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Sleuthing for Ancestors

■ A genealogy rookie scores a 'find' on first try at researching census reports at West L.A.'s Mormon Temple.

By JAMES E: FOWLER TIMES STAFF WRITER

hen I was about 9 or 10, I used to love rummaging through my grandfather's innumerable boxes of stuff stacked neatly in the basement. Grandpa was a pack rat. Treasures, such as his old chauffeur's licenses, would pop out. Some would have his picture and name, Joseph Savarese, while others would

And there were lots of pictures of family, and friends long since gone. My great-grandmother Mary stared at me stoically with fierce Sicilian eyes from many an old photo of the early 1930s. She always reminded me of character actress Maria Ouspenskaya, who portrayed Bela Lugosi's Gypsy mother in the 1941 film "The Wolfman."

feature an Anglicization of his name, Joe Savage.

"When the wolfsbane blooms and the moon is full...,"
the old Gypsy woman would intone in the movie. Like the
Gypsy woman, my great-grandma looked like one tough
customer—someone who had met a few werewolves in her
time and lived to tell about it.

Tracing my family tree is something I've wanted to do for a long time. But I was reluctant to begin, because I wasn't sure where to start, and I thought that the digging might be a little tiresome.

Enter Jan Jennings, a genealogist who often works for a fee with people interested in their family's history but who haven't a clue how to start. She promised that she'd get me hooked, and then I wouldn't have any free time. I met with her at the Southern California Genealogical Society's library in Burbank, where she volunteers.

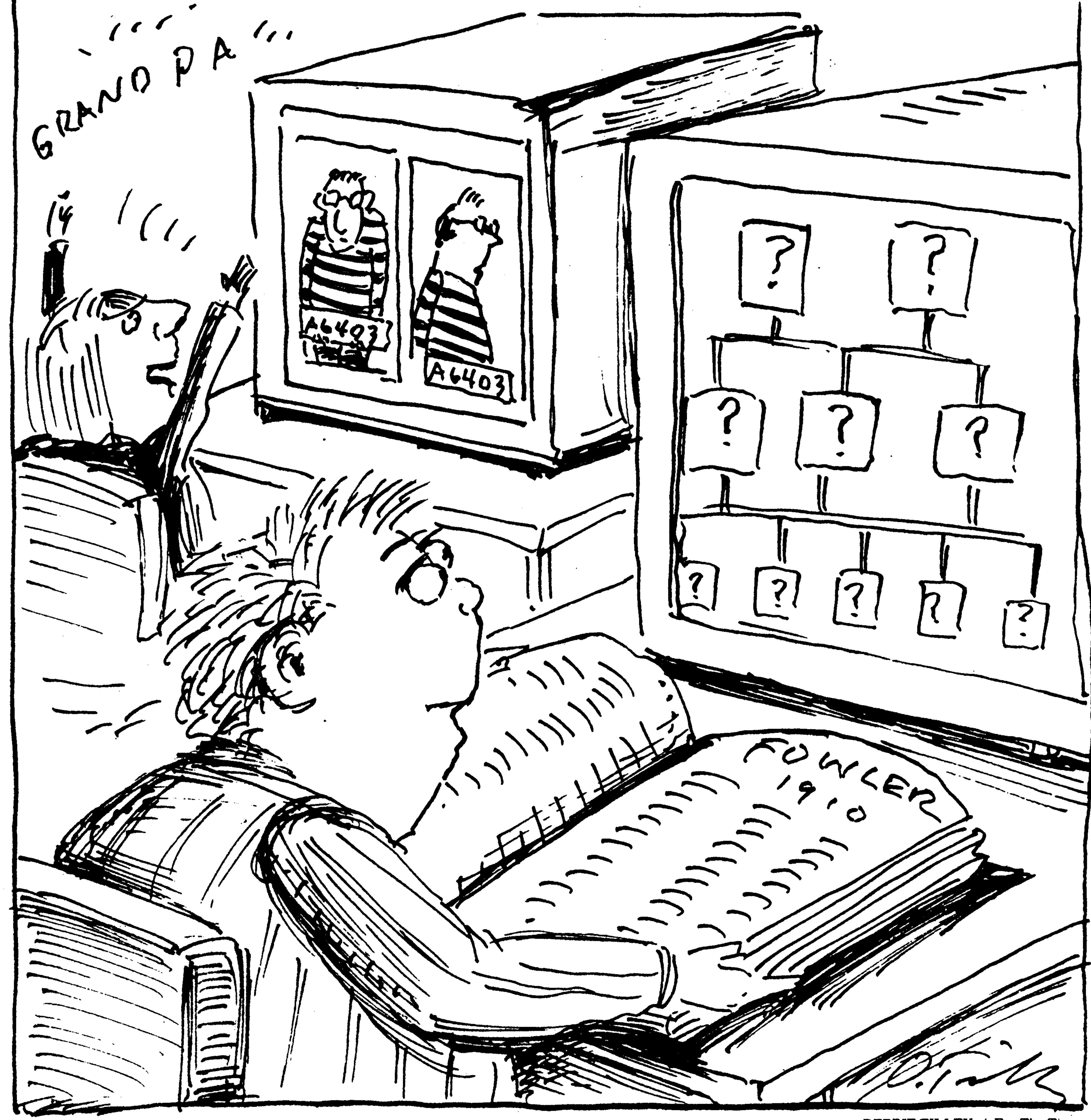
Jennings first had me fill out a pedigree chart. It had a place for my name, birthplace, birth date, wedding dates, along with other historical data, then the same information for my parents, then their parents, and their parents, and so on.

