Chapter 22

Age 115+ in the USA: An Update

Robert Young and Wacław Jan KroczeK

22.1 Validated Cases: Updated Since 2010

This section updates the last “Americans 115+” chapter on cases validated since the previous chapter went to publication. For “validated” cases, we begin with the same standards that were used in the first book chapter, and similar to those used in the SSA study: original proof of birth issued within 20 years of the birth event; proof of survival to 115+; and intervening life documents that show that the person in the death record is the same as the person in the original birth record. Note that, going beyond the mere “three-document” check of a case for age 110, for cases 115+, an additional level of scrutiny is performed, locating the person within the context of their family, and finding as many intervening life documents as is practical (Poulain, 2010). For the purposes of this section, in order to make it easier to follow, we will discuss the individual new US validated Gerontology Research Group (hereinafter GRG) cases in chronological order by birth, not the order in which the cases were validated in real time.

22.1.1 *Augusta Holtz (1871–1986)*

U.S. news reports in the 1980s touted a German-born Missouri woman as possibly the world’s oldest person. Ms. Holtz was said to be 114 years old at the time. However, the family could not locate the initial birth record, and so Guinness World Records (hereinafter GWR) at the time gave the title to a younger person aged 112. Many years later, new evidence has emerged that indicates that Augusta Holtz may have been the first person in documented history to have reached age 115.

R. Young (✉) · W. J. KroczeK
Gerontology Research Group, Los Angeles, CA, USA

Augusta Holtz was born in Germany, Posen province (an area now part of Poland) as Augusta Louise Hoppe, on Aug. 3, 1871. The town of her birth was Czarnikau (now Czarnków). Augusta was the daughter of Michael and Wilhelmine Hoppe (nee Quade). Two years later, the Hoppe family migrated to the United States and settled on a farm near Troy, Illinois. In her later years, Ms. Holtz mentioned her earliest memories being the U.S. Centennial in 1876 and pioneers in ox-drawn covered wagons stopping at her father's farm for water as they travelled westward. On Apr. 17, 1900, Augusta Hoppe married Edward Holtz in Madison, Illinois. Thereafter, the couple moved to Missouri. They had four children: Edward, Hester, Gertrude, and Augustus. Edward Holtz died in 1922. Ms. Holtz moved to St. Sophia Geriatric Center in Florissant, Missouri at age 109. On her 114th birthday, she was reported as still mentally alert but also confined to bed and having failing eyesight and hearing. One year later, she reached her 115th birthday, possibly becoming the first validated person in history to do so (the next validated person after Ms. Holtz to reach this age was Jeanne Calment, who turned 115 in 1990). The Holtz family had initially applied to Guinness World Records, but her original proof of birth was not located then. Having been born in the German Empire in a province that later became part of Poland, finding the original proof of birth was not an easy task¹. Ms. Holtz died 79 days later, having not attained Guinness World Records recognition at the time. The original proof of birth remained unlocated.

About 15 years later, the Augusta Holtz case was included in the SSA Study "group 2" cases (neither validated nor invalidated), indicating that the original proof of birth had still not been located. But the SSA Study records left mid-life documents as clues, such as the names of her parents from the SS-5 (application for a social security number numident file). An application for a Social Security Number Numident file has unique identifying information for the individual such as birthdate, place of birth, and the names of parents (death dates were often added later as most Social Security applicants in the 1950s were alive at the time of application). Verifying overseas births at the time was more difficult, as many records of birth were not yet computerized.

In this case, we already knew that we had proof of death [the National Death Index (NDI) from the Social Security Administration Supercentenarian Study] and an intervening mid-life document that identified the names of her parents, Michael Hoppe and Wilhelmina Quade. We also knew that this woman's story stayed the same throughout her life course, and the Social Security Record listed her as born Aug. 3, 1871 and dying Oct. 21, 1986. All that was needed, then, was to find the original proof of birth from Germany. This was located in April 2012 by GRG-Germany researcher Stefan Jamin: an 1871 German baptismal record, recording Augusta's birth and matching the parental information in the much-later SSA Study records. Also located by Stefan Jamin was an 1873 immigration document. Gabriel Ainsworth helped finding census matches.

¹In 1985, the Iron Curtain has not yet fallen, so East German and Polish records were not then accessible to the West.

Table 22.1 Augusta Holtz document summary

Time	Type of document	Documented age/date of birth	Record accords with
Aug. 1871	Birth record	Aug. 3, 1871	
Dec. 1873	Immigration record	11 months ^a	Jan. 1873? ^a
June 1880	US Census	8	Aug. 3, 1871
Apr. 1900	Marriage record	29 ^b	Aug. 3, 1870 ^b
June 1900	US Census	29 ^b ; Aug. 1871	Aug. 3, 1871
Apr. 1910	US Census	38	Aug. 3, 1871
Apr. 1920	US Census	48	Aug. 3, 1871
Apr. 1930	US Census	58	Aug. 3, 1871
Apr. 1940	US Census	68	Aug. 3, 1871
Oct. 1986	SSDI	Aug. 3, 1871; died Oct. 21, 1986	

^aLower age documented

^bHigher age documented

Documents supporting the Augusta Holtz case include the 1871 German Christening index; US 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930, and 1940 censuses; the SS-5 (Numident) file; the SSDI; the newspaper reports; and the gravestone. Only the 1873 immigration record, which recorded her as age “1” (and thus would suggest a birthdate in 1872), clearly disagreed (the 1900 marriage record suggests birth in 1870, but might have been rounded up) (see Table 22.1, Augusta Holtz document summary, below):

With the oldest document written in 1871, it would be virtually impossible for Augusta Holtz to have been younger, unless a hypothetical younger sibling of the exact same name was also born in 1872. But so far, no evidence to support this has been detected. Moreover, additional case research in Poland in 2017 by GRG-Poland correspondent and paper co-author Wacław Jan Kroczyk further narrowed the possibility of identity-switching. Wacław’s research on Augusta Holtz’s siblings basically ruled out this scenario: the discovery of the birth records of Augusta Holtz’s siblings. It was established that Bertha Marie Hoppe was born on Feb. 24, 1867 and Emma Pauline Hoppe on July 1, 1869 (see Box 22.1). This piece of information is very important as it suggests that Augusta’s older sisters’ ages in the immigration record were also underestimated; namely, Bertha’s age as “5” and Emma’s as “2”. According to the birth record, their ages should have been recorded as, respectively, “6” and “4” as of December 1873. Likewise, Augusta’s age seems to have been underreported as “11 months” instead of “2” years old. Meanwhile, no documents for a potential second sibling of the same name were located. Given the timeframe of just one year open between the 1871 birth (9 months after August 1871 is mid-1872) and the 1873 migration, the document period is short. No infant death record was located for this period, either. Finally, Augusta did have one additional older sibling (Paul died at birth in 1870) and one younger sibling (Louise) but she was born in the USA, after the migration...which already records Augusta. Thus, Louise cannot be Augusta.

Box 22.1 Family Tree² of Augusta Holtz Parents (Married Apr. 15, 1866)

Michael HOPPE (Sept. 3, 1838 – Aug. 11, 1918) (79 years old)

Wilhelmina Henrietta QUADE HOPPE (Dec 11, 1831 – Dec 19, 1922)
(91 years old)

Siblings

1. Bertha Marie HOPPE BUSSE (Feb. 24, 1867 - June 3, 1948) (81 years old)
2. Emma Pauline HOPPE HEINTZMANN (July 1, 1869 – Oct. 22, 1954)
(85 years old)
3. Paul HOPPE (July 9, 1870-July 9, 1870) (0 years old)
4. **Augusta Louise HOPPE HOLTZ (Aug. 3, 1871 – Oct. 21, 1986)
(115 years old)**
5. Louise Julia HOPPE (June 16, 1875–1960) (85 years old)

Spouse (married Apr. 17, 1900)

- John Edward HOLTZ (Mar. 6, 1873 – Mar. 6, 1922) (49 years old)

Children

1. Edward J. HOLTZ (Feb. 24, 1901 – July 24, 1984) (83 years old)
2. Hester E. HOLTZ BADER (Sept. 28, 1902 – May 23, 1988) (85 years old)
3. Gertrude O. HOLTZ DICKINSON (Oct. 6, 1905 – Sept. 9, 1992)
(86 years old)
4. Augustus M. HOLTZ (May 10, 1908 – Apr. 30, 1968) (59 years old)

The vast majority of the evidence supports 1871 (including the oldest record, from 1871) and this case as “validated”. There is only a very small hypothetical window whereby another child of the same name could have been born in this case (1872), and this wasn’t located (although absence of proof doesn’t completely rule this option out, hypothetically, a checking of the books virtually does). This isn’t a case of missing documents or having gaps in the record. We should also note that Augusta was recorded in the June 1900 census as having been born in August 1871. The 1910, 1920, 1930, and 1940 censuses also support this. Augusta Holtz’s identified year of birth has been consistent with just one exception, a document whose age reporting has already been shown to be unreliable. Considering the weight of the evidence, and that this case is a proof of birth case, not a validation by proxy case, it seems reasonable, based on the evidence, to conclude that Augusta Holtz reached the age of 115 years in 1986 and was the first validated person to do so, so far known, based on the research currently available.

