

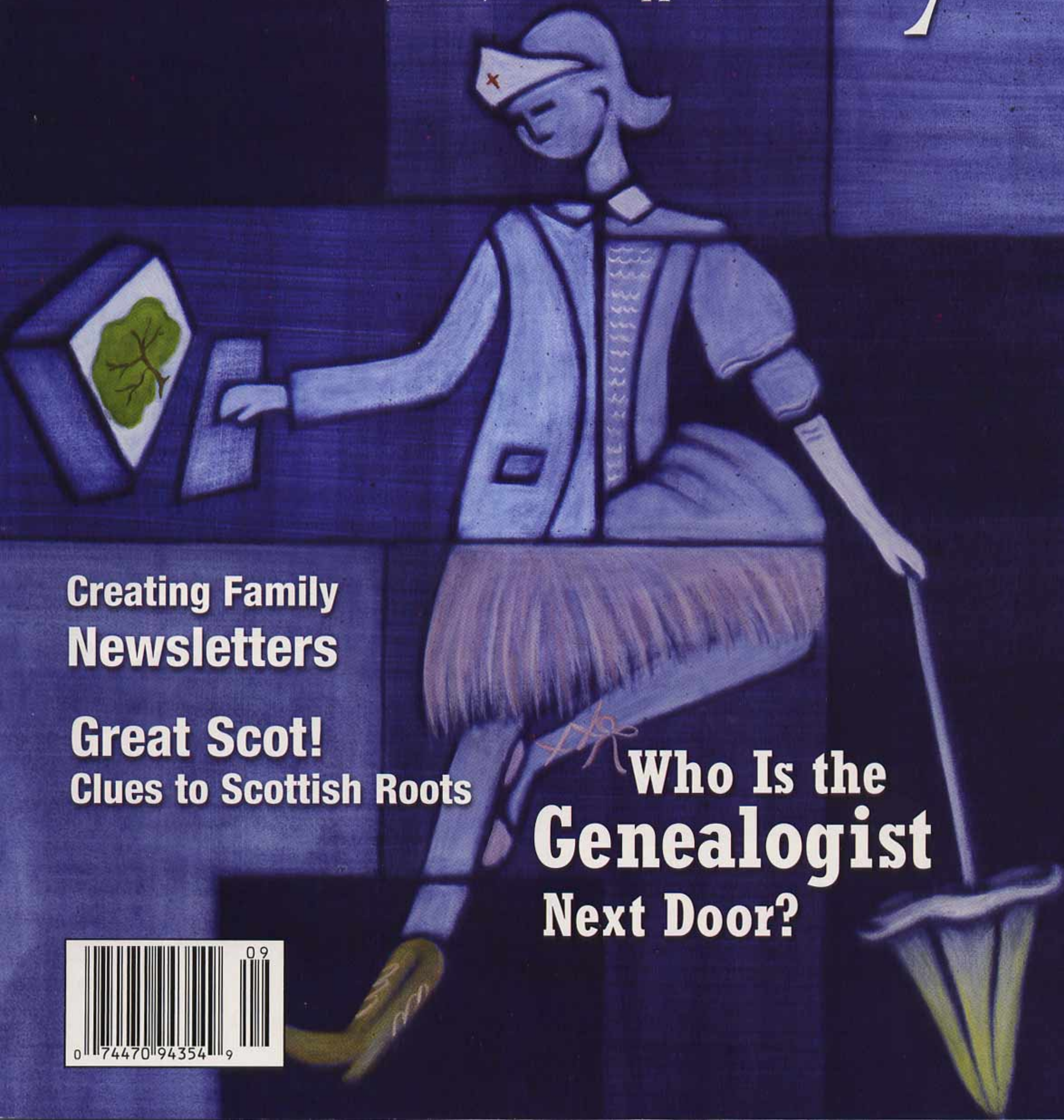
WAS GRANDPA IN A SECRET SOCIETY?

