



*Photograph of a merchant from Chinese Business Partnership Case File for Quong Lee Company (NAID 296501), RG 85, NARA.*

# In Their Own Words: Family Stories in the National Archives

**F**ortunate are researchers with ancestors whose individual stories or family histories were written down in their own words. Surprisingly, there are many places to look for those narratives in Federal records.

Some of the most commonly used records in the National Archives are those that captured names and identifying information about our ancestors at brief moments in time, such as census records, military rosters, ship passenger lists, naturalization records, postmaster appointments, and so on. But does the National Archives have records written by or for our ancestors themselves—in their own words—in which they tell their own life stories? Yes—sometimes. There is no guarantee. The key is to look for case files, which are files about certain persons or subjects.

In this article we examine different types of case files in which our ancestors' stories are told and sometimes in their own words. National Archives Identifier (NAID) numbers are provided for examples available online in the

National Archives Catalog at <https://catalog.archives.gov>.

## **Military Pension Files**

Military pension files in the Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs (Record Group 15) have affidavits and letters by veterans, their widows and others that may describe an ancestor's life. Sometimes these are complete biographies, while other records may describe a person's life experiences during a limited time. For example, Revolutionary War pension applications filed after the Act of Congress of 7 June 1832, typically give the man's life history from his date and place of birth, where he lived before the war, battles or campaigns in which he participated, and names of officers under whom he served, to occupations and residences after the war.

Civil War pension files may have affidavits describing the circumstances of a veteran's injury in battle or life after the war. These are usually brief, but lengthy ones are occasionally found, such as the six-page biography of Reuben Griffin (Co. H, 1st Michigan Light Artillery, Civil

War pension file SC 227,148), dated 12 November 1886. Griffin starts with his birth in Queensbury, New York, on 10 May 1826; the state of his health before the war; the birth of his sixth child on 16 March 1862, a few days after his military unit left Michigan; his wartime experiences; and finally, his “poor miserable existence” since the war due to poor health and financial struggles. After the war, the earnings of his eldest son, eldest daughter, and wife all contributed to the family’s support. They made bread from corn bought at \$1.00 to \$1.25 per bushel, because they could not afford the higher price of wheat. Despite his troubles, he lived to be 86 years old.

