

*Brick Walls: the more you do,
the more you can do
by Hal Braschwitz*

Several years ago I volunteered to work on a high school reunion committee. I reasoned that the skills I had acquired in my family genealogy work could be put to good use in this endeavor. As it turned out this was true, and as an added bonus in locating classmates for the reunion, I managed to increase my research skills noticeably as well.

Working along with another couple on the reunion committee, my first project was to locate about 150 classmates who had never been contacted before. This project turned out quite successfully as we managed to locate all but twelve of them. The route was fairly arduous however, and this effort took about a year, including putting in several hours daily. We started with the graduate's name and address at the time of graduation. The 1930 census was available to us and helped immensely. We also used the Cuyahoga county marriage records to find many of the girl's subsequent surnames. Ancestry.com was also very helpful. The Social Security Death Index helped as it reduced the numbers we had to search for. With these resources we were able to shorten the list of unknowns significantly. We then started to make telephone calls and although most were dead ends, many were successful in either locating the individual or obtaining information to assist in finding them. Along the way we found stories that were quite interesting, and in a few cases, were quite sordid. One might say "real life."

The really tough part of the project then commenced. The number was much smaller but also much more difficult. Some of the girls had married several times. A few of the men had changed their names. Some of the folks did not want to be located. The bottom line, however, was that we learned to keep trying. In many cases we found that brick walls can either be circumvented or blasted through.

One anecdote illustrates this. One class member we couldn't find had a father who died about the time he graduated. We noted this death certificate and some time later the father's wife died but did not list the graduate as a son. It turned out that the father had remarried about the time of the boy's graduation. In the meantime we had checked the mother's cemetery, her church records, and even the checked with the Cleveland Catholic Diocese, all to no avail. In checking with the real estate records we found who currently owned the house in which he lived and it turned out to be a distant relative who only knew that the individual now lived somewhere in Massachusetts. With this information we were able finally able to locate him.

Interestingly, of the original group of 150 unknowns, 50 of them actually attended the reunion. The total reunion attendance was 100 graduates, so basically our efforts doubled the size of the reunion!

By taking on this project I was able to improve my people-locating skills, which has since helped me with my subsequent genealogy work. Brick walls CAN be scaled with the perseverance and know-how. The old saying "the more you do, the more you can do" certainly applies here.