

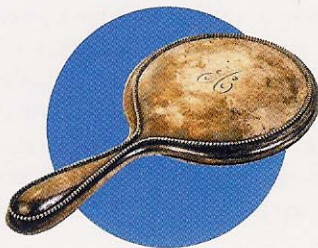
RETURNING LOST HEIRLOOMS

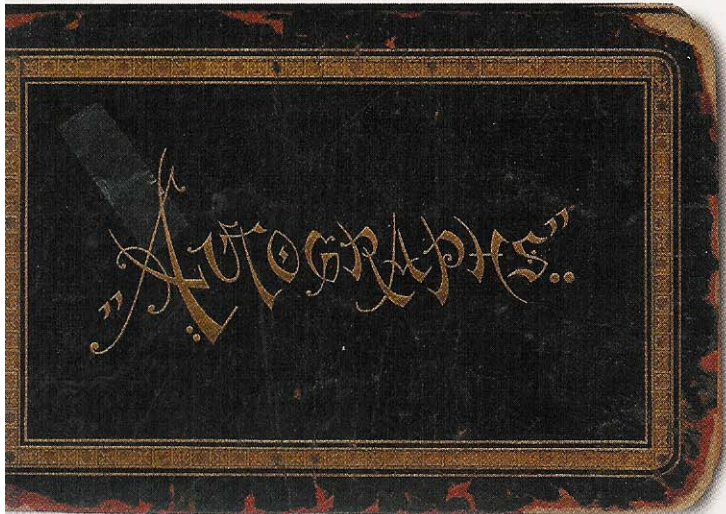
by Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak



“What you do is ... an invaluable service to people like myself. All our old family photos were destroyed in a flood when my mother was a girl.”

This is only one of the many comments that Marge Rice receives on a regular basis. Marge is a pioneer in the growing contingent of genealogists who have created a hobby of returning heirlooms to their families of origin. To date, she has returned a remarkable 506 photos to 369 people.





To a member of the
"Model Class,"
of Hamburg Academy, 1881.

An Album. When we gaze on its pages
in after years, how many happy
recollections crowd on our memories.
May this be filled with as many
beautiful thoughts from true friends,
as your mind is filled with ideas,
then no blank page will greet the
eye. Your true friend,
Hamburg, N. Y. June 7/81. Carrie E. Campbell.

Meriden, Conn.
Feb. 17th 1887.

Dear Nephew,
"Can you yield your heart to man,
Sign reluctance if you can.
He'll prize the treasure doubly dear,
If kept in doubt, 'twixt hope and fear."
Yours with love,
A. S. B.

WHO ARE THE RESCUERS?

Marge isn't the only person out there working to return heirlooms to their families of origin. Many generous people use their sleuthing skills (and often their own funds) to bring smiles to the faces of complete strangers. Prowling flea markets, antique shops, and eBay for photos, Bibles, certificates, and other items that have strayed from protective hands, they purchase them and provide temporary homes while they do whatever is necessary to find a descendant who will appreciate them.

There is another cluster of would-be rescuers: the accidental owners. These people have come into possession of some other family's treasure through fluke circumstances. Perhaps they bought a suitcase at a garage sale and found some old letters in it; maybe they bought an old house and found photos tucked away in an attic crevice; I've even heard of an instance when a stranger wandered into a church and donated a 200-year-old Bible.

Having been a participant in this little-known hobby for several years, as well as a researcher for the U.S. Army's Repatriation Project, I have a reasonable success rate with this type of research. Following are some effective tactics and resources to help you return your own orphaned heirlooms to their families of origin.

SELECT RESCUABLE CANDIDATES

Assuming that you intend to proactively look for items to rescue, there are a couple of guidelines to bear in mind. Begin by inspecting any candidates for identifying information. Names, places, and dates are the most critical—and in that order. For this reason, Bibles tend to make a good choice since they often have a generous amount of such information. Photos, by contrast, are usually more challenging since they may only offer a clue or two.

It's true that unusual names are easier to trace than names like Smith and Jones, so if you're new to this hobby, improve your odds by looking for less common names. An 1880 autograph book I recently returned, for instance, belonged to a girl whose last name was Hall, but whose first name was Wegia. As soon as I saw her name, I knew I would be able to find her family.

