

Human Research Project: Means and Methods of Public Records Access

PROJECT SUMMARY

THIS PROJECT WAS AN ATTEMPT to explore the various sources of human information available in the world today, as well as the methods of accessing it. “Human information” means anything involving another human being, or even yourself; it means everything from the car you drive to your blood type to how much you paid in taxes last year. This sort of information is virtually limitless, but our interest here was in data that could be collected legally and easily through *public records*.

Public records, by the technical definition, are documents held by the government—generally the state or county you live in, though the federal government has them as well, and other sources do too—that are considered, by their nature, to be something that the public has the right to examine. For example, real estate holdings are generally public record, because it’s considered the public’s right to know who just bought the house next door to yours.

We are using a less formal definition, basically to mean anything that can be discovered easily, without spending exorbitant amounts of money, and without breaking the law. In other words, information that is “out there,” available to anyone who cares to find it—information about people, that is. In short, we set out to answer the question, “If I point at a random person on a random street corner, what can I know about him in a few weeks time?”

We were successful inasmuch as we discovered the general bounds of the informational infrastructure of California. We were *not* able to dredge up as much data as we would have liked, particularly the basics (home address, date of birth, etc.), but it seems unlikely that such things were actually completely unavailable; more probably we simply did not find them within the scope of our research.

We also discovered, for better or for worse, that personal information is surprisingly secure in California. Many sources that would yield a goldmine of personal data in other states are not considered public record here, and others are completely sealed (neither of which means that they are entirely secret, but they are certainly more difficult to obtain).

Here we will present our findings in several forms. First, to illustrate our process, a straightforward log, as recorded throughout our research, keeping track of what transpired. Second, a summarized list of the information uncovered, as well as a description of the sources used. And finally, a structured visual chart of the flow of information, illustrating the ways in which data leapt from source to source, spawning new elements, and throughout.

RESEARCH LOG

PRELIMINARY INFORMATION:

NAME: *Lance Dean Velasquez*

PROFESSION: *Chef*

PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT: *"Bendean" (restaurant on Solano Avenue)*

DATE - 5·3·05

Made initial check for name in online directories. Whitepages.com finds no results. zabasearch.com finds two, neither with listed phone numbers, though both with addresses; one is in Albany and one is in El Cerrito. Both are under "Lance D Velasquez." The El Cerrito address also has a date of birth: 1964. The coincidence of the names and both being in California, in the Berkeley area, seems too great; if I have to guess, I'd say these are both places he has lived, though possibly neither is current. I'm also unsure of where zabasearch is getting this information, although it's offering me a background check and other information for a fee. (No thanks.)

DATE - 5·5·05

Google around, trying to find more information. Find one restaurant review enumerating past locations LDV has worked; one, interestingly, is in Georgia. Apparently he's been all over. I find two references to the Georgia restaurant: a news review (<http://www.cnn.com/FOOD/resources/food.for.thought/southern/beautiful.south/>) which clarifies that it's the right person, and the restaurant's website (<http://www.1848house.com/>). From the news piece, I also get a poor image of the man (<http://www.cnn.com/FOOD/resources/food.for.thought/southern/beautiful.south/cuisine.long.jpg>).

This gives me the idea to get a better photo. I perform a Google image search for "lance dean velasquez," which returns one result (<http://images.google.com/images?q=lance%20dean%20velasquez&hl=en&lr=&c2coff=1&safe=off&client=safari&rls=en-us&sa=N&tab=wi>). Unfortunately, it's for a page which is now offline, which means I can neither get a larger version nor check that it's actually of the right person. However, putting the page's address into the Wayback machine (archive.org) brings up an archived version, which confirms that it's a picture of LDV—however, I don't get a larger image. It also gives me the name of his wife: Lisa. I now have two small, low-quality photographs.

Searches for "Lisa Velasquez" return nothing. Either she's totally unlisted or she didn't take his name.

Decide to drop the computer for a bit and perform some actual legwork. Since Bendean (the restaurant) is so close to my house, I decide to check it out; the address is easily available from online reviews (1647 Solano). I get the idea of "staking out" the place at closing time; perhaps I can see LDV in person, and identify the car he gets into, getting the make/model/year/color/plate.

I arrive a bit before 9:30, when it closes; the last customers don't wrap up until 9:45 or so at best, and employees keep rattling around until much later. Various people trickle out,

but as best I can tell, none are LDV. At last, at 10:35, there is a final exodus. It's dark, but I observe someone who looks similar to the guy in my photos; he's walking with someone who looks like his wife (also in one of my photos). He's the last guy out.