The Augusta Holtz case changed history. Augusta Holtz became the oldest validated German-born person in history, displacing Charlotte Benkner, 114 (and that

²All family tree dates listed are birth/death dates unless otherwise indicated. These family trees were reconstructed with the assistance of genealogy websites and, in some cases, family input. Information in these family trees is meant to provide context for the birth, growth, life, and death of the supercentenarian claimant. Information as provided in these trees varies in reliability depending upon the sources used...with primary documents closer to the birth events being more reliable than later census approximations or mid-to-late life claims.

makes Germany's two oldest persons on record emigrants to the USA).³ More importantly, Augusta Holtz was the first validated person to reach age 115, displacing Jeanne Calment (who reached age 115 in 1990) and moving back the start of validated 115+ cases four years. Yet, from a larger perspective, Augusta Holtz's case only moves the highest datapoint in the 1980s marginally higher, as age 114 had been achieved already by 1985, according to International Database on Longevity (hereinafter IDL) data.

22.1.2 *Edna Parker (1893–2008)*

Edna Parker was born as Edna Scott in Morgan, Indiana, on Apr. 20, 1893. She was the daughter of Frank and Mary Eads Scott. In the early 1890s, the family moved to Johnson, Indiana. She grew up on a farm before becoming a schoolteacher. Edna taught in a two-room school in the Shelby County town of Smithland for a short time until she married her childhood friend, James Earl Parker, on Apr. 12, 1913. The marriage took place in Shelby, Indiana. That same year she graduated from Franklin College with a degree in education. But as was the tradition of that era, her teaching career ended with her marriage. She began the arduous life of a farm wife, preparing meals for as many as 12 persons who worked on her husband's farm. She had two sons: Clifford and Earl, Jr. Edna Parker was widowed in 1939. Thereafter, she outlived both her sons. On her 113th birthday, Edna Parker said that the biggest difference between the present times and a century ago was that people had been more friendly then and worked together more.

The Edna Parker case was validated in 2005, and that validation process included locating her in census matches, as well as reviewing documents sent in by the family. The family said that Edna herself was an extraordinary woman: she was said by family to have shoveled snow off her roof at age 100. Having spent her entire life in the same Indiana area, within the family and location context, it was an easy case to verify.

Below, please find Table 22.2, a summary of public documents for this case:

From the above family tree information, there's little room for uncertainty. An older sibling, Opal, was born in 1892; a younger sibling, Harry, was born in 1895 (see Box 22.2). An 1894 birth would be unlikely, although not impossible. The 1900 census clearly identifies Edna as 7 years old, born in April 1893. Later documents are all consistent: Edna was born in April 1893.

Note that, in addition to the public documents, the GRG also has documents from the family, such as a "recent ID". With the strong family connection, the possibility of identity-switching is minimized. What is clear from the evidence trail is that we have a relatively strong proxy proof of birth (the 1900 census was written

³Germany's third-oldest person on record, Adelheid Kirschbaum, 113, was also an emigrant to the USA. This migration pattern strongly suggests that Germany's lack of anyone 113+ in Germany itself may have had to do with Germany's twentieth-century history (including WWI, WWII, and the interwar and postwar periods). Persons born in Germany that migrated to the safer haven of the USA achieved age 113+ at least three times, compared to none for Germany itself from that same time frame.

Table 22.2 Edna Parker document summary

Time	Type of document	Documented age/date of birth	Record accords with
June 1900	US Census	7; “Apr. 1893”	Apr. 20, 1893
Apr. 1910	US Census	17	Apr. 20, 1893
Apr. 1913	Marriage record	Apr. 20, 1893	
Jan. 1920	US Census	26	Apr. 20, 1893
Apr. 1, 1930	US Census	36	Apr. 20, 1893
Apr. 1, 1940	US Census	46	Apr. 20, 1893
2012	Death record	Apr. 20, 1893	

^aLower age documented

^bHigher age documented

Box 22.2 Family Tree of Edna Parker

Parents

- Frank SCOTT (Apr. 29, 1872 – May 23, 1944) (72 years old)
- Mary EADES SCOTT (June 2, 1872 – July 16, 1925) (53 years old)

Siblings

1. Opal Avilda SCOTT OSBORNE (Jan. 14, 1892 – May 31, 1980) (88 years old)
2. **Edna SCOTT PARKER (Apr. 20, 1893 – Nov. 26, 2008) (115 years old)**
3. Harry Luther SCOTT (Feb. 2, 1895 – Nov. 8, 1974) (79 years old)
4. Georgia Deloris SCOTT FATELEY (June 16, 1907 – July 19, 2006) (99 years old)

Spouse (married Apr. 12, 1913)

- Earl PARKER (Nov. 24, 1884 – Feb. 23, 1939) (54 years old)

Children

1. Clifford Scott PARKER (Nov. 23, 1913 – July 13, 1998) (84 years old)
2. Earl PARKER Jr. (Mar. 14, 1919 – June 11, 1985) (66 years old)

7 years after the birth event), a consistent year of birth⁴, and strong evidence (including the marriage certificate) that ties the identity of the person in the 1900 and other census records (the 1930 and 1940 censuses were as of April 1), with the woman who died in 2008, as well as the family records. In short, Edna Parker was validated to be 115 years old, with a large set of consistent documents over her life course, and this case presents little room for doubt.

⁴The 1930 and 1940 censuses were supposed to give Edna’s age “as of” April 1, so the ages given were technically correct, preceding her next birthday by 5 days.

22.1.3 *Gertrude Baines (1894–2009)*

Gertrude Baines was born in Shellman, Georgia on Apr. 6, 1894 as the third daughter of Jordan Baines and Amelia Daniel. According to the family stories, she married Sam Conley at a young age and had a daughter named Annabelle, who was said born in 1909. The family moved to Hartford, Connecticut and resided there for some time. Gertrude's daughter died of typhoid fever at the age of 18 and Gertrude and Sam separated thereafter. Gertrude resumed her maiden name Baines. She later relocated to Ohio, where she worked as a dormitory housekeeper at Ohio State University in the 1940s, before retiring and moving to California many years later. She lived on her own until 1999, when she was 105 years old, and later moved to Western Convalescent Home in Jefferson Park, Los Angeles. In the 2008 U.S. presidential election, at age 114, Gertrude Baines voted for Barack Obama, becoming perhaps the oldest person to vote all-time.⁵ Gertrude Baines died in Los Angeles, California, on Sept. 11, 2009, aged 115 years and 158 days.

Gertrude Baines was only “discovered” by the media at age 112. Having previously gone unnoticed and appearing to be in remarkably good health, Robert (who met Gertrude Baines in person, twice) was initially skeptical whether her age claim was correct. This was a woman who had no close family with her, and so offered a bit of a mystery when it came to identification. She did have social security records supporting her age claim (which are mid-life to recent documents), but no birth record or early-life document initially. Yet, even at 114, when Robert first met her, she was a still-lucid woman. Her recall of her own past history (including that she had once worked at the dormitory at Ohio State University) helped establish the parameters for the documents check. It should be noted that, at the time, Gertrude was not aware of many of the documents that were later found and that helped to confirm her claimed date of birth of April 6, 1894, including the 1900 census, which listed her as born in April 1894 and confirmed her age. After the 1900 census and accompanying mid-life documents from Ohio from the 1940s surfaced, it was clear that her story checked out. Later, at her 115th birthday party, Ms. Baines offered a wonderful juxtaposition of society: she, at 115, an African American daughter of an ex-slave, was photographed by then-25-year-old celebrity photographer and LGBT rights activist, Adam Bouska.⁶ While Ms. Baines's 114th birthday article said that “she made 114 look easy”⁷, it was clear that, by age 115, she was starting to fade physically and mentally. She passed away five months later, in Sept. 2009, at the age of 115.⁸ Ms. Baines was the last validated person from the year 1894.

Table 22.3 lays out a summary of the documents for this case:

⁵LA Times video by Sachi Cunningham shows Gertrude Baines, 114, voting for US President in Nov 2008: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LMOYHpA3C08> (accessed Sept. 20, 2016).

⁶Photo by Robert Young shows Adam Bouska, 25, with Gertrude Baines, 115. http://www.bouska.net/?blog_id=267 (accessed Sept. 21, 2016).

⁷<http://articles.latimes.com/2008/apr/07/local/me-baines7> (accessed Sept. 21, 2016).

⁸<http://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-gertrude-baines12-2009sep12-story.html> (accessed Sept. 21, 2016).