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**Who Is the
Genealogist
Next Door?**





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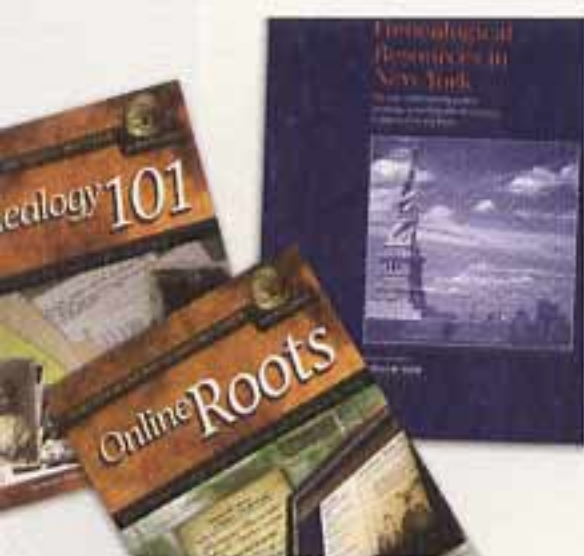
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Genealogy 101: How to Trace Your Family's History and Heritage

By Barbara Renick,
Rutledge Hill Press, 2003.
Softcover. \$19.99. To order,
visit <www.ngsgenealogy.org>.

If you are interested in learning more about your ancestors and you don't know where to begin, *Genealogy 101* may be the book for you. Produced under the direction of the National Genealogical Society, this handbook will help you decide what your genealogical goals are, organize your findings, select the best genealogy software for you, and preserve your family history.

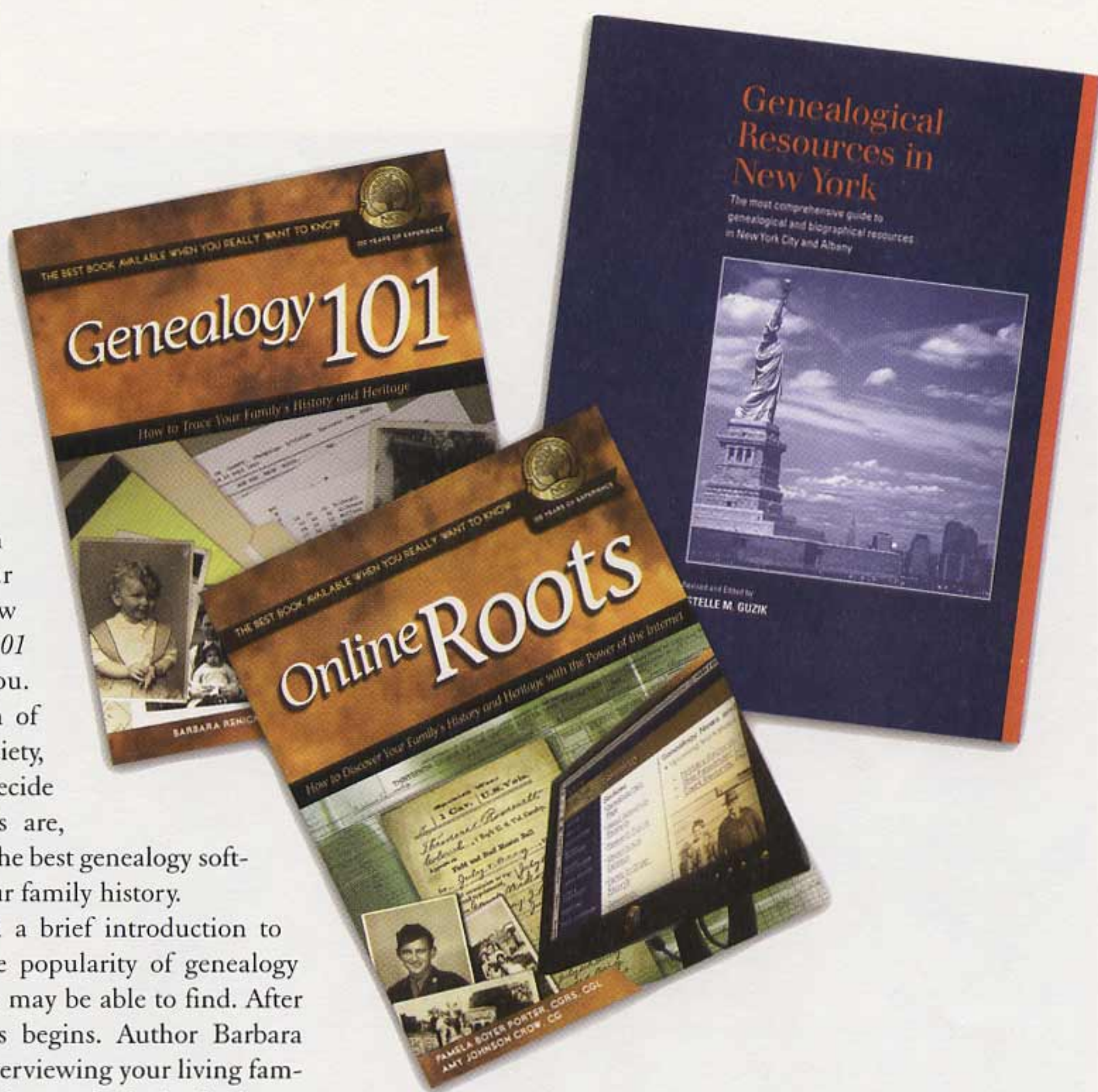
Genealogy 101 begins with a brief introduction to genealogy work, detailing the popularity of genealogy and the breadth of results you may be able to find. After this, the search for ancestors begins. Author Barbara Renick guides you through interviewing your living family members, and explains what to look for in home resources. Also, she tells you how to fill out pedigree charts and family group sheets.

