

Telling Their Story When They Left No Stories

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After years and years of research, a genealogist's work isn't complete until he or she has done something to write it down in some sort of document, be it a paper or a book to be shared and passed on to siblings, cousins, children and parents. But what if your ancestors didn't leave any stories or letters to provide texture and detail for your family history? Are you stuck with writing a dry list of "begats?" Of course not! A little investigation work, digging deeper into the census and vital records data you have and combining that with social history resources will allow you to write a story you'll be proud to share with your family, one they will enjoy reading.

BASIC STRATEGY

1. Gather what you know
2. Timeline it
3. Fill it in and fluff it up
4. Write it down

MINE WHAT YOU ALREADY HAVE

1. Vital records – look at death records for more than just parents' names and place of birth and death. Examine cause of death, contributing causes, and length of suffering from these conditions. Was he under a doctor's care? What does that say about the family? Did she die in a hospital or at home? Was the death sudden or did the family know it was coming and have time to prepare? Consider every detail on the vital record for clues.
2. Census Records – Census forms contain a multitude of questions. Often we look at name, age, place of birth and occupation and then move on to the next census. But focus on ALL the questions and answers, particularly those on the right side of the form.
 - a. **Deaf dumb blind idiotic** – Did great grandmother have an insane uncle living with her? A blind son? Maybe you never knew because no one talked about it?
 - b. **Value of personal and real estate** – compare this to the neighbors. Look at the current value of that. What would it have bought?
 - c. If **separate slave schedule** is listed, check it out. How many did they have? Look at the ages and genders of those people.
 - d. **Number of months unemployed**. This affects the income but also the social standing and marital dynamics. How would the husband feel about himself for not working? How would the wife view him?
 - e. **Number of children born/still living** – We often look at this to make sure we've got all the names. But how did this make a woman feel? Think about what it's like to lose children. Compare her to her sisters, her sisters-in-law, her mother.
3. Non-population schedules – Between 1850 and 1880 there are various non-population schedules for industry, farming and others. Seek these out. If your ancestor's occupation is "farmer" what does that mean for him? Did he grow wheat? Fruit trees? Cattle? Was that beef or dairy cattle? If dairy, did he sell milk or make butter? Compare his output

with his neighbor farmers. Calculate yield per acre or other statistics for comparison. Compare him across various census years. Was the trend upward or downward?

GOOGLE TO THE RESCUE

The methods and tools of a farmer in 1870 were far different from a farmer in 2016. Try google searches such as “dairy farming methods Ohio 1860..1900” or “sheep farming 1850”. Your search results may contain bibliographies with more resources.

ARCHIVE.ORG

While Google may contain modern articles about what life was like “back then” Archive.org may lead to publications written at the same time your ancestor plied his trade. While your bookshelf might hold recent books to help you do your work or hobbies, if your ancestor wanted to be a successful farmer, he would have had his own library of resource to help him do that. Read what he might have read to help you to understand how he did his job.

Archive.org also has movies. You might find short films of an early 20th century blacksmith in action.

Both Google and Archive.org will lead to articles and materials on life in the home. Examples of modern resources include *Food on the Frontier*, while *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, circa 1870 might have been a book your great-great-grandmother was given as a wedding gift or purchased herself. *Godey’s*, found on archive.org, has recipes, sewing and knitting patterns, and homekeeping tips. Read what she read to learn how to do her job and to understand the political and social influences which shaped her life.

SOCIAL HISTORY RESOURCES ON THE WEB

1. Cornell HEARTH – Home Economics Archive: Research, Tradition and History (<http://hearth.library.cornell.edu>) is a collection of full texts of books and journals published between roughly 1850 and 1950 addressing such home economic topics as child development, housekeeping, etiquette and consumer studies. Currently there are over 1200 books and 400 volumes of 16 different periodicals.
2. Cornell CHLA – Core Historical Literature of Agriculture (<http://chla.library.cornell.edu>) contains great resources to understand agriculture and even gardening in the for a similar time period
3. Making of America (MOA) (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moa>) is a digital library of primary sources in American social history primarily from the antebellum period through reconstruction. The collection is particularly strong in the subject areas of education, psychology, American history, sociology, religion, and science and technology. The book collection currently contains approximately 10,000 books with 19th century imprints. Joint project University of Michigan and Cornell University
4. GenWriters (<http://www.genwriters.com>) contains various social history topics and 12-20 questions on each topic to spark your thinking. Note: website is no longer active but you

can access it on Archive.org
(<https://web.archive.org/web/20180719212658/http://genwriters.com/>)

