

A Strong Search: The Tale of Two Ralph's

My great grandfather, Walter Strong, was born in Farmersville, Texas in 1881 to Ralph Strong and Mary Ella Hall. Although Ralph Strong was the ancestor I received my last name from, he was the one I knew the least about. When my wife and I first set out to find out who his parents were, we never realized it would be a ten-year process. During our research, we used both tried and true methods, as well as some new technology. We also made some mistakes along the way, but our search finally revealed the names of Ralph's parents, and much more.

My first glimpse of Ralph and Mary Strong was about ten years ago, on the 1880 federal census. We first found Ralph listed on the Texas head of household census index at the local library, and used that to locate the family on the actual microfilm

District 7, Precinct 7, Collin County, Texas

Ralf B STRONG Self M Male W 23 Oh Farmer Oh Oh

Mary E STRONG Wife M Female W 22 Mo Keeping House TN TN

Agustus H STRONG Son S Male W 1 TX Oh Mo

I ordered a copy of Ralph's death certificate, His death certificate confirmed that he was born in Ohio, but did not list a specific city. His parents were shown as "Unknown." I already had a copy of his obituary, published in April 1929, in the DUNCAN (OK) EAGLE. It read:

RALPH B. STRONG TAKEN BY DEATH

Ralph B. Strong, 71 years of age, passed away here at 3:15 o'clock Saturday afternoon at the home of Walter W. Strong, 705 S. 8th Street. Cancer was the cause of his death. Funeral services were held at the Beeson Grantham Chapel at 2 o'clock Sunday afternoon with Rev. T.P. Haskins of the Baptist Church officiating. Burial was at the Lawton Cemetery.

The deceased was a pioneer resident of New Mexico. He had homesteaded there 22 years ago and lived at Portales. He was brought to the home of his son here in Grantham Ambulance about three weeks ago, when his illness became more serious.

Surviving are the wife, seven sons, seventeen grandchildren, and three brothers. The sons are Walter W. and Burt of Duncan, Claude and Earl of Cement, R.J. and A.H. of Tintino, New Mexico, and Earnest of Toledo, Oregon.

Since the census confirmed he was born in Ohio, we decided to look at all the Strong families listed in Ohio at the time of 1860 census, and find one of them with a three-year old son Ralph. If an "every name" census index existed back then, we didn't know about it, so we started off with Lida Flint Harshman's two-volume 1860 Ohio Head of Household index

By May 2000, my father had extracted every one of the 100-plus Strong families indexed in the 1860 Ohio census. We hoped to find one with a son Ralph of the appropriate age. There was not one. There were two.

1860 OHIO CENSUS, Lake County, Willoughby Township

Strong, Samuel 30 Carriage Maker Oh

Strong, Sarah 38? Oh

Strong, Ralph 4 Oh

Strong, Harry 2 Oh

Strong, Mary 1 Oh

1860 OHIO CENSUS, Trumbull County, Bristol Township

Strong, David 40 M Farmer NY

Strong, Leonora 28 F born Ohio

Strong, John 18 M Printers Apprentice born Ohio

Strong, George 16 M born Ohio Attended School

Strong, Henry 14 M born Ohio Attended School

Strong, Francis 7 M born Ohio Attended School

Strong, Ella 4 F born Ohio

Strong, Ralph 2 M born Ohio

Strong, Mary 12 F born Ohio Attended School

We had one Ralph too many. And to make matters worse, we could not find either of these Ralph's with their families on the 1870 census. Both seemed to have disappeared. David and Lenora Strong, along with all of their other younger children, were still living in Trumbull County in 1870. However, their son Ralph, who should have been about 12 years old, was not listed. Maybe he was there but just not listed by the enumerator, or maybe he died, we thought. But he seemed too young to have "gone to Texas" on his own.

