
Age 115 or more in the United States: Fact or fiction?

Robert Young

499 Northside Circle NW, Apt 628, Atlanta, GA 30309, United States.
E-Mail: robertdouglassyoung@yahoo.com

Abstract. The United States contributed the largest number of cases to the International Database on Longevity and probably has the largest supercentenarian population in the world. This chapter provides a detailed description of the methods used to validate eight supercentenarians in the United States who attained an age of 115 years or older. The chapter also describes five claims to age 115 and beyond that were eventually shown to be false, again emphasizing age validation and the various different problems commonly encountered by researchers.

1 Foreword

It is a rare instance indeed when a revolutionary work not only results in a paradigm shift of scientific opinion, but so thoroughly ingratiates a topic that, some 130 years later, it remains an unassailable tower. Such was the groundbreaking work of William J. Thoms, whose “Human Longevity: Its Facts and Fictions,” published in 1873, remains a supreme foundation on which future generations of extreme longevity researchers can build. Thoms’ calling to task the shameful instances of otherwise great minds falling for the fallacies of a few countryside storytellers, his examination of fictive claims of a past age of great longevity, and his debunking of the idea that longevity is greater among the poor, resonate well with today’s situations. Thoms sets up the principle that the burden of proof is upon the claimant, not the other way around. Page after page, we find Thoms calling out issues involving testimonial fallacy, name-saking (e.g., naming a younger brother after an older brother, or a son after a father), mis-identification, familial context, numbers of descendants, and earliest recollections. Indeed, Thoms did such a thorough job that it must be left to us to explain why a further book is needed.

If anything has changed at all in the field of age verification research since Thoms's time, it is that people today really are living longer than people in the 1870s. In Thoms's time, the oldest verifiable centenarian that he could find was a mere 103 years old. This is simply not the case today, with some tens of thousands of persons currently living who are aged 103 and older, and a new class of supercentenarians (persons aged 110 and over) emerging; the proven record in 2008 is the 122 years and 164 days, attained in the case of Jeanne Calment; and the oldest living person currently is believed to be 114-year-old Edna Parker (born April 20, 1893) who as of this writing (February 26, 2008) does not yet qualify for this chapter. This apparent increase in the human life span may not actually contradict those who see the human life span as 'fixed;' some may argue that the increases in life span in the past two hundred years are due to the cumulative benefits of increased sanitation, health care, treatment, diet, etc., coupled with a huge increase in sample size and recordkeeping. Indeed, even today in small nations such as Norway, the oldest person is normally only 107-110 years old, whereas in the United States, which has the world's largest centenarian population (estimated at about 80,000 currently)¹ has seen the oldest living American record consistently stay above age 113 (since 1986). Most remarkably, nearly half of the world's verified instances of a supercentenarian aged 115 and older have come from the United States. That alone is reason enough to take a closer look at maximum longevity in the United States.

However, there is a second major reason, as well. In the United States, demographic transition and industrialization over the past two centuries have also been accompanied by parallel shifts in recordkeeping. Such improvements would seem to lend a degree of credibility to American cases. However, these shifts have occurred far more recently than in Western European nations (for example, birth registration in the UK was compulsory by 1837, but was not required in the United States until 1933). Recent research (Jeune and Vaupel, 1995, 1999) has indicated that a period of 100 years or more of compulsory and complete birth registration is needed to finally defeat the myth of aging in that nation. The United Kingdom, once well-known for claims such as that of Thomas Parr, said to have lived to age 152, has seen no verified supercentenarian exceed the age of 115 before the 1990s. The United States, in contrast, remains in transition from a semi-literate to a fully literate society. Even in 2006, age claims in the United States

¹ http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/backslash009715.html (accessed Feb 13 2008).

included Alberta Davis of Georgia, 125²; Oberia Coffin of Texas, 122; and Lajean Smith of Arkansas, 117. In all these instances, the case is an African-American from the U.S. South. Where birth registrations are absent, age inflation goes unchecked. Yet we would be remiss if we simply presumed that every age claim in the U.S. to age 115 or older was false, or that every false claimant was from the South or African-American. Indeed, some were from the North, and false claims came in every ethnic group.

Below, I provide the cases of verified supercentenarians in the United States who attained the age of 115 years or greater, along with a few of the many cases which turned out to be false. For the sake of space, I have compiled an unabridged list of validated cases³ followed by a few examples of false cases. This should not be taken to mean that most claims were true; in fact, the vast majority of U.S. claims to age 115 or older have been shown to be either false or unverifiable (see chapter by Kestenbaum and Ferguson in this volume for more details). A complete listing would prove difficult as the claims number in the thousands (again, the words of Thoms from 1873: “Every day and week sends forth a new [case].”). Thus we are reminded why the burden of proof must be on the claimant to establish with certainty the age of the person claimed. In my opinion, that task has been accomplished in the first set of cases. While presenting the details, I expect that future readers will choose their own level of skepticism regarding the veracity of each case. As Thoms noted, the greatest error, that of assuming to be true what has not been shown to be true, was related to appeals to authority and a tendency to believe ‘experts.’ Thus, readers need not take my word for it, but the evidence itself should suffice to prove beyond a reasonable doubt whether the below cases are true or false. In a few cases, such as those of Maggie Barnes, Elizabeth Bolden, or Susie Gibson, there remains some degree of doubt about exact ages,

² <http://www.wrdw.com/home/headlines/5010191.html> (accessed Feb 26 2008).

³ With the exception of one case, Lucy Hannah. Lucy Hannah: Aged 117 or 118? (July 16, 1875-March 21 1993) The Lucy Hannah case is different than most in that her claim to age 118 did not gather much attention (if any) while she was living. The first mention of this case in a national listing was in the 1999 SSDI listings. The claim to age 118 would have made Lucy the world’s oldest person, if validated. But for reasons unknown, this case never made it into the news.. However, in September 2003, the SSA study reportedly validated the age of Lucy Hannah to be one year younger than claimed, or 117. This would make her the third-oldest validated person after Calment and Knauss but never the world’s oldest person, as Calment was a few months older at the time. Due to a lack of detailed information, this case will not be examined closely in this chapter.

but the question is whether these women were 115 or 116; in all cases, they were found to be at least 115 years old, so they are included here.

2 Validated cases

2.1 Sarah Knauss: Oldest validated American ever at age 119 (September 24, 1880 - December 30, 1999)

Sarah Knauss, at 119 years and 97 days, is the oldest American whose age has been validated. She was named the “world’s oldest person” by Guinness World Records upon the death of Marie-Louise Meilleur of Canada on April 16, 1998. More importantly, she is listed as the oldest verified supercentenarian in the Social Security Administration’s Kestenbaum study of U.S. supercentenarians who reached the age of 110 or greater between January 1, 1980, and December 31, 1999 (see chapter by Kestenbaum and Ferguson in this volume for study details).

The Sarah Knauss case first garnered international media attention in August 1997, following the death of Jeanne Calment at 122, who had held the Guinness record for “world’s oldest person” for several years⁴. In an attempt to gain Guinness recognition following the August 4, 1997, death of France’s Jeanne Calment, the Sarah Knauss case was researched in 1997 by genealogist Edith Rogers Moyer for Phoebe Ministries. Prior to that time, the Sarah Knauss case had already attracted the attention of both the American media and the scientific community, but documents had not yet been located. Her 117th birthday in September 1997 drew major attention, as did her ascent to the title of “world’s oldest person” in April 1998. Her family was featured in *Life* magazine in February 1999, complete with a photo of six living generations.

Meanwhile, international researchers Tom Perls, Jean-Marie Robine, Bernard Jeune, and John Wilmoth visited Sarah Knauss in 1998. Some may have arrived skeptical, but all left convinced she was really the age claimed. Documents that were located and reported by the genealogist Moyer in 1997 (a partial list of these results has been published) (Robine and Vaupel, 2002), included a 1900 census match, an 1880 census record for the family, a 1901 marriage license, and an August 29,

⁴ Guinness World Records gave Calment the title in 1988, aged 113. In 1989, they took it back and gave it to Carrie White (1874?-1991) (see discussion about Carrie White later in this chapter). In 1991 Calment regained the Guinness title and held it for six years, uncontested.

1901, newspaper article. Indeed, checking back through the local Allentown newspaper archives (<http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/mcall/>) one finds scores of news articles, including coverage of her 106th, 107th, 108th, 111th, 113th, 114th, 115th, 116th, 117th, 118th, and 119th birthdays. Sarah Knauss was featured in a national news article as far back as age 115. There can be no doubt that Sarah was well-known in her hometown as a centenarian a decade before the international media coverage began. In the case of Sarah Knauss, the Social Security records accord with the birth date of September 24, 1880. Indeed, she was featured in a news article as “Three Generations on Social Security.” When she was 115, her daughter was 92, and her grandson was 70.

In re-investigating this case, I decided to pretend, for the sake of methodology, that this case had not already been verified. As mentioned before, the first step in such a validation is to establish background details of the person’s life. From numerous news articles, I was able to gather that Sarah Knauss was born on September 24, 1880, to Walter and Amelia Clark, in the tiny hamlet of Hollywood, Pennsylvania. She moved as a child to South Bethlehem. On August 28, 1901, she married Abraham Lincoln Knauss, and gave birth to her first and only child, Kathryn ‘Kitty’ (Knauss) Sullivan, on November 17, 1903. Her husband died in 1965, aged 86. Sarah Knauss died on December 30, 1999, in Allentown, Pennsylvania, alleged to be 119 years old.

Searching the April 1930 census, I found Sarah listed in the state of Pennsylvania, Lehigh County, town of Allentown, as age 49.⁵ Included in the listing were Knauss, Abraham L., head, 52, age at first marriage, 23; and Knauss, Sarah C., wife, 49, age at first marriage, 21. Given that someone born in September 1880 would be 49 years old in April 1930, the age accorded with what was expected. The names of the county, town, husband, and middle initials all matched. Even the age at first marriage was roughly correct (off by no more than one year). However, only one relation, the husband, was listed.

Going further back, I ran a search in the 1910 census for an “Abraham Knauss” (families are indexed by “head of household”), and located the Knauss family. The April 1910 census⁶ was a perfect match for several reasons. First, the location (Allentown, Lehigh County, Pennsylvania) was correct. The husband, Abraham L. Knauss, is the same as in the 1930 census, but this time “Sarah” is listed as “Sadie.” This shows

⁵ Roll T626_2604, enumeration district 38, image 0304, page 21 B.