Table 22.3 Gertrude Baines document summary

Time	Type of document	Documented age/date of birth	Record accords with
June 1900	US census	6; “Apr. 1894”	Apr. 6, 1894
Apr. 1910	US census	20 ^b	Apr. 6, 1890 ^b
Jan. 1920	US census	22 ^a	Apr. 6, 1899 ^a
Apr. 1940	US census	39 ^a	Apr. 6, 1901 ^a
–	USPR	“Apr. 6”	
2009	SSDI	Apr. 6, 1894; died Sept. 11, 2009	

^aLower age documented

^bHigher age documented

In Gertrude’s case, the evidence is inconsistent and appears to both overstate and understate Ms. Baines’s age. The 1910 census overstated Gertrude’s age as “20”, as she was 15 (almost 16), married, with an infant child (it was common for young mothers to add a few years when young). Later, in mid-life, Gertrude’s census age is understated, at a time when it was culturally acceptable for women in their mid-years to understate their age. However, significantly, both the oldest document (the 1900 census) and the social security records match for the year of birth, month of birth, and the names of the parents. The 1940 census age can be discarded, as “39” would make Gertrude younger than the oldest document. Also, the context of the 1900 census record needs to be considered: we have an age given (6); a year and month of birth given (April 1894); and we have a younger sibling listed as born in May 1895, which would make it very unlikely that Gertrude were born later than 1894. While this case may not pass the strongest possible skepticism (for example, some may claim a remote possibility that the Gertrude who died in Los Angeles in 2009 was not the one who was born in 1894, but was an impostor or younger sibling), the fact that she was able to recall events that only later were checked out and found to be correct makes that very unlikely. Ms. Baines also gave birth to her only child, Annabelle, circa 1910,⁹ which would have made her about 15 years old at the time, leaving not much room for age inflation. Also, the names of Ms. Baines’s parents were not common (Jordan and Ammie; see Box 22.3), making the census match very likely to be true. Finally, the 1910 census listing for Jordan and “Amy” Baines listed only two children: Ada, “20”, and Ister, 13 (Gertrude had already moved out and gotten married). While the ages of the children are again off by a bit (Ada should be “18” and Ister should be “14”), what we can confirm is that no additional children are listed. Had there been a later child listed, it could have raised the possibility of “sibling switching”, but by 1910 Jordan and Amy “Ammie” Baines had stopped having children for over a decade. In short, in evaluating the Gertrude Baines case, the early-life 1900 census substitution matches well with the mid-life and late-life data and provides strong evidence (listing Gertrude’s year and month

⁹The 1920 census lists Gertrude’s daughter Annabelle as age 10 (suggesting birth in January 1910 or 1909). However, the April 1910 census does not list a child living with Gertrude and her husband Sam, suggesting that Annabelle was not born yet. Hence, the most likely approximation of her daughter’s age would have her born in mid-1910. (added Apr. 16, 2018).

Box 22.3 Family Tree of Gertrude Baines**Parents:**

- Jordan Baines (Apr. 1863)
- Ammie Baines (Oct. 1867)

Siblings:

1. Fannie Baines (Mar. 1887)
2. Ada Baines (Nov. 1891)
3. **Gertrude Baines (Apr. 1894 – Sept. 11, 2009) (115 years old)**
4. Ister Baines (May 1895)

Spouse:

- Sam Conley (divorced)

Children:

1. Annabelle Conley (1910–1928)

of birth as well as age), with only a short six-year gap between the birth event and the recording of age. While not the most solidly-validated case, we have original proof of birth, mid-life records including work records from Ohio State, a family tree check, and late-life ID documents. We feel that the evidence is sufficient to conclude that the person who passed away in 2009 was the one who was born in 1894.

22.1.4 Besse Cooper (1896–2012)

Besse Cooper was born as Besse Berry Brown in Sullivan, Tennessee, on Aug. 26, 1896, the third of eight children born to Richard Brown (1861–1932) and Angeline Berry (1866–1927). In 1916, she graduated from the East Tennessee State Normal School. She worked as a teacher in Tennessee before moving to Georgia in 1917. In 1922, Besse Brown married Luther Cooper. The couple had four children: Angie, Luther, Sidney, and Nancy. Luther (the father) died in 1963. Thereafter, Besse Cooper lived alone until 2001, when she moved to a nursing home.

One of us (Robert Young) first met Besse Cooper when she was 111, as part of a Georgia State University (GSU) student oral history project (this helps to establish identity by connecting the person alive at 111 with their memories of the past). At the time, she was in remarkable shape, as can be attested to in her oral history recordings.¹⁰ At 111, Ms. Cooper was able to read books. At her 113th birthday

¹⁰<http://www.100wisdom.com/Super-Centenarians/> (accessed Sept. 21, 2016).

party, Besse tended house like a family matriarch, giving a 30-minute speech before a room of family, friends, and invited guests.

Over the course of five years, Robert had gotten to know Besse Cooper’s family, especially her son, Sidney, and grandson, Paul. They assisted in documenting Ms. Cooper’s life (she still had a teaching certificate from 1911, when she graduated at 15) and also filling in the stories that Ms. Cooper herself might not have told—such as their saying that she chopped down a tree for Christmas at 86. She lived on her own until 105. But Ms. Cooper herself also reminded people that she sailed down the Tennessee River in 1899 with her dad, at age three. Besse may have been the last living person with firm memories of the 1800s.

Besse Cooper appeared to still be in good shape when she suddenly got caught up in the “worst flu outbreak in Georgia in a decade,” while a norovirus outbreak was also occurring. Over 100 nursing home residents were taken ill, including Ms. Cooper’s grandson. Besse herself trudged on sick for three days, continuing to stay active. On her last day, she had her hair done and watched a movie before breathing issues led to her death on Dec. 4, 2016.

Regarding Besse Cooper’s age, the evidence for her age built up over time. At 109, she was a participant in the Georgia Centenarian Study when she came to Robert’s attention. Among the documents located were the 1900 census, listing her as age “3” and born Aug 1896 in June 1900. This document, and the following census and other documents in Table 22.4, support Besse’s age also (see below):

Besse had four children between 1929 and 1944...the last at age 48! Having a natural child at age 48 may be a sign that Ms. Cooper was in better health than most—a slower-aging individual. In some instances, a relatively high generation gap can raise suspicions, but we firstly have an explanation (Ms. Cooper delayed child-bearing due to being a teacher early in life) and the documentation and life history for Ms. Cooper is too solid for this to raise any unaddressed concerns. See Box 22.4, below, for family history details.

From the family tree information, a skeptic would also note that there is a large gap between the birth of Besse (the third child) and Edward (the fourth child). One reason for this gap is that the family moved from Tennessee to Georgia in 1899. As Ms. Cooper stated, long before becoming the Guinness “oldest living person”, that

Table 22.4 Besse Cooper document summary

Time	Type of document	Documented age/date of birth	Record accords with
June 1900	US census	3; “Aug. 1896”	Aug. 26, 1896
Apr. 1910	US census	13	Aug. 26, 1896
Jan. 1920	US census	23	Aug. 26, 1896
Jan. 1920	US census (II)	23	Aug. 26, 1896
Apr 1922	Marriage record	No age given	N.A.
Apr. 1930	US census	33	Aug. 26, 1896
Apr. 1940	US census	43	Aug. 26, 1896
2006	USPR	Aug. 26, 1896	

^aLower age documented

^bHigher age documented

Box 22.4 Family Tree of Besse Cooper**Parents**

- Richard Kitzmiller BROWN (May 16, 1861 – Jan. 20, 1932) (70 years old)
- Barsheba Angeline “Angie” BERRY BROWN (Oct. 27, 1866 - Jan. 9, 1927) (50 years old)

Siblings

1. Thomas Cecil BROWN (Nov. 25, 1893 – June 1974) (80 years old)
2. John Ralph BROWN (Feb. 19, 1895 - Oct. 26, 1972) (77 years old)
3. **Besse BROWN COOPER (Aug. 26, 1896 – Dec. 4, 2012) (116 years old)**
4. Edward King BROWN (Apr. 15, 1903 - Sep. 4, 1974) (71 years old)
5. Mary BROWN (Jan. 1, 1905 – June 29, 1996) (91 years old)
6. Urcel BROWN (Jun. 7, 1907 – Oct. 25, 1981) (74 years old)
7. Richard E BROWN (Apr. 6, 1909 – Dec. 17, 1932) (23 years old)

Spouse

- Luther Harris COOPER (Apr. 1, 1895 – Dec. 11, 1963) (68 years old)

Children

1. Angeline COOPER (born 1929)-fl. 2020 at age 91+
2. Luther Jr. COOPER (1932–2019)-87
3. Sidney COOPER (born July 29, 1935)-fl. 2020 at age 85+
4. Nancy COOPER (born 1944)-fl. 2020 at age 76+

she remembered sailing down the Tennessee River in 1899, and for someone to remember indicates that they must have been two or older, Ms. Cooper’s story fits the evidence well. From the census and social security information, we can see that every document supports “1896” (and not one document contradicts 1896, although the marriage record does not state an age); there is strong proof of identity from parental and sibling matches; the marriage record attests to the name change; the recent news reports, SSDI record, and the gravestone records all match. While, hypothetically, one could argue that the 1900 census is a reflected memory and Besse might have been a year younger, there’s no evidence to support a younger age. One of the best-documented US 115+ cases, there’s little reason to doubt that Ms. Cooper was 116 years old when she passed away in 2012. We thus concluded that she was 116.

