

Working in the Past

John M. Hoenig describes the challenges of understanding how our ancestors made a living.

HOW OUR ANCESTORS made a living had a great influence on all aspects of their lives. It could determine their social class, their level of comfort, where they could live, the opportunities available to their children and so on. So learning about our ancestors' occupations and employment can be an exciting part of our research.

We may encounter puzzling, obsolete professions in old records. One of my relatives was a "bushelman" in a men's clothing store according to the 1925 census of New York. My dictionary reveals that a bushelman repaired or altered clothing. A number of my relatives were "operators" in businesses associated with clothing. An operator, one of the most common occupations in the censuses from the early part of the 20th century, was simply one who operated a machine, such as a sewing machine or clothes presser. But, the term was not restricted to the clothing industry — there were elevator and telephone and meat cutter and many other operators.

Sometimes, you may struggle to figure out spelling, especially when the penmanship is poor. Spelling may have changed over time, as when pedlar became peddler. The people creating documents may not have known proper spelling; for example, a marriage certificate filled out by a foreigner, specifying the bride was a "water" (waiter). It may help to look at a

list of old professions (one such list is at <http://www.cpcug.org/user/jlacombe/terms.html>). Another helpful trick for the 1930 census is to look at the occupation codes. These may seem uninteresting — the actual profession is listed so why look at a coded summary of

sources may provide more than just the occupation — you may find the name of the company, its address, a description of the company's services and product line, the position in the company occupied by your ancestor and more. Perhaps the most straightforward

method of learning about an ancestor's employment is to search for the ancestor in a city directory. You can then look in the business part of the city directory to find more about the place of employment.

I found the WWI draft registration card for Adolph Bertisch, which indicated he worked as a waiter for Luchow's Restaurant in Manhattan. Luchow's sounded familiar so I searched for it using Google. Sure enough, it had been a well known restaurant — there were several photos of the restaurant — inside and out — on the Internet, along with recipes from the restaurant, used copies of the

Luchow's cookbook for sale and a dining review published on the occasion of the restaurant's 75th anniversary.

Aliens in the United States had to register with the government at various times: during the colonial period, the War of 1812, WWI and WWII. Alien registrations from July 1940 through 1944 have been microfilmed and are available from the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration

THE CITY OF NEW YORK. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH.		STATE OF NEW YORK. CERTIFICATE AND RECORD OF MARRIAGE		No. of Certificate 1845
Groom's Residence <i>125 Pitt St</i>		Bride's Residence <i>47 Clinton</i>		
Age <i>24 Jahre</i>		Age <i>20 Jahre</i>		
Color <i>Weiß</i>		Color <i>Weiß</i>		
Single, Widowed or Divorced <i>Singel</i>		Single, Widowed or Divorced <i>Singel</i>		
Occupation <i>Water</i>		Maiden Name, If a Widow		
Birthplace <i>Austria</i>		Birthplace <i>Austria</i>		

Above, part of a 1907 marriage certificate from New York showing the groom was a "weitt singel water" (white, single waiter). Below, an advertisement from the Albany city directory of 1926 reveals details of Pincus Peller's business.

Electrical Department

168 ALBANY DIRECTORY, FOR YEAR ENDING JULY 1926

PELLER ELECTRIC SHOP

Telephone Main 7247 P. PELLER Residence, Main 4241-M

Electrical Contractor

FIXTURES—ELECTRIC APPLIANCES AND SUPPLIES

Let me quote prices from your plans and specifications

MOTORS

QUALITY—SERVICE—DURABILITY

64 HUDSON AVENUE ALBANY, N. Y.

the original? But when you have a hard time reading the profession it can be helpful to have a clue as to the nature of the occupation. Steve Morse has put a compilation of the occupation codes on his website (www.stevemorse.org/census/locodes.htm).