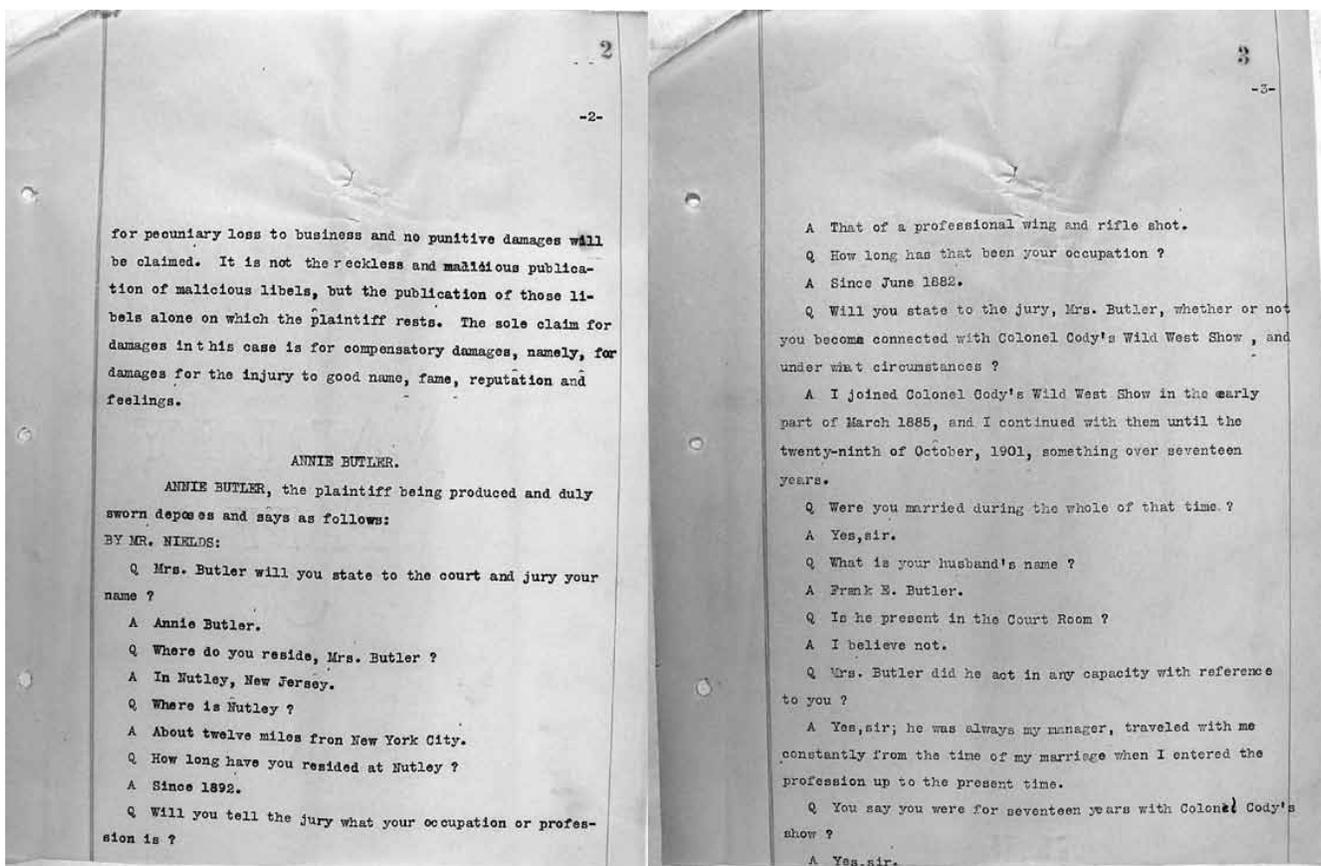
### Court Case Files

Prosecution of criminal violations and litigation of civil wrongs result in thousands of case files

in the records of Federal District and Circuit Courts (Record Group 21). In addition to legal documents drafted by lawyers, there may be transcripts of testimony by litigants and witnesses. For example, testimony by famous sharpshooter Annie Oakley is included in the court case file “Annie Butler v. Every Evening Printing Company, October 1904, Case #1” (NAID 12043749) from the U.S. Circuit Court for the District of Delaware.

### Claims Files

Testimony or other statements of evidence in support of war-related losses are usually found in claims files, such as the “Indian Depredation Case Files, 1891-1917” (NAID 2734773); “Settled Claims Files and Related Records, 1816-1854” (NAID 2658457) relating to losses from British



First two pages of testimony by Annie Butler, better known as Annie Oakley, in *Annie Butler v. Every Evening Printing Co.* (NAID 12043749), U.S. Circuit Court for the District of Delaware, October term, 1904.

actions in upstate New York during the War of 1812; or the several series of Southern Claims Commission case files. Witness testimony is also found in case files relating to land ownership, such as “California Land Claim Complete Files” (NAID 596652); the “Reports of Commissioners at Kaskaskia on Claims to Land in the Illinois Territory, 1814” (NAID 5927829); or “Land Case Testimony, 1893” (NAID 5675870) in connection with a single timber culture claim in Kansas.

## Investigative Files

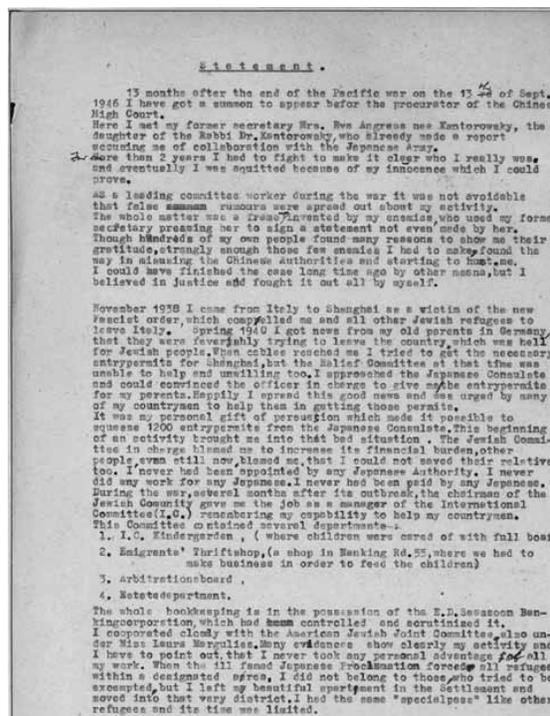
Federal agencies investigated persons suspected of illegal activity. The Department of Justice’s Bureau of Prohibitions took the “Statement of Floyd Jeffry” (NAID 298440) as a part of its “Investigation of Clay Roselle, et. al” (NAID 298436) for bootlegging activities in the vicinity of Idaho Falls, Idaho. Testimony from Caroline Johnson, George M. Leeper, and Lydia Jane Johnson Leeper are in the “Case File of Robert M. Atkinson” (NAID 7580868), whom the Bureau of Pensions investigated for taking an illegal \$500 fee from Caroline Johnson, mother of James H. Johnson, Co. D, 26th Ohio Infantry (Civil War).

## Immigration Case Files

Alien Case Files (A-Files) and Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files in the Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (Record Group 85) may include statements from aliens and other persons. For example, in 1932, Lou Yuck Hong gave both a narrative statement (NAID 7788643) and testimony (NAID 7788644) in support of his claim for admission to the United States as a returning citizen.

## Visa Files

Visa files in the Records of Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State (Record Group 84) contain correspondence and other records relating to applications for the granting of visas for individual aliens to enter the United States. For example, the “Case File for Robert Peritz” (NAID 12017273) includes a two-page statement



Page 1 of two page Statement of Robert Peritz, dated Shanghai, China, 18 January 1949, from Case File for Robert Peritz (NAID 12017273).

by Peritz, a displaced Italian Jew, about his experiences in China during World War II.

## Conclusion

Federal agencies created thousands of case files in which individuals told their stories in their own words. Relatively few have been digitized, so they won't be found online. The key, as with all research in federal records, is to think creatively about the ways in which an ancestor may have had contact with a federal agency, then use finding aids to locate those case files, and finally, thoroughly examine the case files themselves. You can begin your journey in the National Archives Catalog online at <https://catalog.archives.gov>.

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