Once you have gathered information about your ancestors, proper organization is critical. Renick offers suggestions for creating a research log, citing your sources, and publishing your findings. She also addresses a common difficulty in genealogy work—ascertaining the validity of the information you find. *Genealogy 101* provides aspiring genealogists with a handbook that can make the pursuit of their family's genealogy more manageable and enjoyable.

Genealogical Resources in New York

Revised and edited by Estelle M. Guzik. Jewish Genealogical Society, 2003. \$49.95. To order, contact info@jgsny.org.

With all the resources and history of New York City, researchers surely need a map of the city's facilities for



genealogists. Subtitled “the most comprehensive guide to genealogical and biographical resources in New York City and Albany,” this book has been revised and updated to include websites, e-mail addresses, fax numbers, and wheelchair accessibility as well as basic information on each facility that appeared in the previous edition: name, title of director, address, street and mailing address, phone number, cross streets, closest public transportation, travel directions, hours of operation, description of resources, finding aids, description of facility, restrictions on use, fees/copies, e-mail address, and website address. Sample forms to order birth, marriage, and death records from New York City and New York state agencies covered in this book are also included.

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Illustration by Heather Young

Who Is the **GENEALOGIST** Next Door?

by Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak

Like any good genealogist, I was curious. Curious about other genealogists. I know how I found myself on the slippery slope to a lifetime of roots-seeking, but what had sparked the interest of others? And what kept them engaged in the pursuit months, years, and even decades later? Are we all motivated by the same factors, or are our reasons as plentiful as we are?

The Researchers

Determined to find some answers,
I contacted three researchers who have studied genealogists:



Dr. Ronald D. Lambert, professor of Sociology at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada, was first on the scene with his pioneering 1994 study of 1,348 genealogists (members of the Ontario Genealogical Society). Since then, he has continued to probe the world of the family historian through national surveys in Canada (1998) and Australia (2000), and two smaller, but in-depth investigations in Australia (1999 and 2002).



