

# If I Were To Start My Genealogy Now

**I**T'S EASY TO TELL someone embarking on their research to keep the basics of research in mind. You should check out books of abstracted or transcribed data, and be aware of the ever increasing availability of digitized material and online databases. Thoroughly document successful research as well as dead ends. Check all evidence and presumed "facts" against original documents. And, perhaps most importantly, create an easy to use system of organizing and storing the material you collect.

And, over the course of more than 20 years of research experience, there are some additional lessons that I would like to share with you — whether a novice or experienced researcher.

## **START EARLY. IF YOU CAN'T START EARLY, AT LEAST START!**

All too often, I discovered new relatives just before or after they died, thought of questions when I could no longer ask them, or learned of a former ancestor's employer only to discover that the personnel records had just been destroyed the previous year. I found houses that had just been torn down, or attics and basements where documents and photos were held had been damaged in storms and so on! All lost opportunities that were once within my grasp.

Don't wait! Even if you don't know exactly what to ask or what information you need, just getting started is key. If you are a typical genealogist, once you get a question answered, you realize you have about 10 more and you are off and running!

## **LISTEN TO YOUR RELATIVE'S STORIES!**

When I started, I wrongly assumed that I would be able to learn so much more from paper-

## **Diane L. Richard shares the lessons she's learned in more than 20 years of family history research!**

work than from the people. I have since learned that in one conversation, you can learn much more than you can from hours of slogging through documents.

Yes, grandma has told you the story of her father's emigration many times, but do you recall the details? I can tell you from personal experience that even weeks later, when I reviewed my chicken-scratch notes from those conversations, I could barely decipher the intriguing notes I had made. I know that I didn't listen as closely to each subsequent re-telling, certain that I already knew what she was going to say.

In later years, I realized that in each re-telling, she mentioned different details — now mostly lost due to my inattention, horrible notes and her dementia. I needed to do a better job at recording what I was told, processing it and asking clarifying questions!

## **SEARCH OUT AND COMMUNICATE WITH ALL FAMILY LINES!**

When I started, I focused solely on querying my grandmothers about their respective families. In both cases, with deceased grandfathers, I also relied on them to tell me about their spouse's families. This worked well on the maternal side.

On the paternal side, my

grandfather died when my dad was two. My grandmother then re-married, moved quite a distance and essentially lost touch with her first spouse's family. She always told me that my paternal great aunts were deceased.

You can imagine my surprise when, in the late 1980s, I learned that one of those paternal great aunts, Anna, was still living in the home she had purchased in the 1930s. Here was a living person who was part of my great-grandfather's family! Fortunately, I was able to visit with Anna several times before she died — she shared stories and photos of herself, her parents, my great grandfather, my grandfather and even a bit about my dad as a young child. She also wrote me letters about her memories, and put me in touch with other extended family members.

You are not limited by who your family has remained in contact with! Seek out distant cousins for all your family lines.

## **LOCATE AND COMMUNICATE WITH EXTENDED FAMILY!**

Don't let circumstances or serendipity guide you! Actively look for extended family members.

On my maternal side, my gran eventually put me in touch with her two surviving cousins, Auntie Edith (Nelson cousin) and Jack (Taylor cousin), both in their 80s. For several years we enjoyed a wonderful long-distance correspondence relationship. Jack and I shared research notes, while Auntie Edith and I swapped stories and tales! They were both very interested in the family and its history; not a priority for my gran!

Everyone lived different lives, and remembers different pieces of the shared puzzle of our common ancestors. For example, Auntie Edith's mother was very



*Left: The author's only photo of her ancestor Wasyl Barna, obtained from a parishoner at Wasyl's church. Above: A Nelson family holiday; the author's Aunt Edith, third from the right, supplied details about the Nelson branch of the family.*

close to the Nelson family, whereas gran's mother was not. Auntie Edith had photos of her cousins shared holidays, and had many tales about people who were just "names" to my gran. Jack provided a similar perspective on the branch of the Taylor family who left the Manchester, UK, area.

Similarly, for a recent client project, my client contacted a distant cousin and learned that the cousin had her mother's old address book. Based on the names and addresses found in it, we were able to learn about four previously unknown siblings of her grandmother.

