



Archive

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Tracking down those long lost friends

James Turner

Most of us have someone in our past that we have lost contact with.

In the United States - a country with a high mobility factor - it's easy to fall out of touch, whether it's a high school heartthrob or a former neighbor. Fortunately, the Internet offers several resources to help you find missing acquaintances.

Good places to start are electronic equivalents of the good old phone book. Online directories such as www.superpages.com and www.switchboard.com conduct searches using pretty much the same databases, the only difference might be slight variations in the techniques used to search them.

Most online directories now allow nationwide searches, so if a person you want to find has an unusual name, you may be able to locate him or her quickly.

Of course, if your friend is named George Jones, this probably isn't going to be a practical way to go.

In such cases, think about any specific skills or interests that the person has, and head to a general Web search engine. I personally like using AltaVista because of its good Boolean search capacities. For example, if George Jones was a professional flute player, I'd click on advanced searches, and then enter "George near Jones near flute."

If that returned nothing, I might open it up a bit by saying "George near Jones and flute" ("near" means the words are found very close together, "and" means the words are on the same Web page).

A similar search of the discussion archives at Deja.com will locate anyone who has ever posted to, or been mentioned on, Internet bulletin boards. It's almost scary to see words you typed (perhaps in the heat of discussion) come back to bite you years later.

If these methods fail, a final option is a fee-based online search. With so many of these services available on the Internet, it's impossible to list them all.

Just go to Yahoo! and search for the term "background verification."

Most fee-based search sites charge between \$25 and \$100 to hunt someone down. They take basic information about the person (name, approximate age, prior addresses). In return, customers get a virtual cornucopia of information, including the history of every place that person has lived, phone numbers of neighbors, and (disturbingly) their Social Security number.

These searches are based on public records, so there is little chance the search will come up empty.

On the flip side of the coin, there's almost no way, short of becoming a total hermit, to keep yourself from being located by someone else. The same tools that are used to find high school sweethearts are also used to stalk people, or to engage in identity theft, where people can obtain your credit-card numbers and other

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personal information. Like everything on the Internet, there are good and bad points - it's all in how you choose to use it.

James Turner is a computer consultant and avid Web surfer.

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