We could not find the family of Samuel and Sarah Strong at all. We did find a Samuel Strong of the same age living in nearby Cleveland, but he was married to a Dora, working as a druggist and didn't have the same children. Not a likely match. Nor could I find a widowed Sarah indexed. So my wife and I scoured the 1870 Lake County microfilm page by page, again with no sign of the family. I had already looked for Ralph and his parents in Texas in 1870, but went back and looked again. They still weren't there. I guessed the family might be in transit, living somewhere between Ohio and Texas. We did not have access to a nationwide census index, so we couldn't check using that method. We wrote the Lake County Genealogical Society for information about the Samuel Strong family. They had none. We next looked for both families again on the 1880 census. David and Leanora were still living in Trumbull County, now with only

their youngest daughter still at home. But we were still not able to locate the Samuel Strong family of Lake County. Too make things worse, we were back to having one Ralph too many. One of them was my 23-year-old great-great grandfather living in Collin County, Texas. The other was a single 22-year-old delivery wagon driver, living in Cleveland, Ohio. But who was who in 1860, and how could I prove it? Since both Trumbull and Lake counties were near Cleveland, either Ralph could logically have moved there. But why couldn't we find either of them, anywhere, in 1870?

In 1900 my Ralph was in Hopkins County, Texas, with his wife and six youngest sons. I could not find Ralph Strong the delivery driver. My Ralph, age 53, moved to New Mexico in 1910, with his second wife and the youngest of his sons. And now a Ralph W. Strong of the same age appeared in Cleveland, listed as a married salesman, but living in a boarding house away from his family. In 1920, I couldn't find my Ralph, but knew he was in New Mexico. I did find 63 year-old Ralph W. Strong again, a farmer in Lake County, living with his wife and son Harry. Was this the same Ralph that lived in Lake County some sixty years ago, when he was four? Could I even be sure this was the same Ralph W. Strong that lived in Cleveland 10 years previously? Maybe this was yet a third Ralph. More importantly, I still didn't know which Ralph belonged to which parents. We searched the online Ohio death index for 1913-1937, as well as going through Lake County cemeteries records, trying to find a date of death for Ralph W. Strong, but had no luck. We hoped a death certificate or obituary might tell us who his parents were, but once again, the second Ralph seemed to have disappeared without a trace.

I joined the Strong DNA Study to see if it could help me narrow my focus. My DNA (kit #5858) was a high-resolution match to the DNA of two documented descendants of "Elder" John Strong. This meant it was very likely we shared a common ancestor within the last 17 generations or less. I ordered the reprint of Benjamin Dwight's, "The History of the Descendants of Elder John Strong of Northampton, Mass.," to see if I could tie the information I had gathered about the Strong's of Lake and Trumbull Counties, Ohio into his work. I thought if I could find a link to "Elder" John Strong for one of the families, but not the other, it might help me to narrow my focus. The results of my test, along some 40 or so other participants, are at this URL <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~donegalstrongs/dnaresults.htm>. If you are interested in joining, contact study administrator David B. Strong at: dbstrong@sos.net.

I discovered both Ohio families were likely descendants of Elder John. On pages 174 through 177 of Dwight's book, the family of Judge John Harris Strong of Chatham, Ct. and Cleveland, Oh. was detailed. Judge Strong had seven sons and 3 daughters. I thought he was a likely candidate as an ancestor of Samuel Strong of Willoughby, Lake County, Ohio due to the time period, the location (one of his son's, James Madison Strong, also lived in Willoughby Township), and the fact that Benjamin Dwight bemoaned "this very meager account of his...descendants which no continued correspondence served to improve." However, I was unable to find a direct link.

On page 194, I found David Brainerd Strong, "a farmer in Bristolville, O., m. Betsey Kagy." Based on the township, date of birth, and his first wife's name, I knew this was an exact match. Although we learned David's full middle name, and the names of his parents and siblings, those facts didn't seem particularly helpful at the time.

This was early in 2003, and around this time the Ancestry U.S. Census Records and Indexes service, to which we subscribed, released their first "every name" 1870 index. We once

again searched for Samuel, Sarah, Ralph and Harry Strong, formerly of Lake County, this time in every state, but once again we failed to find them.

Four months ago, two things changed. We had let our census subscription lapse, but signed up again when our son left for college. We also updated our Family Tree Maker software to the 2005 version. When I loaded the software, my pedigree view happened to be on Ralph Strong. I pushed the web search button to test it. The search engine suggested that a Ralph Strong, who was living in Cleveland at the time of the 1870 census, was a good match. Stunned, I immediately went to that census page. I had at long last found the missing Strong's of Lake County, discovering they had relocated to Cleveland.

