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WHERE TO START WHEN YOU INHERIT GENEALOGY

JANET HOVORKA

I come from a long line of genealogists. Besides many great genealogists on my mother's side, my patriarchal great-grandfather was Joseph Hatten Carpenter, who started doing genealogy work at the turn of the century. He received the Certificate of Merit in Genealogy from the Institute of American Genealogy in Chicago in 1939, wrote articles about genealogy from the 1920s to the 1960s, and was an early member of many genealogical societies that were precursors to those we have today. As he wrote back and forth to his native England, he kept records of some 40,177 people and traced lines back to the 1000s and 1200s.

The only genealogical work that I know of that my grandfather Alvin Carpenter (Joseph Hatten Carpenter's son) did was to write a book about his father. I was about ten years old when it was published, and as one of the descendants, I got a copy. It sat on the little white bookshelf in my room and whenever I had a school report about an ancestor, I would use the book to tell about Joseph Hatten. Although I had many other famous ancestors that I knew little about, Joseph Hatten became the person I knew and loved, because of the many times I pulled that book off the shelf in the quiet of my room. As I have grown up and become fascinated with genealogy, I have grown to really appreciate this man introduced to me by my grandfather's book.

When you have had several genealogists in your family, it can be overwhelming to begin to dabble in your family's history. However, even if you only accomplish one thing, like my grandfather Alvin did, it will enrich your life and the lives of your descendants. There are many things you can do to build on the work of the other genealogists in your family. I have collected some ideas here. They are organized into four categories: collection, computerization, finding new information, and processing it and passing it down.

COLLECTION

If you know that people have worked on collecting your genealogy but it hasn't come into your hands yet, you might have to go out looking for it. In that case, you follow the general rules any beginning genealogist follows: start with yourself and work out. Start first with your close relatives and work to obtain copies of what they have that might be of interest. Then ask those close relatives about distant relatives. Ask questions like, "Who is interested in genealogy? Who inherited the journals or pictures? Will you help me contact them?" Family reunions, weddings, and funerals are great times to start asking questions. When I began to collect my paternal great-grandfather's work, I went to my dad and asked him where my grandfather's journals and genealogy work had gone when he died. My dad then helped me contact some of his cousins that I had only briefly met. With their help, the ball began rolling.

Sometimes you lose touch with distant relatives or you just have a huge family to deal with. In that case, you start with the same resources that a beginning genealogist would start with. Look first in compiled sources, such as Internet databases like Ancestry.com or FamilySearch.org. And try compiled histories by looking for books by surname. Then try posting to a surname forum or bulletin board that can be found on Ancestry.com or Cyndislist.com. If you find something relating to your family, always contact the person who submitted the information. You may find some cousins to work with.

COMPUTERIZATION

You next come to the issue of computerizing the information. As you work with other family members, matching and merging large computer files becomes an issue. You will probably be dealing with .ged or GEDCOM files. These are stripped down versions of genealogy information that can be imported into your personal genealogy software. You and the cousins you have found to work with are probably using different personal genealogy software, such as Personal Ancestral File (PAF), RootsMagic, Family Tree Maker, Legacy, etc. As you share with each other, you will move data between programs and databases with a .ged or GEDCOM file.

Matching the people and merging family files can get really tricky if you have overlapping computer files. I have had the best success in combining files with RootsMagic, Legacy, and PAF Insight. Three of my dad's cousins had built on my great-grandfather's research, expanding different lines and sometimes coming into conflicting information. As we carefully combined two files at a time, we collected discrepancies into a Microsoft Word document, which one of the cousins took to the library to verify. By carefully combining files, we were able to come up with one master file that we were all able to work from and contribute to.

Sometimes you don't inherit anything on the computer. In that case why would you want to take the time to enter the information into a personal genealogy program? There are a few reasons. First, computerization makes you organize and process the information that has been collected. You will know right where you want to build on what has been done. Second, it is easier to back up, copy, and protect the information. Copying boxes of documents on a copy machine takes a lot more time than burning another CD. Third, it is easier to share and pass the information down to your family. All three of my children can have copies of the important information even if they have to fight over the heirlooms. And fourth, it is easier to compare and combine information. As hard as it was to combine my dad's cousins' computer files, it would have been much harder if we had had twelve boxes of documents to go through. If you plan an hour or two a week, you'll be surprised how quickly things can be processed into the computer. And then when you are done, you will be itching to get to the library to work on this or that missing link you have found.