As part of her masters thesis in psychology, **Pamela J. Drake** of California State University, Fullerton conducted an online survey that netted the participation of 4,109 genealogists in just a few short weeks in March 2001.



Dr. Kevin Meethan of the Department of Sociology at the University of Plymouth in the U.K. opted to get slightly more specific, focusing on “travel in search of one’s ancestral roots.” His study is still in progress, but well over 1,000 family historians have completed his online questionnaire and many have followed up with detailed accounts of their genealogical jaunts.

All three graciously allowed me to turn the tables on them by fielding my questions. What follows are the results of my own admittedly less-than-scientific survey.

Why Study Genealogists?

Somewhat perplexed by the scarcity of studies of genealogists (a reality Dr. Lambert believes may reflect the fact that “genealogists don’t represent the kind of ‘problem’ for society that calls for a solution”), I queried the three researchers about what prompted them to examine this relatively neglected population. Did a personal interest in genealogy perhaps have something to do with it?

Lambert: The seed was planted in 1983 when my wife and I visited a town in New Jersey from which my ancestors were said to have migrated to Canada in 1802. At the time, I was surprised at the intensity of the experience and wondered about its basis and how common it might be among

genealogists. Upon my return to Ontario, I found myself searching out and handling old documents associated with the family, visiting cemeteries, and traveling to family sites, thus further deepening my puzzlement about the basis for and significance of these experiences. By 1993, I decided to turn my research attention to exploring the genealogical experience, thus the survey conducted in 1994.

Drake: As a military kid who grew up overseas, I started my family history research while I was very young. As an adult with an interest in human behavior, I examined my reasons for my continued involvement and realized that genealogy had helped me to develop a sense of connection to place and a connection to history, giving me more of an

identity. I am very interested in the questions of who is doing genealogy and why. Did other people do genealogy for the same reasons I did, or to meet other needs, I wondered? Were people who were mobile more or less likely to get involved? Could a model be built to explain interest in genealogy or participation in genealogical activities? I had also read Dr. Lambert's paper on the subject and wondered if things had changed since so many people were now doing genealogy on the World Wide Web.

Meethan: Two reasons. First, I began researching my own family tree. Second, as an academic who has research interests in tourism, I have long been aware of "roots tourists," but interestingly, this is only now beginning to be researched. When I began my own search, I realized that the Internet was not only a key tool in family history research, but it also enabled me to reach a global sample for my academic research. Also, I am interested in the ways in which people construct their sense of self, their autobiographies of who they are in the world, and how the Internet provides people with new ways to connect to the past, and with each other.

How True Are the Stereotypes?

Many non-genealogists seem to assume that our pastime is the dominion of elderly women. Wondering how accurate this perception is, I asked the researchers what their surveys revealed.

Lambert: In the face of the expectation that genealogists are mostly older and female, perhaps the interesting finding is not that 63 percent of genealogists are women, but that 37 percent are men. In terms of age, 27 percent of the respondents were seventy or over and 29 percent were between sixty and sixty-nine. Only seven percent were younger than forty.

In a number of my studies, I have drawn the distinction between "interest" or "passive interest" and "effort" or "active interest" in genealogy. Passive interest in genealogy is to be found throughout the life cycle, and is not the preserve of the middle-aged or elderly. I think that the perception of a special affinity on the part of the middle-aged and elderly for genealogy flows largely from the fact that they are most likely to join genealogical societies, and hence, to be more visible to the outside world.

Drake: The current stereotype of genealogists being elderly females in rural communities was not supported by the participants in my study. It's true that the majority of participants were female (72.2 percent); however, only 20 percent were what might be considered, by one definition, as "elderly" (e.g., sixty-five or older). This finding was especially interesting when you look at reports of who uses the Internet—described typically as primarily urban young males. Family history is of interest across a wide range of ages and may even motivate people to use the Internet and computers.

