At five minutes to eight on Friday September 19 last year, as the main lights dimmed in the reception of the Auckland Central City Library and last-minute book borrowers scuttled out the door, a small group gathered on the second floor outside the research centre. There were about 40 people, mainly women in their forties or fifties, most from Auckland, but some were out-of-towners: Rotorua, Hamilton, Wellington, Whangarei, Turangi. Each of them was here to solve a mystery. A family-history mystery.

On hand to help were three library staff and five advisers from the New Zealand Society of Genealogists (NZSG). They were distinguishable by their black “Library Lock-In” T-shirts.

It was the fourth annual Family History Lock-In at the library – similar to the type of lock-in held by certain English pubs, where the doors of the establishment are locked so that a privileged few can secretly remain inside after hours, but different in that there was no alcohol. There was pizza, though, delivered at midnight.

After the advisers had declared their “countries of expertise” and a photograph was taken of the group, everyone streamed into the room, full-steam ahead into their 12-hour research marathon.

Family History librarian Karen Kalopulu borrowed the lock-in idea from America. “Most of the libraries that do a lock-in tend to do it until midnight. That’s wussy.”

Having worked in the bakery business, Ian Bushett of Rotorua felt staying up late wasn’t a problem. The 54-year-old saw the lock-in as a good opportunity to spend a whole evening on genealogy research “without annoying my family” (meaning the one he lives with now). He says discovering his Maori heritage has prompted him to learn te reo, including how to declare his pepeha (family background).

Bushett had some interesting tales to tell. The 1836 marriage of his great-great-great-grandparents Pourewa, the daughter of a Maori chief, and Charles Cossill was allegedly the first between a Maori and a Pakeha that was officially recorded and sanctioned.
by the church. Family lore has it that Hone Heke was a suitor of Pourewa; apparently he wasn’t thrilled to be rejected in favour of her new fiancé were sprung in the bushes at Orere Pt on the Firth of Thames. The couple then changed their names, making it tricky for Moore to find evidence of the tale he’d been told as a child: that his grandfather served in World War I and was an honour guard at the funeral of Baron Manfred Von Richthofen (flying ace The Red Baron).

He discovered his grandmother had left her first husband in Australia to emigrate with her lover to New Zealand. The couple were pardoned. As a teen, Swann adored listening to her family tales told by her great-aunt, Ada Ward (above), which Swann dutifully recorded in a notebook. When it came to facts she wasn’t thrilled to be rejected in favour of a settler. When Heke began to rebel in the North in 1845, the couple and their children fled to Sydney.

Their daughter Mary eventually returned to Aotearoa and married a Belgian, Michael Buchet. However, they divorced within a decade and, in 1876, Buchet drowned when he was jammed between logs that became stuck in a logging accident in 1876.

A s genealogists are fond of saying, the third generation spend all their time trying to find out what the second generation tried to cover up about the first. (Genealogists are also fond of pointing out that family-tree searches are one of the most popular uses of the internet – second only to porn, they whisper.)

Kim Williams of Sandringham, Auckland, cracked a cover-up on her first lock-in. She’s since changed their names, making it tricky for Moore to find evidence of the tale he’d heard as a child: that his grandfather had left his first husband in Australia to emigrate with his lover to New Zealand. The couple were pardoned.

Moore reckons he got his creative streak from his grandfather. “My father was quite academic and I’m not, but my kids are. It’s like every second generation, you get that trait from the people before you.”

Rather than being a source of shame, convictions are covered by genealogists. That’s because their every move was well-documented, says NZSG adviser Vivienne Parker. Like Swann, the former NZ Genealogist editor was also a youngster when she was wooed by the family lore of a great-aunt. She stumbled upon the link during her research after their deaths, when she needed a kip. But he didn’t. “You feel you could spend another 12 hours researching.”

He admitted that he was having trouble getting back further than the 1880s because of a language barrier – his ancestors are Polish and Swedish.

Persson is a Mormon, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Mormons’ belief in the value of family is at the thrust of the church’s owning and operating the mother of all genealogical resources, the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, USA. The library and an accompanying website (www.familysearch.org) provide the general public access to the Mormons’ numerous records and computerised indexes. More than 957 million names feature in the library’s searchable databases and 10,000 volunteers worldwide help to build up the indexes by entering information from original documents using their home computers. (The library aims eventually to build up the indexes by entering information from original documents using their home computers. (The library aims eventually to
Mary says. “I really wanted to ensure my kids have scanned images of original documents don’t get access to – the precious old diaries and photographs kept in family homes.” Kiwi genealogists are better than their foreign counterparts, says Nash, “because in the early days a handful of good ones nationwide drummed into us the basics of good research skills, which are still relevant 30 years on. Kiwis have to be experts – we don’t have a long history in this country and we’re all immigrants.” The internet makes family-history research “too easy”, he says. “I had 20 minutes spare the other day and within that time I added another 20 people to my family tree. Five years ago that would’ve taken five years to do!” Nash theorises that there are three levels of genealogy: “Collecting dead people, putting flesh on bones; and total nutter stage, when you volunteer for NZSG, do indexing...” He reveals that a genealogy acquaintance of his unwittingly frittered away more than $1000 in one weekend using a pop-up-view genealogy website.

