition, a small amount of subject indexing would prove helpful. For example, if a journal lists a school roll from the 1830s, it would be appropriate to place the name of the school in the index, as well as the names of the individual students. A publication that does not index its pieces on a regular basis, and lacks interest in ever creating some sort of compiled index, just transfers inaccessible information from one source into another hiding place.

### Rule #3. Only Heckman's likes filler.

– **Content.** The more creative the journal is in finding sources (a listing of customers in an early coffin maker's register, for example) or the more dogged in pursuing the indexing of those standard hulking government records, the better. This isn't to say that other types of material such as local histories and humorous snippets from old newspapers aren't valuable to readers of genealogical journals; it's just that most folks who pick up these sorts of journals hope to find the type of information churned up by the "creative" and "dogged." In a related matter, individual family histories, abstracts of court records, cemetery listings, genealogi-

cal society news, book reviews, family Bible records, and the like sometimes must compete with a "goodly portion" of items that smell a whole lot like filler. Some filler is inevitable, but a publication should never allow white space and filler to predominate. Still, white space is preferable to hand-drawn word games that use the surnames of founding fathers as clues.

### Rule #4. Avoid publications that appear to be giant "seek 'n' finds" overlaid by some sort of treasure map.

– **Page design and layout.** A publication might publish a family Bible record that traces the Cherry family of Lincoln County back to Charlemagne's great-aunt, but if this information is scattered throughout one issue without any visual method of tying it all together and separating it from neighboring pieces, a reader would have a difficult time in discovering the royal blood lurking about the edge of the Catawba River. Dividers created from lines of keyboard symbols can never take the place of titles, explanatory subheadings, and "continued from" statements.

### Rule #5. Footnotes are your friend.

– **Source documentation.** If, indeed, a periodical publishes a family Bible record that traces the Cherry family of Lincoln County back to Charlemagne's great-aunt, it certainly would be nice to know where the original resides. Published abstracts should routinely note the "edition" of the microfilm from which the information was taken, the location of the original (if known), and any special editing procedures that may have taken place during the compilation. Did the citizens appearing in the 1810 township census happen to build their homes in alphabetical order or did the compiler regroup them? Was the cemetery listing from the First Dunking Church drawn from the grave markers themselves, or some waterlogged written record? The validity of a documented and explained source is easier to judge.

#### Rule #6. It's good to be regular.

##### – Maintenance of publishing schedule.

As has been noted, genealogical publications are often created by volunteers, and we all know how difficult it is to get writers to meet deadlines, even when they aren't volunteering. Still, what begins life as a monthly soon becomes quarterly and often mutates into a thrice yearly affair with issues one and two bound together. Even when the issues are mailed regularly, the infinite possibilities for numbering lend these periodicals' volume and issue designations a chimerical quality that can drive a librarian to drifting glassy-eyed about the stacks. In a genre so plagued, any periodical with a publication schedule that is maintained, and a numbering system that is consistent, is to be praised.

There are good local genealogical journals out there. North Carolina is fortunate to have a disproportionate share of these worthy journals.<sup>2</sup> Many local societies have turned what essentially were glorified newsletters into substantive periodicals, containing relevant, previously inaccessible information that is now proving to be not only useful for those involved in family research, but also for those interested in a broader picture of the past. For example, an increasing number of social historians are beginning to consult the works of local family researchers.

Despite these helpful hints, those of us involved in genealogy collections will still add to our shelves those publications that cover our geographic area of interest or those that come to us free or through the good offices of that inspired collection development tool, the exchange program. But that doesn't mean that we each can't make suggestions to our local creators of these serials: **index, eliminate filler, pay attention to page layout, document sources, and stay regular.**

#### References

<sup>1</sup>Jo White Linn, "Editor's Page," *Rowan County Register* 5 (Feb. 1990): 968.

<sup>2</sup>The four journals featured in this review were chosen for their geographic distribution (northern coastal plain, southern coastal plain, piedmont, and mountain) as well as for being good examples of this article's evaluation criteria.

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#### Northern Coastal Plain

*Pamteco Tracings*. Publisher: Beaufort County Genealogical Society, P. O. Box 1089, Washington, NC 27889-1089. Semiannual. \$15/yr.

With both old and present-day Beaufort County as its geographic range, *Pamteco Tracings* carries a proper name index in each issue, but includes no subject indexing. No filler, contains standard information. Design varies from article to article, but in such a way as to still present the information in a clean and precise manner. Documentation of source varies from article to article as well, with some pieces including a thorough discussion of the sources and others containing only the bare minimum. It maintains a regular publishing schedule.

#### Southern Coastal Plain

*Clarendon Courier*. Publisher: Old New Hanover Genealogical Society, P. O. Box 2536, Wilmington, NC 28402-2536. Quarterly. \$15/yr.

With southeastern North Carolina under its purview, the *Clarendon Courier* is indexed yearly with a four-year compiled index for the years 1989-1992. Scattered among the court records, voter registers, and lists of armed service veterans are some local history articles. The page layout is pleasing to the eye and maintains an order to the information presented. Source documentation is adequate although location of originals, filming information, etc. could be more complete. It appears regularly.

#### Piedmont

*Rowan County Register*. Publisher: Jo White Linn, P.O. Box 1948, Salisbury, NC 28145-1948 [ISSN 0885-8454]. Quarterly. \$25/yr.

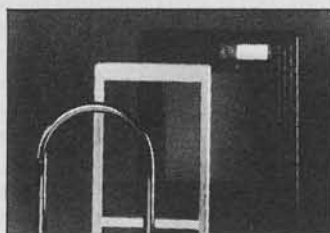
Covering both old and present-day Rowan County, this publication's annual index is by proper name and contains some subject indexing. No filler, creative sources of information abound. Excellent page design, breaks in articles are clear, and "continued" statements are readily evident, although long lists of names or abstracts are frequently divided within an issue to make best use of space. Each article contains an introduction that cites sources, makes note of editorial activities, and often goes on to explain the intricacies of how this information might be used to further a reader's research even if his or her ancestor's name might not make the issue. It appears like clockwork.

#### Mountain

*The Burke Journal*. Publisher: Burke County Genealogical Society, P. O. Box 661, Morganton, NC 28655. Quarterly. \$10/yr.

With the Burke County area as its "jurisdiction," each issue of this journal contains a surname index. Burke County's journal includes a good bit of the "dogged" variety of information, regularly featuring abstracts of land records and court records. The information within each article is usefully arranged, but the visual separation between pieces could be better. Each article carries basic source documentation. It is mailed on time.

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