So, as you learn about a family, look into each person, research others on the family tree who are not in your direct lineage and learn what you can about them. You, too, may be surprised to find a distant great aunt still alive who has a key that will unlock more of the family puzzle for you.

#### **LOOK BEYOND BLOODLINES**

Look beyond family! After all, just like you, your ancestors did not just hang out with family. After spinning my wheels on several families, I contacted the churches that they had long-time

connections to. From one, I received a letter from an old parishoner who remembered my Barna ancestors, though had nothing good to say about my grandfather Malecki. He even had a photo of Wasyl Barna and his son marching in a parade, the only surviving image I have of them. When another parishoner shared her memories, I learned about my great-grandfather, Ernest Taylor. When not an accountant, he was a Baptist minister, and stayed with this woman's family on weekends while he was preaching.

Remember to also look up old friends (e.g., I received wonderful photos and tidbits from a childhood friend of my mom's), places of business (e.g., I received my grandad's complete employment history in UK banking), fraternal and social organizations (e.g., Russian Aid Society in Salem, Massachusetts) and so on. You never know what great memories someone may have of your ancestor! So, scour the earth for distant cousins, friends and acquaintances; they all help fill out your ancestral puzzle!

#### **ASK PEOPLE ABOUT THEMSELVES!**

Interviewing someone, whether on paper or in person, is an art.

This was not something I was adept at and, in hindsight, I realize that part of that was my lack of understanding. I didn't know what questions, or what answers, would really be important.

When I look back over the questionnaires that I sent to my grandmothers, I'm sure they must have felt they were undergoing an inquisition! I asked them for facts and details, mostly about their parents and grandparents and long-deceased ancestors. I never asked them about themselves!

A few years ago, my daughter did a family history project. She interviewed each of her surviving grandparents via e-mail. She asked questions about favorite foods, memories of growing up, what subjects they liked, what they did for fun, did they date, etc. Essentially, she asked them about "them"; they all responded enthusiastically and she got a great collection of human-interest stories! These are now stored next to the "documented" family histories, and they are actually a more interesting read! I wish that I had done that with my mother, aunts, uncles and grandparents.

Facts are something that, as researchers, we have a good



*The author helped a distant cousin solve a mystery by sharing a copy of a photograph, left, of her great-great-grandfather, Samuel Taylor. By comparing the two, her cousin was able to identify the previously unknown relative in his photo, right.*

chance to locate and document. Personal memories, family stories and lore are the fabric of our ancestors' lives, and we are much less likely to find these except by asking living people!

#### **COLLECT PHOTOS!**

Collect a copy of anything you come across, whether you know how it fits in or not. I have some pictures that my gran had from my grandad's side of the family. None of them were labeled. Now, at least, we have preserved them and I have shared them with others. Who knows when I might stumble across another photo of that individual with a different group of people or in someone else's collection.

In fact, this happened to me a few years ago for a different family. I got in touch with a distant cousin, and we shared digital versions of our photos. We had no photos in common! And, by sharing all the photos, we were able to confirm some identities in what we had considered our "mystery" photos. For example, a Taylor cousin had a photo of my great-great grandfather Samuel Taylor, but he didn't know who that was until I shared my photo!

Besides using documents and photos to describe our family

members, by collecting and copying these items, we have insurance against them being lost. We can make sure that these images and documents are preserved.

Water damage to an attic in my grandmother's house destroyed the majority of the photos she was storing there — these included those of my father as a child, her as a child and young woman, of her marriage to my grandfather, her parents, grandparents and probably other extended family also. All gone! It took us 20 years to find an image of her grandmother.

#### **DON'T ASSUME THAT THERE ARE NO DOCUMENTS!**

I learned shortly before she died that my gran had the Taylor family Bible. Since I had been corresponding with her and interviewing her when visiting for years, and the Taylor family was a large focus of that, I was surprised to learn about the Bible. I then assumed she had shared what was in the Bible and, while she was alive, never asked for copies of its pages. I made a faulty assumption.