While interest in genealogy may be strong at any age, research activities may not begin until middle age. In fact,

the average starting age reported for beginning genealogical research was forty. An interest in genealogy may be part of our development, part of a need, at midlife, to connect with multiple generations. While many of the demographic characteristics were as expected, what was surprising to me was that 6.5 percent of the

genealogists were single, 13.3 percent had no children, and that they lived in all types of communities nearly equally (from very urban to small town or rural areas).

Meethan: Initially I thought the gender profile of my participants—72 percent female, 28 percent male—must be way out, but these numbers seem to correspond to other studies. As to age, only about 12 percent were over the age of sixty, while over 60 percent were between the ages of thirty-six and fifty-five—and even this age segment was skewed toward the younger side. All told, about two-thirds of the participants were fifty or younger.

Some caution is warranted since my survey was aimed at Internet users, which obviously influenced the profile, but it seems safe to conclude that the genealogical community is younger than many imagine, with the youngest in my study being sixteen and working on a school project. A short time after I got that information, my eight-year-old son came back from school and told me that they were going to do a family history project too, so the age profile may get younger still. I am sure this has a lot to do with opportunity. Prior to the Internet, genealogy was much more time-intensive than it is now with the increasing number of online databases, so only those with plenty of time—usually the retired—would have been able to get involved.

A major factor stimulating active involvement in genealogy is the death of loved ones.

I also asked a question about ethnicity, requesting participants to write in how they would describe themselves. I was surprised at the variety of answers I received. At the moment, it runs to over ninety different categories, but these can be grouped into smaller categories. For the most part, these all mention how “mixed” they are, and my favorite to date has to be “Heinz 57.”

I was intrigued with this information because of the apparent differences between the results of Dr. Lambert’s essentially pre-Internet survey and the other two. Of course, one has to be aware of the apples-and-oranges aspect of comparing results from assorted studies, but it seems that today’s genealogist is younger and more likely to be female than previously. But this inference begs another question: Is this in reflection of who is online (i.e., was there an element of self-selection in the later online surveys?) or has the very existence of the Internet perhaps brought younger people into the genealogical fold? In any case, it seems reasonable to surmise that one in every three or four roots-seekers is male and that family historians are younger than generally thought—and possibly getting younger.

What Triggers Genealogical Interest?

In my case, a sixth grade homework assignment introduced me to the world of genealogy, but I was curious as to the trigger event for others. Each of the researchers offered their insight:

Lambert: A major factor stimulating active involvement in genealogy is the death of loved ones. A substantial number of my respondents found themselves confronting questions for which they lacked answers about recently deceased family members. This awareness was prompted, for example, as they disposed of their personal effects.

Various social influences also clearly led many people to genealogy. Respondents told me that they began to ask genealogical questions in the wake of elementary school assignments or when their children sought assistance for these assignments, in the latter case exposing their own ignorance. Other respondents were pushed “over the edge” by the encouragement or example of parents or good friends who did genealogy.

Drake: Many people were introduced to genealogy through school assignments, or when they came across family papers. Most of the same reasons that Dr. Lambert had found in 1994 were still true for my participants in 2001, with the additional reason of being contacted by a distant relative via e-mail.

Meethan: Quite a few say that they were motivated when they inherited items—in particular, old photographs and family Bibles. The death of close family was also mentioned as a contributing factor, and a sense of loss that people’s stories and lives had gone. But then, some people reported that they had been interested since childhood as a result of listening to family stories.

What Motivates Genealogists?

It makes sense that the death of loved ones, inherited heirlooms, school and scouting projects, or even just encouragement from a friend can spark interest. But what keeps it going? What motivates us in our unending quest to learn more about our predecessors? Dr. Lambert, in particular, offered in-depth commentary on this intriguing subject.

Lambert: I have encountered the occasional individual who thinks that genealogists are moved primarily by a desire to discover heroic antecedents, but this assumption has not been borne out in my research. There was a time, of course, when genealogy was used to support a family’s claims to social standing. Apart from respondents’ expressions of gratitude for their ancestors’ imagined qualities of endurance, courage, etc., as well as respondents’ appreciation for a good story, there was little indication that this motivation figured prominently among contemporary genealogists.