22.1.5 *Dina Manfredini (1897–2012)*

Dina Manfredini was born as Dina Guerri, the daughter of Carlo Guerri and Maria Manfredini, in Pievepelago in the Province of Modena in the Italian region of Emilia-Romagna in the northern Apennine Mountains, on Apr. 4, 1897. Dina had two sisters (Lucia and Esterina) and a brother, Angelo. Dina Guerri married Riccardo Manfredini (1885–1965) in Oct. 1920 and came to the USA late in the same year (Dec. 22, 1920), sailing from Le Havre, France to New York City for their transatlantic voyage to the USA. The couple settled in Des Moines, Polk County, Iowa and had four children: Mary Russo (born Aug. 17, 1921), Dante (a WWII veteran) (Nov. 4, 1922–Nov 2016), Rudolph (a WWII veteran) (May 2, 1924–Jan. 15, 1997) and Enes (born May 26, 1928). Riccardo passed away in 1965, age 79. Dina was primarily a mother and homemaker, but later cleaned houses until the age of 90. Dina Manfredini lived independently until the age of 110 and later moved to a nursing home in Johnston, Iowa.

An inspection of the records for this case is essential due in part to Ms. Manfredini being initially reported in the Iowa media as born May 4, 1897, and with Jiroemon Kimura of Japan being born Apr. 19, 1897, a one-month discrepancy would have been enough to deny Dina the Guinness “world’s oldest person” title¹¹. Yet a closer look at the documents, including the original Italian record of birth, confirms that Dina was, indeed, born Apr. 4, 1897. What quickly became clear was that the “April 4” birthdate was supported by multiple sources, including the original birth registration. The “May 4” birthdate may have been a reporting error by the Iowa department of Elder Affairs. The other documents all supported “April 4, 1897” (Table 22.5).

In this case, Dina Manfredini’s age claim to 115+ is not in doubt, with nearly all documents supporting “1897” as the year of birth. Given the earliest document is from

Table 22.5 Dina Manfredini document summary

Time	Type of document	Documented age/date of birth	Record accords with
1897	Civil birth registration (Italy)	Apr. 4, 1897	
Dec. 1920	Immigration record	23	Apr. 4, 1897
Jan. 1925	Iowa census	28	Apr. 4, 1897
Apr. 1930	US census	33	Apr. 4, 1897
Aug. 1930	Naturalization record	Apr. 4, 1897	
Apr. 1940	US census	42	Apr. 4, 1897
2007	USPR	Apr. 4, 1897	
2012	SSDI	Apr. 4, 1897	

^aLower age documented
^bHigher age documented

¹¹ For the purpose of this chapter, the focus is on the individual case and the investigation by the GRG. Guinness World Records has accepted the following cases reviewed in this chapter as “World’s Oldest Person” titleholders: Parker, Baines, Cooper, Manfredini, Weaver, Talley, Jones. Madigan, Rivera, and Hannah were never old enough to be considered, and the Holtz and Miller cases were incomplete at the time the title was awarded.

1897, only the slight possibility of “identity switching” could cast hypothetical doubt on this case. However, the 1920 immigration record precludes the kind of issue seen with the Damiana/Dimina Sette case. Also, the 1930 naturalization record gives detailed information, including the birthdates of Dina’s children. When Dina passed away in 2012, her oldest child, Mary, was 91, and Dante was 90. It’s clear that Dina’s age was well tracked consistently throughout her life, the only error coming at 110+, and that from a local government centenarian list. We thus conclude that the documentary evidence and the family tree together, though missing records on siblings, is enough to validate that Dina Manfredini was indeed 115 in 2012.

22.1.6 Gertrude Weaver (1898–2015)

Gertrude Weaver was born as Gertrude Gaines, the daughter of African American sharecroppers, Charles Gaines and Ophelia Jeffreys, in Lafayette County, Arkansas. She married Gennie Weaver in Arkansas on July 18, 1915. The couple had four children: Cab, Marie, Joe, and Ruby. Her husband died in 1969. At 104, Gertrude Weaver moved to the Silver Oaks Health and Rehabilitation Center in Camden, Arkansas after breaking her hip. After successful rehabilitation, she was able to move back to her home with the help of her granddaughter. At 109, she returned to the nursing home. When interviewed about the secret of her longevity, Gertrude Weaver told that there were three factors that have contributed to it: “Trusting in the Lord, hard work and loving everybody.” Later, she added a fourth factor: “Just do what you can, and if we can’t, we can’t” or, in other words, “Kindness”.

Gertrude’s story is also one of overcoming odds. A woman who was of mixed-race heritage (African-American, Caucasian-American, and Native-American), her case was not even featured in the major media until age 112 (at which point, she looked extraordinary for her age). By December 2012, she was still missing proof of birth. The fact that she married in 1915, however, was compelling evidence of this woman’s extreme age. Yet, initial proof of birth was difficult to come by. A potential 1900 census match had been located, but the name given in the document wasn’t exactly “Gertrude”: it was a nickname: “Tonpon.” It took some additional

Table 22.6 Gertrude Weaver document summary Claimed date of birth: July 4, 1898

Time	Type of document	Documented age/date of birth	Record accords with
June 1900	US census	2; “Apr. 1898” ^b	April–July 4, 1898 ^b
Apr. 1910	US census	10 ^a	July 4, 1899 ^a
July 18, 1915	Marriage record	17	July 4, 1898
Jan. 1920	US census	20 ^a	July 4, 1899 ^a
Apr. 1930	US census	26 ^a	July 4, 1903 ^a
Apr. 1940	US census	36 ^a	July 4, 1903 ^a
–	USPR	July 4, 1904	

^aLower age documented
^bHigher age documented

research to ensure that the woman who was alive in 2014 was the same as the woman who was born in 1898. This included oral-history interviews with her then-93-year-old son, Joe Weaver, in 2014.

In reviewing the documentation available (see Table 22.6, below):

The oldest document (the 1900 census) supports 1898. Given that the census report was so close to the birth event, the chances of Gertrude being even a year younger are slim: most people could tell the difference between a 2-year-old and a 1-year-old. July 1900 is definitely out, as the record itself is older than that. The 1910 census supports 1899/1900, but is a reflected memory a decade later. The 1915 marriage record listing of “17” again supports “1898”, but not a specific month (but given that it was recorded in July, it supports that Gertrude was born earlier than July 17, 1898). Mid-life documents understate Gertrude’s age, but these documents are much further from the birth event. Gertrude being born in 1903/1904 is also impossible, with the oldest document being from 1900 itself. It was not uncommon in the mid-twentieth century US for women to understate their age, so a pattern of older documents showing an older age is not unusual.

Gertrude Weaver’s case is another example of a “fuzzy” validation, although the age discrepancy is one of only three months. Ms. Weaver patriotically claimed to be born July 4, 1898 in her later years, yet the 1900 census lists her as born in April 1898, and the family indicated that they believed she may have been born in April. Taking a look at the family tree information (Box 22.5), since Gertrude was the youngest child, this rules out “sibling switching” with a younger sibling.

Box 22.5 Family Tree of Gertrude Weaver

Parents: (married in 1885)

- Charles GAINES (1861 – July 4, 1928) (67 years old)
- Ophelia GAINES (Dec. 1866 - Apr. 2, 1916) (49 years old)

Siblings (as recorded in the 1900 US census):

1. Lemon GAINES (b. Jan. 1886)
2. Martha GAINES (b. Jan. 1890)
3. Mag [Maggie] GAINES (b. May 1893 – May 27, 1991) (98 years old)
4. “Teeto” GAINES (b. Dec. 1894)
5. Burley GAINES (b. May 1896)
6. **“Tonpon” [Gertrude] GAINES WEAVER (b. Apr./July 1898 – Apr. 6, 2015) (116+ years old)**

Spouse:

- Genie WEAVER (1896–1969) (c73 years old)

Children:

1. Cab WEAVER (Mar. 9, 1916 – Aug. 1976) (60 years old)
2. Marie WEAVER BENNETT (July 24, 1918 – Apr. 3, 2006) (87 years old)
3. Joe WEAVER (Apr. 7, 1921 – fl. 2020) (99+ years old)
4. Ruby WEAVER (Oct. 13, 1924 – Nov. 22, 2007) (83 years old)

In summation, Gertrude Weaver's case is one that took years of research to convince skeptics (including myself) that the 1900 census listing, in particular, really was her. My own case investigation, along with the work of local genealogist Carolyn Stratton Cox, is sufficient to convince most skeptics. Whether Gertrude was 116 or 117 is another matter. In the larger picture, Gertrude's validated age of 116 years, 276 days could possibly be upgraded to two months older, should additional material be located to support "April" as the month of birth. Only the 1900 census lists "April", and a single document that is a reflected memory is not enough, in my estimation, to grant her an age upgrade. But if we did, Gertrude could have been as old as just reaching 117. However, that also leaves reasonable uncertainty. We thus decided to go with age 116. In summation, the only issue regarding Gertrude Weaver's age is a matter of months, not years: she was clearly over 116.