Finding Occupational Information

Fortunately, there are many sources of information. Some

<i>Peller, Saml</i>	<i>Head</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>Austria</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>cit</i>	<i>1²⁰ reg.</i>	<i>Rein cloth Bushelman</i>
<i>Peller, Fanny</i>	<i>wife</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>Austria</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>cit</i>	<i>X</i>		<i>Housework</i>

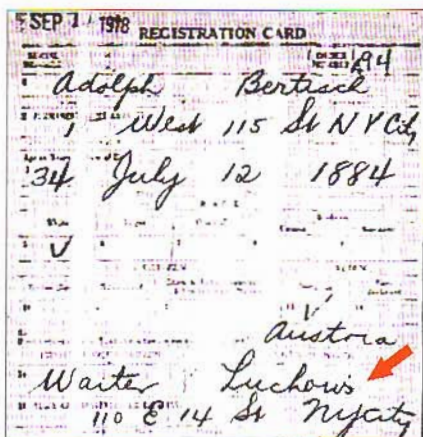
Part of the 1925 New York census showing Samuel Peller was a bushelman.

Services through the Freedom of Information Act (see <http://uscis.gov/graphics/aboutus/history/immrecs/areg.htm> for information on ordering records.) The AR2 forms have provisions for reporting the usual occupation, current occupation and name of employer, and thus are potentially of great interest.

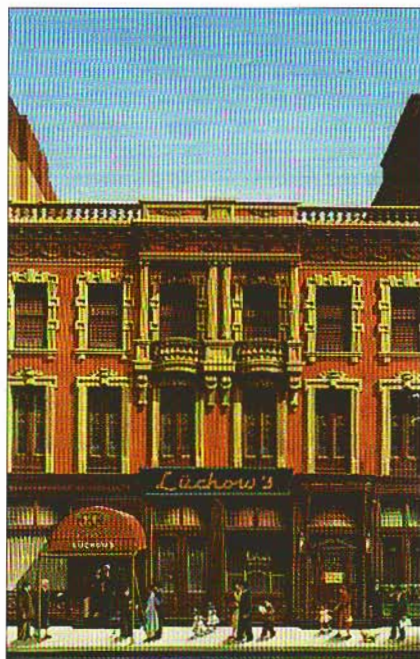
My grandfather Martin's employer was a mystery to me for a while. I had heard Martin was a traveling sales representative for a shoe company in Paterson, New Jersey, in the 1950s, and that he sold a line of multicolored sandals called "play shoes". When the librarian at the Paterson library checked two city directories about 10 years apart for me, he found a handful of shoe manufacturers in each directory — with no overlap in names. Apparently, the shoe business was quite volatile. Then one day I obtained my grandfather's probate file from the county courthouse. It was just luck that it mentioned on one page that my grandfather worked for the Windsor Shoe Company. My goal now is to see if I can find advertisements that show Windsor's play shoes.

The federal censuses of 1880 and 1900-1920 also provide information on unemployment. I noted with satisfaction that one cousin who arrived in 1910 two weeks before she was enumerated in the census was already working as a servant for a butcher, his wife and two children. That must have been a relief for her.

Many of the sources listed in the accompanying table apply to the Old World as well as America. We have used business directories, phone books, vital records, censuses and baptismal records from France, Belgium, Austria, Hungary and Poland to good advantage. Many of the sources are available through the Mormon Family History Centers. My wife is lucky to be able to trace her Saffre ancestors back to 1599 in a small town in what is now Belgium. The baptismal records indicate the family fortunes rose from humble begin-



Above, a WWI draft registration card for Adolph Bertisch reveals he worked for a renowned German restaurant called Luchow's, seen below. (Courtesy Tipsontables.com)



nings to a level of prominence in the 1800s and then declined to a modest state. Early in the 20th century, my wife's grandmother worked in the stone quarries in the ancestral town of Bascles, polishing marble slabs. From the town's website, my wife was able to find a picture of her grandmother with the other female stone polishers.

Tracking Businesses

In many places, city government registered businesses and licensed people, such as peddlers, in specific trades. Thus, the New York City Municipal Archives has licensing records for theater

matrons for the year 1940, as well as physician and surgeon affidavits from Brooklyn for the years 1908-24. The City also commissioned a study of push-cart owners in 1904. Other cities undoubtedly have similar sorts of records.