⁶ Pennsylvania, Lehigh County, roll 1363, book 2, page 108a lists Knauss, Abraham L., head, 32, married 8 years Knauss, Sadie C., wife, 29, married 8 years Knauss, Kathryn C., daughter, 6 years old Clark, Foster L., brother-in-law, 20 years old.

that “Sarah” and “Sadie” is almost certainly the same person. The middle initial is the same, and someone who was married eight years previously and was 29 years old at the time of the census would have been married at 21. Also of note, we see the daughter, Kathryn, listed as age six in April 1910. This accords with a birth date of November 1903, and the woman listed in the 1999 obituaries as Sarah’s 96-year-old daughter (Kitty Sullivan died in 2005, aged 101). If this were not enough, the brother-in-law, Foster Clark, shows that Sadie Knauss’s maiden name was “Clark.” The age of 29 years old in April 1910 accords with a birth date of September 1880. However, this is still outside the “20-year window” of “validation by proxy,” a generally accepted limit within which a delayed proof of birth may be considered reliable (and the cutoff used by the SSA study). Thus, some earlier form of evidence was needed.

I then ran a search in the June 1900 census, and found the necessary record.⁷ We see that Sadie Clark was listed as 19 years old, and as having been born in September 1880. The record is within the 20-year window. Curiously, there is no “Foster L. Clark” listed, but the age of 20 years given in April 1910 suggests he could be listed as “Earl Clark,” born May 1889. One small issue is that there is a nine-year gap between Sarah Knauss and her next-oldest sibling. Were there other children not listed here who either died before June 1900, or were living elsewhere at the time? A skeptic might say that Sarah Knauss could have been born as late as 1888. In that case, she would be a mere 111 years old. However, such a supposition is highly unlikely.

Revisiting the Edith Roger Moyer report, the marriage license states that Sarah De Reemer Clark and Abraham Lincoln Knauss were married by Rev. Dr. Gilbert Henry Sterling on August 28, 1901 (housed at the Cathedral Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania). The document states that Sarah Clark was 21 at the time (actually, she was 27 days shy of her 21st birthday). Also of note, the *Globe* newspaper of South Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, printed on August 29, 1901, a wedding notice that included the words: “of the contracting couple, Abraham Lincoln Knauss and Miss Sadie De Remer Clark.”

This issue might have been further resolved by the 1890 census. Unfortunately, most of the 1890 census (about 97%) was destroyed by

⁷ Listed in Pennsylvania, Northampton County, South Bethlehem borough, roll 1447, book 1, page 93 is: Clark, Walter , head, born Apr 1849, age 51, married 25 years Clark, Amelia, wife, born June 1857, age 42, married 25 years Clark, Charles, son, born July 1878, age 21 Clark, Sadie, daughter, born Sept 1880, age 19 Clark, Earl, son, born May 1889, age 11 Clark, Emily, daughter, born May 1893, age 7.

fire in 1921. Pennsylvania was not on the list of states with surviving fragments. Going back 10 years, we find in the June 1880 census, in the village of Hollywood, Pennsylvania, the family of Walter Clark, 31; wife Emelia, 23; son Albert L., four; and son Charles H., two. The ages of Walter, Amelia, and Charles match what is expected from the 1900 census records. The presence of an older brother, age four, shows that Amelia gave birth as early as 1876, when she was 19 years old. The subsequent fate of Albert is uncertain at this time. Sarah Clark, as expected, was not listed. This proves that, in June 1880, she had not been born yet, and thus could be no older than 119 years old.

Taking a close look at the documents, we find that Sarah did indeed have siblings born between 1880 and 1889: Walter Clark, Jr., born on July 19, 1884, and baptized on September 7, 1884, apparently died as an infant; the 1884 baptismal record noted he was deceased. Also of note was the brother, Edward Clark, born November 8, 1885, and baptized July 23, 1886; again, he was deceased by the time of his baptism. This helps to fill in the gap. We can conclude that, if her younger siblings were born in 1884 and 1885, she must have been born no later than September 1883, and even this would be an implausible nine months' separation between births. Thus, we can further state that she was almost certainly born in September 1882 or earlier, and hence aged no less than 117 years old. There is, however, ample evidence supporting the 1880 date, and not one document suggesting any other year of birth. This case is much cleaner than many other cases.

Given all the information available, we can conclude that Sarah Knauss really was 119 years old. The family maintained meticulous records; they never left or migrated outside a small area of the state of Pennsylvania; and the age of Sarah matched the 1880 birth claim in every record checked. We have proof of marriage and name change. While it is possible to further scour the records for more missing details (i.e., to answer the question of what happened to her older brother) and to carry out a further family reconstitution, the false cases mentioned later in this chapter would already have been exposed with such a level of scrutiny.

2.2 Elizabeth Bolden: Was the world's oldest person at age 116 (August 15, 1890 - December 11, 2006)

The African-American Elizabeth Bolden's story surfaced in 2003, when an article ran in the Memphis, Tennessee newspaper about "Lizzie" Bolden's "112th" birthday and was picked up by national newswires. As usual, the first step in investigating an extreme claim is to collect

details of the story and try to create an outline. In this case, early factors pointed to Elizabeth being quite old, including reports of children said to be in their eighties, and of great-great-grandchildren. When it came to actual documents, however, the story pleaded, as is typical in such cases, that the family did not have them, and that any documents that once existed were destroyed. Since a fire had destroyed the Fayette County, Tennessee, records in 1925, the family had guessed that Elizabeth was born in 1891. Though the newspaper reporter had given up on trying to verify the age before she started, I wanted to make my own attempt. The SSA study also suggested to me that Elizabeth Bolden was listed as still living in their database, but they were not permitted to release the information for confidentiality reasons (the records become public after death in the U.S.).

What did the census records say? First, I found the 1930 census, which listed “Lizzie Bolden,” 37, wife of “Louis” Bolden. While Lewis was misspelled, it was the correct location (Memphis, Tennessee) and the children included Queen and Mamie L., matching the names of the children in the newspaper. This first find established that Elizabeth “Lizzie” Bolden was probably at least 110 years old, but listed her as a year younger than expected. However, from hundreds of prior searches, I knew that the ages given for women, especially married women over the age of 30, tend to be understated, and especially if they were older than their husband. Also piquing my interest was the discovery that Lizzie’s oldest child, Ezell, was listed as being 21 years old! If she was, in fact, 37 years old, she would have given birth at just 16 years of age (possible, but not likely). Even with this age undercount, in 2003 Elizabeth would have to have been at least 111 years old.

Jeff Knight, Tennessee police investigator and amateur investigator of supercentenarian claims, agreed to assist in my effort to find Lizzie in earlier census records. He located her in the 1920 census.⁸ The bad news was that it listed her as 26 years old, in January 1920, suggesting that Lizzie was born in 1893. The good news was that the census listed one of the missing children, John Bolden. In any case, I had found Elizabeth Bolden in the 1910 census as well.⁹ As far back as April 1910, Lizzie’s age was recorded as 19 years old, and she had a seven-month old son. “Lizzie” Bolden was already married and had a child in 1910! This record suggested that Lizzie was older than the ages recorded not

⁸ 1920 United States Federal Census > Tennessee > Fayette > Civil District 8 > District 12.

⁹ Tennessee, Fayette county, roll 1498, book 2, page 165. Listed were Lewis Bolden, 19, black, head Lizzie, wife, black, 19 Ezell, son, 7/12 year (7 months old).

only in the 1930 census (born in 1892) and in the 1920 census (born in 1893), but was also older the family thought (born in 1891). Still, I couldn't be certain that Lizzie was really born in 1890. The 1910 census was only one record, and the other census matches did not confirm the birth year as 1890. Moreover, the 1910 census only gives the age, not the month or year of birth. Thus, we needed the 1900 census. But that would be difficult, because I didn't know the names of her parents at the time. A little more background information was needed.

The 2003 article had listed Elizabeth Bolden as the grandmother-in-law of the Memphis police director (James Bolden)¹⁰. Phone calls to Memphis provided early-life family history—names of Lizzie's parents and siblings. Finally, Jeff Knight located the 1900 census match. To quote Mr. Knight below:

I found what I believe to be her census match. She is listed in the home of Annie Jones with siblings Monroe, Mary, Josie and John. Annie is listed at the head of the household and apparently a single parent at this point. They are living in Fayette County and this clearly lists Lizzie as born August 1890 and age 9. This was taken from the 1900 Census for Tennessee, Fayette County, First District, Supervisors District 10, Enumeration District 2, Sheet 13. This census was taken June 23, 1900.¹¹

The 1900 census seemed to confirm the 1910 census. Not only was Lizzie found to be nine years old in June 1900, the 1900 census (unlike the 1910 census) listed the actual year and month of birth (making it a better census for research purposes). And that year and month of birth was listed as "Aug 1890," which would make Lizzie Bolden older than the woman then believed to be the oldest living American, Bettie Wilson (see Bettie Wilson section, below).

But one final question remained: Can we be sure that the Lizzie Jones in the 1900 census is the Lizzie Bolden living today in Memphis, Tennessee? To help me solve that problem, I asked the grandson if he could guess one or more names of Lizzie's siblings. When he said, "Monroe," I was convinced this was the correct match. I was careful not to let the left hand know what the right hand was doing. Mr. Knight did not have the grandson's phone number, and the grandson did not have the 1900 census. Hence, I was convinced that the person listed in the 1900 census as born August 1890 was the same person who was alive when I made the phone call to the family.

¹⁰ Elizabeth also had two grandsons named James.

¹¹ See http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/Worlds_Oldest_People/messages for details.

At the time of her age validation in April 2005, Elizabeth “Lizzie” Bolden was 114, but, by August 2005, she had celebrated her 115th birthday. Of her seven children, two were still living in late 2006: Queen, age 89; and Mamie, age 86. The birthdates cited for Lizzie’s children matched well with the records: Ezell, the first son, was born September 21, 1909—note that being seven months old in April 1910 would place his birth date in September 1909. Both Queen’s and Mamie’s ages were correct in the 1930 census (April 1930–March 1917 would make Queen thirteen, and April 1930–August 1920 would make Mamie nine). The grandson also said that Lizzie’s second child was John Bolden, confirmed from the 1920 census listing. Finally, the grandson, James Bolden, sent me a copy of a family biography of Elizabeth Jones Bolden from August 1983. The documents confirm the identity of Elizabeth, her parents, and her seven children, long before anyone thought she might become the world’s oldest person.