22.1.7 Jeralean Talley (1899–2015)

Jeralean Talley was born as Jeralean Kurtz, one of 12 children of Samuel James Kurtz and Amelia Kurtz née Jones, in Montrose, Laurens, Georgia, on May 23, 1899. She spent her early years living on a farm picking cotton and peanuts and harvesting sweet potatoes. She grew up in Laurens County before moving with her family to Inkster, Michigan before 1930. Jeralean Kurtz married Alfred Talley (January 30, 1893 – October 17, 1988) in Lucas, Ohio, on Dec. 10, 1936. The couple had one child, a daughter, Thelma Holloway, born in 1937. "Mother Talley", as the New Jerusalem Missionary Baptist Church community she was a member of called her, stayed active in her later life. She bowled until she was 104. Reportedly, Mrs. Talley lived by the Golden Rule: "Treat others the way you want to be treated". She was known in the community for her wisdom and wit. Jeralean advised people to use common sense, saying "I don't have much education but what little sense I got, I try to use it". On her 114th birthday, she received a personalised letter from U.S. President Barack Obama, who wrote that she was "part of an extraordinary generation".

Jeralean Talley was a remarkable woman even before her world recognition: she still lived in her daughter's home (not a nursing home) and even went fishing at age 114 (though with younger relatives assisting)¹². Jeralean was lucid during her interviews as well. At first glance, one must have wondered if this woman were the age claimed, and how much longer she might live. Let's take a look at Table 22.7, below, which summarizes Jeralean's recorded age in various documents:

For the first issue, there really was little doubt: documents supporting her age included the June 1900 census listing her as born in May 1899, located in 2009, and included matches for her parents. A later, undated family Bible entry did list her as born in June 1899 instead, but the census record is more sure because it is certain when it was written (close to the birth event), not potentially decades later. Social security and other

¹² https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/18/oldest-person-dies-jeralean-talley_n_7614112.html (accessed Apr. 16, 2018).

Table 22.7 Jeralean Talley document summary

Time	Type of document	Documented age/date of birth	Record accords with
Unknown	Family Bible entry	June 23, 1899	June 23, 1899
June 1900	US census	1; “May 1899”	May 23, 1899
Apr. 1910	US census	10	May 23, 1899
Jan. 1920	US census	19 ^a	May 23, 1900 ^a
Apr. 1930	US census	20 ^a	May 23, 1909 ^a
Dec. 1936	Marriage record	May 23, 1899	
Apr. 1940	US census	40	May 23, 1899

^aLower age documented

Box 22.6 Family Tree of Jeralean Talley

Parents:

- Samuel James KURTZ (Aug. 17, 1866 – Jan. 30, 1941) (74 years old)
- Aurelia Amelia KURTZ (June 4, 1869 – Feb. 24, 1952) (82 years old)

Siblings

- Malinda KURTZ (born Aug. 1887)
- Arnetta KURTZ (born Nov. 4, 1888-fl. 1956)
- Richmond KURTZ (Oct. 29, 1891 – July 1964) (72 years old)
- Levance KURTZ (Dec. 27, 1893 – Oct. 1970) (76 years old)
- Ida V KURTZ EDMONDS (Mar. 6, 1897 – June 3, 1995) (98 years old)
- Jeralean KURTZ TALLEY (May 23, 1899 – June 17, 2015) (116 years old)**
- Louverta KURTZ (Apr. 4, 1905-Oct 25, 2003) (98 years old)
- Sam J KURTZ Jr. (Sept. 5, 1908-Oct. 19, 1991)(83 years old)

Spouse (married Dec. 10, 1936)

- Alfred TALLEY (Jan 30, 1893 - Oct. 17, 1988) (95 years old)

Children

- Thelma TALLEY HOLLOWAY (born 1937)-fl. 2020 at 83

family records also supported her age claim. A marriage record from 1936 was also located, again supporting the age claim, as well as her identity. While there were some small discrepancies in the census records (the 1900 census is transcribed as “Kuntz”, but, due to the cursive writing, it may very well mean “Kurtz”), the numerous matching points (including the names of parents and siblings, and location) made it certain that the woman who was born in 1899 was the same woman who was alive in 2015. One small issue, the one-month discrepancy in the month of birth, does not affect whether she was 115+ or not, although it has bearing on whether Jeralean was 116 (if born June 23, she would have been six days short of her 116th birthday).

A larger potential issue is one of “identity-switching”. What happened to younger sister Louverta Kurtz, born in 1905 (see Box 22.6)? One counter-argument is that

the names “Jeralean” and “Louverta” are not similar. Also, the family Bible entries indicate a close-knit family that tracked births, at least. Finally, the 1920 census lists both sisters in the same document (one is 19; the other is 13). Thus, Jeralean and Louverta cannot be the same person. The only other younger sibling is male. Sibling-switching seems to be ruled out here. Further family tree research found that Louverta died in 2003, age 98. Together with sister Ida, who also lived to 98, this shows a pattern of sibling longevity.

Despite being in great apparent shape at her 116th birthday celebration in May 2016, just a month later, Ms. Talley had passed away, several days after experiencing heart trouble. Jeralean lived her life to the fullest, staying active until almost the end. This was a woman who was never confined to a nursing home; never confined to bed. She walked, with the assistance of a walker and others, rather than settle for a wheelchair. If we need a poster woman for “plateau aging”, Jeralean Talley is it.

22.1.8 Susannah Mushatt Jones (1899–2016)

Susannah Mushatt Jones was born as Susannah Mushatt, the daughter of Callie and Mary Mushatt, in Lowndes county, Alabama, on July 6, 1899. Her parents were African-American sharecroppers. The family stories said Susannah wanted to escape from the life on a farm and she turned to education as a way to accomplish this goal. She graduated from the Calhoun Boarding High School on Mar. 4, 1922. She wanted to become a teacher and was accepted to Tuskegee Institute’s Teacher’s Program; however, she could not afford tuition and moved to New York in 1923 where she worked for wealthy families taking care of their children. Since 1929, she was married with Henry Jones, but they divorced soon after – in 1933. She supported many of her relatives as they moved to New York. She also helped to establish a college scholarship fund for African-American students at her high school. Susannah Mushatt Jones was blind after her 100th birthday and partially deaf. She used a wheelchair. For breakfast, she always ate four strips of bacon along with scrambled eggs and grits. She resided at Vandalia Senior Center in Brooklyn, New York where she had an open party on each of her consecutive birthdays (Watson, 2014).

Susannah Mushatt Jones was the last American from the 1800s and the next-to-the-last validated supercentenarian from the 1800s. Her case is particularly important. Robert met Ms. Jones in person on April 1, 2016, at the age of 116 years, 270 days. At this point in time, she was still able to eat a banana, but didn’t do much else. When she said things like “I want to go home”, her family took it to mean that she wanted to pass away (“Go see the Lord”). About six weeks later, on May 12, 2016, Susannah passed away at the age of 116 years, 311 days. Her death marked the end of an era: the last American from the 1800s; she was also the last American from 1900 or 1901 as well.

But was Ms. Jones the age claimed? Let’s take a look at the documents for this case in Table 22.8.