I spent about 10 years working with another researcher to determine the parents of James Taylor, the latter. Eventually, we

had a pretty good collection of documents, had finally figured out when he died, where he was buried, etc. A few years after my gran died, I asked my uncle to copy the personal pages of the Bible, just so I could have a copy for my file. He also copied some loose papers that were stored in the Bible. I discovered the death/burial card for James and some other cemetery documents for other individuals. The good news is that they confirmed our hard research. The bad news was that with this information, we could have spent a lot less time researching James, and focused on other, equally deserving family members!

Always ask relatives what records or documents they may have, or if they have boxes in the attic from another relative. Do ask for copies of any documents they might have. Don't assume that just because you haven't heard about something, it doesn't exist, or, even if you know about it, that it might not have some surprising information in it!

#### **LET PEOPLE KNOW THAT YOU ARE RESEARCHING**

There is a good chance that there are others out there trying to research some of the same fami-

lies as you. If everyone were to communicate who, what, when and where they are researching, you'd have a better chance of finding a distant cousin! Here are two examples in which this has happened to me.

My dad's cousin remembered that I was doing family research. When he was contacted about his ancestry, he put them in touch with me.

Ultimately, our combined research identified the numerous half-siblings of the family, surviving cousins in the Ukraine and it resulted in my grandmother receiving part of an estate — the only US-based surviving cousin.

Someone researching the Burdasz family in Pennsylvania contacted me about a query I had posted about the Burdasz-Barna family in Massachusetts. Besides the name Burdasz, the village name of Deszno caught his eye. Ultimately, he had an uncle who traveled to Poland, whose research helped both of us.

By working with others researching the same extended family, we all ended up knowing more than if we worked alone!

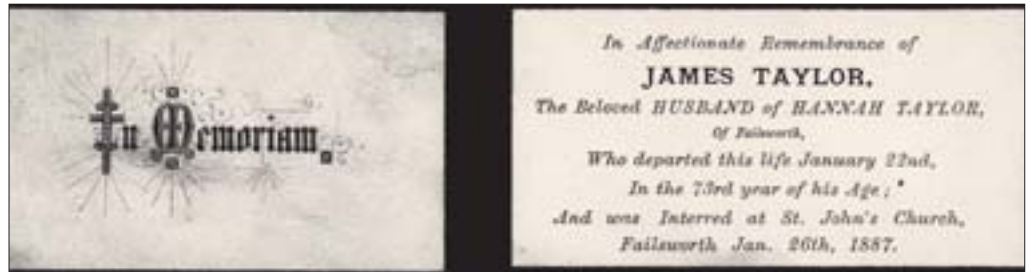
Partner as much as possible — share stories, photos and research.

### CONCLUSION

As you can see, much of my advice is not about the mechanics of doing your research, it's about

communities!

To really paint an interesting and accurate portrait of a person or family, one needs to capture lots of little details and consider multiple perspectives — the same can be said for starting out on a new genealogy research project.



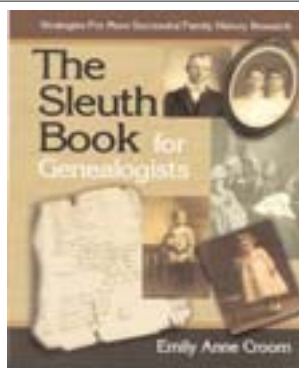
*A card in the family Bible gave the exact date of death and place of burial for James Taylor.*

capturing the stories, looking beyond the obvious, creating a more complete and 3D version of your ancestors. As you gather stories, you learn about new places to research, acquire substantiating documentation and you learn more about your ancestors. Much of what I have talked about revolves around a few themes — search for people, stories, documents and photos. Don't stop at your immediate family, or even extended family — research into ancestral com-

Look everywhere... you'll find some pleasant surprises along the way!

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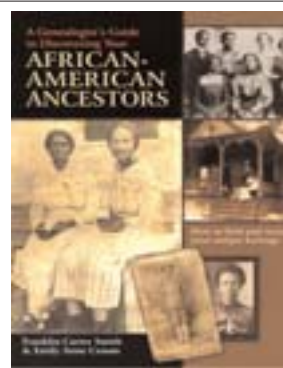
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