Elizabeth “Lizzie” Bolden was recognized by Guinness World Records as the “oldest living American” from June 23, 2005. She was briefly recognized as the world’s oldest person for 101 days in late 2005 after the death of Hendrikje van Andel-Schipper of the Netherlands on August 30, 2005 (see chapter by Jeune et al. in this volume) and before Maria Capovilla was awarded the title on December 9, 2005. After the death of Maria Capovilla on August 27, 2006, Elizabeth Bolden was considered to be the “world’s oldest person.”¹² Her living children were 89 and 86 years old; her oldest son would have been 97 if still living (but he died in 1987, aged 78) and she was said to have great-great-great-great-grandchildren, though the claim to seven generations has not been verified.

2.3 Maggie Barnes: Aged 115 or 116? (March 6, 1881 or 1882? - January 19, 1998)

I first became aware of the claim that Maggie Barnes had reached age 117 in 1998, after her death made the newspapers. The reports said she was born on March 6, 1880, and died on January 19, 1998, which would have made her 117 years and 319 days old—older by five months than Canada’s Marie-Louise Meilleur, who, at that time, was still alive at 117. At first, I was skeptical, as many exaggerated claims had been made by African-Americans in the past. However, upon reading the

¹² Guinness officially bestowed the title on her on September 17, 2006. Bolden is just the second person, after Jeanne Calment, to re-gain the title after losing it to someone thought to be older.

obituary from the local newspaper (Raleigh, North Carolina's News and Observer, January 22, 1998), I noticed several characteristics of this story that stood out from the others I've seen. For one, the surviving children were aged 92, 90, 75, and 71; which compared well with the ages of Marie-Louise Meilleur's surviving children, aged 89 to 71. Another factor was that the family had made a concerted effort to document her age, applying to Guinness for the "world's oldest person" title. Interestingly, the article stated that the family Bible said she was born in 1882, while the 1900 census "put her birth date in 1881," and the marriage license said 1880. It appeared that, although she might not have been the 117 years claimed, a case could be made that she was at least 115 years old.

Searching for Maggie's children, I discovered that three of the four children listed in the article had died, but the youngest, Mildred, was still living. A search of the Social Security Death Index (SSDI) turned up the dates of birth and death for the three children mentioned in the article who had died since: Gladys Roberson (November 7, 1907 - September 7, 1998), at age 90; Clara Barnes (August 30, 1905 - September 8, 1998), at age 93; and Ruth Revell (December 4, 1922 - January 12, 2002), at age 79. This information confirmed the ages of the children given in the story.

The daughter, Mildred, was able to provide information pertinent to her mother's case. Her father was William O. Barnes; there were 15 children, but seven died as infants or in childbirth. The first child born was Lillian, while Gladys also went by the name "Beatrice." The SSDI listed Gladys B. Roberson, so the middle initial matched as well. Maggie Barnes had lived her entire life in Wilson and Johnson counties, North Carolina. Mildred also confirmed that "Hinnant" was her mother's maiden name, not a middle name. The children, as she remembered them, were Lillian, Clara, Mary, Nellie, William, Ruth, Mildred, Marian, Malichai, and Gladys Beatrice. The husband's name was William Orangie Barnes. The family had been sharecroppers.

Searching the 1930 census, I discovered Maggie Barnes, 48, in Beulah, Johnston County, North Carolina. Maggie was listed with husband William O. Barnes, 52, and children Willie, 16(?); Mary, 14; Ruth, eight; and Mildred, four. Since the 1930 census was taken in April, this suggests that March 1882 was the correct birth date. I also noted that the two younger children were definite matches, although the ages given, eight and four, appeared to be rounded up. The names Willie and Mary also match the list of children mentioned by Mildred.

Going further back, the 1920 census for Beulah, Johnston County, North Carolina, listed W.O. Barnes, 48, and his wife, Maggie, 40; as well as children Clara, 15; Beatrice, 12; Nettie, nine; Willie, seven; and Mary, four(?). The names of every child roughly corresponded with what would be expected: Clara, born August 1905, should have been 14; Beatrice, born in November 1907, is correctly listed as 12 years old in January 1920; "Nettie" is likely "Nellie;" while the names Willie and Mary appear again. Ruth and Mildred were not born yet, and thus are not listed. The age of 40 years old in January 1920 suggests a birth date in March 1879, which, if correct, would have made Maggie Barnes 118 years old.

Turning the clock back another ten years, I was able to locate Maggie Barnes again in the 1910 census,¹³ which listed husband William Barnes, 32; wife Maggie, 30; daughter Lillian, 10; daughter Clara, 5; daughter Beatrice, 3; and an indecipherable name. The names of the three oldest children all matched what would be expected. Once again, the age of Clara appeared to be rounded up; if born in August 1905 she would have been four years old in April 1910. The age for Beatrice appeared to be rounded up as well: three, instead of two. The age of the husband, William, corresponded with the 1930 listing of 52 years old 20 years later, suggesting the 1920 census record was less reliable in this instance. The age of Maggie, 30 years old in April 1930, suggests a birth date in March 1880.

Mildred Barnes also sent me a copy of the marriage certificate. It stated that William Barnes, 22, married Maggie Hinnant, 19, on October 22, 1899. However, this was a delayed certificate only issued in 1954. From this document, we can say that Maggie Hinnant and Maggie Barnes were one and the same person, but a document written in 1954 (not a 1954 copy of an 1899 original) does not prove that Maggie Barnes was really 19 years old, or that she actually married in 1899. The family Bible, apparently, could not be located. Thus, the last document that remained to be checked was the 1900 census. The 1998 newspaper article stated that Maggie Barnes was listed as born in 1881 in the 1900 census. The 1900 census match was found by the SSA/Kestenbaum study.¹⁴ The 1900 census listed this couple as married less than one year. However, given that the census was taken in

¹³ The rolls for North Carolina, Johnston county, town of Kenly, East Beulah township, roll 1118, book 2, page 157.

¹⁴ In September 2003, the Kestenbaum study located in the 1900 census for North Carolina, Wilson County, roll 1224 book 2 page 1 a the following match:
Orangine W. Barnes, head, 21
Maggie Barnes, wife, 19 (born Mar 1881).

June, a marriage date of October 1899 is plausible. Moreover, if born March 1881, Maggie Barnes would have been 116 years and 319 days old at her passing. However, the SSA study decided to “err on the side of caution.” Because the family Bible said “1882,” the SSA went with age 115.

The issue, then, with this case is not whether Maggie Barnes was older than 115, but how much older. When I asked Mildred how old her mother “really” was, she replied, “116.” The evidence almost certainly suggests that the Maggie Barnes who died in 1998 was at least 115 years, 10 months old; and possibly 116 years, 10 months old. However, it may be that the SSA study’s conservatism was on the mark: in 2008, I located the North Carolina Death record for Maggie Barnes, which listed her date of birth as March 6, 1882. While this would make her younger than Marie-Louise Meilleur, and even deny her the “oldest living American” title (Sarah Knauss, born September 24, 1880, eclipsed her), all the evidence agrees that Maggie Barnes was one of the first verified persons to reach age 115,¹⁵ and was, at the very least, the world’s third-oldest person at the time of her passing.

2.4 Margaret Skeete: Oldest living american at age 115 (October 27, 1878 - May 7, 1994)

Margaret Skeete, said to be born October 27, 1878, in Rockport, Texas, first garnered national media attention in 1993, when she was included in the Guinness Book of Records as the “oldest living American” at age 114. She was again listed in the 1994 edition at age 115. The family actually applied to the Guinness Book and was accepted in 1992, when Margaret Skeete was age 113, according to the local Roanoke Times newspaper (July 11, 1992). Other local press mentions were found for April 1, 1992 (application for Guinness recognition); October 29, 1992 (114th birthday); March 5, 1993 (inclusion in 1993 Guinness edition); October 28, 1993 (115th birthday); and December 8, 1993 (parade marshal). Thus, we have a case where the person was not suddenly declared to be age 115 upon death; instead, the record shows that Margaret Skeete had been verified as 113 years old while still alive, and then went on to live two more years.

The second step in the age investigative process involved combing the news articles for pertinent background details. Of particular note

¹⁵ Including Lucy Hannah but discounting questionable cases, Maggie Barnes would have been the eighth person to reach 115, in March 1997. The ninth person, Christian Mortensen, turned 115 in August 1997 (see chapter by Jeune et al. in this volume).

were the claims that Margaret Skeete was born in Rockport, Texas; that she was recorded in the 1880 census; that she lived in Texas until 1953, when her husband, Renn Skeete died, then moved to Virginia; and that her oldest daughter was Verne Taylor. Also noted in Guinness was her maiden name, Seward. The articles also stated that she had three children.

Searching the 1920 census, I located a listing for Martha M. Skeete, age 41, wife of Renn Skeete, who had three children: Verne, daughter; Seward, son; Charles, son. The record was for Brazoria County, Texas. Since the 1920 census was taken in January, someone born in October 1878 should have been 41 years old at the time, exactly the age given for “Martha” Skeete. The unusual name of the husband matches, as does the name of the oldest daughter, Verne. The older son’s name, Seward, suggests he was named after Margaret Skeete’s maiden name. The location, Texas, also matches. We can thus conclude that this is the same woman who died in 1994 at the age of 115.

However, 41 years is still too far removed from the birth event to provide certainty. It could be that her age was still off by a few years. If the 1880 listing could be found, however, it would put this issue to rest. Because Rockport, Texas, is in Aransas County, and the county had a population in 1880 of only about 150 people, a simple search of the county should turn up the match—and it did. Located was an R.H. Seward, 39, with wife Margaret, 39, and children Mary, 14; William, 11; Isaac, nine; L.E., seven; Frank, four; and Mattie, two. This was obviously the same match found and sent to Guinness by the family. Of course, knowing the names of the family in advance would have helped, but both the maiden name, Seward, and the name of the mother, Margaret, match. In addition, in such a small population, there was only one Seward family listed. Thus, this appears to be the same person. A minor issue is that if this were the same person, taken literally, she would have been 116 years old, not 115. However, it is likely that the age of the child was rounded up to two, the census having been conducted in June 1880. In any case, finding evidence suggesting Margaret may have been older certainly does not contradict the claim to being “115+,” but strengthens it.

