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ROOTING THROUGH HISTORY

Show off your roots with these tips for conducting genealogical research and tracing your family tree.

BY SAMANTHA JOHNSON

Genealogy, the study of family history, is a rewarding hobby that holds endless fascination for many individuals. Studying your ancestors can be an enlightening and engaging experience, bridging the gap between the past and the future while promoting feelings of continuity and connectedness. Genealogical pursuits can put you in contact with long-lost relatives, take you on adventures through history and educate your entire family.

Before the advent of the Internet, tracing your family tree required infinite patience and a lot of time spent working with microfilm in dusty libraries. Now a wealth of documents, records and information is available at the click of a mouse. Improved access to this information has been an enormous boon to genealogists world-

wide, but searching the Internet shouldn't necessarily be the first step in tracing your family tree, according to Megan Smolenyak, a genealogical researcher and the author of *Hey, America, Your Roots Are Showing* (Citadel, 2012) and *Who Do You Think You Are? The Essential Guide to Tracing Your Family History* (Penguin Books, 2010). "I suggest you start at home," she says. "Do a scavenger hunt through your attic, basement and drawers, and look for clues, old articles, diplomas and scraps of information. A lot of us are sitting on a lot of family history and don't even know it." The names, dates and geographic information you glean from these documents will provide a starting point as you map out your family's history. Take notes on what you already know before attempting to research your roots via the Internet.

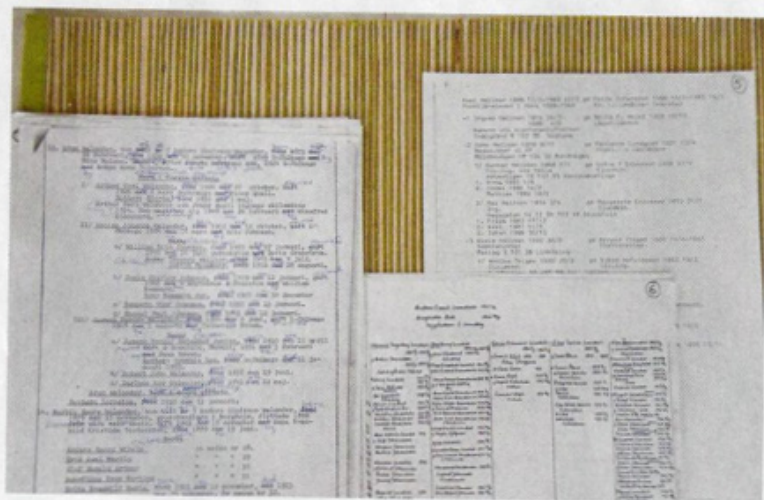


JOURNATHY WOODWARD

GENEALOGICAL SURVEY

Nowadays, many people choose to compile their family history digitally using genealogical software. This high-tech format is helpful in many ways and allows for easy sharing of genealogical information between family members, but it does lack the tactile charm of a scrapbook filled with documents and vintage photos. You can have the best of both worlds if you digitally archive dates, names and other information, and then create lasting pieces of family memorabilia that can be handed down from generation to generation.

Scrapbooks and albums are timeless methods of compiling and archiving information. Shadow boxes are another attractive way to display documents or photos, and quilts and wall hangings can be created using pieces of important family fabrics, such as wedding gowns or christening dresses. Family members can also work together to archive information through written narratives or video or audio recordings—items that can be easily passed down to future generations.



Documents, such as military papers, marriage certificates and census forms, can help you trace your roots.



DANIEL JOHNSON (2)

Websites like Ancestry.com have made genealogical research easier than ever.

especially if you have a common surname (such as Smith or Johnson) that's difficult to research because of its prevalence. Start with your own date and place of birth and your parents' names, then go back a little further: your parents' dates and places of birth, your mother's maiden name, names of your aunts and uncles, and what you know about your grandparents' vital statistics. Don't worry if you don't have some of the information—these are the first questions to which you'll seek answers as you begin climbing your family tree.