On pictures, you'll want to look for a photography studio's imprint since it usually furnishes a location. Dates are helpful, but less vital than the other information. I make it a habit to look for items that have at least one name that's less bountiful than John Williams and an indication of place that's other than where I'm doing my browsing. When in Maryland, for



example, I will not purchase photos from Maryland because I don't want to make the effort to find the family, only to return it to the person who sold or tossed it out in the first place.

THE BROADCAST STRATEGY

Let's assume that you now have a family treasure, either by design or by accident, and you think you can find the rightful owner. When locating likely descendants, you have two choices. You can either make it easier for them to find you or you can go find them. I refer to these as the broadcast and seek strategies, respectively.

The broadcast approach is the electronic equivalent of leaving a trail of bread crumbs. Marge Rice has used this approach with great success. It entails sprinkling the Internet with postings at appropriate surname and locality message boards, such as those at Ancestry.com, as well as the growing collection of sites devoted to this purpose. Some of my favorites include:

- **Dead Fred**
www.deadfred.com
- **Ancient Faces**
www.ancientfaces.com
- **Your Past Connections**
www.yourpastconnections.com
- **Julia Case's Somebody's Links**
www.petuniapress.com

For a more comprehensive list of such sites, take a few minutes to peruse the links at <www.honoringourances.com/orphanphotos.html>.

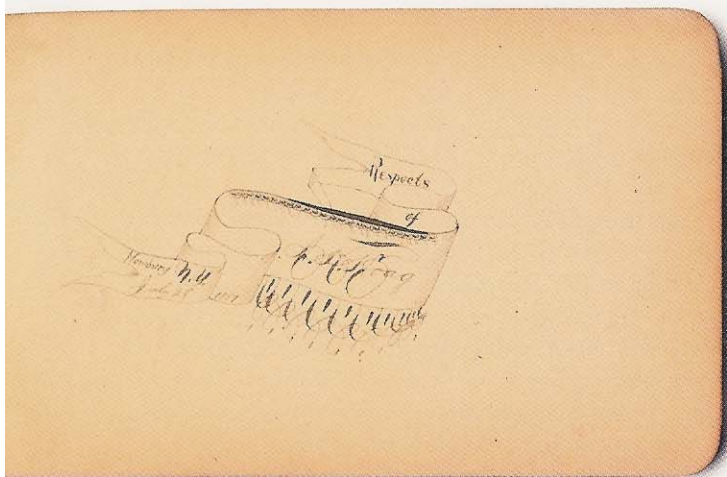
THE SEEK STRATEGY

If you're the type that likes detective work, the broadcast strategy may not be your style. Or perhaps you'd like to combine both approaches. When doing the detective work yourself, the following tactics will prove helpful:

- If you're fortunate enough to have several names to work with, begin your search by focusing on the most recently born, the one with the most unusual name, and/or a male. The youngest person listed is your closest bridge to living descendants, and once again, you'll have more success looking for Elijah Brown than John Brown. Males are easier to follow through the generations because they retain their surnames. So unless it's clear that the item belonged specifically to a woman, start with one of the men instead. If your efforts to find this person fail to produce results, move on to another individual and continue to work your way through the names you have.

- Adopt a surround-and-conquer mentality by using individual names to find additional relatives. Every-name census indexes such as the 1930 (available at Ancestry.com) and the 1880 (available at FamilySearch.org) are especially





useful for finding clusters of names. For instance, perhaps the woman in the photo left no direct descendants, but most of her eight brothers and sisters did.

- When necessary, go backward to come forward. If you identify a candidate in the 1930 census, but he's recently married with no children yet, try to locate him in the 1920 census with his parents and siblings. This will give you additional names to search in the 1930 census.

- Follow the trail left by the deceased to find the living. The Social Security Death Index (SSDI) and online state vital records are some of the most helpful resources for discovering where the family may have resided within the last few decades. Due to dust bowl emigration, for instance, I have found a disproportionate number of descendants in

California, even though their ancestors' heirlooms bear the markings of another state.

- Find a connection and work your way closer to target descendants. If you're intent on returning the item to an elusive direct-line descendant, consider trolling for second and third cousins on the Internet and asking for their help to find members of their extended family. If they don't know how to contact a particular individual, ask them who else in the clan might be able to help.