Searching again, the 1910 census turned up a match. Once again, we find husband Renn Skeete, 27. Daughter Verne is the only child listed at 1, but the others wouldn’t have been born yet. The county, Brazoria, matches the 1920 listing. Interestingly, the wife’s name is given as “Mattie Skeete.” This proves that the Margaret Skeete who died in 1994 went by “Mattie” at an earlier period, and thus provides

more evidence to support the assumption that the Mattie Seward in the 1880 census listing is the Mattie Skeete in the 1910 census, the Martha Skeete in the 1920 census, and the Margaret Skeete who died in 1994 at age 115. Further, the age given, 31 (in April 1910), is consistent with what is expected for someone born in October 1878. Although this case could be studied further, all the evidence combines in a way that strongly supports the contention that Margaret Skeete really was 115 years and 192 days old when she died on May 7, 1994. Mrs. Skeete's cause of death was given as a result of a fall three weeks earlier, breaking a hip.

2.5 Emiliano Mercado Del Toro: Second man to reach 115 (August 21, 1891 - January 24, 2007)

In 2002, it was reported from Puerto Rico that the oldest military veteran in the world was living there at age 111.¹⁶ In early 2003, a family member contacted me to report that Emiliano Mercado Del Toro was “dying” of gangrene in his foot. However, he recovered, and by December 2003, was featured prominently in a New York Times article.¹⁷ It was not until November 2004, following the passing of Fred Hale, 113, that I began receiving documents on this case. At this point, Emiliano was the leading candidate for the Guinness “world’s oldest man” title. At the time, I was a correspondent with Guinness, and they sent me the documents for the case to help validate it. While the details of the documents remain confidential, what was impressive in my view was the number of early documents. The family had sent a certified copy of an original 1891 birth certificate written in September 1891, an 1892 baptismal entry stating that the birth had taken place in 1891, and identification cards verifying both his status as a veteran and as a resident of Puerto Rico. Using the personal family details, including parental information, I, with the help of Mr. Jeff Knight once again, was able to come up with some census matches.¹⁸

The 1910 census in particular was compelling, as it listed Emilio Mercado y Toro as age 19, along with his father (age 45), mother (age 50), sister (age 13), and niece (also 13). Not only was this the correct

¹⁶ <http://www.puertorico-herald.org/issues/2002/vol16n46/Media2-en.shtml> (accessed Oct. 16, 2006).

¹⁷ http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/w/world_war_i_/index.html?query=MERCADO\%20DEL\%20TORO,\%20EMILIANO&field=per&match=exact (accessed Oct. 16, 2006).

¹⁸ Source Citation: Year: 1910; Census Place: Pedernales, Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico; Roll: T624.1761; Page: 16A; Enumeration District: 491; Image: 658.

town (Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico), but the names of both parents matched the birth certificate (Delfin Mercado and Gumercinda Del Toro). Hence, we have a positive identification and an age that points to a birth date in 1890 (since the census was taken in May, the family may have simply rounded up Emiliano's age, as he would have been three months shy of 19, if born in August 1891).

The 1920 census¹⁹ also lists what appear to be Emiliano, his mother, and some siblings, again in the same town, Cabo Rojo. However, the age given this time is 27, or one year younger than expected (and, given that the 1920 census was taken in January, this census record correlates to a birth date in August 1892).

The 1930 census, in contrast, is a clear age underreport. Here we see Emiliano again with his mother, Gumercinda, in Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico. However, the age given, 32, correlates to a birth date of 1897. Also of note, Gumercinda's age was listed as 59 in 1920, as 50 in 1910, but as 60 (instead of 70) in 1930. This points to the issue of age underreporting. While age overreporting is common for persons over 80, many middle-aged women tend to underreport their ages. Emilio's age underreports in 1920 and 1930 would partly be a reflection of his mother wanting to appear younger, but perhaps also reflected a slight embarrassment with having a 38-year-old, single bachelor still living with his mother. Documents must be viewed in the context in which they were written.

For this case I also received assistance from Lt. Col. Bob Johnson of the Veterans Administration (VA), who had been searching for remaining World War I veterans, especially in obtaining the WWI papers and the VA records. In Emiliano's case, his WWI papers listed his age erroneously (as age 25 in late 1918), which suggested a birth date in 1893. However, given that the two documents were written in 1891 and 1892, we must conclude that these were in error, and that 1891 was the correct date. It should be noted that WWI records often were erroneous, as ages given were adjusted to make a candidate more likely to be drafted (i.e., 17-year-olds became 18, while 27-year-olds became 25). The main importance of these documents is to establish identity. Emiliano never married and never had children, so to conclude that the man living today is the one in the original birth and baptismal records, military records confirming his identity are absolutely necessary. In January 2005, Guinness World Records officially recognized Emiliano as the world's oldest man and oldest veteran.

¹⁹ Source Citation: Year: 1920; Census Place: Pedernales, Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico; Roll: T625.2049; Page: 12B; Enumeration District: 491; Image: 366.

In short, we have many documents to support this case. In contrast to some cases, the oldest documents (1891 birth certificate, 1892 baptismal record, 1910 census) support the oldest birth date, whereas the later records (1918 WWI papers, 1920 census, 1930 census) suggest birth dates of 1892-1897. The principle of stratigraphy again holds that the older documents, laid down first, are more reliable. Moreover, given that the 1891 and 1892 records were written in 1891 and 1892, Emiliano must have been born in August 1891, assuming the records refer to him. In regards to sibling-switching, in 1910 we see Emiliano listed along with a 13-year-old sister and a 13-year-old niece. According to the 1910 listing, Emiliano's parents had been married for 21 years.²⁰ This makes it likely that Emilio/Emiliano was the firstborn son.²¹ Given that, as of 1910, the mother was listed as 50 years old (and had stopped having children 13 years ago), Emiliano was alive and listed, and the only other sibling listed is a 13-year-old daughter, we can find no room for an alternate explanation. If a younger Emilio had been born, the older one would have died and the younger one would have been listed. That is not the case here. Instead, the Emiliano listed is older, and there is no younger male sibling. Emiliano's age only begins to be less than expected when he is an adult, and when society's assumptions of marriage and independent living, combined with a middle-aged woman's tendency to understate her age, may have led his mother to underreport his age in 1920 (by one year) and in 1930 (by six years). Notably, the mother underreported her age by one year in 1920 and, 10 years in 1930, suggesting that the mother's age was an overriding factor in Emiliano's age underreport.

In regards to the Emiliano/Emilio name issue, I found that the original birth and baptismal certificate used "Emiliano," but that many documents, including the census matches and identity cards, used "Emilio." However, first it should be noted that these two names are seen as interchangeable, much like Tom/Thomas or Dave/David in English. Second, rather than one name being used earlier and another later, I instead found that the two names were used interchangeably at

²⁰ If Emiliano's age were false, it would be more likely that his parents would have been married for a time too short for him to be 19 in 1910. Clearly, this case passes that test, as 21 is greater than 19.

²¹ We can also note that Emiliano's father would have been 26 years old and his mother 31 years old at the time of his birth. Given that many false cases forget to change the age of their parents (i.e., the parents gave 'birth' at age 10 or 15), this case passes yet another test. I know of one case, William Coates, where the 22-year age exaggeration claimed placed his birthdate in 1889, while his mother was born in 1890!

various points in time, and with cross-identifying information. Third, the names of the parents and town location, and the double last name, help to confirm that there was only one Emiliano/Emilio Mercado Del Toro who was born in Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico, on August 21, 1891, to Delfino Mercado and Gumercinda Del Toro.

Given Emiliano's frail health, many did not expect him to survive to his 115th birthday, but Emiliano was not one to give up easily. In August 2006, he reached the age of 115, becoming just the second verified male to reach that age. On December 11, 2006, following the passing of Elizabeth Bolden, Emiliano was named world's oldest person by Guinness World Records, the first time in twenty years a male had held the title. It was not to be long, however: on January 24, 2007, Emiliano passed away "like an angel" according to a family member, at age 115 years 156 days.

2.6 Bettie Wilson: Aged 115 (September 13, 1890 - February 13, 2006)

The Bettie Wilson case first came to my attention in September 2003. Shortly after Bettie's 113th birthday in New Albany, Mississippi, the local newspaper reporter sent me an email informing me that, not only was a local resident turning 113, but that the family had documents as well, including records from the 1900 census. Further, the newspaper story claimed that Bettie was a great-great-great-great-grandmother, and that her son was 94 years old. Not only was Bettie said to be 113, but photos of her also showed her to be in great shape.

The family already had documentation, including a 1900 census match listing Bettie Rutherford as nine years old, born September 1890; a 1919²² marriage certificate; a 1922 marriage certificate; and a 1959 census copy of the 1900 census match, showing that, in 1959, the family used the 1900 census match, perhaps to identify Bettie Wilson to obtain retirement benefits (she would have been 69 years old in 1959). Moreover, the 1959 document established that Bettie Wilson was then a resident of New Albany, Mississippi. However, the son was said to have been born on October 27, 1909 (which would have made

²² Marriage certificates in Mississippi did not begin until 1912. Thus, for a marriage license to be issued to an African-American couple some 9-10 years after the birth of their child is not surprising, given the context of time and place. Given the ages of Bettie's son in the 1930 and 1920 census, it seems most likely that Willie Rogers was born in October 1910, although the family claims he was born in October 1909. Bettie's son was thus 95 or 96 years old at the time of his mother's passing.

him 93, not 94, in September 2003). Also, apparently the claim that she was a four-time great-grandmother was an error: Bettie was simply a great-great-great-grandmother, I was told. Nonetheless, my interest was piqued.

Thus, in September 2004, I attended Bettie Wilson's 114th birthday party. There, I talked to her in person, as well as to her family. The family tree book, apparently written in the 1970s, listed Bettie Antry (Rutherford) Wilson as born on September 13, 1890, and her son Willie Rogers, as born on October 27, 1909. It was the only record I saw listing their birth dates. However, each new piece of evidence seemed to help: the 1900 census listed Bettie A. Rutherford, with her middle name now starting with an "A." In November 2004, I returned to Mississippi to interview Bettie Wilson for an oral history project (for Georgia State University in conjunction with the University of Mississippi). In talking to Bettie, I learned that her mother came from South Carolina, and that her father was Solomon Rutherford.

With the best census record, that of 1900, already located, I continued on to the April 1910 census, which included a record of Bettie Rutherford, age 20, a single woman and maid. The age given suggests that her birth date was in September 1889, but she may have been 19 years old. The 1900 census is earlier and seems more accurate (listing her as born in September 1890 and as age nine)—once again, the closer to the birth date, the better.