They walk a couple of blocks and get into a silver Volkswagon Jetta, license 5CNZ629, four-door, which seems more or less appropriate for this guy—a successful chef with his own restaurant, a minor celebrity within Bay Area culinary circles, probably not rolling in money but fairly well-off.

On a “why not?” whim, I follow them for a bit. They drive down Solano and stop in front of Cafe Raj, then go in and eat. They get in right before closing.

When they leave, I follow them a bit more, but lose them on Shattuck, turning onto Ashby. For what it's worth, assuming they're headed home, they don't seem to be going anywhere near either of the two addresses zabasearch found (actually, both of those are quite near Bendean), suggesting either that both addresses are incorrect/outdated, or that I managed to follow the wrong guy. I'll file this information as “questionable.”

DATE – 5 · 12 · 05

Whoops, discovered an error—Lisa Lee isn't his wife, she was a chef and co-owner at Our Place Cafe. (Got that from here: <http://www.contracostatimes.com/mld/cctimes/10438779.htm>) I have no evidence that she has any connection to LDV at all.

In retrospect, I don't know where I got that idea in the first place. The image I have of him with a woman is named “lance_kate.jpg.” Just a screw-up.

Okay, I'm just about ready to start digging into sources I need to access by mail or in person, but I want to polish off the web, so I pull up the website for Alameda County (<http://www.co.alameda.ca.us/>). Goldmine! I guess the internet has revolutionized the world of records, because all sorts of things are accessible here that I thought I'd have to dig with a shovel for... one of them is a searchable record of fictitious business names and other public records (<http://rechart1.acgov.org/>).

I start with the fictitious business name search and put in “Bendean,” LDV's current restaurant. One result, which doesn't reveal much, but does show when it was filed and when it expires, and confirms that LDV is the owner.

Okay, I now go to the general public record search, and put in “Velasquez, Lance.” I get eight results, all under “Lance D Velasquez,” which helps confirm the identity. Several are deeds, the rest are things I don't understand. The information is again sketchy, save for names and dates; maybe the dates will be useful later. There's one “REQUEST NOTICE DEFAULT/DELINQ” connected to Liberty America Mortgage Corp., which sounds like a loan default.

The most useful thing here is that every one of these documents is listed under both LDV and “Susan C Stevenson.” That's who I'd bet the wife is.

Let's do some checking. Back to zabasearch, and I put in Susan Stevenson. Whaddya know? One of the results is at address 136 Ashbury Ave. in El Cerrito—the same address I got from LDV's search. (It also gives a birth date of April 1960.) This, to me, confirms that Susan is LDV's wife, or was at some point; and that Ashbury was their address at some point in time.

Going back to the internet white pages, I do a reverse listing on that address, and I get back “David Maier” as the resident. Best guess is that they've moved out and Maier lives there now. Checking whitepages for Susan gets a number of results within California, in-

cluding two “Susan C”s, one in Stockton and one in San Diego, neither much closer than that. Either they’re divorced and Susan has moved elsewhere, or she’s unlisted as well, now.

Okay, back to the Alameda County page. There’s a property search here; I punch in the address of Bendeau and get the parcel number (62-2871-20), plus a bunch of other information—mostly assorted tax stuff. Total taxes appear to be \$8,549.92, due in two installments; one was paid four days before the delinquency deadline and one was paid exactly on it.

Property assessment information gives the value of the land at \$155,856, improvements at \$363,664; total taxable value, \$519,520. No exemptions. Use code is 3100, which is a one-story store (which is accurate, by the way).

Now, it appears that birth, death, and marriage records for Alameda are available online as well. Birth and marriage would be what interest me. However, they all seem to require information I don’t have—dates of birth are the main ones, or date of marriage (I have the birth *years*, as long as I trust the zabasearch info, and Susan’s month, but no days at all). Now, according to the site, there are two types of these documents: “unrestricted,” which can be used as a certified proof, and “informational,” which can’t, but they have the *same information*, which is all I care about. You need a special relationship for the former—attorney, sibling, etc.—but it doesn’t say you need anything for the latter, so maybe the informational prompts are merely for the sake of locating the proper record. Also, I believe that this information is all recorded at the state level as well, so I may try there instead—maybe it’s easier.

DATE – 5 · 13 · 05

At this point I’m beginning to go through the material I picked up at the library. The most useful is a sheaf of photocopies I pulled from *The Sourcebook to Public Record Information*, edition 5, edited by Peter J. Weber and Michael Sankey. Basically I’m just running through the sources it lists and seeing what I can find.

