

Step 2: Treasures in the Attic
— Terry and Jim Willard

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the second in our continuing series "Family History Made Easy: Step by Step." at <http://ancestry.com/library/view/ancmag/2082.asp>

In Step 1, we encouraged beginning genealogists to start their project at the best point—with the information they could remember about their family. Beginners were encouraged to ask themselves basic questions about each significant event in their lives and in the lives of their immediate family. These basic questions are: who, what, where, when, and why—the cornerstones of good genealogical research. Once this information is recorded on note cards, pedigree charts, family group sheets, and a research log (the "tools" of the genealogist), the beginner is ready to move to step two—looking for information that is close at hand.

It is amazing how much family information can be discovered by taking a very short, inexpensive trip. Actually, beginners may not even have to leave home because "generations" of information might be resting in their own attic or basement. Since we had no real genealogical treasures in our home, we began our search by taking a short trip to Jim's parent's home.

It began with a telephone conversation in 1968. While talking with Jim's mother about our new hobby, we asked if she might have any information at her home that would be useful. Specifically, we were hoping there might be an old family Bible with names and dates handwritten on the inside jacket. These dates would be records of births, deaths, and marriages that had occurred in the family over the years. We were taking a local history course as part of our undergraduate studies and had learned that many families followed this practice in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Our professor, an amateur genealogist, indicated that a family Bible was one of the real treasures of family history; any student whose family had one would get a bonus grade by bringing it to class. Our concern was not so much the grade as it was the information we might gather.

We were informed, though, that there was no family Bible, at least that she knew of, but that two boxes in the basement might have something useful in them. When we sat down with the boxes we discovered more valuable information than we had dreamed possible. Armed with our pedigree charts and family group sheets, we spent four rewarding hours pouring over the contents of those two boxes.

While your experience will be different, here are examples of what we found and how it all proved useful in our research. In this discussion we will begin with the obvious items and then move through to less obvious ones.

The contents of the boxes had been divided between family sides, so items from Jim's father's family were in one and Jim's mother's family in the other. In the box containing records of Jim's paternal family, the first items that proved useful were birth certificates of his grandparents. These documents yielded another generation of names. In addition, the place of birth was given which provided a valuable clue to the marriage location of their parents. Birth certificates are common sources that one can find around the house and are one of the most valuable primary sources a genealogist can find.

A second major find (and another primary document) in this box was Jim's great-grandfather's will. It was a simple document, yet one that named his wife, all of his children, and the location of his home and property. It also named two more people in a preceding generation, filling in more of the blanks on Jim's pedigree chart. Likewise, names were filling in on a family group record for another family.

We also discovered Jim's grandfather's hand-written business ledger, used for one of the businesses he had owned in his lifetime. While this ledger provided no genealogical information, it did place his grandfather in a particular place at a particular time. More importantly, he wrote notes on the pages, almost in diary format, where he commented on events such as family births, local politics, world happenings, the weather, and even his observations on prevailing business practices. This information gave us insight into Jim's grandfather's personality, provided much anecdotal material for the family history we were pursuing, and began to "flesh in" the project.

Also in the box were Jim's father's high school report cards. Again, while this did not provide us with genealogical information we were not already aware of, these progress reports did name his parents with their signatures, and listed the address the family was living at each year. This last clue could prove useful in leading to other sources such as property records or census information.

The final items in Jim's paternal keepsake box included property deeds, old newspaper clippings containing articles of interest to the family, military discharge papers, and, of course, pictures. (A future column will discuss these sources in greater length.)

The box containing items from Jim's mother's family proved equally rewarding. Her parents had been emigrants from Quebec, Canada, and this one significant difference from his father's family led to many different items in the box. Perhaps the most significant find in the maternal storage box was his grandfather's application for naturalization. As with many immigrants during the first decades of the twentieth century, his grandfather wanted to become an American citizen. His application listed his full name, wife's name, living children, occupation, date and place of birth (the most significant clue), and signature. This one document told us more about Jim's grandparents than we knew up to that point, and ultimately led us to several more generations of information.

Since his grandparents were Catholic, there were also some religious items that provided clues for us to follow. Among these were burial mass cards—small documents, similar to obituaries that are distributed at the funeral mass held for the individual. Information on these cards note the deceased spouse, children (if relevant), and even parents' names. These proved to be a real asset in compiling family group sheets on Jim's great aunts and uncles. Other helpful items of a religious nature were baptismal, confirmation, and marriage certificates. These documents were created by the priest at the time of the event and in some cases listed parents' names and addresses at the time of the event.

One other item of note in the box was a train ticket. While seemingly unimportant at first, it turned out to be a ticket purchased by Jim's grandparents for their honeymoon trip to Old Orchard Beach, Maine, just after the turn of the century. It so happened that Jim's grandfather got off the train while it was stopped for water about sixty miles from their destination. He responded to an

advertisement for employment, took the job, and secured housing for he and his bride—they didn't continue any further. Forty years and sixteen children later, they finally made it to Old Orchard.

These boxes proved to be an invaluable wealth of information for us in beginning our genealogical project. We derived individual or family data on seventy-one different relatives/ancestors from these two boxes. While some of the information was piecemeal at best, there were enough clues to lead to other potential sources.

The process of uncovering one clue and following it to additional information is the essence of doing genealogical research. While your experience will be different from ours, we hope you uncover items that will benefit your research. Listed below are additional items that you might find around your home or a family member's home. Review the list we have provided and use it as a guide whenever the opportunity presents itself.

Valuable home sources:

Letters. Some family boxes have one or more packets of letters. These letters may yield some valuable insight into the relationships of two or more people. Even if there is no genealogical information, reading letters written by an ancestor can provide a unique glimpse into that person's world and his or her personality.

Scrapbooks. Some of the most interesting and useful information can be found in these momentos that so many people keep. While they may not contain direct genealogical evidence, they do provide documentation of certain events in that person's life such as athletics, vacations, and entertainment. These certainly provide a unique peek into one's life and add wonderful anecdotes to a family history.

Military memorabilia. Military records are a major source of genealogical data and will be covered in length in a later column. Here we are referring to items that may have been saved because of their unique or emotional value. Items such as group pictures, weapons, uniforms, or unit histories put an individual at a particular place and time. This information could lead to further supporting evidence.

School records. We mentioned report cards earlier, but there are other school-related records that may prove valuable. Examples include registration papers that name parents, school yearbooks with pictures, a student essay written by your relative, certificates of achievement, diplomas, etc. Again, all such materials give the genealogist a look into the world of the individual being researched.

Licenses. Some family memorabilia may contain old driver's licenses, professional licenses, or hunting/fishing licenses. Any of these make interesting sources.

Keepsakes. Some potentially helpful items may not be stored away but are actually prominently displayed in one's home. We have seen jewelry passed down from parent to child—each with its own story. Some have engravings that provide a very valuable clue to the owner. Likewise, we have seen furniture built by an ancestor and kept for generations; furniture built from wood taken from an old family home; mirrors with each generation of ownership inscribed on the back; and numerous other examples of useful household items that are valuable to the genealogist.

Genealogy is all about clues, and there is no better source for these clues than within the home. We have provided a list but remember, this is only a suggestion. It is by no means the only list a beginner should refer to. The important thing is to be creative. Imagine what might be around your home, utilize what you have, keep records on your note cards, pedigree charts, and family group sheets, and be certain to record the source of your information on your research log. Above all, have fun. Genealogy is a hobby that provides great pleasure.