However, in the 1930 census her age was recorded as 35, and her second husband, Dewey Wilson, was said to be only 32. As the head of household normally gave the information, could it be that Dewey didn't want it to be known that Bettie was much older than he was? Indeed, in the census, Bettie's age at first marriage is given as 27, and Dewey's as 24. But if Bettie was 35 in 1930, the year when she was 27 would have been 1922, the year of her second marriage certificate. For some reason, Mr. Wilson mis-reported Bettie's age at her first marriage as her age at her second marriage, although Bettie's children from the first marriage were listed: "Duke" and Theresia Rodgers, aged 19 and 16. The family explained that Willie's nickname was "Duke," and given that he was listed as the stepson, not son, of Dewey Wilson, this cements the claim that Bettie Wilson was formerly Bettie Rodgers (the marriage records spell the name as "Rogers"). One last note about the census matches: if Willie "Duke" Rodgers was 19 years old in 1930, he would have been born in 1910, not 1909. Also, the April 1910 census lists Bettie Wilson with no children, which also suggests that Willie was not born in October 1909.

Hence, after investigating, I found that Bettie Wilson's age was correct, but that Willie's age may have been off by a year. Still, Mrs. Bettie Wilson had celebrated her 115th birthday and her son, Willie, was still living at age 95 (not 96 or 97). "Miss Bettie," as she was affectionately called, could still read and write at age 114 and still sang gospel hymns at 115. Sadly, Bettie Wilson passed away February 13, 2006, at the home of her great-granddaughter. At the time, Bettie was recognized as the world's third-oldest person.

2.7 Susie Gibson: Aged 115 or 116? (October 31, 1889 or 1890? - February 16, 2006)

When she died in February 2006, Susie Gibson was believed by family and local Alabama residents to be age 116, born on October 31, 1889. Susie herself has said, "I'm the world's oldest person;" and, "I was born in 1889." The Susie Gibson case was mentioned in the press in late 2001, when a story from a local Alabama newspaper ran about a woman celebrating her 112th birthday (this was found by Louis Epstein; he informed me of this case in March 2002), and I located the original story in a newspaper search index. While relatively late for a first mention of a centenarian story, the claim was still made well before anyone alleged an age of 115 or greater.

Later, in November 2002, the claim was made that Susie Gibson had turned 113 years old, and was one of the oldest living Americans. Whereas previous requests for more information made by Mr. Epstein and me were ignored for months when Susie was 112, now that she was in the running for the "oldest living American" title, we were finally getting some responses. Indeed, several people emailed us to inform that "Suzie" Gibson was celebrating her "113th" birthday. Most importantly, the news writer sent me the phone number for the nursing home, which then asked the family if they would allow me to contact them. When they said "yes," the case began to move forward.

This case began with a dispute over whether Susie Gibson was the "second-oldest" American, or not. The local Times-Daily newspaper had touted her as such, albeit without verification. As it turned out, the family of Susie was able to give pertinent details of her life history. Susie was born in Corinth, Mississippi. Her father was Joe Potts, her husband was James W. Gibson, and her only son was James W. Gibson, Jr. To dispel any doubts about the name change, the family sent me a copy of a wedding invitation. Susie Elizabeth, daughter of Joseph P. Potts, was marrying James W. Gibson on November 8, 1915, in Corinth, Mississippi.

In November 2002, I called daughter-in-law Ernestine Gibson and interviewed her for background information about the family, including the names of Susie's father, mother, siblings, husband, and child; as well as information about the places where they lived. I was subsequently able to find a record in the 1920 census of a Susie Potts Gibson, who was married to James W. Gibson, but had no children yet; her only son, James Jr., was born in 1921. They lived in Sheffield, Colbert County, Alabama. The census match listed Susie as 29 years old.²³ Maybe Susie simply fudged her age in 1920?

I therefore checked the 1900 census as well. Ernestine Gibson told me that Susie's parents were Joe and Mary Potts, and lived in the town of Corinth in Alcorn County, Mississippi, when Susie was a child. Susie had other siblings, including Henry and Aileen. While the names Joe and Mary are extremely common, a search of the 1900 census found only one Joseph Potts in Mississippi, and he lived in Corinth, Alcorn County, in 1900.²⁴ The chance of a similar family living in the same state, county, and town, with the same names of husband, wife, and children, is so small as to not be worth considering. Therefore, I concluded that Susie Potts Gibson was born on October 31, 1890, and was 112 years old at the time.

By November 27, 2002, the GRG list²⁵ had accepted Susie Elizabeth (Potts) Gibson as validated and born on October, 31 1890, instead of on October 31, 1889. While not at the top of the world ranking yet, Susie continued to thrive, while those who were listed as older than she was passed away. A year later, by November 2003, Susie was up to seventh-oldest in the world. Although late age validations, such as those of Bettie Wilson, Elizabeth Bolden, and Maria Capovilla, would slow her climb on the validated living list, Susie continued to thrive in 2004, being well enough to talk to me for an hour interview in November 2004, at the age of 114. Susie would last more than a year longer, even attending an O'Charley's restaurant for her 115th birthday party in 2005. However, she began to fade shortly after that, and passed

²³ The 1920 Census lists a James W. Gibson, 34, and wife Susie Potts Gibson, 29, in Sheffield, Colbert County, Alabama, enumeration District #19. Because the 1920 census was taken in January, 1920-1-29=1890.

²⁴ 1. Joseph Potts, father, born Apr. 1856, 44 years old
 2. Mary Potts, mother, born June 1861, 39 years old
 3. Henry Potts, son, born Oct. 1886, 13 years old
 4. Aline Potts, daughter, born Dec. 1888, 11 years old
 5. Susie Potts, daughter, born Oct. 1890, 9 years old
 6. Robert Potts, son, born May 1893, 7 years old.

²⁵ <http://www.grg.org/Adams/E.HTM> (accessed Oct. 16, 2006).

away on February 16, 2006, just three days after Bettie Wilson. Susie, like Bettie, ended her life as the world's third-oldest person. As I had interviewed both, I attended the funerals of both as well.

But the case of Susie Gibson was not completely finished upon her death: her tombstone, written in the 1950s, was inscribed with an 1889 birth date. Given that Susie herself always said she was born in 1889, I believe that Susie could have been 116 years old, based on the circumstantial evidence.²⁶ However, given that there was no birth certificate and the family Bible has not been located, we must go with the oldest documents available. Two census matches suggest that Susie was 115 years old, including the oldest (1900) census match.

2.8 Maud Farris-Luse: Aged 115 (January 21, 1887 - March 18, 2002)

I first became aware of the case of Maud Farris-Luse in early 2001, shortly after reports of her 114th birthday made the Detroit-area news, and, subsequently, the Internet. Her first 113 birthdays never made it further than the local newspaper in Coldwater, Michigan. However, in 2001 a local resident posted her 114th birthday story on a national website, where I found it. Together with Louis Epstein, we were able to verify that Maud Farris-Luse was really 114 years old by May 2001, less than a month before the death of Guinness "world's oldest person" titleholder Marie Bremont of France (April 25, 1886 - June 6, 2001). Maud was given the Guinness "world's oldest person" title on June 23, 2001. Despite being in delicate condition, Maud reached her 115th birthday in January 2002, before passing away March 18, 2002, from pneumonia.

In the case of Maud, there is ample newspaper evidence of earlier birthday celebrations: her 98th, in 1985; 100th, in 1987; 101st, in 1988; 103rd, in 1990; 105th, in 1992; 106th, in 1993; 107th, in 1994; 108th, in 1995; 109th, in 1996; 110th, in 1997 (whereupon she wrote a letter to Jeanne Calment of France, then almost 122); 112th, in 1999; 113th, in 2000; 114th, in 2001. Thus, a 115th birthday celebration in 2002 was, barring her death, totally expected. We can say with certainty that the

²⁶ That is, the family tombstone was made long before anyone thought that Susie would live to the year 2006. Also, her Social Security records were issued well after age 65, so there was no 'early retirement' incentive. Third, Susie herself said she was born in 1889. At it is, the census reports were made by persons other than Susie (i.e., her father or husband). Thus we have no direct self-reported age from Susie herself. Choosing the census date of 1890 is a default, based on the lack of direct evidence (i.e., birth certificate) from the birth event.

person who died in 2002 aged 115 was the same person who celebrated her 100th birthday 15 years earlier in 1987²⁷.

Maud Davis was born January 21, 1887, in Morley, Michigan, to parents Chester Frank and Della Davis. In 1891, the family moved to Angola, Indiana, reportedly by wagon. In 1903, she married Jason Ferris at age 16, which required parental consent. They enjoyed 48 years together, having seven children, until his death in 1951. The children were identified as Charlie (1905-1987), Ester (1907-?), Ruby (1908-?), Walter (1909-?), Clair (1911-1988), and Dale (1913-1986)—six children born in eight years, when Maud was 18 to 26 years old—then a lone child in 1928, Lucille, when she was 41. Lucille was the only one of seven children to survive Maud. In 1925, the Ferrises moved back to Michigan, settling in Coldwater. At some point, Maud decided to spell her name “Maud Farris;” it was originally “Maude Ferris.” Later, a short marriage to a Mr. Luse in the early 1960’s rounded out the present form, Maud Farris-Luse.

Comparing the files of family history sent to me by the family of Maud, we now take a look at the census evidence. The 1920 census for Indiana, Steuben County, city of Angola, enumeration district 160, lists Jason Ferris, head, 41; wife Maude, 32; and children Charles, 14; Esther, 13; Clair, 8; and Dale, 6. Because the 1920 census gives the age of the persons “as of January 1, 1920,” and Maude wouldn’t have been 33 years old until January 21, the listing here is technically correct. With four matching children (it is possible that Ruby and Walter had died early), the correct husband, town, county, and state, there can be no doubt as to the identity of the family here.

Looking at the 1910 census for Indiana, Steuben County, city of Angola, roll 380, book 2, page 95, lists Jason Ferris, husband, age 30; wife Maud, 23; son Charles, four; daughter Esther, three; and son Walter, 10 months old. Because the 1910 census was conducted in April, we would expect Maud to be 23 years old, as she is listed here. The ages of the children also match the 100th birthday record (Ruby possibly had died earlier).

The marriage license was dated June 27, 1903, well within the 20-year limit for validation by proxy. Although this document provided proof of name change (from Maude Davis to Maude Ferris), there was no age listed. Fortunately, an affidavit signed and dated June 27, 1903,

²⁷ In his book *Human Longevity: Its Facts and Its Fictions* in 1873, William Thoms proposed the ‘100th birthday test’ for supercentenarian claims, mostly to see if the age claim stayed consistent over time.

by the mother, Della Davis, giving parental consent to the marriage, lists Maud's age as 16 years old in 1903.