The June 1900 census alone was almost 116 years older than her month of death (May 2016). The record lists a “Suzy Mudhat” as 11 months old. While this

Table 22.8 Susannah Mushatt Jones document summary

Time	Type of document	Documented age/date of birth	Record accords with
June 1900	US census	11 months; "July 1899"	July 6, 1899
Apr. 1910	US census	10	July 6, 1899
Jan. 1920	US census	20	July 6, 1899
Apr. 1930	US census	28 ^a	July 6, 1901 ^a
Apr. 1940	US census	40	July 6, 1899
2006	USPR	July 6, 1899	

^aLower age documented

Box 22.7 Family Tree of Susannah Mushatt Jones

Parents:

- John Callie MUSHATT (1868 – Apr. 1, 1931) (c62 years old)
- Mary Cook MUSHATT (1875 – July 27, 1940) (c65 years old)

Siblings:

1. Elbert MUSHATT (1891–Jan 1937) (c45 years old)
2. Hardy MUSHATT (Mar. 1, 1893 -fl. 1917) (last confirmed alive in WWI registration)
3. **Susannah MUSHATT JONES (July 6, 1899 – May 12, 2016) (116 years old)**
4. Louvilla MUSHATT HAYES (Apr. 12, 1906 -Nov. 8, 1928) (22 years old)
5. Callie MUSHATT (May 22, 1909 -Jan. 15, 2004) (94 years old)
6. Verbena MUSHATT GLOVER (Feb. 10, 1911 – Jan. 26, 1996) (84 years old)
7. Cody MUSHATT (Sept. 18, 1912 – Dec. 1, 1989) (77 years old)
8. George Wesley MUSHATT (Jan. 12, 1915 – Mar. 23, 2003) (88 years old)
9. Eva Mae MUSHATT ROBINSON (May 7, 1918 – Sept. 4, 1991) (83 years old)
10. Lecettie MUSHATT (1919 -Dec. 7, 1938) (19 years old)

particular census-taker didn’t record the year of birth, there can be no doubt that June 1900 minus 11 months equals birth firmly in the 1800s. In addition, the April 1910 census lists Ms. Jones as “10” (which accords with a July 1899 birth). Ms. Jones was only briefly married but had no children, but she lived her entire life with her family, as a member of society, including attending school and working as a nanny, making identity-switching unlikely. Her job taking care of the children of others included for some Hollywood stars in the 1940s. A niece, Dr. Lavilla Watson, wrote a 100+ page biography of her aunt (Watson, 2014).

With the June 1900 census so close to the time of birth, the only major issue is whether the woman who died in 2016 was the same as the woman who was born in 1899. Given that the family tree information on siblings (see Box 22.7) shows that all younger siblings are accounted for and the only siblings missing death records

are two older brothers, it seems reasonable to us to rule out this issue. While Ms. Jones had no children and was only married briefly, she was connected to society and her age claim was for the most part consistent throughout her life course. We thus conclude that this case is valid: Susannah Mushatt Jones was 116 and possibly the oldest African American on record, excluding the Lucy Hannah case.

22.1.9 Bernice Madigan (1899–2015)

Bernice Madigan was born as Bernice Marina Emerson, the daughter of Harry Emerson and Grace Emerson (nee Bennett) in West Springfield, Hampden, Massachusetts, on July 24, 1899. At the age of six, the family moved to Cheshire, MA. Bernice Emerson graduated from Adams High School in 1918, and thereafter moved to Washington, D.C., where she worked as a secretary for the Veterans Administration, then the Treasury Department. On Sept. 10, 1925, Bernice Emerson married Paul H. Madigan in Washington and later moved to Maryland. They had no children. Paul Madigan died in 1976. Bernice returned to Massachusetts in 2007. A lifelong Republican, she attended the Inauguration of Warren G. Harding in 1921, and cited Dwight D. Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan as her favorite U.S. Presidents. Reportedly, she did not take any medicine nor a daily vitamin. Bernice maintained exceptional mental and physical health to the point she would have an open birthday party each year until aged 114. Bernice Madigan died in her sleep in Cheshire, Berkshire, Massachusetts on Jan. 3, 2015, aged 115 years and 163 days.

Bernice Madigan was an ebullient personality who countered conventional wisdom by eating doughnuts, and yet living to an extreme old age. A career woman, she moved to Washington, D.C. for a typing job. Bernice Madigan, despite living to 115 years of age, never made it to higher than the world's fifth-oldest person (trailing Misao Okawa, Gertrude Weaver, Jeralean Talley, and Susannah Mushatt Jones) in the GRG rankings (despite making it clear in interviews that she coveted the #1 position, it was not to be). Yet despite coming along at a time when age "115" was less rare than it was in the past, this woman's personality fit right up with the best of them. Her birthdays often featured some special local event, such as riding in an antique fire truck. Bernice had a Facebook account which documented her life almost until the last. When she fell in 2014, injuring her hip, her recovery T-shirt said it all: "I intend to live forever. So far, so good." While, in her earlier years, she appeared to be in fairly good health, Bernice's last year or so included being on oxygen as an attempt to keep her going. Her last New Year's celebration on Jan. 1, 2015 was just two days before she passed away and her last photo, on Jan. 2, 2015, included her making toast.¹³

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10206322935171370&set=o.385969844848669&type=3&theater> (accessed Sept. 25, 2016).

Bernice’s age is well-attested to by documentation (see Table 22.9 and Box 22.8, below).

Bernice’s birth in July 1899 was recorded in a December 1899 birth registration. This is backed up with a 1900 census listing (July 1899), as well as census matches in 1910, 1920, 1930, and 1940. There’s also a marriage record and a recent ID (not all documents privately sent in will be shared here; only those that are publicly available). The bottom line: this case is one of the best-validated cases; all documents agree. We are confident, based on the records produced, that Bernice (Emerson) Madigan lived to 115 years, 163 days of age.

Table 22.9 Bernice Madigan document summary

Time	Type of document	Documented age/date of birth	Record accords with
Dec. 1899	Birth record	July 24, 1899	
June 1900	US Census	10 months	July 24, 1899
Apr. 1910	US Census	10 years	July 24, 1899
Jan. 1920	US Census	20	July 24, 1899
Sept. 1925	Marriage record	26	July 24, 1899
Apr. 1930	US Census	30	July 24, 1899
Apr. 1940	US Census	40	July 24, 1899
2000s	USPR	July 24, 1899	
2015	Obituary	July 24, 1899	

^aLower age documented
^bHigher age documented

Box 22.8 Family Tree of Bernice Madigan

Parents

- Harry G Emerson (Dec. 19, 1876–1927) (50 years old)
- Grace E Bennett Emerson (Apr. 19, 1878 – Jan. 1963) (84 years old)

Siblings

1. Muriel Winifred Emerson Andrews (July 13, 1898-fl. 1944)
2. **Bernice Maria Emerson Madigan (July 24, 1899 – Jan. 3, 2015) (115 years old)**
3. Roy Howard Emerson (Jan. 4, 1906 – Aug. 17, 1979) (73 years old)

Spouse

- Paul H Madigan (May 21, 1896 – May 1976) (c80 years old)

22.1.10 *Antonia Gerena Rivera (1900–2015)*

Antonia Gerena Rivera was born in Loiza, Puerto Rico, a US possession, on May 19, 1900 as the daughter of José Felix Gerena Agosto and Basilia Rivera Diana¹⁴. At 15, she left her parents' farm and married Jose Solis y Serrano (died 1943). Her first daughter, Isabelle, was born in November 1917, when Antonia was 17. At this time, she had to work on a farm and raise children herself as her husband fought in the First World War. Afterwards, Antonia worked as a teacher in a rural schoolhouse in the Puerto Rican countryside. Overall, Antonia had nine children, two of whom (Carmen and Fermina) survived her. Antonia had two additional husbands in later life. She came to Florida, USA in the 1970s.

Antonia, whose ancestors came to Puerto Rico from the Canary Islands, came from a long-lived family. Her brother Francisco Genera Rivera, a World War I veteran, was born in 1898 and died at 105 in 2003. A sister, Maria (married to a WWI veteran), lived to 103. The ages of the two centenarian siblings have been documented. Antonia's family longevity also extended to her children. Her oldest surviving daughter, Carmen, was 90 as the time of her mother's passing (and is now 95), while her first-born daughter, Isabel, lived to 92. A third daughter, Fermina, is now 91. Less certain are the ages of Antonia's mother (said to have been 95–98) and sister Augustina (said to have lived to 98). The age of Antonia's father is not certain (his death certificate claimed he was 110!) but early census records suggest he was about 87.

Healthwise, Antonia was a remarkable woman. She could walk until age 113. According to granddaughter Jennie Jimenez, she drank brandy every day until she was 110. Mrs. Gerena Rivera herself believed that the key to being successful in life is to be independent as an individual while maintaining close ties to your family. Antonia was in good health at age 111 but a fall at 113 weakened her. Antonia Gerena Rivera died in Kendall, Miami-Dade, Florida, on June 2, 2015 at the age of 115 years and 14 days.

Following Emiliano Mercado Del Toro (1891–2007)¹⁵, Antonia is the second validated Puerto Rico-born 115-year-old. While Puerto Rico is not counted as part of the US population by the US Census Bureau, Puerto Ricans became US citizens in 1917, and Antonia Gerena Rivera passed away in Florida, on US soil, in 2015, after having lived in the US for many years.

When Robert first met Antonia and her family, she was doing well for 110½: still drinking shots of brandy, still able to walk about. However, at age 113 years 11 months, Antonia fell, and was in delicate condition after that. The family even asked Robert for care advice, and the family agreed that Robert's advice helped Antonia do better. She recovered gradually over the next year. When Robert met her again in January 2015, it was clear that this woman of 114+ years of age was no

¹⁴ Alternate spelling: Viana.

