Computer software for your family history
Part 1: Selecting Genealogical Software
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Many of you have been reading these genealogy columns for more than a year. Hopefully, you have accumulated a good amount of information about your family. Now, what do you do with all of it? This month, I'll introduce you to genealogy programs for your computer and for online use. I'll focus on full-featured programs.

Full-featured genealogy programs provide a central place for all your data and notes. A good program helps you organize and display your data in various ways, record your sources, produce a variety of reports, charts and trees, and provide suggestions for additional research. Most top-line programs will help you create a family history website so that you don't have to learn html coding. All of the major programs have trial versions; you can try before you buy. Some software is free, but even good commercial software is relatively inexpensive. Many programs link to printing services that print large family trees on oversized paper, for a fee. Some software is exclusively for use in an online environment ("cloud computing"). You create your family tree online, or upload your data to a commercial website. Putting your tree online opens the possibility that unknown cousins will find it and connect with you. I'll discuss the pros and cons of online family trees in a future column.

There are more than 200 full-featured programs available, but only a few are for sale locally. If you want a program that is not heavily marketed, you have to buy it online, usually from the publisher's website, although lower prices are available elsewhere on the Web. It is easy to get started right away with your new genealogy program. You can do basic data input right out of the box with most programs. However, these programs contain many built-in features. Mastering them will require some time, as is true of any new software.

So how do you pick a good program from this bewildering array? The time-honored way is to ask someone whose opinion you trust. A better way is to check online reviews. Genealogy software guru Louis Kessler provides user reviews for 245 full featured programs (www.gensoftreviews.com), including 123 for Windows computers and 23 for the Mac. (Mac users also can use Windows mode to run Windows programs.) Users rate each program on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 is best) using these criteria: enjoy using it, use it often, easy input, useful output and overall rating. Table 1 shows ratings for the programs with the largest number of reviews.

Before I continue, let me say that I am partial to RootsMagic. It is as full-featured as any other program and is easy and reasonably intuitive to use. As it happens, RootsMagic is the highest rated program on Kessler's list of most popular programs. However, the biggest selling program in America is Family Tree Maker (FTM). It is published by Ancestry.com and is heavily marketed, yet it is near the bottom of Kessler's user-ratings list. Other websites rank FTM much higher. Personal Ancestral File (PAF) and PAF Companion are published by the Mormons, offered free,

and are very popular. In 2005, the LDS announced it no longer would update PAF, so the program is not in Table 1, although it still is available at FamilySearch.org. On the other hand, Dorotree, which is oriented specifically to Jewish genealogy is in Table 1 even though Kessler has no reviews for it because it allows you to input your data in both Hebrew and English. A relatively new Israeli-developed program, Family Tree Builder, also deserves mention. It offers cutting edge features like face matching in photographs that are in the MyHeritage.com online database. The program searches up to 5 spelling variations of your surname in more than 1,500 online databases. I expect features like these soon will be included in other mainstream genealogy programs.

Almost all these programs have active online discussion groups that provide good user support. In addition, RootsMagic (Leslie@LawsonResearch.net) and The Master Genealogist (http://www.gfo.org/intgrp/tmg.htm) sponsor local groups that hold periodic meetings. Advice also is available through the Computer Interest Group at the Genealogical Forum of Oregon. Contact Marty Krauter (mkrauter@pacifier.com) for more information.

Next month I'll discuss some key features of family history software. In the meantime, the Jewish Genealogical Society of Oregon will have a special meeting on 1 July 2010. Dan Horowitz, an IAJGS Board Member will discuss new developments in genealogical software including face recognition, photo tagging and "supersearching". Contact Barbara Hershey (barbara.hershey@comcast.net) for more information.

Table 1
User Ratings of Most Popular Full-Featured Genealogy Programs

Program	Overall Rating (best=5	Operating System	Cost ($)	Web Address
RootsMagic	4.96	Windows	29.95	www.rootsmagic.com
dynastree	4.72	Online	free	http://www.dynastree.com
Genbox Family History	4.70	Windows	29.95	www.genbox.com
MacFamilyTree	4,65	Mac	49.00	www.synium.de/products/macfamilytree
Brothers Keeper	4.59	Windows	45.00	www.bkwin.org
Legacy	4.49	Windows	39.95	www.legacyfamilytree.com
Ancestral Quest	4.49	Windows	29.95	www.ancquest.com
Family Historian (U.K.)	4.30	Windows	52.00	http://family-historian.co.uk
FamilyTree Builder	4.07	Online	free	www.myheritage.com/family-tree-builder
Reunion	4.06	Mac	99.00	www.leisterpro.com
GenoPro	3.93	Windows	49.00	www.genopro.com
iFamily for Leopard	3.88	Mac	29.95	www.ifamilyforleopard.com
The Master Genealogist	3.39	Windows	39.95	www.whollygenes.com
Family Tree Maker	2.12	Windows	39.95	www.familytreemaker.com
Dorotree	not rated	Windows	59.00	www.dorotree.com

All data are from www.gensoftreviews.com, as of 1 June 2010. Scale 1 to 5, with 5 best.