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### **Growing Pains - USGenWeb & RootsWeb**

As has been discussed on this and many other blogs and message boards around the Internet, many of the state and county coordinators who host their USGenWeb sites at RootsWeb [have chosen to move on to new ISPs](#) over the past week or so. Quite a few say they've been disgruntled for a while, however, so what exactly is it that triggered the exodus this week and why the obvious mistrust of Ancestry.com and their parent company, The Generations Network (TGN)?

From everyone I've spoken to or corresponded with, there have obviously been issues and differences of opinion between USGenWeb coordinators and TGN for quite some time. The biggest long-term issue appears to be the [Acceptable Use Policy \(AUP\)](#), which governs use by The Generations Network and Ancestry.com of content submitted to RootsWeb.com. The fact that Ancestry.com took over control of the message boards and mailing lists upon its assimilation of RootsWeb made some people unhappy. There are also some unhappy with the older servers and lack of "toys" that are available through other ISPs. Still others have had issues with slow staff response. Everyone's story is a little bit different. The biggest overall response, however, is that the USGenWeb project's goal of providing free access to genealogy is no longer fully compatible with that of TGN. It's important to remember that USGenWeb aligned with RootsWeb before TGN ever came into the picture. The USGenWeb Project is basically all grown up and ready to leave the nest to stand on its own.

On the other side of the coin, MyFamily.com (former name of The Generations Network) acquired RootsWeb in 2000, which helped to keep it financially viable. And they've continued this support by footing the bill for the equipment and staff necessary to maintain RootsWeb as a source of free genealogy for the past eight years (and into the future). Many of the USGenWeb sites have no branding or advertising that even mark them as part of RootsWeb, much less The Generations Network. It is suggested that such an

acknowledgement is appreciated, but has never been required. So for those of you saying that TGN is in it for the money - sure, they are a for-profit business. But I'm pretty sure more goes out for RootsWeb than comes back in - and that's definitely the case for the USGenWeb sites. TGN is looking to gain a little more recognition and increased search engine placement in return for their continued support of RootsWeb as a free online genealogical community. Is that too much to ask?

### **Concerns & Reactions from Both Sides:**

*The data will no longer be free after the move to the Ancestry.com URL - either immediately or at some point in the future when TGN changes their policy once again.*

While some people have expressed concerns that the free genealogy data contributed to RootsWeb by many thousands of volunteers over the years will be used by Ancestry.com behind their subscription wall, Mike Ward at The Generations Network says that is not the case. "RootsWeb will continue to remain a free online experience. There are no plans to make changes to the way RootsWeb currently operates. We love RootsWeb. We love what it stands for. We love to help people put free family history information on the Web and we continue planning to support that."

*The RootsWeb [Acceptable Use Policy \(AUP\)](#) seems to imply that user-submitted content could end up on Ancestry.com where users will be charged to access it.*

TGN basically holds all the cards -- it's their Web site after all and I'm sure their lawyers want them to cover the bases. That makes many county coordinators nervous, as they are generally fierce about protecting the rights of the many users and volunteers who contribute free content for all to share. On the other hand, if you read the fine print, most sites that accept user submitted content, such as [You Tube](#), [Yahoo!](#), and Google Services (such as [Blogger.com](#)), have similar terms of agreement. Just as with the RootsWeb's AUP, the typical user agreement will guarantee that you retain the copyright to your work, but by submitting the work to their site you agree to grant them a non-exclusive license to use and distribute the work on their company Web sites. Whether its a compilation or creative content, you still "own" your submitted work - not TGN.

I agree that the RootsWeb AUP should be

probably be reworked to more accurately reflect the needs of the various projects and sites supported on RootsWeb.com. Right now it is too general, perhaps because it is covering everything from the USGenWeb sites, to individual [FreePages](#) sites, to the mailing lists and message boards. But the Acceptable User Policy is also lawyer-speak, and TGN continues to support their position that they are committed to supporting RootsWeb as a free genealogy resource. They did make a [big blunder](#) when they introduced the [Internet Biographical Collection](#) last year, but they also admitted their mistake and took steps to rectify things almost immediately. But genealogists have long memories...

TGN reiterated on the [RootsWeb blog](#) that "Your data will not be taken away from you. We host the mailing lists, message boards, sites etc. but you own the information that you post or upload."