5. TeachingHistory.org (<http://teachinghistory.org/>) For specific information on 20th Century Jewish immigration check out <http://teachinghistory.org/history-content/beyond-the-textbook/25059> In the Annotated Bibliography under “Primary Sources” see “The Jewish Women’s Archive” (<http://jwa.org/>) and look at their collections dropdown menu. (I think jwa.org still works, but if not, try via Archive.org)
6. Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938 (<https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938>) – more than 2300 first-person accounts of slavery

PERIOD SPECIFIC NEWSPAPERS

Read the newspapers your ancestors read to understand their world. To have specific details to describe important events in their lives, read the papers on and around those dates. For example, read the paper on the day your grandparents got married. Was there a snowstorm? Was it unseasonably hot? Were the guests talking about the explosion in the mine? The presidential election?

Read the ads in the paper. What was she wearing? How much did it cost? What did her groceries cost? What was the local theater or vaudeville house showing?

Buy old catalogs to see what kind of home goods your ancestors had. Check ebay or look for reprints.

TRAVEL ACCOUNTS

If you weren’t lucky enough to have your ancestor’s diary of their trip west or across the ocean, seek out others’ accounts of the same journeys.

Googled “Pioneer diaries”

Emigrant Diaries and Journals www.oregonpioneers.com/diaries.htm

Trails of Hope—Overland diaries and letters 1846-1869 <http://overlandtrails.lib.byu.edu>

Googled “isthmus of panama diaries”

The Ship List <http://www.theshipslist.com/accounts/index.shtml>

Googled “isthmus of panama 1845..1870”

Panama Railroad <http://www.panamarailroad.org/travelog.html>

EXAMINE YOUR OWN LIFE

People are people with the same needs, wants and desires. Look at your own life. If you have something in it, odds are your ancestors had it, too, albeit perhaps in a different form. Think broad categories such as entertainment. They might not have had television but they probably had a fiddle to dance to and a book to read. They didn’t have the internet but they read the paper or listened to the news and politics on the radio or in the conversations in the general store.

Question all aspects of your life – work, play, clothing, food, home, recreation. Your ancestors had these, too. Research:

Food – Where did they get it? How did they cook it? How did they store it?

Illness – What kind of medical care did they have? How did they treat illness?

Childbearing – Did they use a midwife? A doctor? Age at first birth? Age at last? Stillbirths? Early infant deaths?

Marriage customs

Death customs

Furniture – Did they make it or buy it? What styles? What did it cost?

Clothing – Did they make it or buy it? What styles? What did it cost?

Housing – Did they live on a farm? In the city? How was their house constructed? Did they buy it or build it themselves?

Jobs and working conditions – How old when they started? Indoor work or outdoor? Were they employed by someone else?

Economics and money – their personal circumstances, their community, the world at large

Crime

Religion – How was this affected by marriage? Did they convert? What did that mean in terms of their relationship with their spouse? with their family of origin?

Education – How long? College? Were daughters educated as well?

Family relationships

Hygiene

Songs, dances, music – if your family appreciates music and the arts, explore family and cultural tradition in these areas.

Relaxation and social gathering

Sports – if there are athletes in your family make the connection with your ancestors' athletic interest or pursuits when writing your family history

World history – famines, wars

Local history – floods, mining disasters, establishment of a town or settlement in a new area

Politics – were they politically active? Office holders? Consider women's voting rights? Slavery?

More????

CONCLUSION

Use all your senses when you write. Conjure images of the scent of flowers at the wedding, of the color of the ocean on the voyage to the new world, the sound of the wolf baying on the prairie, the texture of homespun cloth, the sweetness of fresh churned butter. It's the day-to-day details that will engage a reader and make their great-grandfather someone they can identify with. And when they identify with them they will want to know more.

Finally, just write, write, write. And write some more.

Websites current as of 8 January 2020