1870 OHIO CENSUS, Cuyahoga County, Cleveland, Ward 14

Strong, S.B. 38 M W Occupation illegible \$3000 Ohio

Strong, Sarah 28? Keeping House Ohio

Strong, Ralph 14 M W Ohio

Strong, illegible 11 F W Ohio

Strong, illegible 9 F W Ohio

I don't think that a S.B. Strong was listed in the 1870 Head of Household index I had initially used to search for him. Of course, I SHOULD have looked for every possible variation of his name or initials, but may or may not have actually done this. And although I had thoroughly searched the earliest version of Ancestry's "every name index" for 1870, it was probably not as complete when first released. Ralph was not indexed then. But he certainly was now! And all of the sudden, my assumptions started spinning. Maybe Ralph of Lake County moved to Cleveland in 1870, and was STILL there in 1880. But I was still left with the question as to where Ralph Strong of Trumbull was in 1870.

The other thing that changed was that Rhodene Frederick found us. She was researching the family of Ralph Strong of Texas as well. Not because of the Strong's, but because Augustus Homer Strong had married into her GAY line in Oklahoma. She had reached a brick wall with her Gay's, so had started tracking each of their spouses. She contacted us about Augustus and his wife from an old query my wife had posted on a Rootsweb board. She also asked if we could confirm that David B. Strong from Trumbull was Ralph's father, and the grandfather of A.H. Strong. She thought this was likely from looking at the census records. We explained our dilemma. Rhodene pointed out a few clues we had overlooked. Ralph's obituary said he was "survived by three brothers"---but did not list them by name. Rhodene noted that the key point seemed to be the number of brothers. David of Trumbull had plenty of sons. Samuel and Sarah of Lake seemed to have only Ralph and Harry. Also, David had an "extra" 11-year-old son (Charles) on the 1870 Trumbull census, who was not listed at all in 1860. Maybe Charles and Ralph were the same person, which would mean Ralph really wasn't missing. Finally, David Strong's middle name was Brainerd, and our family knew Ralph's middle name to be Bernard. Rhodene thought the similarities in the middle name were more than a coincidence. We decided the time to find out more about the Strong's of Trumbull County was long overdue.

We wrote the Trumbull County Chapter of the Ohio Genealogical Society. They sent us a detailed packet of information about the family of David Strong of Trumbull. There was nothing in their packet, however, which added more to what we knew about either Ralph or Charles. We were quite surprised, though, to discover that David and Leanora Strong didn't marry until March 16, 1876, well after the birth of their six children. And if David didn't marry Leanora until 1876, why was she listed as his wife on both the 1860 and 1870 census? Could there be two Leanora's as well? Rhodene also helped us solve this mystery, finding reference at the Clayton Genealogy Library to an earlier marriage recorded between David B. Strong and a Leanora A. Sherman, this one in nearby Ashtabula County. It was dated July 14, 1851. This was exactly one month after the death David's first wife. The fact he had four young children at home probably contributed to their brief courtship. An article we later found in the "Trumbull County (Ohio) Independent," dated March 24, 1876, explained the reason for the subsequent remarriage: "*The following divorce case, I believe, was the only successful one during the present term of court. Mrs. L. Strong vs. David B. Strong for divorce, on the ground of neglect of duty, etc. Divorce was granted. But now comes a singular turn in the case. Mr. Gillmer defended the husband with such vigor, and showed by such irrefutable arguments that these parties should not be separated, that, although the judge's sympathies for the woman could not be overcome, the parties themselves experienced a very great revival of earlier sympathies. In such a masterly manner did defendant's counsel portray the manly qualities of Mr. Strong, that the quick and appreciative nature of the petitioner (Leanora) was again touched as of old, and in precisely four days and a half days from the time the divorce was granted a (marriage) license was procured, and the happy couple were again married. We sincerely wish the bride and groom much joy.*"

We also wrote the Trumbull County Archivist, asking for David Strong's probate records. The archivist located the records we asked for. Fortunately for us, she also included with her reply the probate records for Leanora Strong, who died just nine days after her husband. We had not thought to ask her to search for those. And at long last, we had proof positive linking Ralph of Texas to one of the two Ralph's in Ohio! On the Civil Docket index page for Estate No. 1065 for Leanora A. Strong, it was noted that an "*affidavit for service by publication on Ralph Strong filed in May 1894, containing notice to nonresident mailed to Ralph Strong, Baird, Callihan County, Texas and (also attempted to mail the same notice) to Ralph B. Strong in Blue, Indian Territory.*" These locations are both in proximity to Ralph's location at the time of the 1880 and 1900 federal census. The docket page also listed all of Leanora's children, including a son Charles, so the theory that Ralph and Charles might be the same person was proven wrong. So we had succeeded in tying Ralph back to his family in Ohio, but still didn't know why he was missing from the 1870 census.