#### ***So why the new mastheads and the change to the Ancestry.com URL?***

Announcements and statements from TGN have stated that the [new mastheads](#) are an effort to brand RootsWeb as a cohesive site, as well as a part of The Generations Network. While FreePages sites on RootsWeb have had a variety of banners and/or mastheads for a while, the USGenWeb and other special sites have had no branding whatsoever. Personally, I don't feel that the new banners are really any different than those served up by most hosting services, such as Geocities and AOL, that offer free Web site space. The Generations Network has also worked to provide a custom banner for the USGenWeb sites, and they are still working to create a masthead that pleases both sides and takes a minimum of effort to implement. Although many may not agree with me, I feel that such a banner is a small price to pay in return for free, unlimited hosting. And, properly implemented, a USGenWeb masthead appearing on every page would actually provide more cohesiveness for USGenWeb as well. There are many pages on the project that don't even include the USGenWeb logo and users coming into such pages from a search engine often don't understand where the data came from or that it is part of the USGenWeb Project.

#### ***Why the change in URLs?***

Mike at TGN says that the speculation that RootsWeb sites are being moved to

Ancestry.com URL's based on a desire to increase the site's traffic numbers on paper is a small part of the reason for the move. He also said that improving search engine rankings for both sites was a big consideration. Yes, as part of the Ancestry domain, RootsWeb will offer more of a benefit to TGN, but Mike also said that makes it easier to justify increased attention and money spent on improving RootsWeb. Nothing is changing on RootsWeb other than the URL (and the new mastheads). All old RootsWeb URLs will continue to work - people will be automatically redirected to the new URL. RootsWeb will continue to be free.

#### ***What about the mailing lists?***

The RootsWeb mailing lists, including those which correspond with USGenWeb sites, belong to RootsWeb and will remain there. Some hosts are choosing to create new mailing lists on their new sites, but they can't kill the RootsWeb list, and TGN assures me that the archived mailing list posts -- such a valuable source of genealogical information -- will remain as well.

#### ***So what's really going on?***

In defense of The Generations Network (TGN), they have been supporting RootsWeb as a free genealogy site since they [stepped in to save it in 2000](#). They do run banners and branding on the FreePages sites, used primarily by individuals and small associations, but have in the past had no banners or advertising or anything at all running on USGenWeb sites, or the sites hosted under their own virtual domains. In other words, they shell out what must be quite a bit of money to keep those sites up and running and receive little in return, other than the fact that they have been happy to help support the free genealogy community. Mike at TGN says that the move to provide more consistent branding across all RootsWeb pages -- the new mastheads -- is to help people who come across these pages from RootsWeb realize there is more to explore. To help identify RootsWeb as a network of genealogists and sites. And to identify TGN as their sponsor as well. Currently those hosting USGenWeb and other sites on RootsWeb have no obligation to mention RootsWeb or Ancestry.com at all, and many don't.

Feelings on both sides of the issue are definitely running strong. In Illinois, for example, the decision to move the state pages and most county sites happened very quickly. Cheryl

Rothwell, Assistant State Coordinator, [The ILGenWeb Project](#), said that when the discussion began she expected it to be protracted, as most such discussions are. "I expected the counties would be split on the Ancestry issue and those who chose to leave would be scattered. Instead there was almost instant agreement -- and more active participation by County Coordinators than I have seen in my 10+ years."

TGN, on the other hand, says that while they "totally respect the decision to move to another hosting service," they are sad that so many have chosen to leave. They plan to continue to support every site on RootsWeb as they have in the past, and there will absolutely be no "retribution" against USGenWeb sites that have chosen to stay (although there have been some reports of retribution from state coordinators against county coordinators who have chosen to remain at RootsWeb which is against USGenWeb policy). Mike said that TGN would also be most happy to welcome back any sites who might choose to return in the future.

Basically, on both sides of the fence, this is a business relationship. I personally feel The Generations Network provides a wonderful service to the genealogy community and can understand their need to see at least a little bit of return for the money they spend supporting RootsWeb. This will only help to ensure that the valuable genealogy data that so many volunteers have posted over the years will be preserved. Some people at USGenWeb feel the need for a hosting arrangement that offers them additional independence and control - many choosing to go with paid hosting arrangements that can offer more options than the free hosting at RootsWeb. I can't fault them for that.

The concern of Joan Young, who writes articles on how to use RootsWeb for the [RootsWeb Review](#), -- a concern that is shared by myself and many others -- is that some of those who move may fall into "deals" that don't turn out to be viable. There's also the possibility of data getting lost when a county coordinator who has moved to a paid hosting solution decides to quit, or possibly forgets to renew their domain name or their hosting service. And any new coordinator coming in to take over a site hosted via a paid hosting arrangement would either have to be willing to continue paying the hosting bill, or take on moving the site to a new host.

My hope is that people think things through carefully and make informed decisions. I'm not saying anyone is right or wrong in their decision to move or not move. But too many people are panicking and throwing around false information about Ancestry planning to "steal" data. While they can be blunder-prone at times, I'm convinced that they are trying to do the right thing by the genealogy community. I also hope that the USGenWeb Project continues to survive and thrive through this period of change. It's an absolutely invaluable resource and my thanks goes out to each and every volunteer who has ever worked for or contributed to the project.