- Your research results will probably be effective whether you make contact with descendants by e-mail, phone, or snail mail. Especially when contacting them by phone, be sure to share some information about the family before asking questions to ascertain if he or she is the person you're seeking. Many initially suspicious people will relax when they hear you mention Grandpa's birthplace or the names of some of their great-aunts and uncles. And when you tell them about the family treasure in your possession, make it clear whether you intend to give it to them or would like assistance locating a more closely related relative. You'll probably be surprised at how many people will be eager to aid in the rescue.

A LITTLE EXPERIMENT

No two situations are alike, so the resources you use may vary widely. Just remember that these searches can throw unexpected curves at you. For instance, one case I worked on was finally resolved when I realized that I was dealing with a pair of brothers who also happened to be uncle and nephew and had identical names (the younger brother had been adopted by his grandparents who changed his birth name to that of the grandfather even though they already had a son of that name). In this case, the critical clue came from an online obituary for the elder of the two men, which listed his same-name brother as a survivor.

Still, there are certain resources I have used over and over in these quests. The question I couldn't answer, though, was which of these were the most essential to success in rescuing orphans. So I decided to conduct an experiment.

I randomly picked ten cases I had worked on in the past and followed my research trail, noting the resources I had used in each case. Of course, all cases involved the use of multiple resources, and any given tool may have been consulted a dozen times during a single search. To simplify matters, I counted a resource only once for each case in which it contributed to the solution. A convenient hierarchy of results quickly emerged, as can be seen in the accompanying table.



VALUE OF RESOURCES BASED ON 10 SOLVED CASES

Rank	Resource	Frequency of Use
1	Every-name census (1930, 1880)	8
2	Online lineage collections	7
3	Online phone directories	6
4	Social Security Death Index	5
5	Online State Vital Records	4
6	Other census indexes	3
7	Search engine	2
8	Other sources (e.g., military, digitized newspapers, etc.)	2

THE BEST RESCUE RESOURCES

The clear-cut superstar is the 1930 every-name census index with the 1880 playing a supporting role. This tool was a factor in eighty percent of the cases examined. The power of being able to search on just the first name (such as Wegia) or to use multiple variables (e.g., state, age, place of birth, etc.) and wildcard spellings to hone in on your target is indisputable. But the true value of the 1930 census derives from its recency. When you find a name there—particularly a child—you're already dealing with someone who may be alive. And if they are deceased, odds are that

they lived long enough to leave a trace in the SSDI. A little lower in the list in sixth place are other online census indexes (e.g., 1920 head-of-household and 1910 Miracode) that may help you flesh out the family tree.

The second most useful tool is the ever-expanding collection of online family trees. By these, I mean the family trees that can be found in such places as the Ancestry World Tree at Ancestry.com or the Ancestral and Pedigree Resource files at FamilySearch.org. While I have found plenty of misinformation in such lineages, orphan heirloom rescuing requires less precision than traditional research, and there is usually enough correct information (especially about recent generations) to lead you to someone in the family today. When I find people I'm looking for in online pedigrees, I contact the individual who uploaded or submitted it. Doing this contributed to seventy percent of the resolutions.

Not surprisingly, online phone directories often provide the last bit of information necessary to make contact, so they placed third in importance. Since approximately thirty-five percent of Americans have unlisted numbers, it makes sense that sixty percent of cases were facilitated with this resource. While I have traditionally used sites such as Whitepages.com, I am curious to experiment with MyFamily.com's new People Finder tool to see if it will improve my hit rate. In the cases where I can't find a phone listing, I often resort to a search engine and enter the surname and suspected current location. In one recent reunion effort, doing so surfaced an article about a policewoman in a local newspaper. She turned out to be the granddaughter of the woman who had originally owned the bridal book in question.



