

Step 18 - Adding Life to Your Family History  
Terry and Jim Willard

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the final article in our continuing series ["Family History Made Easy: Step by Step."](http://www.ancestry.com/library/view/ancmag/5081.asp) <http://www.ancestry.com/library/view/ancmag/5081.asp>*

One of the most pleasant family history events we have attended was a fair held on a beautiful fall day in October 1976. That year followed the release of Roots and the resulting phenomena that stimulated a surge of interest in family history research. It was also the year of the United States bicentennial celebration. It seemed that every community was hosting or celebrating some type of historically related event.



Family history research not shared with others is almost an exercise in futility. What would be its purpose?

This particular fair was held in a small Maine town. The participants had been encouraged to display projects that tied their family's history to the town's history. It was not a genealogical conference. There were no speakers discussing research strategies or touting the virtues of a particular library. It was simply an opportunity for members of the community to present a bit of handiwork that they had labored on during the previous months.

As relative newcomers to the hobby of genealogy at the time, we were amazed at the array of projects on display. Our eyes were opened to the creative projects that could make a family history come alive. Never again would we view our hobby as simply an intellectual exercise, the results of which would only appeal to a few academicians.

We strolled through the church grounds viewing family history projects that add life to the hobby. Most of all, we recall the spirit of sharing that permeated the air.

It is only natural that family historians should want to share their hobby with others. It is this sharing that sets family history research apart from so many other hobbies. In fact, family history research not shared with others is almost an exercise in futility. What would be its purpose?

In this concluding article of the Family History Made Easy series, we want to present some methods for research sharing. Most of these suggestions come from the family history fair we attended so many years ago. These are projects that can excite the senses, stir the curiosity of individuals not yet interested in family history, and really put "family" into a family history.

### **Family Quilts**

Of all the projects on display at the fair, none were more compelling than a collection of quilts displayed by a ninety-year-old town resident. She had sewn a quilt for each of her seven children, and central panels on each quilt had information about the child's date and place of birth. Other panels named the mother, father, and grandparents. Her work was a very original way to display family history information. Since that day, we have seen other quilts that contain family data.

### **Family Photos and Art**

The most common displays at the fair were those involving pictures. Organizing pictures will always be a noteworthy family history project. Even if the project is no more than identifying the people and places in the photos, that alone is sufficient.

Among other identification projects we have seen in the past few years, the most interesting has been a collection of pen and ink sketches done by Raphael Guber, a family historian we interviewed for the original Ancestors series on PBS. He stated in the interview that he "wanted to give life to the people and places that had given life to him." He had taken old photographs of people or places and turned them into works of art. His montages are a beautiful way to display pictures that have so much meaning to his family, and to others.

Similarly, one individual at the fair was a gifted artist. She had taken memories from her childhood that revolved around family activities and painted them. Her style was similar to that of Grandma Moses, and the paintings brought back comparable memories for the viewers.

### **Family Area**

Another unique idea is to create a place in your home dedicated to family memorabilia. One relatively new home on the main street in which the fair took place was open to the public. The couple who had built the home had taken an old jewelry store display case and turned it into a family memento case. They were fortunate to have several items that belonged to their ancestors, such as hairbrushes, pocket watches, diaries, and china, and each piece was identified and described on a 3 x 5 card. While the display could easily have resembled something from a museum, it fit perfectly below the old family photos hanging on the wall.

### **Family Cookbooks**

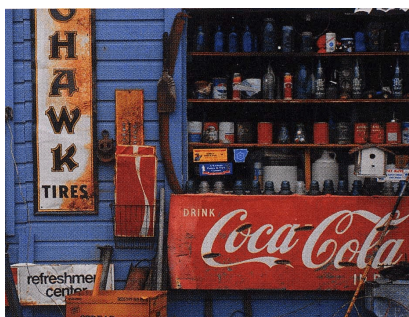
Another interesting project we have encountered is the family cookbook. Most of these projects have been ethnic in nature, as well as family oriented, but they all have one thing in common: they feature recipes from family members. We have seen family cookbooks prepared exclusively as holiday gifts for family members. Regardless of their purpose, cookbooks are a lasting tribute to relatives or ancestors, and will always provide an interesting glimpse into the lives (and tastes) of the people in the family.

### **Family Traditions**

Two of the easiest projects a family historian can initiate are to pass on family traditions or to create new ones that will be enjoyed by future generations. Some of our most memorable times stem from occasions when the entire family is participating in a family tradition. Whether it is eating a particular food on a holiday or going to a family picnic, traditions should be created and passed on. It is also a good idea to write down a paragraph or two about the tradition's origin.

### **Cemeteries**

Another project on display at the family history fair was a cemetery map. The individual had highlighted each cemetery on a town map, which served as the cover. Then each cemetery was depicted on its own page with the grave sites he had located. The individual had located the



Family history research has the power to bring people together from across continents, across state lines, even across generations.

grave sites of all of his ancestors and relatives who had been buried in the community cemeteries. He had numbered every known grave site and had highlighted those of his family. It was a well-done project that provided a great deal of useful information.

### **Interviews**

Other common projects on display at the fair were taped interviews. It was amazing how many people had interviewed their oldest living relatives. These were done on audiotape, as it was the best technology available at the time. Even so, a taped interview makes an excellent future reference. Imagine someone in 2142 being able to listen to a recording of one of his or her ancestors eight generations previous. Today, our technology is vastly improved. Videotapes and/or multi-media presentations

will only make the content that much more interesting for future generations.

### **Family Trip**

Among our most memorable genealogical experiences are the various trips we have taken to sites that relate to our family history. Our research has taken us to two continents, five countries, and nine states. It has certainly been a lesson in geography and history quite unlike any we could ever receive in the classroom. Few experiences in family history can match the thrill of walking the soil of your ancestral homeland.

### **Family Reunion**

One of the most obvious family history projects is to organize a family reunion. As a researcher, you have spent countless hours learning about your relatives, so getting those people together so that they can get to know each other would be worthwhile. It might even become a family tradition to meet on a regular basis and renew family ties. An excellent resource for planning a family reunion is the recent book *Your Family Reunion: How to Plan It, Organize It, and Enjoy It* by George G. Morgan (Ancestry, 2001).

### **Family Association**

A relatively easy project would be to join a family association. Most public libraries have a book in their reference section listing known family associations. Ask your librarian for help in locating such a resource. If there is no association, there might be enough interest at a family reunion to form one. There are many useful publications available to assist in such an undertaking.

### **Family Web Site**

Today, few venues offer the same potential to the family historian as the Internet. It has truly opened the doors to easily share and gather data. Whether it is a single-page Web site used for posting family announcements, a shared commercial Web site where pictures can be displayed,

or a personal Web site where you can put your entire research project online, consider creating a Web site to display your family history.

### **Family History Book**

And then, of course, there is the family genealogy in the traditional published form. There will always be a place for published genealogical work. For researchers using commercial genealogy software to organize their research, one of the program's features is probably the ability to print out some format suitable for publishing. Whatever the choice, it makes for a worthwhile project.

While the suggestions listed above might provide some ideas, they are by no means the only projects you could choose to get involved with. The important thing is to create something from all the research you have accumulated.

Family history research is not like other hobbies. It has the power to bring people together from across continents, across state lines, across the street, even across generations. The key to this "reunion" is to create some type of project and then get it out there for others to see. You never know what will happen.

*Terry and Jim Willard hosted the ten-part PBS "Ancestors" series. They have researched their family history fifteen generations back on both sides.*

November/December 2001 Ancestry Magazine