While it seems obvious that uncovering the names of your ancestors is of prime importance in your search, you'll soon discover that dates are just as vital when tracing your genealogy. Without dates, you can't be sure if the John Doe you've found in a genealogical reference book is your Great-uncle John or some other (completely unrelated) John. In other words, if you've found a John Doe that was born in November 1912, and your Great-uncle John was born in 1923, you know it's time to resume your search.

Personal Reference

When embarking on a genealogical quest, it's important not to overlook the valuable information available directly from your relatives. "Pick up the phone and call any relative who is older than you," Smolenyak suggests. "They are living libraries, and they know so much and can save you so much time." Ask questions about your com-

mon ancestors, including names (and maiden names), dates and places, as well as other information that could prove helpful in your search, such as military service and educational history.

The members of your extended family will undoubtedly be helpful sources of information, but it's possible that they won't be able to recall specific dates of events in your family history. Thankfully, you can often pinpoint dates another way: by relating the event to your relative's own life. For instance, your uncle might not remember the exact year of Great-grandma Ethel's death, but asking about his age at the time might jog his memory. If you



DANIEL JOHNSON (2)

If possible, seek out and visit cemeteries where your ancestors are buried, taking stone rubbings for your personal records.

Left: Involve other members of your family, including children, in your research process.

can establish that he was 12 years old at the time of Great grandma's death, then you can determine the year based on his current age.

If you live in a rural area where your family has roots, utilize your location to your genealogical advantage. "If you're fortunate to live where your family has lived for generations, then maybe you're within a half-hour drive of your county courthouse or maybe you can drive to the cemetery where several generations of your family are buried," Smolenyak says, citing the array of record-checking opportunities that can exist in a rural community. "The true sign of any genealogist is if their eyes light up when you mention a cemetery," she adds.

Smolenyak also suggests involving your children in your genealogical pursuit by encouraging them to assist with the search for clues to your family history. Many children are fascinated with history in general, so getting them excited about their own family's history is often very



easy. Involve them in each step of the process: conducting interviews with relatives, visiting the library and local cemetery and sorting through old photos and documents. For very young children who might not be interested in library visits or looking through old census archives, visual family trees can be an effective way for them to grasp the concept of family history and ancestors. Get a large piece of poster board and outline your family tree with your child's name at the base of the tree and each previous generation on higher branches.

Branching Out Electronically

After you've compiled a sufficient quantity of names and dates for the foundation of your family tree, branch out and explore other ancestors. Internet resources, especially Ancestry.com, can be incredibly helpful at this point. This website provides access to approximately 10 billion records, including vital documents, such as birth, marriage and death certificates, military papers, immigration records, and census forms. Another extensive source of records can be found at Archives.com. While these resources require fee-based access, they compile vast quantities of information and can save you a lot of searching. (Both sites offer temporary free trials to help you get started.)

For free information, visit Cyndi's List (www.cyndislist.com), a comprehensive list of genealogical resources that includes more than 300,000 links in 190 categories, or simply type the name of one of your ancestors into an Internet search engine and see what records pop up—the

latter method is most effective when searching for a person with a unique or unusual name.

Dedicated genealogists often devote decades to the pursuit of their hobby, but the length of time you take to pursue and trace your family tree will vary by project. According to Smolenyak, several factors affect the length of time it might take to trace your roots, including your family's country of origin. "The biggest factor is where your family is from. Once you cross the ocean, how much [information] you're going to be able to find and how fast becomes very location-specific," she says. "For example, English research is much easier than Irish. [But] I would say that most people—if they're willing to put in a little legwork—can trace four to five generations within a couple of months."

Whether you decide to trace just a few generations of your family tree or to pursue your hobby long-term, Smolenyak offers the following advice: "Just have fun! It's your own personal history mystery. But watch out," she adds. "There's a very good chance you'll get addicted!" *

Samantha Johnson is the author of several books, including the forthcoming FFA Guide to Vegetable Gardening (Voyageur Press, 2013). She raises purebred Welsh Mountain Ponies in northern Wisconsin and has enjoyed genealogy since childhood.

Old letters, scrapbooks and photos found in your family's home can be the first clues in your family-history search.

Satisfy your craving for personal history by compiling a farm-property scrapbook at www.hobbyfarmhome.com/farmscrapbook.