I pull blanks until I check the corporation/LLP/LLC/LP records in California, which are available online. I search “Bendeau,” and get a result. Very little new information, except that it’s under LDV’s name, it’s a corporation (“Bendeau, Inc.”), it incorporated on 6/29/2004, and its number is C2659216.

I fire off a letter to the UCC division in Sacramento for UCC information and to the Secretary of State for corporate records. I’m going to mail for birth and marriage records as well, but apparently turnaround times on those are massive; I’ll see if I can pull it off at the county level first (quicker).

Apparently voter registration records are closed to the public in California, a shame; one of my sources (*The reporter’s handbook: an investigator’s guide to documents and techniques*, John Ullmann) recommends it as a great source.

At this point, I’m mainly waiting on my written inquiries to come back, though I’ll keep exploring other sources. I’ll also swing by the Alameda County vital records office and see if I can locate birth/marriage information—which should be possible *if* LDV was born/married within this county. If not, I’ll have to inquire with the state recorder’s office, which will mean a much longer wait.

DATE – [various]

At this point I'm doing a lot of waiting on my mailed requests. I have a few more aces to try, and I'm doing "fishing expeditions" on some low-probability attempts, but my best chances remain somewhere in the mail.

In addition to my UCC and corporate records requests, I have mail out to the Alameda County vital records office for birth and marriage records of LDV. This is a bit iffy, like the others, mostly because I don't know for sure that either his birth or his marriage even took place in this county. He lives here *now*, so it seems like a reasonable bet, but it could easily have occurred in another county, or even another state (in which case I'm screwed). Now, I'd have had better odds if I'd gone to the *state* vital records office instead, since that would include all births and marriages within the state of California, but I understand that their turnaround times are much greater than the county office, and I'm hoping to get this back in time to do something with it, so I thought I'd take the shot.

The other iffy part is that I didn't have nearly all of the information that was prompted on the request forms. I had names and year of birth, and the spouse's name, but they were wanting stuff like mother's maiden name, date of birth, city of marriage, and so on, none of which I had. On the other hand, I'm pretty sure they only want the info to help facilitate the search; it's not for verification, as in, if you don't have it, they think you shouldn't be asking in the first place. So it's just a question of whether they can find the records, and I doubt that there's more than one person with the information I did specify.

In fact, the Alameda County office called me and asked if I had a date of birth for the birth certificate. When I told them no, they verbally shrugged and went on their way. Dunno. Either I'm not going to get anything, or I will.

My last pending request is with the postal service. It seems that they no longer release forwarding addresses to direct requests, but you can get around it (I don't think it counts as a loophole, it's just the nature of the system). What you do is post a letter to someone with the endorsement RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED written on the front (it used to be "ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED," but they changed it), and they'll return it to you with the new address stamped on it. (There are three other endorsements, all in the format of XYZ SERVICE REQUESTED; this one seems to fit my needs the best.)

So what I did is send a letter (actually just an empty envelope) to the Ashbury address (which I'm pretty sure is correct). With luck, I'll get the current address out of it. I'm not certain, since I'm not 100% sure the Ashbury is even correct, and I'm also not sure whether the USPS performs address service indefinitely—they may only do it for a year or 18 months or some such after someone moves. But again, worth a shot.

Anyway, I checked out some other possibilities that didn't bear any fruit, just canvassing kind of stuff. I also took a preliminary look at court records, which I think I'll check out more later; I registered for PACER, which is the online centralized court records system, and made a couple of searches, which turned up nothing. However, I don't think I really understood the system yet, so it bears further investigation. I can't just fire off searches will-nilly, because it charges you for the privilege of using the system.

Anyway, again, I'm mostly waiting at this point and shoring up loose ends. If *any* of my requests give me anything, I can probably use it to pull more leads, but if not, I'm not sure what I'll do. I'm running out of tricks.

DATE – 6 · 11 · 05

Okay, time to tie things off, simply because of time constraints: my deadline is here.

Unfortunately, none of my records requests (neither county or state) got back to me in time to be useful (though knowing my luck they'll probably all arrive in the mail tomorrow).

My USPS attempt—trying to get an updated home address using address correction—failed as well, though that one arrived, at least. The envelope came back with “RETURN TO SENDER NOT DELIVERABLE AS ADDRESSED UNABLE TO FORWARD” stamped on it, plus some other coded gobbledygook. So either the address I used was completely incorrect, or it was simply so old that the postal service didn't have the forwarding information anymore.

I made another attempt at figuring out the PACER system, but found nothing of note.

