



Ancestry24

origins versus obstacles = creativity and tenacity
- typical traits of our nation!

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Genealogy has been Heather MacAlister's passion for a long time. So when the media group Naspers approached her to run a new ancestry site for them whilst including the material that she already had, she thought, 'How lucky can you get: to do what you love and get paid to do it!' And so the web site *Family Tree*, which started out as *Heather's Help List* in 2004, eventually became *Ancestry24*. Heather moved from Hof Street in Gardens (Cape Town), with other components of the extended Naspers family, including *whoswhosa.co.za*, *mygeskiedenis.co.za* and *myfundi.co.za*, to eventually locate at No 11 Adderley (the old OK Bazaars Building), right next door to Leisure Books/Leserskring.

In this imposing glass and chrome construction we chatted about *Ancestry24*, South Africa's leading digital genealogy site. In her usual quick-witted way she fired off answers. I asked: 'Heather, what is your aim with *Ancestry24*?' and immediately she said: 'To make *Ancestry24* the most diverse family web site in this country.' Heather is not fazed by the myriad of challenges, such as the sheer volume of source material, costs involved and (in certain instances) the reluctance of some institutions to get on board.

Hurdling obstacles, *Ancestry24* is growing exponentially – with more than eight million names, 250 000 marriage records, 280 000 baptism records and thousands of historical photographs and other images already available at the click of a button, *Ancestry24* is undoubtedly South Africa's most extensive ancestral and genealogical database. Slave records, voters' rolls, church registers, ships' passenger lists and rare history books can be viewed at leisure – those of us who are familiar with the *schlep* of traditional research methods: hours of paging through old, fragile archivalia . . . waiting for trolleys stacked high with boxes which may (or may not) hold some clue to your research theme. Primary research is not so romantic as it may seem. Not if you have to literally travel the country, 'sit-sit-so' from one archival repository to the next!

Instead one can visit *Ancestry24*'s attractive and functional web site.

The very logical, viewer-friendly layout is inviting and easy to use, in contrast to intimidating archival reading rooms which are frequently overpopulated and confusing to novice researchers. The site's numerous options include 'Why build a family tree?' with step-by-step instructions, and offers a free beginner's guide with several links to, for example, birth records. According to this section, there is no other official online archive except this one. The Department of Home Affairs' Western Cape Archive (HAWC) poses some problems to researchers: a fee is payable to Home Affairs, even though the actual indexes and registers are housed in the Western Cape Archives and Records Service at 72 Roeland Street in Cape Town. (I know – I sorted those records myself, about a decade ago!) Especially birth records are a problematic subject – researchers need to apply for special permission to access this archival group, and only papers pertaining to themselves may be viewed.

Heather has succeeded in obtaining the last white voters' roll of South Africa, which will be useful for genealogists and historians in general – a real coup. She would like more members of the public to donate data (there is no charge for downloading data on *Ancestry24*) to expand the site and to add to the various options available. For instance, more Government Gazettes need to be added to the web site. Huge gaps in the overall picture still need to be filled: for example, links to

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'Government Gazettes: various years' and 'South African Magazine 1896-1906' confirm that, despite the time, cost and effort already invested, there are still many pieces lacking in this massive puzzle.

As the web site *Africamediaonline.com* propagates, donating data to *Ancestry24* will 'ensure that your collections are digitised [according to] archival quality [standards] so that the standards for long term archiving are met. This means that the original object does not need to be handled in order to grant access to the public and so it can be preserved for future generations'. Thus the public can help to build a web site they can 'own' – can relate to – because they will actively participate in shaping it and leaving behind a network which will in turn hold a wealth of information for future generations to build on.

Ancestry24 provides many interesting info-bytes, like 'When did civil registration begin for birth records in South Africa?' Quite handy also are the instructions regarding physical searches at provincial archival repositories – Heather's many years of hard grinds in reading rooms is apparent, therefore I recommend that anyone attempting genealogical research should first visit *Ancestry24*, and then perhaps have a look at the official web site of the provincial archives (*www.national.archives.gov.za*) before even entering the reading room of an actual archival repository. This strategy will save you time and money. Having spent about three decades in such repositories either as a student or an archivist; take my word for it.

Ancestry24 has links to provincial repositories – Cape Town,

Pietermaritzburg, Pretoria and Bloemfontein. The web site provides alternative routes to choose from in order to solve certain practical dilemmas. There is also a link for volunteers who can assist Heather with the long slog ahead; presenting access to masses of information regarding our forebears and their fascinating doings and ... whatever may be the opposite of that! New additions to the site such as 'St Philips Marriage District Six 1874-1940' seem attention-grabbing, and will no doubt generate many hits.

Information regarding historical personalia like Sir Andries Stockenström, themes like 'Jewish burials' and events like 'Fires in the Cape' can be found under 'Articles'. Book reviews on historical works by luminaries like Dr Hans Fransen (on architectural heritage) and Dr HF Heese (Slavery, and, Afrikaners in Angola) are also on offer. Such subjects bring history to life, assisting like-minded people to network and subsequently open up further topics for discussion and research. And discussion leads to debate, which the South African nation undoubtedly should invest in; especially about our heritage. To know where you are going, you must know how you got to where you are! It's 'Life Orientation 101', Boet ... just do it.

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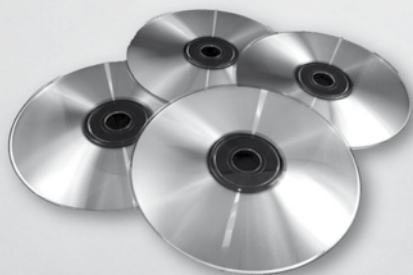
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