Making good use of our census subscription, my wife decided to try to find all of Ralph's siblings at each census subsequent to 1870. We wanted to see if we could prove that three brothers did indeed survive him. Since David Strong's brothers (Ralph's Uncles) were listed in the Benjamin Dwight book, we decided to go ahead and look for their families as well. Over the next few weeks, we went through Ralph's sibling and uncles one by one. One night last month, I heard my wife yell out: "It's Ralph! He was in Nebraska in 1870!" And indeed he was.

1870 Census, Nebraska, Johnson County, Todd Creek Township, Tecumseh P.O.

STRONG, H.B. 47 M W Farmer \$6800 \$800 New York

STRONG, Caroline 50 F W Keeping House New York

STRONG, Ella 16 At School Wisconsin

STRONG, R.B. 12 M W Works on Farm Ohio

WRIGHT, Petri 22 M W Farm Laborer Wisconsin

We knew from both Benjamin Dwight's book, and from the BIOGRAPHICAL ALBUM OF JOHNSON & PAWNEE COUNTIES NEBRASKA, found online at Rootsweb, that this census listing was for David Brainerd Strong's brother, Hezekiah Bulkley Strong, the youngest son of Ansel Strong and Hannah Stocking. The Johnson County biography, published around 1890, had also noted that to Hezekiah and Caroline "*there were born three children--Emma, Edward B. and Ella.*" This meant they were not the parents of the 12 year-old R.B. Strong who was working on their farm. This was at last our Ralph, missing from his home in Ohio.

Flush with success in finally finding our Ralph, we wondered if we could use the census to once again find the other Ralph. We had never actually looked for him before in 1930, because our Ralph was dead by then. We found him immediately. The same Ralph W. Strong who lived in Lake County in 1920 (with his son Harry) was in Falls Church, Virginia in 1930 (still with his son Harry). We could not find a death certificate for Ralph W. Strong on file in Virginia. Amazingly enough, we later stumbled across his obituary while searching for something else, published in 1948 in Cleveland, Ohio. The online death index only went through 1937, explaining why we had not found him listed there. His death certificate revealed he was indeed born in Willoughby Twp, Lake County, Ohio, the son of Samuel STRONG and Sarah SCHRAM.

One of the final pieces of the puzzle fell into place when we were reviewing our documentation before sending it off to the historian of the Strong Family Association of America. I had ordered Ralph Strong's death certificate 15 years ago. At the time, I read his name as Ralph Bernard Strong, because that is what my great aunts and uncles called him. When I looked again, I realized it actually was written as Ralph BRENARD Strong. I looked at every other scrap of paper I had relating to Ralph. He was always listed as Ralph or R.B. We found that in the obituary of Ralph's daughter-in-law, Tessie (Soukup) Strong, his grandson Barney was listed as "BRANYARD." I had never thought this was anything other than a typographical error, but now I wondered. My father called Barney and asked what his given name was. Barney replied it was "something funny" that he never much liked, so he went by Barney. Rhodene's intuition was right. The similar names were more than just a coincidence. Ralph Bernard Strong, of Collin County, Texas, was actually Ralph Brainerd Strong, born in Bristol, Ohio.

Ralph's obituary said he was a pioneer resident of New Mexico. But his obituary left a lot out, more than just the names of his parents, and of those three brothers that survived him. It also left out that his pioneering spirit first took hold of him as a 12 year-old, when he left behind his family in Ohio to go work for his Uncle in the frontiers of Nebraska. This same sense of adventure later propelled him, on his own, to the frontiers of Texas, and both the Indian and New Mexico territories. At the conclusion of my ten-year search for Ralph, I discovered far more about him than just the name of his parents. I feel like I discovered a bit about his spirit as well.