I did stumble upon one piece of information while googling for “Liberty America Mortgage Corporation,” which seemed to be connected to LDV by a delinquency notice. Liberty America operates in the western states, and is “a subprime lender providing mortgage loans to average Americans with below-average credit histories.” (<http://biz.yahoo.com/ic/116/116608.html>) Combine that with the delinquency/default notice (which I don't know the nature of, but which doesn't sound auspicious), and we might draw the conclusion that LDV does not have a stellar credit history. I know from some of the restaurant reviews that he's run at least one other restaurant, and I'm not sure if he had much financial stake in it or others; if so, and if he left because it was doing poorly (he does move around quite a bit), that may have contributed.

That's that, I suppose.

INFORMATION SUMMARY

The following was learned with near-absolute certainty:

- The restaurant Bendeau is located at 1647 Solano Ave, Berkeley, 94706.
- Lance Dean Velasquez is the head chef and main owner of Bendeau.
- Velasquez previously worked in a number of other restaurants, too numerous to list here; he is known as a bit of a peripatetic, though he is well-respected in the Bay Area culinary community.
- Bendeau is a corporation. The full corporate name is Bendeau, Inc., it incorporated on 6/29/2004, and its corporation number is C2659216.
- The total taxable value of the Bendeau building is \$519,520.
- The total taxes paid by Bendeau are \$8,549.92.
- Assorted other tax and real estate parcel information.
- Velasquez has a son named Ben.
- The basic appearance of Velasquez and his wife.

The following was learned with a high degree of certainty:

- Velasquez's wife, either currently or in the past, is Susan C. Stevenson.
- At some point, Velasquez and Stevenson lived at 136 Ashbury Ave, El Cerrito, 94530.
- Velasquez's mortgage, either in the past or ongoing, was obtained from Liberty Mortgage.

The following was learned to a reasonable, but not positive degree of accuracy:

- Velasquez was born in 1964. He is therefore 41 years old, give or take a year.
- Stevenson was born in April of 1960. She is therefore 45 years old.
- Stevenson joins Velasquez at Bendeau for at least a part of his work day, at least on occasion.
- Velasquez and Stevenson own a silver, four-door Volkswagon Jetta, license number 5CNZ629.
- Velasquez and Stevenson eat dinner, at least on occasion, at Cafe Raj on Solano after the restaurant closes for the night.
- Velasquez and Stevenson live somewhere south of Dwight Way.

The following is suggested or can be conjectured, but cannot be proven:

- Velasquez has an uncertain credit history.
- Velasquez has moved at least twice while living in the Bay Area.
- The first three digits of Velasquez's social security number lie between 545 and 573 (California range).

SOURCES DESCRIPTION

A number of sources were used in the course of this project. They fall into two categories: the actual "primary" resources from which data was gathered, and the "metasources" used to learn about those resources and suggest areas of research. To preserve the same path of information used in the project, we will begin with the latter. Several entirely redundant sources have been left out.

- *You, Too, Can Find Anybody: A Reference Manual*, by Joseph J. Culligan
- *Scram: Relocating Under a New Identity*, by James S. Martin
- *How to Find Almost Anyone, Anywhere*, by Norma Mott Tillman
- *The Reporter's Handbook: An Investigator's Guide to Documents and Techniques*, by John Ullmann
- *International Vital Records Handbook, 3rd edition*, by Thomas Jay Kemp
- *Get the Facts on Anyone*, by Dennis King
- *The Sourcebook to Public Record Information, 5th edition*, edited by Peter J. Weber and Michael Sankey

The last was especially useful, and this project would have been a great deal more taxing without its invaluable assistance; it is as near a thing as exists to a roadmap for this sort of research.

The following sources were used in the actual gathering of information. There are no omissions.

Google — The grandest and handiest of the internet search engines. Best used for “wide but shallow” canvassing; it will not access many of the truly useful records and databases (many are not even available online, and most of the rest are not indexed by Google), but it does a good job of providing basic information known to the public eye, and digging up widespread morsels such as mainstream news mentions. Google’s Image Search can also be a shortcut to finding images when you wouldn’t know where to start looking, and Google’s cache often stores information that has disappeared from its original location.

The Wayback Machine — A classic internet tool, this is an easy-to-use means of accessing the Internet Archive, which is basically an attempt to store and archive the entire internet. Many, many web pages are stored on it, which means that you can often go back and pull up a given page and see exactly how it looked in June of 1999, even if the site disappeared completely in 2001. An excellent adjunct to Google, since Google occasionally brings back results that aren’t available anymore, and its cache is not infallible.