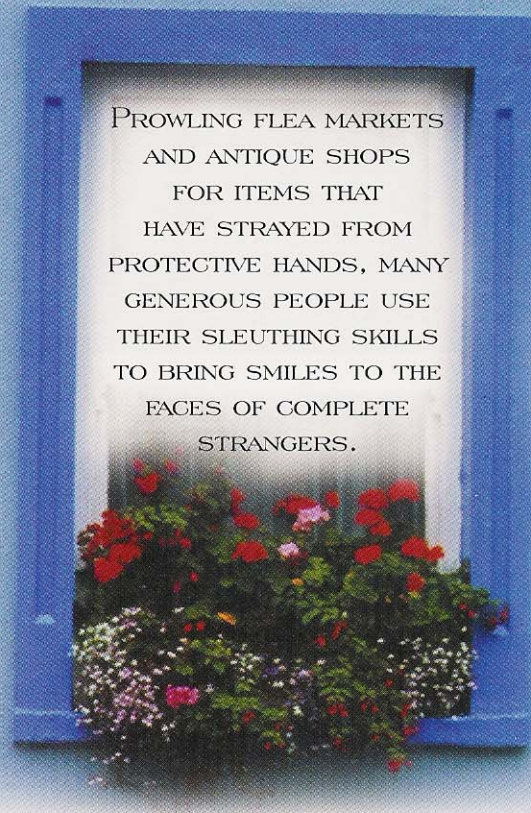
The SSDI and online state vital records indexes are also extremely effective tools. The locations mentioned for last residence and benefit in the SSDI often point me to an area where I will find family members today. If available, I also search state indexes to see if I can obtain additional information such as a spouse's name, a woman's maiden name (to confirm identity), etc. Since the records and years covered vary widely by state, it helps to bookmark a list such as Joe Beine's at <http://home.att.net/~weemonster/vitalrecords.html>.

Holding up the rear is a myriad of resources that may be used for specific circumstances. When someone recently asked about a military discharge certificate, it was only logical to look at military records. In a growing number of cases, digitized newspaper records provide clues. County websites at RootsWeb and USGenWeb are also valuable. In one recent case, I not only found the descendants, but was also able to direct them to online cemetery records at a county site that led back to their immigrant Irish ancestor who was born in 1802—a nice bonus!

FINDING WEGIA'S FAMILY

While every case is unique, I thought it might be helpful to conclude with an example, and since I've already mentioned Wegia Hall several times, the journey of her autograph book seems an appropriate tale to share. The story began when I purchased it in an antique store in Vienna, Virginia. From the entries, I could see that Wegia had attended school in New York around 1880 and had traveled to Wisconsin and Illinois during the same decade. Education clearly mattered to her as some of the signatures were in German, Latin, and Greek. Beyond that, her life was a mystery to me.

Since she had presumably been born around the 1860s, I decided to start with the 1880 every-name census index at FamilySearch.org. Unfortunately, Wegia did not readily appear in the census, but I found an *IGI* entry (an apparent locality extraction) for the marriage of a Wegia Hope Hall in 1891. The timing fit, the middle name matched the initial in her book, her birth place was the same town as the location



of her school, and the wedding occurred in Illinois, a place I knew she had been.

Now equipped with her full name—Wegia Hope (Hall) Tracy—I went to the every-name 1930 census to see if I could find her. She appeared in Massachusetts, a widowed sixty-six-year-old with the rather unorthodox occupation of editor for the Vivisection Society. Noting a couple of other hits at Ancestry.com, I discovered from the California death index that she had died in 1944 in Los Angeles. Another click took me to a single family tree that included Wegia (an entry that has since been substantially supplemented). I e-mailed the gentleman who had uploaded the tree and soon learned that Wegia had died childless, but that two of

her nephews were alive and interested in their family history.

Timothy, who refers to himself as the great-great-grand-nephew-in-law of Wegia, was the one who had posted the pedigree. He commented, "This experience ... was the result of shared work and would not have succeeded otherwise. My online family tree was just the lightning rod; the unique name Wegia would never have been in there had it not been for her nephews' generous sharing of information. All I had was the 1870 census, where Wegia, as a young child, was named Mary. She had separated from her family after that. It was her nephews, Ed and Harold, who supplied the name that she was known by for the rest of her life. And until just two years ago, my branch of the family had been lost to theirs for seventy years."

He continued, "I think it's just great that the ... autograph book ... is in the possession of close relatives. Better than a sorry fate of someday showing up on some theme restaurant's wall." I couldn't agree more! ☺

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 PBS's 2000 Ancestors series and the Today Show. She can be reached at <www.honoringourances tors.com>.