The SSA study found Maud in the 1900 census, state of Indiana, Steuben County, in Salem township. Listed are Frank Davis, 42, head of household; wife Della, 36; and children Jay, 18; an indecipherable name, 15; and Maud D., 13, born January 1887. The family had provided newspaper articles from 1920, covering the tragic murder of Frank Davis at age 62, which listed his children as Jay, May, Maud, and Essa, who died in infancy. With this, we can say we have quite a few matching points: same father, mother, brother, county, name (including middle initial), age, and month of birth. The indecipherable name appears to be Ima M. Davis, which could easily be "May" Davis (assuming she went by her middle name). Not surprisingly, the deceased infant is not listed.

The many matching points in historical records identifying the Maude Davis listed as born in January 1887 in the 1900 census as the same Maude Farris-Luse who died on March 18, 2002, at age 115 years, 56 days old, clearly validate this case.

3 False cases

3.1 Mattie Owens: Aged 119 or 105? (October 15, 1883 or 1897? - February 6, 2003)

Like so many other claims, the claim that Mattie Owens was 119 years old did not even reach major news outlets until after her death on February 6, 2003, in Long Beach, New York. It was then that the claim was made that she was born October 15, 1883, which, if true, would have made her 119 years and 114 days old—older than Sarah Knauss, the U.S. record holder, by 17 days. This was, of course, a first sign of a problem: if she had really been 119 years old, why did it take this long for the claim to be made that she was the world's oldest person? Why not submit a claim in 2000, when she would have been two years older than Eva Morris, who, at 114, was the official "world's oldest person" listed by Guinness? This case required further investigation.

Luckily, in the newspapers' eagerness to report the story, a plethora of background details were given—details which would prove important in investigating this case. The first solid indication that Mattie Owens was not actually 119 years old was that the family had thought she was "only" 117 years old, and that the birth date of October 15, 1883,

came from the Social Security Administration—a source that has been notoriously unreliable when it comes to age reporting.

The local newspaper article, “Remembering Mattie Owens, 119,” by Kimberly Acevedo of the Long Island (NY) Herald, stated that Mattie Owens was born Mattie Arnold in Greenville County, South Carolina. Her children included Capers Elrod, 87; Immajean McKeeson, 79; and Alvin and Mack Elrod, both deceased. Her husband was George Owens. This suggested that Mr. Owens was not the first husband, and that a Mr. Elrod was Mattie’s husband during her childbearing years. This was subsequently confirmed by family members.

With the story laid out, it was time for background investigation. I started with the 1930 census, which immediately produced a match: in South Carolina, Anderson County, town of Williamston, district 54, page 16, image 189, was listed Mattie Elrod, 35; son David Elrod, 18; Walter Elrod, 15; Mack Elrod, 9; Capers Elrod, 7; Imogene Elrod, 5; and Alvin Elrod, 3. The names of the last four children all matched, suggesting the family had somehow lost track of the older siblings (or, at least, that the obituaries failed to mention them). For the name, Mattie, and the location, South Carolina, there were a total of six matches, far more than enough to conclude that the Mattie Owens who died in 2003 was the same Mattie Elrod listed as 35 years old in April 1930. If we assume that she was born October 15, this would suggest a birth date of October 15, 1894, and hence an age at death of ‘only’ 108 years. Further, the oldest living son, Capers, was listed as just seven years old in 1930, and was, therefore, only 80 years old, not the 87 claimed, at his mother’s death. Daughter Immajean, five years old in April 1930, was likely 78 years old, not the 79 claimed. It should be noted that the Social Security records for David Elrod (November 24, 1911-1969), Mack Elrod (June 24, 1920-July 11, 1982), and Alvin Elrod (June 27, 1926-September 1969) all closely match the ages given here. It seemed that the older the person, the more years that were added to the person’s age. This also shows that the ages of the oldest children cannot be used to prove the age of the parent, unless the age of the child can also be demonstrated to be valid.

Going back a further ten years, I found another match in the 1920 census. Once again, in South Carolina, Anderson County, town of Williamston, enumeration district 65, we find a listing for Kate Elrod, 40, husband; Mattie Lee Elrod, wife, 22; David, son, 7; and Walter A., son, 5. We can assume that children Mack, Capers, Imogene, and Alvin were not born yet, as all were listed as less than 10 years old in 1930. This also points to the need for multiple census checks—the

1920 record cannot be directly matched to the 2003 obituaries, as neither the husband's unusual name, Kate, nor that of the oldest children, David and Walter, were mentioned. Yet, this can be directly linked to the 1930 census record, as it is the same location, the names of the two oldest children match (as well as the ages given), and the last name, Elrod, also matches. Once again, a family member (Dionzia Chapman) confirmed that the first husband was Kate Elrod, and that Mattie's middle name was Lee.

To be honest, I had at first passed over this match, as I had thought that "Kate Elrod" must have been a single mother listed as head of a household, without checking the possible match. Once found, however, this presented a problem: If Mattie Lee Elrod, later to become Mattie Owens, was only 22 in January 1920, then she would have been born in October 1897, and was, therefore, only 105 years old at her death in February 2003. So which age was correct: 105 or 108? Because the oldest record is closer to the actual birth event, it is more reliable. Still, another search was needed.

Going back ten more years, I found another match in the 1910 census. In the entire state of South Carolina, there was only one Mattie Arnold. She just happened to be in the right county—Greenville county. The record for South Carolina, Greenville County, roll 1461, book 2, page 70, listed the following family: Joseph Washington, 44, head; Lizzie Washington, wife, 26; Mattie Lee Arnold, 12, boarder; James Washington, 16, boarder; and Hannah Washington, 12, boarder. She was the correct race for a match, black. Her age given, 12, matched the age of 22 given 10 years later in 1920 (with a birth date in October, the discrepancy between April 1910 and January 1920 had no effect). Her middle name, Lee, matched. Finally, her next-door neighbors were the Owens! These were just too many coincidences, but I needed confirmation from the family. Once again, not just one, but two, family members confirmed that Mattie's parents had been John (or maybe Bob) and Elizabeth Arnold, that Elizabeth later married Joseph Washington, and that James Washington was a stepbrother. If Mattie's mother had been 26 years old in 1910, and Mattie was 12, then she gave birth to Mattie at age 14. If we assume that at age 26 in April 1910, Lizzie Arnold had not yet reached her birthday, she would have been born in 1883—the same year that was claimed as the birth date for Mattie Arnold in her Social Security records.

In retrospect, one can speculate that Mattie, tired of working as a servant and maid, applied for Social Security benefits using her mother's birth date. Adding 14 years to her age allowed her to col-

lect early retirement benefits and made her less dependent on work for income. Knowing that she could possibly be caught if she revealed her true age, Mattie would, of course, have wanted to keep knowledge of her age a secret. For someone who had worked hard most of her life, the temptation of an early retirement may have been too great.

However, there appears more to the change in Mattie's age than mere money: Mattie's obituary indicated that her age was a mystery, and she liked it that way. Moreover, her first husband, Kate Elrod, either died or abandoned the family. Either way, this left Mattie with a need to fill a matriarchal role of being a strong female head of the household. In this situation, adding extra years to her age as early as 1930 may have helped enhance her status as a the "elder" in the household, just as Mr. Elrod's 40 years old in 1920 far exceeded the 22 years of his then-wife, Mattie Lee.

Whatever the motivation behind the exaggeration—money, a need for power, or a need to cling to myths of the past—we can unequivocally state that Mattie Owens was indeed not the age 119 claimed, but was, instead, 105 years old—old, but definitely not the world's oldest person.

3.2 Walter Hickman: Aged 116 or 99? (March. 22, 1889 or 1906 ? - August 8, 2005)

In April 2000, a story ran in *Jet* magazine about a man named Walter Hickman, who celebrated his 110th birthday.²⁸ Of note was that his son was 53, and grandson aged eight—large generational gaps that suggested that this case may be an exaggeration. In response to several queries regarding the claim that Walter Hickman had been born on March 22, 1889, I initiated an investigation.

I talked to the daughter of Mr. Walter Hickman of Martin, Tennessee, and she was able to provide enough details for me to find census matches which show that Mr. Hickman is nowhere near age 116. To start, Ebbie McGraw said she was 77; her father Walter, Jr. was born and lived in Kemper County, Mississippi. His parents were Walter Hickman, Sr., and Addie. His wife was "Corrina" (she pronounced it like Cor-eeen-a). It appears that Mr. Hickman was about 99 years old; not even born yet when the 1900 census was taken (I found his father there). In the 1910 census, I found Walter Hickman, aged four; his identity confirmed by the parents, location, and siblings. In addition, the 1920 census listed Walter as age 13. Finally, the 1930 census listed Walter as age 23.

²⁸ *Jet* Magazine, Apr 17, 2000. http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1355/is_19_97/ai_61834865 (accessed Oct. 16, 2006).

Walter's father's age changed from 39 in 1910 to 57 in 1920, but in 1930 he was listed as 64.

The daughter, Ebbie, seemed not to know that age 116 would be the "oldest in the world." This seems to be a case where reporters took family lore seriously, and confused it with a real supercentenarian case. Clearly, with four census matches showing Mr. Hickman's family, and three showing Mr. Hickman in the context of the correct county and the correct wife, with no other possible matches, there is no doubt in my mind that Mr. Walter Hickman was 99 years old, plus or minus one year (98-100). Less than a month after my investigation, Mr. Hickman died on August 8, 2005, ostensibly 116 years old, but really only 99.

3.3 Carrie White: Aged 116 or 102? (November 18, 1874 or August 1888? - February 14, 1991)

Carrie White of the United States was declared the "world's oldest person" by Guinness World Records in 1989, and remained the titleholder until her death on February 14, 1991, allegedly at age 116. Carrie White had been, according to Guinness, the first person since Shigechiyo Izumi to reach age 115—a claim contested by scholars.

Carrie White was said to have been born Carrie Joyner on November 18, 1874, in Gadsden County, Florida. At some point after marrying, she showed signs of mental illness and was committed to the state mental hospital (Florida State Hospital) in Chattahoochee, Florida, in 1909. According to newspaper accounts, she was 35 years and one day old when committed. Some 75 years later, at the purported age of 109, she was released to a nursing home facility in 1984 in Palatka, Florida. Knowing this, I was able to locate her in the April 1930 census, listed as 55 years old and a patient of Florida State Hospital (for the Insane). Similarly, the 1920 census lists her as 45 years old and a patient of Florida State Hospital. The 1930 listing includes the middle initial, C; both listings indicate that she was "white." Thus, we can confirm the newspaper accounts of her long sojourn there, and the ages given match perfectly with a claimed birth date of November 18, 1874. Of course, as a victim of mental illness, the age was reported by the mental institution, and was based on their existing records.