As I filled it out, I realized that, besides anecdotes, I knew very little about my family. Since I knew so little, Jennings said, census records were probably the best place to start. The Mormon Temple on Santa Monica Boulevard in West Los Angeles would be my next stop.

Because of its religious tenets, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints keeps extensive records on genealogy and provides the public free access. Its genealogical library has U.S. Census reports on microfilm dating to George Washington's time. Even more extensive records are kept in Salt Lake City, and those are available for a nominal rental fee through the Los Angeles temple.

For reasons of privacy, the National Archives does not release the actual census sheets for 72 years. Thus, the latest census available to the public is the 1920 report.

During the Depression, the Works Progress Administration indexed the census records, using an arcane method



DEBBIE TILLEY / For The Times

known as Soundex, Jennings said. By assigning a number to consonants in a surname, the system accords a letter and three-digit number to different names that sound somewhat alike.

So all the Fowlers were assigned the number F460, along with the Fullers and the Flowers. For each census, you can find the Fowler you're looking for by just looking under F460 in the county and state where the person lived. Names are arranged alphabetically by first name. The Mormon Temple's genealogical library has the census sheets and the Soundex on microfilm.

At the Mormon Temple, I signed in and took a numbered wooden block that corresponds with one of the film-viewing machines. As I searched the file cabinets, I replaced the box of filmstrip I took with the block.

I started by looking for my paternal grandparents in the 910 Census in Tennessee.

1910 Census in Tennessee. There were a lot of Fowlers then. I was looking for William and Betha in Dover County, but I couldn't find them. I couldn't even find Dover County.

After two hours on that one film, I decided to look for my

mother's maternal grandparents, the Tenores, in New York City in the 1900 Census. Well, there weren't as many Tenores in New York as there were Fowlers in Tennessee. But there were more than I expected, and none of them related to me as far as I could tell.

After another hour, I decided to look for the Savarese clan in the 1910 Census. I knew the Savareses were living in a small town in New Jersey at that time. Soundex is limited to 21 states for the 1910 Census because the WPA discontinued the project due to lack of funds. Since New Jersey is not one of those 21, I had to search the census sheets directly. The town my relatives were living in was

so small, I figured that it would be easy to find them. I had to look in Warren County, in Washington Township, in the village of Changewater—and, after about two more hours of eyestrain, there they were.

My great-grandfather's given name was Vincent. But on the census sheet, he was listed as James. (My mother later told me that her grandfather was called Jimmy by friends.) But there's no doubt that this was my family.

My grandfather, Joseph, was 20 years old and working on a farm. Uncle Phil, 16 then, worked in a local factory. Aunt Gussy, Uncle Tony and Uncle Frank, whom I knew when they all were elderly, were there—ages 8, 11 and 13, respectively. My great-grandmother's sister, Madelina Pavia, whom my own mother was named after, is also listed.

The census told me that my great-grandparents were married in 1886, probably in New York. My great-grand-

father, James Savarese, 46 in 1910, immigrated to the United States from Italy in 1878, and my great-grandmother, Mary Pavia, 47, immigrated in 1872 and first settled in Memphis, Tenn. My great-grandfather knew how to speak, read and

write English, but my great-grandmother could only speak Italian. She had given birth to 10 children, of which only six were living in 1910. Times were hard, even without werewolves.

When I found them on the census form, I was so excited that I told the woman sitting next to me. Sensing that I was a rookie, she told me that it was good and unusual to score a "find" on your first visit. I was thrilled. I made a copy of the census sheet for 30 cents. I felt like I was on a roll. I was going to look for my grandfather in the 1920 Census but the library was closing.

Next time.

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