

The Ryerson Index

by John Graham
President, Ryerson Index Inc

Introduction

The Ryerson Index, found on the web at www.ryersonindex.org, is primarily an index to contemporary death notices published in Australian newspapers. It currently contains in excess of 2.1 million entries, and is growing at the rate of over 900 entries per day.

While the majority of entries relate to deaths occurring since 1970, the index also includes a considerable number of notices from earlier periods, back to the commencement of the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1831.

The index is free to use, although we do appreciate donations from satisfied users. It is maintained and managed by Ryerson Index Incorporated, an association comprising approximately 150 members, all of whom are volunteers who contribute either by indexing notices, or providing a lookup service.

Origins of the Ryerson Index

In 1998, The Sydney Dead Persons Society was seeking a project with which many members could become involved. As the then-Convenor of the DPS, I suggested to the members that we could look at indexing death notices from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, something which had interested me for many years but which had always been in the too-hard basket in the pre-computer age.

The rationale behind such an index lay in the type of information publicly available at the time. By 1998, the NSW Registry had released indexes to births (to 1918), and to deaths and marriages (to 1945), but had no plans to release further indexes. We also had the Probate Index (to 1985), again with no plans to release subsequent years. The BDM website with its rolling 30-year cutoff for deaths was still a dream. So genealogists were faced with a "black hole" where information on recent deaths was very difficult to obtain. That was the area I thought such an index as was proposed could help to fill.

Those DPS members present at the meeting at Parramatta on Saturday October 10th, 1998 (our official birthday!) were very enthusiastic about the idea, and by the end of the meeting we had agreed to commence indexing death notices from the *Daily Telegraph* (DT) immediately, and to put together a team of six indexers to start indexing the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) from the beginning of November 1998.

Our Indexing Methodology

Death notices (and their close relative, Funeral notices) have changed considerably over the years. Whereas fifty years ago it was the norm to publish a death notice in the SMH, followed a day or two later by a funeral notice, we now find in most cases only one combined notice is published, if indeed any notice is published at all. However, on the positive side, there is often much more family information in a current notice than was published fifty years ago.

When looking at what we index, we need to differentiate between the papers published daily (seven days per week in some cases) and those published only once or twice per week.

With daily publication, we found that indexing only those notices published under the headings “death notices” and “funeral notices” avoided much of the duplication which would have occurred had we also indexed probate notices (usually headed “legal notices”).

However, in country areas, it is quite possible for a resident to die and be buried between issues of the local paper, and often such a death would not be marked by either a death or a funeral notice. But we found that probate notices are more reliable, simply because they are more likely to be published in these circumstances. Hence the decision was made to include probate notices in non-daily papers at the discretion of the indexer, on the basis that a local indexer would know more about the local attitude to publishing notices than would someone sitting at a computer 1000 km away.

Our aim is to index the **major** information. For each notice, we try to include four items of information:

- Name
- Date of death
- Age
- Location details

We do not include family information, for two reasons. Firstly, because of the variability in the amount and format of such information, which would lead to a large increase in the time taken to index a notice, and secondly because Ryerson is an index only, not a full transcription (which would lead us into a copyright minefield.)

In this regard, it is important to realise that the Ryerson Index cannot, by any definition, be considered a primary source for research purposes. The index exists purely to direct a researcher to a published death notice, and for no other reason.

The question of which papers to include in Ryerson is easily answered. If someone wants to index a paper from anywhere in Australia, then we will include it. It is much harder for us to find willing indexers than it is to find a supply of papers.

We always prefer a local indexer with access to the printed version of the paper, for a number of reasons. Primarily, a local indexer has a much better idea of the spelling of local placenames than an indexer who may live a considerable distance away, and may never even have visited the area concerned.

The second reason is the unreliability of online data. Although many newspapers publish their classifieds on the web, with notices usually staying online for about seven days, we have found by comparing the online notices with the printed notices that not all notices are included in the online version. We have also found the websites for some papers can also go for a week, even two weeks, with no deaths or funerals listed – and there is often a correlation between these periods and school holidays!

However, we do index some country papers from the notices published on the web. Most of these were commenced before we discovered the problem with missing web notices, and we considered it was of more use to continue, hopefully to pick up a local indexer to take over the task, than to discontinue these papers. We also have some papers where a local indexer has ceased indexing, and the only replacement available is non-local, indexing via the website. We do indicate, with a very clear statement, if a paper is being indexed from the web.

We are always open to new indexers joining Ryerson Index Inc, and taking on otherwise-unindexed papers. If your local newspaper isn't currently included in the Ryerson Index, please consider taking on the role of indexer. You will know just how many notices to expect, and so how much time you will need to devote to indexing. We provide everything you require – software, training and support.

Back Indexing

Initially, there was no thought given to indexing backwards from our start date – we planned only on indexing current notices as they were published. And aside from tidying up the DT and SMH indexes so that they started from the beginning of 1998, that remained our position ... but not for long.

At the DPS meeting in May 1999, Joyce Ryerson (a recently-joined member) volunteered the information that she had some back issues of the SMH death notices which we might be able to use. When pressed, Joyce confessed that she had kept the death notices from every issue of the SMH since late 1985. We were overjoyed with Joyce's offer, and gladly accepted. Our back-indexing was on its way, and hasn't looked back since.

By the time we had worked our way through Joyce's supply, we had a core of indexers who were happy to continue back-indexing, and so we started a program of systematically copying and back-indexing notices, particularly from the SMH. In this respect we received great support from the Liverpool Genealogical Society, who supplied us with copies of many years of the SMH, at no cost to us.

We also found an interesting, and unexpected, side benefit – some of our indexers found they enjoyed the work so much that they wanted to do more, and so started back-indexing their local paper. In this way we have taken the *Macleay Argus* back to 1987, the *Northern Star* back to 1968, the *Mudgee Guardian* back to 1960, and the *Moruya Examiner* back to 1947.

Back-indexing is not confined to individual indexers, We are also happy to work with local Genealogical or Historical societies, and libraries, to incorporate existing indexes into Ryerson. As an example, we were approached by the Goulburn Regional Library earlier this year with an offer of data from one of their indexes which covers death and funeral notices, and obituaries, from the *Goulburn Post* covering the period from 1930. Work is well-advanced in adding approximately 25,000 records to Ryerson, which will then give us complete coverage of this paper for the past 79 years.

The Future

Contrary to the beliefs of some well-known media personalities, I don't foresee the imminent demise of the printed newspaper. Particularly in country areas, the newspaper is often the only means of regular communication with outlying areas.

When we started indexing death notices, we covered only two papers. Since then, we have added, on average, fourteen new papers each year. The only reason we cannot continue to expand at a similar rate is the absence of indexers – our infrastructure will support as many papers as we can index.

In Australia, there is in excess of 500 newspapers in current publication. Of the 150 newspapers we currently include in Ryerson, approximately 140 of them are current, so there is still scope for considerable expansion. Our aim is to ultimately index every contemporary death notice published in Australia, and have the index entry online within one month of publication of the notice.

All we need are the people to make it happen.

If you are one of those people, you can contact us by email at ryerson-index@tpg.com.au.