¹⁵ <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2007/01/24/emiliano-mercado-del-toro-world-oldest-person-dies-at-115.html> (accessed July 252,018)

longer the ebullient walker at age 110. Yet, she was still happy to meet and greet. One thing that was clear was that this woman’s health depended on the care and attention she received from her loving family. When, in May 2015, the granddaughter (herself age 70) checking up on her was hospitalized, Antonia’s care at a local care home floundered. Antonia soon took ill with pneumonia and died a few weeks later, June 2, 2015, just two weeks after her 115th birthday.

But was Antonia the age claimed? Let’s review the documents for this case in Table 22.10, below.

Table 22.10 Antonia Gerena Rivera document summary

Time	Type of document	Documented age/date of birth	Record accords with
Mar. 1904	Birth record	May 19, 1900	
May 9, 1910	Puerto Rico census	10^a	May 19, 1900^a
Jan. 1920	Puerto Rico census	22 ^b	May 19, 1897 ^b
Apr. 1930	Puerto Rico census	28 ^a	May 19, 1901 ^a
Dec. 1935	Puerto Rico census	34 ^a	May 19, 1901 ^a
1961	Birth record	May 19, 1900	
1978	Birth record	May 19, 1900	
2000s	USPR	May 19, 1900	
2015	Grave	May 19, 1900	

^aLower age documented

^bHigher age documented

Box 22.9 Family Tree of Antonia Gerena Rivera

Parents

- Jose Félix GERENA AGOSTO (1855? – Aug. 5, 1942; Rio Grande, Puerto Rico) (87 years old) (said to be 110 in his death certificate)

Basilia RIVERA VIANA (April 10, 1863? - May 2, 1958; Rio Grande, Puerto Rico) (95 years old)

Siblings

1. Rosario GERENA RIVERA (1881? – June 25, 1912?) (c31)(Typhoid)
2. Bienvenido GERENA RIVERA (Mar. 2, 1884 – July 1975) (91 years old)
3. Brigida GERENA RIVERA (Dec. 21, 1885? – Feb. 21, 1911) (25 years old) (Typhoid)
4. Agustina GERENA RIVERA (May 5, 1887 – Feb. 19, 1986) (98 years old)(old age)
5. Nicodemes GERENA RIVERA (Nov. 5, 1888/1896? – Oct. 14, 1953) (64 years old)(she fell)
6. Andrea GERENA RIVERA (Nov. 30, 1889 – Aug. 16, 1927) (37 years old)(Tuberculosis)
7. Victoria GERENA RIVERA (Mar. 6, 1893 – May 26, 1977) 84 years old
8. Adela GERENA RIVERA (July 13, 1894 -fl. 1940)

(continued)

Box 22.9 (continued)

9. Amelia Gerena Rivera (1895-fl. 1940)
10. Nicolasa (Nicumedia) GERENA RIVERA (Jan. 11, 1897 – June 1, 1898) (1 year old)
11. Francisco GERENA RIVERA (Sept. 9, 1898 – Dec. 16, 2003) 105 years old; WWI veteran
12. **Antonia GERENA RIVERA (May 19, 1900 – June 2, 2015) 115 years old**
13. María GERENA RIVERA (Mar. 15, 1902 – June 5, 2005) (103 years old)
14. Pedro GERENA RIVERA (May 24, 1905 – July 17, 1998) (93 years old)

Children

1. Isabel (Nov. 5, 1917 – Apr. 26, 2010) (92 years old) died Cape Canaveral Florida
2. Daniel (Mar. 11, 1921 – Jan. 17, 1999) (77 years old) San Juan, Puerto Rico (WWII veteran)
3. Catalina (Apr. 30, 1923 – Jan. 17, 1937) (13 years old) died as a child. Buried in San Juan, Puerto Rico
4. Carmen (Apr. 21, 1925 – LIVING 95+)
5. Blanch (Oct. 27, 1926- deceased), Newburgh, New York, cremated.
6. Fermina (July 7, 1929 – LIVING 91+)
7. Abraham (Nov. 29, 1930 – May 21, 1988) (57 years old) Buried in New York, City. Saint Raymond Cemetery
8. Margarita (Feb. 5, 1933 – June 24, 2014) (81 years old) died Las Vegas Nevada
9. Marta (Apr. 30, 1936 – Nov. 28, 2003) (67 years old) Clewiston, Florida, Buried, Miami, Florida

From the family tree records shown in Box 22.9, we can ascertain that Rivera's family tree came from a time of transition. Early-life documents are missing for Antonia's parents and most of her older siblings, but especially for the period from 1898 onward (when Puerto Rico was transferred from Spanish to US control as a consequence of the Spanish-American War), the coverage improves markedly. There are birth records or early-life census matches (all less than 10 years after the birth events) for the last five siblings. Antonia's own birth of May 19, 1900 was established as early as the Mar. 15, 1904 delayed birth record (and two other siblings were also registered at the same time). Moreover, the tightness of the births leaves little margin for differences: only the year 1901 is hypothetically open, but a May 1901 birth would be only 10 months prior to the birth of younger sister Maria, so it is unlikely.

Though there is also some messiness when it comes to records for her husbands and children, the records for the oldest children have been located. That Antonia gave birth in 1917 (also backed by a birth record which records the mother as "Antonia Gerena") is also a testament to this woman's great age.

While the 1920 census overstates her age (probably due to her having a child as a teenager) and the 1930 and 1940 census understate her age, the two earliest documents and those from 1961 onward all accord with a birth in 1900. When Antonia died, her second-oldest daughter was 90 and her granddaughter was 70. The birth of a child in 1917 leaves little room for age inflation. With the delayed birth record being less than four years after the birth event and with the 1910 census supporting, we thus conclude that Antonia Gerena Rivera reached age 115 in 2015.

22.2 Invalidated (False), Exaggerated, and Unvalidated Claims

While the 10 new 115+ American cases researched in section one of this chapter might at first give an impression that “most” claims to 115+ are now correct, such is not the case.¹⁶ Even with the purported age of the oldest American claimant declining from “128” in the 1990s to “125” in 2007, there is still plenty of age-inflated literature out there for review. Social Security Death Index (SSDI)-generated frequencies of alleged supercentenarians whose deaths were reported between 1980 and 2009 found only five validated cases among 233 claims of age 115+ in the United States, which results in the 2.1% validation rate in this extreme age group (Young et al., 2010). Below, we will review one of the more problematic recent cases, the Lucy Hannah case.

22.2.1 *Lucy Hannah (1875/1895?-1993)*

The Lucy Hannah case is one of the most-important cases being reviewed in this chapter (the other being Augusta Holtz, the first validated person to reach age 115). The official position of the IDL and GRG since 2003 has been that this case is “validated” and that, at 117 years 248 days, this woman was the third-oldest validated person all-time¹⁷ and the oldest African-American person on record. For the first book chapter on American supercentenarians 115+, this case was not reviewed because there was not enough information publicly available (Young, 2010). However, given additional U.S. records that were released online in 2015, additional

¹⁶There were other false claims that we researched other than this one, but were not included due to limitations of space. The below case is the only case among them that was considered “validated”. Thus, the below invalidation is a retraction, and the most important of the false cases. Thus, the below case was selected for this chapter to be a type case of how a seeming census “match” could be a mismatch, and why more detailed research (such as family-tree reconstruction) is needed for the most extreme age claims (age 115+).

¹⁷In April 2018, Nabi Tajima of Japan ostensibly passed this apparently false milestone of 117 years, 248 days, but her claim is also under review.

research is presented here which will call the “validation” status of this case into question.

Before we get to that, it would be appropriate to review how this case came to be accepted as “validated”. The GRG backing came from the IDL backing; the IDL backing came from the SSA study backing. So, in order to check further, we need to know how the SSA study came to decide that this case was “valid”. The first thing to know is that Lucy Hannah’s SSDI listed her as “118”. The second thing to know is that the “SSA study” was employed on a “group scale”, not a focus on single cases. More details on the SSA study efforts can be found at their book chapter in the 2010 *Supercentenarians* book (Kestenbaum and Ferguson, 2010). Having been an SSA study contributor, I summarize the basics here: the study began with claims to age 110+ between Jan. 1, 1980 and Dec. 31, 1999. Efforts were made to verify, firstly, the dates of death to filter out “ghost cases” (persons “alive on paper” but who had died years or decades earlier). The Lucy Hannah case passed this initial test, as her death date was confirmed in the National Death Index (NDI). Second, mid-life ID/proof of name change was generally considered to be the SS-5 (Numident) application, which in most cases includes the names of the SS applicant’s parents, place of birth, etc. With this information, an attempt was made to match the parental information to an early-life census match (Lucy Hannah, being African American and born in Alabama, likely had no birth record). A “match” with an 1880 census record, listing a child named “Lucy” aged 4, was believed to be the “strong proof” that showed that this woman really was “117” years old. Potential census matches were checked for strength/goodness of fit using a formula, and the match came back as solid. This included correct geographic location, correct name, and a close age. That decision was made in 2003, and has stood since then. Even today, not all details of that scoring “match” have been released.