The County Clerk's Offices in New York City have business registrations going back as far as 1804. (Look also for records of marks and brands.) I've been tracking a man named Eisner because he was the witness for one relative's naturalization and he was listed as a brother-in-law on another potential relative's passenger arrival record in New York. Eisner founded the New York Gas Lighting Company in 1907. Surprisingly, the company stayed in business under the same name, and was run by Eisner's descendants, until a couple of years ago. (But, the company did switch its focus to electric lighting!) When I checked the business registrations I found the company had registered five times over the 90 years of its existence, reflecting changes in ownership and legal status.

Once you find an ancestor's business, you might like to learn something about the business — what services and products it provided, how successful it was and so forth. Advertisements in city directories and business directories are a good place to look. Newspaper ads might be helpful, too, but unless there is an index for the newspaper it may take brute force searching to locate material. Perhaps a better way is to look in your local archives (often at the public library). They may have material organized by name of business, type of business or by street name. Thus, you might find your relative's business in a postcard of Main Street, or in the background of a photo of the Memorial Day parade.

Disasters are newsworthy, so you may well find a picture of your relative's business in a flood or fire scene. At the beginning of the 20th century, labor and management often found themselves

in bitter disputes. Evidence of this turmoil survives in newspaper articles and ads. I searched the ProQuest online digital version of the *New York Times* (available at some libraries and to members of the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society) for Peller relatives and found that the Peller Cloak and Suit Company banded together with other clothing manufacturers to oppose a strike in 1894. A news article described their meeting to formulate strategy and this was followed by an advertisement staking out the manufacturers' position.

Exploring School Records

We can think of scholastic pursuits as an occupation. The information we can glean from school records can be startling. My cousin came from Poland to Strasbourg, France, to live with my mother's family and attend medical school. On a hunch, I wrote to the University of Strasbourg to request my cousin's records, which dated from the early 1930s. Three months later I received a thick envelope in the mail. It contained a certified copy of the information in his birth record, an official translation of that into French, a form indicating he had first applied to their dental program and was turned down but was later admitted into their medical program. (Presumably his knowledge of French was inadequate when he first applied.) It also contained a transcript with the names of all his professors and all his grades. The information was almost creepy in its detail. I learned the name of the midwife who delivered him, and the *mohel* who circumcised him. There was also a doleful letter from him to the

Chancellor of the University explaining that he lost all his records during the war and, unless the University could supply him with certain documents, he would not be able to practice medicine anymore. Handwritten



Above, a photo from the Basecles, Belgium, webpage shows stone polishers around the beginning of the 20th century. The arrow points to the author's wife's grandmother. Below, a photo from the same site shows stone cutters in 1910. The gentleman in the front center is a spitting image of the author's wife's grandfather. He may be her relative as it is known there were stone cutters in the family.



notations on the letter indicate the University sent him four sets of documents four days after the letter was received. I found myself being pleased they had responded so quickly and I realized my cousin must have been beside himself with anxiety waiting for that reply.

Intrigued by my experience, I decided to write to the university in Munich where my father studied engineering, the university in Zurich where he took some post-baccalaureate courses while he tried to figure out what to do about the impending war and to the university in Vienna where

another relative studied medicine. The results were highly variable, with Munich sending me the complete transcripts and Vienna wanting 58 Euros (about \$70 US) for "about 20 pages".

There are few rules about what school records are available. In New York State, for example, public school records are designated by law as permanent records — not to be discarded ever. The problem is, this provision is largely unknown. So many records have been discarded or at least misplaced. You may find the records but you may have to search long and hard.

Sources of Information About Occupation

- Passenger manifests
- Emigration lists (Hamburg)
- Censuses, federal (1850 forward) including manufacturing/industry and agriculture schedules (1820, 1850-80)
- State censuses
- Naturalization declarations and petitions
- City directories, trade directories
- Birth, marriage and death certificates
- Baptismal records
- Tax rolls

Sources of Information About Occupation and Employer

- Draft registration cards, WWI and WWII
- Social security application cards (form SS5)
- Alien registration forms, various time periods
- Obituaries and newspaper articles (ads, notices, news stories)
- Probate files, deeds
- Business registrations, licenses
- Trade associations, e.g., American Dental Association, American Medical Association,
- Chamber of commerce records
- Family photos, papers and mementos; family lore.