Still, the issue of age verification encompasses not only proof of identity, but also proof of birth. Was she really 35 years old when admitted in 1909? Did the 1930 and 1920 census matches only mean that the same incorrect birth year was repeated over and over again—called replication of error? Of course, there is no motive for her to claim to be older than she was at that time; most age exaggerations related to

financial incentives (i.e., pensions) tend to begin after age 50. However, absence of motive does not prove a case to be true.

The real problem here is that, abandoned by her family, there was no repository of family history that could answer some of the questions surrounding the case. Who, for example, were her parents? Did she have any siblings? Her husband was identified as John White. One solution was to run a search for all the Carrie Joyners in the state of Florida. A search of the 1880 census showed that there was only one Carrie Joyner listed in the state of Florida (and only five others in other states) in 1880: this Carrie Joyner was listed as born in 1873, aged seven years old. If this were the same person who died in 1991, she would have been 117 years old, not 116.

The next issue became how to prove this was the same Carrie Joyner. The supposed match found in the 1880 census was for Marion County (not the area expected). The 1880 census listed the father as Abraham Joyner, 38; the mother as 50 years old (name uncertain), and no other children. Thus, if it could be shown that Carrie's father was named Abraham, we might have a match.

The Social Security applications of individuals usually list the names of the parents. Thus, I was hopeful of finding a match when I ordered a copy of the SS-5 form. Unfortunately, the file application, issued in 1966, lists the parents as "unknown." Though the document lists Carrie C. White's birth year as 1874, and confirms that she was a patient at Florida State Hospital, without knowing the names of the parents, we cannot be certain that the Carrie Joyner listed as seven years old in 1873 is the same Carrie Joyner who married John White at an unknown date, and who was committed to a mental institution in 1909.

It should be noted that Carrie C. White is listed in the Florida Death Index as having been born on November 18, 1874, and having died on February 14, 1991, in Putnam County, Florida. Thus, we now have proof of death and proof of identity, together with two age intervals that all suggested the same thing—that she was, indeed, 116 years old. However, there were no matches in the 1910 or 1900 censuses for either a Carrie White or Carrie Joyner that could be the person who died in 1991, and thus the most important record, proof of birth, was yet to be located.

At this point, I sought outside help. The Social Security Administration, under the direction of Bert Kestenbaum, was conducting a study of American claims to age 110 and beyond for the period 1980 to 1999. Included in this group was, fortunately, the Carrie White case. As it turns out, the mystery was solved with a completely unexpected

outcome. SSA researchers had information about the case that included the names of the parents, John and Sallie Joyner. Further, they had discovered a John and Sallie Joyner listed in the 1900 census in Leon County, Florida (in the area where we had expected to find the family). Listed with them was daughter Carrie, aged 11. According to the census, the couple had been married 12 years. Also of note, Carrie White's month of birth was given as August 1888.

This was a stunning reversal. With the expectation that Carrie, if born in 1874, was already married in 1900, a search for a Carrie White listed under husband John White turned up nothing. Another option was that she was not married, but that, at age 25, she would be expected to be single and residing on her own (before her illness). Again, nothing was found. Now, the answer seemed to be clear: Carrie White had been born Carrie Joyner in August 1888. After a bout of typhoid in 1909 rendered her mentally incapacitated, she was committed by her husband to the Florida State Hospital for the Insane. The fact that she was committed one day after her "birthday" may not be a coincidence: likely abandoned there, the facility probably invented both the birth date of November 18 and birth year of 1874. Moreover, the later SS-5 document was typed, the month of birth was not complete, and the parents were unknown. If we accept the 1900 census match as correct,²⁹ then Carrie White was only 102, not 116, years old at her death in 1991. It also means that Guinness simply copied an error which was made in 1909. In retrospect, this case never had a proof of birth, and shows why a proof of birth (from at least the first 20 years of life) is so important. Had the rules later devised for accepting "validated cases by proxy" been applied, this case would never have been accepted in the first place.

3.4 Wilhelmina Kott: Aged 115 or 114? (March 7, 1879 or 1880? - September 6, 1994)

Succeeding Margaret Skeete in the Guinness Book as the "oldest living American" was Wilhelmina "Minnie" Kott, said to be born to German parents on March 7, 1879, in Chicago, Illinois. Minnie Kott was listed as the "oldest living American" in the 1995 edition, despite having passed away on September 6, 1994 (after the publication deadline). Eight years

²⁹ Unlike some census matches, this match is not 100% certain. We do not know, for example, who Carrie's siblings were supposed to be. Without more information, we cannot be 100% certain that Carrie White was only 102. However, we can be certain that no evidence within 20 years of the birth event was used to validate this case, and so it would not have been accepted using today's standards.

later, the SSA/Kestenbaum study found that Minnie Kott was listed as a two-month old (born March 1880) in the June 1880 census, which would have made her 'only' 114 years and 183 days old. Thus, this case is worth noting because Minnie Kott's age was off by only one year.

There is ample information available regarding the details needed to investigate this case. The obituary in the Chicago Tribune reported that Minnie Kott was born on March 7, 1879, in Peru, Illinois, as the "third youngest of 16 children." The obituary also mentions that her father was George Geringer, that she moved to Chicago with the family in 1881, and that she married husband Charles Kott in 1899. A personal communication with a distant relative now living in South Africa (Francois Geringer) reported that she was the 15th of 18 children of George Geringer and Sophia Seepe, and that George was born December 15, 1833, and married on September 17, 1854, in Peru, Illinois.³⁰

Looking at this list, we can deduce several points. First of all, the mother, Sophia, was incredibly fecund; she was still bearing children at age 47 despite having started at 17! The average age attained by the 17 children besides Minnie was 47; if we count only the 12 who survived infancy, the average age at death was 66. No other sibling came anywhere near Minnie's age. The second point we can note is that Minnie was born about three years after the 14th child, and about three years before the twins (16th and 17th). This leaves a margin of

³⁰ The family was listed as follows:

George Geringer, father Dec. 15, 1833-Dec. 17, 1895 (62)

Sophia Seepe, mother Apr. 1838-fl. 1910 at 72

18 children:

1. Mary Geringer July 26, 1855-Oct. 28, 1911 (56)
2. George Geringer Mar. 29, 1856-Aug. 2, 1934 (78)
3. William Geringer Feb. 10, 1857-June 28, 1928 (71)
4. Anna Geringer born 1859, died in infancy
5. Fred Geringer Dec. 29, 1861-Dec. 25, 1925 (63)
6. Amelia Geringer born 1863, died in infancy
7. Caroline Geringer Feb. 14, 1864-Jan. 26, 1915 (50)
8. Sophia Geringer Feb. 12, 1865-1896 (31)
9. Henry Geringer July 16, 1867-Sept. 28, 1935 (68)
10. Charles Geringer Oct. 24, 1869-June 18, 1955 (85)
11. Adam Geringer Oct. 12, 1871-Jan. 29, 1954 (82)
12. Jacob Geringer Oct. 28, 1873-Apr. 7, 1941 (67)
13. John Geringer May 28, 1875-Jan. 4, 1958 (82)
14. Clara Geringer 1876-Jan. 15, 1878 (2)
15. Minnie Geringer Mar. 7, 1879-Sept. 6, 1994 (115)
16. Barbara Geringer Nov. 1, 1882-died in infancy
17. Frank Geringer Nov. 1, 1882-died in infancy
18. Frank Geringer Dec. 15, 1885-May 8, 1951 (65).

error: she could have been born as early as 1877, or as late as 1881, based on this information. We can state provisionally that she must have been between 113 and 117 years old. However, assuming we did not already know the facts, we would need more information to pin down her exact age. Thus, I searched for other documents.

I was able to locate husband Charles Kott (April 28, 1877-May 1966) in the Social Security Death Index. Searching the 1900 census, I found Charles Kott, 23, living in Chicago³¹. Listed were his wife, Minie (misspelled), 21, born March 1879. Also listed were Minnie's mother, Sophia Geringer, 62 (born March 1838); Minnie's brother, Frank Geringer, 15 (likely the last child), and other relatives. From these matches, we can establish beyond doubt that the "Minie Kott" listed here in 1900 as 21 years old is the same Minnie Kott who died in 1994, allegedly 115 years old. This census record is also likely the source of Guinness' acceptance of this case as verified. Other relatives are also listed as living nearby, including brother Adam Geringer (born in October 1871) and Jacob Geringer (born in October 1873). That the ages given exactly match the family tree records attests to their veracity.

However, searching the 1910 census tells a different story.³² Listed were Charles Kott, 33 (again matching the 1877 birthdate), wife Mamie C. Kott, 30; daughter Ruth Kott, 9; and mother-in-law Sophia Geringer, aged 72 years. While some may question the nickname difference, the presence of the exact same mother and husband proves that this is once again the same person. The age listed, 30 years old in April 1910, accords with the 1880 birth date given in the 1880 census. Also of note, Minnie's mother is listed as born in Germany. Sophia Geringer, born in 1838, married in 1854 at age 16, gave birth to 18 children in the next 30 years, having the last one at age 46, and was still alive at age 72 in 1910.

So far, we have one document (the 1900 census) that accords with the 1879 birth claim, and one document (the 1910 census) that suggests 1880 is correct.

³¹ Cook county, roll 249, book 1, page 27.

³² Chicago, roll 244, book 1, page 65A.

Because both of these are outside the 20-year standard for proxy validation, we must look further back. Fortunately, the SSA study had located Wilhelmina Geringer in the 1880 census.³³

Comparing this list to the family tree records, we note that 12 of the 18 children listed match; there are no children listed here that are not on the family tree list. Of the six missing children, it should be noted that three were not born yet in 1880, and the oldest daughter, also missing, may be assumed to have been married off. Of the two remaining missing children, both died in infancy. Thus, we have valid reasons for the discrepancies here. We also have a chilling tangent to note: the daughter, Clara, had died in 1878, but apparently the parents, when giving the names of the children, had originally forgotten to exclude her. Her scratched-out listing as age three (she died on January 15, 1878, apparently one year old) is a reminder of her existence. Of the remaining 11 children, eight of them have an age that matches the family tree list; of the remaining three, the discrepancy is only one year. Undermining the claim that Minnie had reached age 115 was the finding that one of those three is Wilhelmina Geringer, listed as two months old as of June 1, 1880.