There is, in fact, a great deal of variation among genealogists in terms of the personal “needs” that genealogy satisfies for individuals. Genealogists told me about benefits they found, often at great length and with feeling, conviction, and eloquence. Here is some of what they told me:

- **As professional or “objective” documentation of the ancestral past.** I think of those individuals who regard genealogy as a kind of scientific enterprise primarily answering their need to “know” the past with precision and accuracy. Genealogists constructing medical family trees, for example, were clearly concerned that they obtain valid information.
- **As a creative outlet** for genealogists’ talents in research, writing, and ultimately as a gift to others and to posterity. I think here of individuals who described the past as offering fertile ground for their imagination and artistic impulses.
- **As family historians, genealogists play a very important role in their ongoing relations among**

the living. Respondents frequently commented on the feeling of satisfaction they found in educating members of the family, especially the young, about their antecedents.

- **As a heritage activity that seeks to preserve the past** and to pay homage to ancestors. I think here of individuals who were moved by the hardships that their ancestors had endured and who wished to restore them to living memory.
- **As a method of self-discovery.** This was often expressed as answering respondents' need to understand themselves through learning about their roots.
- **As a means of coming to terms with the passage of time and death.** I think of individuals who told me how genealogy helped them to confront the reality of aging, both their own and others', as well as individuals who found in it a consolation during periods of grief and mourning. Speaking of her recently deceased husband, for example, one respondent said that she was "comforted by the thought that his life is documented and will remain forever a part of genealogy."
- **As a venue for socializing with like-minded people** and as a form of service to others. I think of individuals who praised the company of other genealogists, who found the genealogical community a predictable and safe environment, and who enjoyed assisting novices in their research.

There are benefits that I have not listed here. As well, individual genealogists typically cited several of them. Indeed, appreciating the wide range of benefits that respondents told me about goes a long way to explain the hold that genealogy wields over its practitioners.

Drake: The responses I received led me to piece together only a small portion of the puzzle. First, those who reported having the highest interest in genealogy were those who were also involved in more activities related to genealogy. In addition, more people than ever have a general interest in genealogy, but they aren't necessarily participating in societies and groups. They are very likely to be doing their research individually, via the World Wide Web. This study may have tapped into a different portion of the genealogical community than prior studies, which looked at members of organized genealogical groups.

Additionally, my study found that genealogists are very generative; that is, they are concerned with caring



10 Top Reasons* Family Historians Catch the Bug

21%	School assignment
20%	Death of family member
15%	Gave or received a family gift (software, heritage scrapbook, compiled family history, etc.)
11%	Other**
8%	Family stories
7%	Desire to share heritage with children
5%	Co-workers or family sharing enthusiasm
5%	Homeland or cemetery visits
4%	Adoptees/orphans seeking answers
4%	DAR membership/scholarships

* Statistics taken from random poll of seventy-five family historians

** Other reasons include taking an adult education class; seeing errors of family data online and trying to correct them; receiving a challenge from a church leader; researching why a family name was changed; reading a newspaper notice; etc.

for future generations, both within their own family, and leaving a legacy for others. Individuals who are generative tend to be involved in sharing information with other family members, creating indexes of records, preserving family memorabilia, and documenting oral histories. They also encourage the sharing of records, the open distribution of materials, and the interconnection of persons, whether through other genealogists telling stories of "the hunt" or helping one another find source materials, or through distant family members sharing historical information and materials.

My study also found that if a person has a strong sense of place, of rootedness, that they are more likely to have a stronger interest in genealogy. This sense of place, or feeling about one's origins, whether an ancestral home or one's hometown, seems to allow for a stronger development of individual worth.

I duplicated the list of twenty-five reasons Dr. Lambert had used in 1994 as one portion of my questionnaire.

