

Breathe Life into Your Genealogy with the Power of Story

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It’s our responsibility to take the genealogy of our ancestors’ lives beyond the facts and figures. Our ancestors led lives filled with twists and turns, dilemmas and decisions, and testing and triumph. Their stories shaped how you and I became who we are today. This presentation gives you tools and techniques to breathe life into your genealogy with the power of story.

The good news is you don’t have to be a good storyteller to get started. Story telling is an acquired skill. Pulitzer Prize-winning author **Willa Cathert** said, “Most of the basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen.”

Here are the basic elements of a good story. They’ll make your audience **HAPPI!**



H is for History

We are genealogists after all. Whenever possible, tie in some historical tidbits, either little pieces of history or tie your ancestors to historical figures – both work well. Think in terms of snippets that add color or shades of gray to your facts.

Example 1: My dad. His schoolmate became famous. Who was he? Why was he famous?

What historical people might your ancestors have known?

What historical events could you highlight in your ancestors’ genealogy? List name & event:

As Rudyard Kipling, the famous novelist and poet said, “If history was taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.”

A is for Action

A good story has action. It can have drama or be something funny. Almost any type of situation can be used. Your audience craves a sense of movement leading to uncovering the plot of the story. Motion is what draws people in. As they into the movement of where your story is going, they become engaged in it.

Example: When Grandpa lived with us, what were some memorable events?

1) _____ 2) _____ 3) _____

What memorable action events could be added to your genealogy? List ancestors & events:

P is for Place

Let your audience know where the action is taking place. A sense of the physical surroundings gives them a context to imagine the plot as it unfolds. Make sure to reveal the place early in the

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story. Since we are history students, we may even have knowledge of the times in that place. Your story’s context is always enhanced with time and place.

Example: My Grandpa and Grandma married the day after what event? _____

Near what city? _____ In what year? _____

Where (the place) and when (the era) give readers and/or listeners small details to help them identify with the context of your story. They are most important.

Author J.K. Rowling, of the Harry Potter fantasy series, is one of the most successful authors of our day. She says, “There’s always room for a story that can transport people to another place.”

The second P is for Picture

We’ve all heard the phrase: a picture is worth a thousand words.

Example: The story of my sister’s wedding. What happened?

Dr. Anonymous says: A picture is both a _____ and a _____.

Help your audience/reader picture the action – even without images. To write or tell a good story, your goal is to help your audience visualize what’s going on as they paint pictures in their own minds. It can be done with just words.

Here’s an example from the beginning of my book: *Bullion Bend: Confederate Stagecoach Robbers, Murder Trials, and the California Supreme Court – Oh My!*

One night, an online search to fill in some gaps on my Hodges family yielded a surprising result. When this indexed record popped up, *I could only think, what’s this?*

Preston Hodges, born about 1831 in North Carolina. He sounds like mine. Record date is 1864. That’s the right timeframe. But my Preston Hodges lived in Santa Clara County – not El Dorado. But the next line stopped me in my tracks. Institution Place: San Quentin. That’s the infamous state penitentiary!

As the implications sank in, I thought, *Oh no –not in my family!* Followed quickly by, *Whoa! How can this possibly be true?*

What picture did these sentences paint for you? Did you imagine yourself in a situation like this?

The point is that in your own mind, you engaged with the words and were transported somewhere else.

I is for Interest. People need to be interested to be engaged in a story. Otherwise, they’ll turn to their cell phones and start e mailing or texting. Engagement creates interest.

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A story, or frankly any activity, needs to hold our attention. In today’s media-dominated world, people are conditioned to expect and therefore yearn entertainment. Stories can have drama, intrigue, conflict, hilarity, embarrassment, tragedy, or a whole host of other possibilities. A good story creates a mental break offering relief away from the pressures of everyday life. Everyone likes a bit of escapism now and then.

In fact, the topic itself isn’t the most important piece. Irish author, Michael Scott, says, “A good story is always a journey. It is about taking the journey, the people the hero meets along the way and how they change him or her. All stories are journeys. They don’t have to be shocking or outrageous: they simply have to be interesting.”

Think in terms of your ancestors. What are some interesting events that occurred in their journeys? List your ancestor’s name and interesting event.

Use the HAPPI structure. Think of HAPPI as a checklist to help you construct a good story. You’ll find and integrate some interesting details into your stories. Remember, the key is to foster engagement with your listeners/readers. Draw them into your story and away from life’s daily distractions.

How Do You Find Stories?

While you might find some online, they are not original sources. Frankly, that’s better than no stories at all. But stories can be found everywhere. They surround us. Here are four easy ways to find powerful stories to breathe life into your genealogy.

1) Dig through history books and periodicals relating to the place and era of your ancestors. Devote time in libraries and archives that are not just focused on genealogies but also on history. I’m amazed at the level of detail provided by first-hand historical accounts written hundreds of years ago. As an example, I’ve learned much about my Mayflower passenger ancestors (yes, I have two!) available in historical records.

In a county archive during a research trip, we found an entire set of late eighteenth century church minutes detailing elder disagreements between my ancestor and his brother. Those encounters, captured in meeting minutes, led them both to leave and return to their church multiple times. They were such entertaining eyewitness accounts! But we must do the work to look for them and record them for posterity. Where might you look?

2) Talk with your own family members. My good friend, Bob Bone, shares this wisdom: “It’s easier to talk with folks when they’re still alive.” Examples:

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Who are some living relatives to interview for your genealogy?

3) Get and use a digital recorder. Mine is a Sony Digital Voice Recorder with a USB port for easy downloading into a computer. It’s easy to work. Just turn it on, hit the record button, lay it down on a table or the floor, or inconspicuously put it in your pocket. Record some of those family conversations. With remarkable clarity, it picks up all the voices in the room. When the conversation lags, hit the stop button. When an interesting topic comes up, hit the record button. Over time, you’ll capture a treasure trove of family stories, memories, and interesting tidbits of information. The archive you create is priceless and irreplaceable.

4) Ask questions. If you haven’t discovered it yet, remember this fact. As people age, they tend to lose their short-term memory long before they lose their long-term ones. Example: Auntie.

Simply ask a few probing questions as part of a normal conversation. This technique minimizes any ‘performance anxiety’ caused by a more formalized setting with a traditional list of questions. It’s easy to get elders to reminisce about their past. I do encourage you, however, to draw up a list of questions. Just do it in preparation for those conversations. Keep the conversation itself in a casual setting and style. Here are 7 starter questions:

1. What was your most memorable school experience?
2. What is your most vivid childhood memory of _____?
3. Who was your best friend growing up? Tell me about him/her.
4. What got you interested in _____?
5. What are you most proud of? Why?
6. Why did you decide to _____?
7. Is there anything you regret not doing or trying? Why?

These four steps are simple and easy to follow. Just remember to turn on the digital recorder!

The stories of our ancestors’ lives are priceless and irreplaceable. They are unique to an individual, a family, or a group of people experiencing things that others may never know about unless we pass them along. They offer us a window into the past containing lessons for our future. We would be wise to learn from them before we repeat the same mistakes.

Consider this. What happens if no one captures these stories? Author Sue Monk Kidd gives us this answer: “Stories have to be told or they die. When they die, we can’t remember who we are or why we’re here.”

My challenge to you is this. Avoid dying with a story still inside you that needs to be told.

“If history and genealogy were taught in the form of stories, they would never be forgotten!”

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