

Connecting to Your Ancestors

We have all said or heard others say things such as: “I wonder who you inherited that trait from” or “We all have skeletons in our family closets” or “You look just like your grandmother when she was your age” or “I think the spelling of my great grandfather’s surname was changed when he immigrated to America” or “I’m not one nationality, I’m from many nationalities, some would say I’m a Heinz 57 mixture”. All of these statements are referring to your heritage, to your family tree, to your genealogy.

It seems the older we get the more interested we become in our heritage, in the stories of our family members, and the wondering pops up more often in our thoughts and in our conversations. Most of us have little or no interest in genealogy before age 50 but as our grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles die we begin to regret that we didn’t ask them more questions about their own lives or about what they knew about the generations that preceded them. Whether it is in the dictionary or on one of the many web sites, the term *genealogy* is often defined as the study of a person’s ancestry or the study of one lineage or family descendants going back in history as far as you can trace. The most common symbol of genealogy is a tree as your unique family history is usually called your family tree and the generations are the branches of your tree.

Mark Twain said *“Why waste your money looking up your family tree? Just go into politics and your opponents will do it for you.”* While that may be true and that may indeed be a reason some people do not seek public offices, there are many reasons given by those who find it extremely interesting to study their personal genealogy. Four of the most common reasons stated are: personal curiosity; to learn about your ancestors’ health history and whether you might have some genetic connections to medical conditions; preserving the family history and passing it along to others; and, for many it is an entertaining hobby often described as an historical detective story full of riddles and clues, missing and unknown persons, and fascinating stories of mysterious yet magical events and characters. But the bottom line is, you exist because your ancestors existed and who you are is in part who they were. Therefore it is logical that we all would like to know more about those who came before us as in doing so we also learn about ourselves.

Most of us have some family documents such as birth, baptismal and death certificates, marriage licenses, family photographs, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, and a family bible. Sometimes when family members die we find boxes of mementos, old postcards and letters and have no idea what to do with them. These are exactly some of the things you will find helpful to start your own genealogy quest. But one word of caution, only having one source may not be enough as sometimes old records have incorrect dates or names spelled differently. In fact one of the most perplexing situations you will find in genealogy is that names often seem to undergo almost a metamorphosis because sometimes the first name is recorded with its formal spelling (Robert), sometimes a nickname (Bob, Bobby, Bobbie) is used and sometimes it is in a language other than English (Roberto).

Computer technology and the internet have certainly had a positive impact on the amount and types of genealogy information now available and a wide variety of computer software now makes it easier to both do the research and record your findings in a useable format. There are both free genealogy websites and those that you can join for a fee. Most would recommend that you should start with the free resources as many of the free sites contain birth and marriage records, military records, land records, cemeteries around the world, census data, U.S. Social Security Death Index, Ellis Island records (more than 40% of American have at least one ancestor who immigrated through Ellis Island) and of course the largest free family research site (reported to contain over a billion records) which is maintained by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City, Utah. You can also find sites just for beginners and they will give you several useful tips.

Alex Haley, author of the famous book Roots: The Saga of the American Family published in 1976 is credited with providing the catalyst for the growing interest in genealogy. He said “In every conceivable manner, the family is the link to our past, the bridge to our future.” So before it is too late interview members of your family... ask about their memories and family stories and start connecting to your ancestors.

Sue Montesi
Dean of Learning Centers and Innovative Programs
Delta College