In the eighties, Gow, an accountant by day, bought a genealogy book business too. “But nobody buys books any more, they use the internet.” Accordingly, she’s moved with the times, writing a genealogy column for NetGuide and buying the URL “www.worldofgenealogy.com” for $US10 in the hopes of selling it for thousands. She also teaches genealogy classes through community education. One of her students, she recalled, had been told by relatives that he had a connection to the Queen Mother’s Bowes-Lyon family. “‘Turned out Bowes-Lyon was the name of the ship his ancestors came over to New Zealand on.’ Gow is often found at the NZSG head-quarters, a well-stocked family-research centre in suburban East Auckland. Membership is “boomming”, according to CEO Peter Nash, who says that every week, 20 newbies join the 9000-strong society, which has 80 branches nationwide. Along with its popularity, the credibility of genealogy has increased too. “Librarians have realised we’ve a valuable part of their audience and we uncover material historians

Navy genealogists have a bit spoiled of late. As well as the lock-in, the National Library held a family-history month, a fourth series of the BBC’s celebrity ancestry programme Who Do You Think You Are? (which Alex Keating appears on), and the Department of Internal Affairs launched its Birth, Death and Marriage Historical Records website.

And, in January, the NZSG hosted the 12th Australasian Federation of Family History Organisations congress at King’s College in South Auckland – the first time in 12 years that the three-yearly event had been held in New Zealand. In attendance were some of the international rock stars, as it were, of genealogy. One of them was Megan Smolenyak, a half-Slavic, half-Irish American who has the curious distinction of being a Smolenyak by birth and by marriage. DNA testing shows she and her husband don’t have a Smolenyak antecedent. “I don’t know what’s stranger – that I found another Smolenyak to marry or that I managed to find a not-related one,” she says. Smolenyak, who saved her allowance when she was a teen to buy death certificates and couldn’t wait to turn 16 so she could go to America’s national archives, also has the distinction of being one of the few people who’ve turned a life-long obsession with genealogy into a career. She’s chief historian and spokeswoman for Ancestry.com, the largest genealogical company in the world, a co-founder of the Roots Television website (“YouTube for genealogists”) and a consultant to the US Army’s Repatriation project to trace families of servicemen killed or missing in action in World War Two, Korea and Vietnam. Smolenyak loves the “crazy oddball stuff” she’s done for ancestry-themed TV shows, such as finding a pair of related people whose names have been recorded so far, many with attached documents and pictures. “I’m a genealogist, it’s my day job,” she says. “I love it. I really love it.” The site’s data manager is Tony Cairns, whom Barnes met online when they discovered a relation in common. The pair communicated for a year before meeting in person and batting around ideas for a genealogy website.

Cairns has had his DNA tested, which revealed Israeli-Jewish roots rather than his presumed Catholic ones. “DNA testing opens up a new world of understanding and tolerance. When you think anyone in the room could be your relative, you look at them with a different eye.” Like many genealogists, Cairns says he felt the urge to research his family history so he could pass it on to his children.

“Maybe it’s mortality, maybe it’s age, but suddenly things become relevant and what you thought was mum’s shoddy of certifi- cates becomes a connection to your ances- tors. It’s great knowing our kinship links. Keeping those links alive is really important, because you wonder if we know who we are and where we come from!” Meanwhile, a few stands on the trade centre in suburban East Auckland, a co-founder of the Roots Television former IT project manager’s aim was to create an online repository to preserve stories that are still within living memory. The indexes have become the largest collection of Kiwi family trees available online: 13,466,709 names have been recorded so far, many with attached documents and pictures.

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Robert Barnes created an online genealogy repository (nsgenealogy.com) to preserve family stories, including those about his wife Mary’s father, John Alfred Pym (quartermaster, 51st Infantry). John was, he was, he emigrated to New Zealand “because they played good rugby and gave good apples”, Mary says. He has a family-history month, the National Library held a family-history month, a fourth series of the BBC’s celebrity ancestry programme Who Do You Think You Are? (which Alex Keating appears on), and the Department of Internal Affairs launched its Birth, Death and Marriage Historical Records website.

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