

# Obituaries

By Howard Maynard Faulkner

Obituaries are usually but not always written for newspapers by a relative or close friend. As such these are considered *secondary sources* which detail the life of someone who has recently died. Rarely an obituary may be written in the advance of death by the deceased, in which case it may be considered more precise and therefore a *primary resource*. An obituary should not be confused with a *death notice*. Today the death notice is simply a statement usually provided by a funeral home giving the name, date and location at the time of death of the deceased.

The earliest *obits*, as genealogists call them, began in the 1500's and were reserved for those of fame, great wealth or nobility. As printing became more widely available they became more generally used for the *common folk*. In addition to name, date and place of death usually a few more details were noted. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and continuing until quite recently *obits* were widely used, included copious information and frequently photographs of the deceased.

Today most newspapers charge an obituary fee which may be very expensive for many. Funeral homes now regularly provide an *online obituary* service either free or at low cost. There are now several private organizations that have obituaries online, some free while others charge a fee. See *Cindi's List* for a comprehensive listing of obituary sources for both recent deaths and historically. Go to: <http://www.cyndislist.com/obits.htm>

Secondary source obituaries frequently have errors of date, location and/or spelling. When the author was uncertain they would guess, ask another family member, go to the family bible or check an old diary. Each of these sources could easily provide false or incomplete information.

Other frequently overlooked sources for obituaries include; church notices/records, college/university newsletters, ethnic newspapers, newspapers where surviving children live or where the individual may have been born or lived for many years earlier in life, business or professional media, service and/or fraternal organization newsletters or communications. Major newspapers like the Boston Globe, New York Times, Washington Post, LA Times, Chicago Tribune, Atlanta Journal, etc. have obits for those of fame, treasure, or are otherwise notorious.

Contact a local library where death occurred, where the deceased last lived, where that person lived most of their life if in a different location, or where close relatives lived at the time of death to learn if newspapers are archived for that location and era.

Obituaries *may* provide a wealth of quality information; *possibly* give hints where to look for further information or *may* lead you up the wrong tree. *Use this information with caution.*

## Information genealogists gather about the deceased from *obits* includes but is not limited to:

|                           |                       |                            |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| Place of death            | Cause of death        | Age at death               |
| Place of birth            | Parents               | Spouse                     |
| Children & Grandchildren  | Other relatives       | Siblings                   |
| Occupation(s) of deceased | Religious affiliation | Survivors                  |
| Honors & Awards           | Place of Internment   | Attending Funeral Home     |
| Education                 | Military history      | Organizational Memberships |

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