Zabasearch.com — Zabasearch is a mostly-automated search tool designed to query a bunch of databases and give you the results. In a sense, it’s trying to do the same thing this project was based around, pulling up as much information from public data sources as possible. It’s drawn some ire in recent months for being a little *too* effective, although its information is regularly outdated or fudged—it’s only as good as its sources, of course. It’s very handy as a kind of “people” equivalent of Google, allowing you to plug in a name and get some information, although its accuracy is difficult to ascertain, since it doesn’t reveal what sources it came from. If nothing else, it acts as a souped-up phone book, finding many phone numbers and addresses no longer listed.

Whitepages.com — A simple example of an online telephone directory. Though limited, this is an effective way to call up currently-available phone numbers and addresses, and can be utilized for a reverse search to find out what person lives at an address or uses a phone number (useful for verifying information).

Uniform Commercial Code — The UCC, or Uniform Commercial Code, is pseudo-legislative attempt to standardize commercial transactions throughout the fifty states, and has a number of ramifications. Its relevance here is in that UCC filings involving commerce within any state, which include a wide array of finance- and trade-related documents—liens, loans, debts, and the like—are filed with the Secretary of State’s office, and can be accessed as public record. The actual information garnered depends on what is actually included in those documents, but it is a useful place to check if you have a business entity that you want to get background on. UCC records usually must be obtained by mail.

Corporate Records — Corporations are unique as businesses go because they are—by law—much more open with their information than most. (They are considered, in a sense,

to be a part of the public.) Most of the information pertaining to a corporation can be obtained by casual inquiry to the Secretary of State's office by mail; among other things, it can shed light on the corporate owners, who will be listed in the files with accompanying info.

Vital Records — “Vital records” usually refers to certificates of birth, death, marriage, and divorce. As of the past hundred years or so, in California at least, they are recorded at both the county and the state level. Recent legislation designed to combat identity theft set aside fully certified identification documents as a special class of vital record, not available to the public; however, anyone who knows what to look for can request (by mail) an informational copy of the documents, which will contain all of the same data, though it will not be considered valid as a proof of identity (which is irrelevant for the sake of research). The only caveat is that you must know enough information already to inquire in the right jurisdiction and know who you're asking about.

Property Information — Property-related information, including property taxes, ownership deeds, and the like, is public record and available at the county level. Although the records are often sparse, they can be a good place to begin a hunt.

Business Licenses — The local, lightweight version of a corporate record lookup, business licenses are generally available at the county level; they may not show much in the way of useful information, but at the least will include a name of the business owner and a business address.

Court Records — Except in unusual circumstances, court trial records are public by law. This applies to both criminal and civil court, as well as special courts such as bankruptcy court, and if your subject happens to have been involved in a truly juicy court case, the testimony and bodies of evidence may include incredible amounts of information. You need to know which jurisdiction to look in; online searches are possible using the PACER system, or on-site terminal searches can be performed at most county and federal courthouses. (Note: accessing specific court records is not the same as searching “criminal records,” which means making a generalized callup of an individual's criminal history, and is not possible in most states without special privileges. However, if you know what to look for, the actual trial records are available, even if their existence is not.)

Postal Service — The United States Postal Service is not an information broker, but it deals in information every day, and you can make use of it if you know how. Nearly everyone who changes residence in the US will fill out a change-of-address card and file it with the post office. As part of the identity theft legislation, the USPS no longer releases address information to casual inquiry. However, using address services, you can retrieve forwarding addresses for as long as they are available, simply by posting a piece of mail with the proper notation.

Footwork — From time to time, nothing is as effective as human research, which can involve anything from driving past buildings to the well-respected art of “garbology” (basically digging through discarded trash to find valuable information).

The following sources, though generally useful, were *not* used in the course of this project, for various reasons.

Driver Records — Every piece of information on your driver's license, and more besides (traffic history, for instance) is retained by your state's Department of Motor Vehicles. In some states, it is available to casual inquiry, though rarely in toto; however, in California, driver information cannot be accessed without the DMV first notifying the driver of the request and obtaining his assent.

Voter Registration Records — Voter registrations are recorded at the state level by their election department (in California, the Elections Division), and include home addresses. They are not open in California, though they are sometimes sold for political or other pre-approved purposes.

Licenses — Hunting, fishing, boat & small craft, piloting, ham radio, animal, various specialty businesses, and other licenses are all occasionally available in varying extents to anyone interested enough to mail the appropriate offices. Obviously, these are only useful if you know the subject to hold some such license, which may be obvious (a banker will have a banker's license) or may not be (who knows who has a hunting license?). However, the most useful information you're likely to get from such a request is a home address or a phone number.