The SSA study methodology probably was effective over 97% of the time (recent GRG re-investigations have found that to be the case). But, as Jean-Marie Robine and other skeptics have stated, extraordinary claims to 115+ should get a further look, including an attempt to fit the case within a family-tree reconstitution, or at least a check to see what further documents may be available. In 2003, relatively few additional documents were available for this case: there were no news reports, no photos, nothing other than the basic SSDI listings, NDI record, and the census matches. No major breakthroughs came until 2015, when the SSA released details of SS application reports, and a marriage record for Lucy Hannah was located. What the newly-released records showed would finally shine additional light upon this case.

The first new document to be located, the 1972 social security application, didn’t shed any new light: it still listed Lucy Hannah’s parents as Sol and Sally Terrell. But this clue was now more easily accessible to the general public, and led to the larger discovery: the 1943 marriage application “bombshell”: In short, the 1943 (second) marriage application suggests that Lucy Hannah was born Aug. 12, 1895, and that her husband, Fred, actually was the one with a “July 16” date of birth. Fred’s 1942 WWII draft card further confirms his date of birth. Had Lucy been born in 1875, she should be 68 years of age here, not 48 years old as listed.

It has been said that just one major piece of evidence could be enough to invalidate a case, but it’s possible that this person understated their age in mid-life. In a situation like this, we can look at the larger context: are there multiple lines of evidence to support the earlier birth record and show that the mid-life age statement was an understatement? In this case, the answer is “no”. The few additional mid-life census matches returned, such as the 1930 census, cast further doubt that the Lucy Hannah who died in 1993 was born in 1875. Upon further inspection, even the 1880 census “match” appears to be in error: while the right state, it’s the wrong county (Marengo) and Lucy “Terrell” is listed with grandparents, not parents. Furthermore, an alternative 1880 census “match” listed Sol and Sally “Terrill” (slightly misspelled) in the correct county (Elmore) with three older siblings...but no Lucy. A check of one of these siblings, Elmore, confirmed from his later-life records that Sol Terrell and Sally Edwards were his parents. And then we located a likely 1930 census record, listing Lucy Brown (her first husband’s name), age 36! So, we are left with a weak (not strong) 1880 census assertion, versus a better-fit 1880 census match for Lucy’s parents not listing her as born yet.

The lack of a media claim to “117” further speaks against this case, as does the date of birth being transposed from the husband. Taken together, all these clues lead us to the conclusion that this case is one where the ostensible age may have been altered or switched in mid-life. And this raises the issue: how could the 1880 census “match” have been wrong? Problem number one is that the 1880 census “match” shows Lucy Terrell living with “grandparents”, not the parents. It is possible that this is another Lucy Terrell, not the one who later became Lucy Brown, then Lucy Hannah. With the parents living a few counties away and with three of Lucy’s siblings listed (but not Lucy), we must assume that she was not born yet in 1880 and the census “match” was a case of misidentification. This is a plausible solution to this case’s mystery. For a review of findings, please see Table 22.11, below.

There is more to still investigate on this case: indeed, we have not yet located even a single photo, nor interviewed surviving family members for their say on this claim. However, the information that has already come to light is sufficient, in our estimation, to withdraw “validation” support for this case. The concept of validation is for a high degree of certainty (98% or more confident), and a claim of this magnitude must be able to withstand reasonable documentary scrutiny in order to remain as “validation”. Yet the only document issued within 20 years of the birth event is

Table 22.11 Lucy Hannah document summary

Time	Type of document	Documented age/date of birth	Record accords with
June 1880 ^a	US census ^a	Not listed^a	Not born yet^a
Apr. 1930 ^a	US census ^a	36 ^a	July 16, 1893 ^a
1943 ^a	Marriage certificate ^a	48 ^a	Aug. 12, 1895 ^a
1972 ^b	SS-5 Numident file ^b	97 ^b	July 16, 1874 ^b
1993 ^b	SSDI ^b	118 ^b	July 16, 1874 ^b

^aLower age documented

^bHigher age documented

not incontrovertible, and a mid-life document says that this woman was born Aug. 12, 1895, which would make her only “97” years of age, not “117”, at death. The 1930 census age of “36” suggests birth in 1893 (and thus suggests Lucy was 99). It may not be certain what age Lucy Hannah actually was, and more may be investigated, but already the approximately 20-year discrepancy between the late-life and mid-life year of birth claims is quite concerning, and supplementary investigation has not turned up sufficient evidence that would support retaining validation status for this case. Given the seriousness of the above findings, we recommend the scientific community withdraw support for this case upon the publication of this chapter. It should be noted that this case is more similar to the Shigechiyo Izumi (1865?/1880–1986) case of Japan in that the original case validation remains not fully public, and that the “debunking” of the case is not as clear as with a case such as Pierre Joubert. Yet we must remember that extraordinary cases require extraordinary evidence. And while checking a case such as Sarah Knauss has only turned up more evidence in favor of her being age 119 (recently, a transcription of the 1890 census has been located, adding further support to Sarah Knauss’s case validation), a checking of the Lucy Hannah case did just the opposite.

With the retraction of this case, suddenly the USA has only one validated person 117+ (Sarah Knauss). The new “oldest African American on record” is, however, still fuzzy, with the cases of Gertrude Weaver, Maggie Barnes, and Susannah Mushatt Jones being possibilities. All three are confirmed to be 115+ but when it comes to “fuzzy validations”, there is a margin of error. Susannah Mushatt Jones’s age of 116 years, 311 days is certain and that must stand as the official record, even if the other two might have been older. Note that, in addition, Violet Brown of Jamaica (March 10, 1900–Sept. 15, 2017) likely becomes the oldest officially validated Black person on record, with the retraction of the Lucy Hannah case.

22.3 Conclusion

After this second book chapter on American supercentenarians age 115+, we now have a clearer picture than after the first chapter (Young, 2010) about the American 115+ population. Of the 18 USA cases aged 115+ which have now been validated, only one was male, and this was an immigrant from Europe (Chris Mortensen). Indeed, the USA has gained several cases through immigration: in this chapter, Augusta Holtz from Germany; Dina Manfredini from Italy; and Antonia Gerena Rivera from Puerto Rico. As in Europe and Japan, age 115 is becoming more common over time: one case in the 1980s, four cases in the 1990s, seven cases in the 2000s, and seven cases so far in 2010s. There does not seem to be a halt in the increasing number of those reaching the age of 115 years or more in the USA.

Acknowledgments We would like to thank Dr. James Vaupel, founding head of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research; Dr. Bernard Jeune of Odense University, Denmark; and Heiner Maier of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research for providing us with this opportunity to publish research regarding the maximum observed human lifespan in the USA.

We would also like to thank GRG-Puerto Rico Correspondent, Mrs. Jennie Jimenez, for invaluable genealogical information and help in the reconstruction of the family tree of Mrs. Antonia Gerena Rivera, and GRG-Spain correspondent Miguel Quesada who helped with document locating and translations.

Robert would also like to thank Jimmy Lindberg and Waclaw Jan KroczeK for assistance with compiling case data and reviews for this book chapter.

Robert would also like to dedicate this work in memory of the late Dr. L. Stephen Coles (1941–2014), whose vision of a GRG organization that tracked validated supercentenarian cases from across the globe has slowly become a reality over his 21 years (from 1999) with the GRG organization.

References

- Kestenbaum, B., & Ferguson, B. R. (2010). Supercentenarians in the United States. In H. Maier, J. Gampe, B. Jeune, J.-M. Robine, & J. W. Vaupel (Eds.), *Supercentenarians* (pp. 43–58). Berlin: Springer Verlag.
- Poulain, M. (2010). On the age validation of supercentenarians. In H. Maier, J. Gampe, B. Jeune, J.-M. Robine, & J. W. Vaupel (Eds.), *Supercentenarians* (pp. 3–30). Berlin: Springer Verlag.
- Watson, L. (2014). *Susannah, our incredible 114-year-old aunt*. Sarasota: Peppertree Press.
- Young, R. (2010). Age 115 or more in the United States: Fact or fiction? In H. Maier, J. Gampe, B. Jeune, J.-M. Robine, & J. W. Vaupel (Eds.), *Supercentenarians* (pp. 247–284). Berlin: Springer Verlag.
- Young, R., Desjardins, B., McLaughlin, K., Poulain, M., & Perls, T. (2010). Typologies of extreme longevity myths. *Current Gerontology and Geriatrics Research*, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2010/423087>.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.