Aside from the fact that the record literally says that Wilhelmina was two months old as of June 1, 1880, we can be confident of this listing as accurate. Generally, the closer to the birth event, the more reliable the match is. It is hard to imagine someone mistaking a one-year-old for a two-month-old. The family must have vividly remembered the new arrival, even with so many other children; the name given, Wilhelmina, was apparently before someone shortened it to the nickname, "Minnie." It almost doesn't need to be said that this match here is one of the

³³ The 1880 census for Illinois, LaSalle County, roll 223, book 1, town of Peru (enumeration district 86, page 18) lists the following family:

George Geringer, head, 49
 Sophia, wife, 43
 George, son, 24
 William, son, 22
 Frederick, son, 18
 Caroline, daughter, 16
 Sophia, daughter, 13
 Henry, son, 12
 Charles, son, 10
 Adam, son, 8
 Jacob, son, 6
 John, son, 5
 Clara, daughter, 3 (scratched out)
 Wilhelmina, daughter, 2/12 months.

strongest identifications possible from a census record: Wilhelmina is listed in the correct town, with the correct parents and 11 matching siblings. The chance of a coincidental mismatch is not there.

There are enough pieces of the puzzle already laid out to conclude that Wilhelmina “Minnie” Kott was likely born in March 1880, not 1879, and was only 114 years old, not the age 115 claimed. This is an example of the most common of all age misreporting errors: adding one year. While more cases have been off by one year than any other margin, most of them have been exaggerated by one year, not understated. While these cases are often the hardest to detect (because they’re so close to the truth), a level of scrutiny approaching a case like Jeanne Calment’s would almost certainly expose such an error.

3.5 Edna Oaks and her mother, Macy Bare, aged 115 or 107?

The Edna Oaks case is an important example because it shows that wild age misreporting (as opposed to being off by one year) in the United States is not limited to African-Americans, nor is it limited to the past. This case is also a good example of how hearsay and testimonial fallacy can blow a story out of proportion. Even today, the lack of a central government database, combined with the sheer size of the U.S. population (the third largest in the world; the largest centenarian population in the world), makes it easy for age myths to thrive, especially in rural, isolated communities in the South (the last U.S. region, overall, to institute mandatory birth registration). The state of Georgia did not institute state-wide birth registration until 1919; the Federal government did not require universal birth registration until 1933, when the high costs of the “New Deal” made personal age identification an imperative to controlling and calculating future costs, such as Social Security.

Following the death of the oldest living American titleholder, Mary Christian, 113, on April 20, 2003, I was contacted by a number of people claiming they knew of someone who was even older, including a claim relating to Edna Oaks of Roan Mountain, Tennessee, said to be aged 115 (born on November 13, 1887). This was one of the more glaring false cases I’ve seen (not in terms of the age claimed, but in terms of the relative veracity of the initial report) and thus I use it as an example here of age misreporting due to a certain recklessness that tends to occur in hearsay reports.

The case was reported by a nephew of Edna’s, living in Florida. Calling the family, I discovered that Edna Oaks was, in fact, 84 years old. The source of the “115-year-old” myth was Edna’s mother, Macy

E. Bare, who, unbeknownst to the nephew, had died in the latter half of 2002, allegedly at age 114. While this resolves the issue of the claim of being the oldest “living” American—she was in fact deceased—if she had been born when she said she had (November 13, 1887), and died when reported (October 26, 2002), she would, in fact, have been the oldest living American from March 18, 2002, until her death October 26, 2002, at just a few days shy of age 115.

The claim that Macy Bare had lived to be 114 years old does not, however, appear to be true, either. The family mentioned that Macy Bare lived almost her entire life in Elk Park in Avery County, North Carolina. Knowing this, I ran a search in the Social Security Death Index’s online database for all deaths of people with the last name of “Bare” in North Carolina. This yielded one possible match: Macy E. Bare of Avery County, North Carolina, born on October 15, 1894, and died on September 6, 2002. Considering that this was the only possible match, that the name and middle initial, town, and name of the county all matched, I concluded that this was most likely the Macy E. Bare who died, allegedly aged 114, in 2002.

The point of this story is that many exaggerated claims are not the result of outright lies, but errors on the part of the family. Knowing this, a researcher merely has to ask the family details about the claimant unique to the individual, and then attempt to verify them. An initial verification would lead to further investigation, but in a case like this, it seemed that the correct answer has already been deduced: Macy Bare was ‘only’ 107 years old. Why would someone report themselves as seven years younger than they really are, which would delay collection of Social Security benefits by the same amount? In this case, the claim to be 114 years old appears not to be motivated by financial gain, but is merely the result of family pride in the matriarch, coupled with inattention to details. These factors combined to produce an errant age report.

This case also points to the maxim, once again, that claims from rural, isolated areas warrant extra skepticism, because people living in these areas tend to be less educated, and are thus more susceptible to age exaggeration. Indeed, the family of Macy Bare is Caucasian (white), which shows, like many other cases, that the higher-than-national-average number of false and exaggerated cases in the U.S. South is not entirely due to the African-American population, though they do remain the largest source of false and fictitious American longevity claims.

4 Conclusion

Of the almost twenty cases of individuals considered to be validated at age 115 or older (see chapter by Jeune et al. in this monograph), eight were born in the United States and one in Puerto Rico (in addition, a tenth person, Christian Mortensen, migrated to the U.S. at an early age). With a population of 300 million and the largest centenarian population in the world³⁴, the U.S. also comprises the largest component of verified cases aged 115 and older. However, when compared to Western Europe (records are generally lacking for Eastern Europe), the relatively new system of recordkeeping ensures that false and exaggerated cases will continue to thrive in the U.S. until at least 2053. Thus, it is imperative that we separate the real 115-year-olds from the pretenders to extreme longevity.

As of October 2007, I have listed 55 claims worldwide to age 115 or beyond³⁵ that were shown to be false or exaggerated; of these, 52 could conclusively be shown to be less than 115 years old; only two (Maggie Barnes, Susie Gibson) were still 115 or older (even if not 116 as claimed). Moreover, of the eight U.S.-born persons (nine, including Puerto Rico) validated to have reached their 115th birthday by October 2006, only three have been verified to have reached age 116 (one of whom was still living). Including only the seven deceased U.S.-born cases, five died at 115; one, at 117; and one, at 119. When non-validated cases are factored out, the U.S. data falls in line with expectations. The relatively large number of U.S. claims is mostly due to age inflation.

For the eight shown to have reached 115 or older, all have turned 115 since 1990, suggesting that living to age 115 is a recent phenomenon. While there have been two ‘batches’ of cases (in the mid-1990’s and in 2005, there were three 115+-year-olds living at the same time), this appears to be an anomaly. Looking at the numbers of remaining validated U.S. centenarians, the year 1892 already has no U.S.-born cases left, while the year 1893 has a single frail person,³⁶ making it unlikely that another U.S. age bubble of more than one living 115-year-old will emerge before 2009.³⁷ Thus, the recent trio of Elizabeth Bolden, Bettie

³⁴ Japan is a distant second, at 28,395 as of Sept 2006. <http://mdn.mainichi-msn.co.jp/national/news/20060917p2a00m0na013000c.html> (accessed Oct. 16, 2006).

³⁵ My personal database.

³⁶ This is Edna Parker (born Apr 20, 1893), alive as of Feb 26, 2008.

³⁷ There remains a small but unlikely chance of a claim to age 115 or older to emerge and subsequently be validated; we have seen this with both Maria Capovilla of Ecuador and Maggie Barnes of the USA.

Wilson, and Susie Gibson in 2005, and the past trio of Sarah Knauss, Chris Mortensen, and Maggie Barnes in 1997-1998, appear to be 'age bubbles,'³⁸ not the start of a sustainable trend. If anything, the only observable trend is that increased life expectancy and cohort size, together with lower death rates for persons aged 80+ (Robine and Vaupel, 2002) have allowed for the occasional 115+ outliers (higher peaks),³⁹ as well as higher valleys,⁴⁰ and perhaps a slowly increasing frequency of 115th birthdays.⁴¹ With evidence for this occasional population firmly established, reaching age 115 may be less of a feat in the future, but we should not expect a flood of new cases in the short term. As of February 2008, we find the oldest validated American to be 114; the oldest validated European to be 114; and the oldest validated person in Japan to be 113.

We can thus conclude that the numbers of alleged cases of 115-year-olds are wildly inflated by age exaggeration, making age verification for this elite age category especially necessary. Sufficient systems of recordkeeping exist to validate or invalidate the ages of many, but not all, U.S. cases. If we err on the side of caution and include only the validated cases, the U.S. data only slightly exceeds that of Western Europe, but given the larger U.S. centenarian and supercentenarian population, that is to be expected. That the verified numbers fall in line with what can be expected suggests that the methodologies of age validation as given in this chapter are sufficient to produce reliable U.S. data for the elite 115+ age category (even if the sample size is too small, individual cases may be of interest). Additional biographical

³⁸ Like the stock market or an overheated housing market, significant positive deviations from the expected are usually followed by a 'correction' or 'bubble burst.' In 1998, two of the three 115-year-olds died, and by the end of 1999, the U.S. 115+ population was back down to zero.

³⁹ As Bernard Jeune noted (personal communication), "115+ years old people emerged first after 1990 - that's a new phenomenon, a new trend." The point here is that we are seeing higher 'peaks' but the evidence for the emergence of a stable 115+ population is not yet conclusive.

⁴⁰ In the 1980's, persons as young as 112 held the "world's oldest person" title. Since 1990, there has been at least one verified person aged 114 at all times. Hence, the low points or valleys are also increasing, not simply the high points or peaks.

⁴¹ The U.S. is the only nation to maintain a continuous 113+ population since 1986. In Japan, France, and the UK, the sustainable population has been 111+. For example, the UK's 'oldest person' has been at least 111 since 1988, and the current titleholder is 111 (showing no improvement). France's 'oldest person' has been at least 111 years old at all times since 1985, last dipping to 111 in 2003. Japan's oldest person has been at least 111 since 1987 (dipping to 111 in 1995 and 1999). Since 1986, however, the oldest person in the U.S. has ranged from 113 to 119 years old, never dipping below 113.

details about the verified European cases are given in the chapter by Jeune et al. in this volume.

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