THE 1950 CENSUS: Searching with and without a Name Index
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Opening Day

The census day was April 1, 1950. The census is sealed for 72 years for privacy reasons. So the census will be opened on April 1, 2022.

Starting with the 1940 census, the master census microfilm was not copied and distributed to various archives and libraries. Instead the 1940 census was scanned and placed online for free. The same will be true for the 1950 census. But a complete name index will not exist until on opening day. That means that the only way to access the census initially will be by location. When name indexes exist, there will still many reasons for doing locational searches.

The census is organized by Enumeration Districts (EDs), so to access the census by location, you need to convert the location to an Enumeration District.

Enumeration Districts

An Enumeration District is an area that can be canvassed by a single census taker (enumerator) in a census period. Since 1880, all information in the census microfilms is arranged by Enumeration District. If you do not know the Enumeration District, you cannot access the census by location!

Each Enumeration District within a state has a unique number. Since 1930, the number is of the form XX-YY where XX is a prefix number assigned to each county (usually alphabetical) and YY is a district number within the county. Starting in 1940 some of the larger cities have their own prefix number. Such city prefix numbers come after the last county prefix. In 1940 the larger cities were those with 100,000 people or more whereas in 1950 is was 50,000.

As an example, in 1930 the prefixes in California in 1930 went from 1 (Alameda County) to 58 (Yuba County). Los Angeles County was somewhere in the middle with prefix number 19. Long Beach City is in Los Angeles County, so in 1930 it too had prefix 19. But in 1940 it was given its own prefix, namely 59. And in 1950 it was given prefix 65.

Finding your Family's Location in 1950

Before you can use the location tools to determine the Enumeration District, you need to know your family's location. If you don't already have the address, there are several ways of finding it:

address books	naturalization records
birth/marriage/death certificates	photographs
city directories	relatives
diaries	school/church records
employment records	scrapbooks
letters	social security applications
local newspapers/books	WW II draft registrations

Determining the Enumeration District

The One-Step website has several tools for determining the Enumeration District. In past years there was one tool for large cities and another for rural areas. Starting in 1940 those two tools were combined into a single unified tool that can be used in both cases. So the user no longer had to make the decision as to which tool to use. This unified tool was then retrofitted to cover all years back to 1880 (before 1880 there were no enumeration districts). If the city you enter in the Unified tool is one of those supported large cities, will obtain EDs based on streets and cross streets that you select. If you enter a non-supported city, the Unified tool will obtain EDs by searching for keywords in the ED definitions.

Other 1950 census tools on the One-Step site are: ED Definition Tool for definitions on microfilm, ED Definition Tool for transcribed definitions, Street-List Tool, ED Maps Tool, Census Tracts Tool, and Street Name-Change Tool. When the census is open, there will be a Census Image Tool and a Search-by-Name Tool.

Information on the Census

What can you expect to find in the census? For the most part, it will be the same sorts of things that you are probably familiar with from previous census years. That includes things like street and house number, house owned or rented, house value or monthly rent, name of each person in household, relation of each person to the head of household, sex, color or race, age, marital status, place of birth, citizenship, current occupation, and industry.

In addition, there are several new questions for 1950 and several that were dropped. An example of one that was dropped is the name of informant (so you can see if the information was provided by someone knowledgeable or not). This was asked in 1940 for the first time. Others dropped are whether the residence was owned or rented, what was the native tongue spoken, and whether or not the person had a social security

number. Some of the new questions were whether the house had three or more acres, and the number of years in current marriage

There were many more questions that were considered for the census but were rejected. Examples of some of the rejected questions are whether you owned a bible, whether you are over six feet tall, your hair color, whether you owned a burial plot, and how many dogs you had.

Sampling

Before the 1940 census there was no sampling. Every form had 50 lines, and every one of the 50 people was asked every question. In 1940 there were 40 lines per form, and the people on two of those lines (5%) were asked additional questions. In 1950 there were 30 lines per form, and the people on six of those lines (20%) were asked additional questions. Furthermore one of those six people was asked yet more questions. So in 1950, there was two levels of sampling.

Expect the Unexpected (the page numbering gap)

Prior to 1940, all pages were numbered sequentially starting with 1A, 1B, 2A, 2B, etc. If second set of visits was needed, because some people weren't at home when the census taker made his first visit, those visits started sequentially after the end of the first set of visits. There were no page gaps.

In 1940, the second set of visits started on page number 61A. And transients (residents of hotels, flop houses) were enumerated on pages starting at 81A.

Assume that the first set of visits ended on page number 40B. It will appear that the pages from 41A to 60B are missing. People unfamiliar with the new numbering scheme might erroneously assume that the family they are unable to find is on one of the missing pages.

In 1950 the second set of visits will start on page 71. Hotels and flop houses were enumerated on a special night (April 11 for hotels, April 13 for flop houses). These are both referred to as T-Night. It is not currently known where the T-night enumerations are located.

The Long Awaited Name Index

Although no name index will exist on opening day (because the genealogical websites will not have an advance peek at the census pages), work will begin on the index as soon as the census is opened. For the 1940 census, the index was completed within five months, although the initial quality of the transcription was poor because of the rush to market. It is anticipated that the 1950 name index will be completed in the same period of time.

So the question comes about as to whether the location tools presented here will be made obsolete by the name index. The answer is NO. And that's because not everyone can be found from a name search. Let's think about it. Your ancestor might have come from a foreign country and spoke with a heavy accent. Your ancestor didn't write his name directly into the census book but rather told his name to the census taker who in turn wrote the name. So the census taker would have to make his best guess as to what your ancestor said with his heavy accent. Seventy-two years later the genealogical websites are going transcribe the census and produce a name index. They do so by reading the names that the census taker wrote down. And of course the census takers were not known for having great handwriting. So the transcribers will need to make their best guess as to what the census taker wrote down, which was the census taker's best guess as to what your ancestor said. It's like the game of telephone, and the chances of getting it right get lower and lower.

However it's not as bleak as all that, and in 90% of the cases you will be successful by using the name index (although I hate to give numbers like that because you know that 87% of statistics are made up). But there will be those non-negligible number of cases in which a name index will fail you and you'll have to do a location search. For this reason, the One-Step location tools will never be obsolete.

Next question is whether the One-Step site will provide support for the name index. The answer is YES. It has supported name indexes for the census years up to 1940, and that will be extended to include 1950 as well. But since several websites (commercial and otherwise) will have the 1950 name index, they of course will provide a means of using that name index totally on their own site. However there are several advantages to using the name index through the One-Step site. Specifically the search form for One-Step name index will probably contain more search fields than will be present on the underlying site. Another advantage is that the One-Step search form will make it easy to switch between different census years. For example, suppose you just found your grandfather in the 1940 census and now would like to look for him in the 1930 census. His name hasn't changed. His year and place of birth hasn't changed. And there are probably several other attributes about him that haven't changed. Yet if you found him using the search form on the commercial site for 1940, you then have to navigate away from that form, got up a few levels, select 1930, come down a few levels, and then fill in the 1930 form from scratch. On the One-Step form, all you have to do is change the year (it's in a drop-down box) and never leave the search form. A final advantage of doing the name search on the One-Step site is that you will have both the location tools and the name-search tool on the same site.

Where is the One-Step Site?

It's at http://stevemorse.org. Note that's ".org" and not ".com". Someone else has the ".com" domain and claims to be the "Official Steve Morse Website." Don't be fooled – he is not the Official Steve Morse – I am of course. ;-)