The highest rated reasons for doing genealogy were: to come to know ancestors as people, for posterity, to learn about roots, to restore forgotten ancestors to memory, and because the participant liked to solve puzzles. What was fascinating about this part of the study to me was that so many of the reasons listed were rated as very strong reasons for participation.

Examination of the responses I received has also revealed some things I hadn't expected. People who had moved a lot, either as children or as adults, were not any more active in genealogy than those who stayed in place, although interest in genealogy was higher in people who had moved a lot as children. It was also surprising to find that the majority of participants were doing genealogy for reasons that had nothing to do with religious beliefs.

Meethan: It is very diverse. Simple curiosity is one factor that should not be underestimated, nor should the intellectual and practical challenge of finding all the missing pieces, of finally breaking down the brick walls that all genealogists are confronted with. As one informant told me, it was "completing the jigsaw" that really motivated her. And a need to somehow connect with the past is another—although this shouldn't be dismissed as mere nostalgia, for as one participant put it, the important thing was to "make history real, my own." Other informants recorded that they were doing this for future generations, for their children or grandchildren.

Since I focused on the traveling aspect, I found that what is important for those who travel for genealogical purposes is the act of "witnessing" where their ancestors came from—perhaps discovering documents that they had signed, viewing their names in parish registers, seeing a name from the archives on a gravestone, and so on. In this way, people were discovering or uncovering a sense of physical connection to other places and times that cannot be found in archive sources alone. In some cases, this can be seen as a reverse re-enactment of the migrant's journey, and the experiences of travel always caused people to reflect back on their own sense of selfhood in the world.

Childhood memories figure prominently, and oral testimony is also very highly valued, so meeting living relatives and distant cousins is another motivation. There is a very strong sense of emotional attachment here.

Closing Remarks

Recognizing that there was much more to learn from Dr. Lambert, Ms. Drake, and Dr. Meethan, I invited each to share any final observations or comments.

Lambert: I am glad that I conducted my study when I did, for

historical reasons if nothing else. I think the Internet and computerized indexes have made such profound inroads into genealogy that the picture might look quite different were I to repeat the survey today. I suspect, for example, that a significant number of people have been attracted to genealogy because of its large databases and opportunities...rather than because of their interest in the past as such. It is also probable that many of these people will become weaned onto genealogy, not unlike earlier generations of genealogists who succumbed after encountering it.

In light of my later studies, I also wish that I had asked about respondents' spiritual orientations and whether they believed in a personal life after death. In some of my unpublished writing, I have formulated some of my ideas on modes of knowing ancestors. I wish I had developed questions to probe each of these modes.

Drake: The sheer volume of responses I received in a short period of time confirmed in my mind that there is a great deal of interest in genealogists' motivations. It is gratifying to know how much interest there continues to be in this subject. I hope that other researchers continue to examine the ins and outs of why people are interested in and participating in genealogical research.

Meethan: I intend to conclude my survey over the next few months and would be very appreciative for people's accounts, narratives, and stories about why they began their research, why they wanted to travel for it, and what the actual experiences of traveling meant to them. All contributions will be gratefully received at kmeethan@plymouth.ac.uk and I would also like to thank all those who have already participated, and who may be reading this. ♪

Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak, author of Honoring Our Ancestors, In Search of Our Ancestors, and They Came to America, has consulted for and appeared in several television shows, including "Ancestors" and "They Came to America" on PBS and the Today Show. She can be reached at <www.honoringourancestors.com>.

Learn More about These Surveys

See a series of articles Dr. Lambert wrote on his initial study under "A Study of Family Historians, Parts I-IV" at <<http://globalgenealogy.com/globalgazette/misc.htm>>.

See a summary of Pamela J. Drake's results at <<http://psych.fullerton.edu/genealogy/>>.

Participate in Dr. Meethan's survey or share your experiences at <www.sociology.plymouth.ac.uk/%7Ekmeethan/roots.htm>.