FINDING NEW INFORMATION

Although I earned a master's degree in Library Science and had helped many people with their genealogy as a librarian, I was never interested in my own. Every time I began to be interested, someone would tell me that I had to start with collecting everything that had previously been done. That was always discouraging because I have

grandparents, cousins and other family members who have worked on collecting our family history, and I never felt I could ever completely talk to all of them. But there are ways to get started, and even find new information without collecting everything that has already been accomplished. Just remember that there are so many more resources now than there have been in the past, and that there is always another line to follow.

You might start by asking an active genealogist in the family to give you a place to work. When I became serious about working on my family history, I went to my sister who had been collecting information. She handed me a folder and said, “Here is a family you could look for. They are still in America and shouldn’t be too hard to find.” Immediately I was plunged into the thrill of the hunt, rather than collecting other people’s work.

When you are ready to build on other people’s work, you may not want to start with the people you are most closely related to. Lines that end most recently probably have been worked on and really are dead ends. For example, my great-grandfather’s birth record may really have been lost in a fire. However, the last person to work on those lines may not have had the enormous amount of new resources that have become available on the Internet. Take a look around on the lines that end closest to you, but don’t get discouraged if you can’t find anything. Head out into another line.

If you have inherited a computer file it might help to get things out where you can see them, off the computer screen. My mother’s genealogy file was very confusing until I printed out a chart that showed my ancestors going back, as well as their children. Then I could see the whole picture better. This type of chart, showing ancestors and their children and grandchildren evolved into a business for me called Generation Maps (generationmaps.com), and since then I have helped many others understand the research that has been done by using a chart. Any time you receive a file from someone else but haven’t been involved in the research, it is good to get it out on a chart where you can see it.

PROCESSING IT AND PASSING IT DOWN: DON’T BE THE WEAK LINK

There are lots of things to collect and assemble so that you can pass down your heritage and inspire your children with an appreciation for their family history. So far we have talked about the genealogical data, but there are also personal histories, pictures, and your own experience with family history to record.

My mother is not interested in building on what has been collected and finding missing members of our family like I am. She is mostly concerned about making sure the histories and pictures are passed down. She compiles short histories of her parents and grandparents and other ancestors she has researched. Then, once the history is compiled, she writes a beautiful children’s book on each person using Heritage Makers’ book publishing service (heritagemakers.com). In the book she focuses on a value or character trait that the person exhibited in their life. For example, a pioneer ancestor who crossed the plains with a handcart showed “the value of perseverance” and my great-grandmother who lived during the depression showed “the power of sacrifice.” Needless to say, the books have become instant treasures in our family.

In compiling histories and pictures, the rule “start with the people closest to you” applies again. You are the one who knows your grandparents and parents the best. Even if you only write short histories of them, these histories will be treasures in only a few

generations. There are some great new products that can help you. Personal Historian (personalhistorian.com) is a great piece of software that makes it easy to write histories. Passage Express (passageexpress.com) is a user-friendly program that compiles histories, data, and pictures into a beautiful CD that is easy for anyone to access.

When you do pass down the data, make sure you keep good notes of the sources you have used and what you have done. These are the road signs for the next generation. I have taken many people to the library to build on what others have done and found “family records,” or “the family Bible” listed as a source. If the documentation was more specific, we would have more to build on. Make sure you have a plan for backing up and updating electronic files. Anything in an electronic format cannot be considered archived.

While you are compiling things to pass down to your family, keep in mind the Library of Alexandria rule. At the time of Cleopatra the largest library in the world was in Alexandria, Egypt. It may have had hundreds of thousands of books, scrolls, codices, and so on. It was a center for learning in the ancient world; scholars came from all over to study there, and many great discoveries were made. According to legend, Caesar and Ptolemy XII were fighting, and the people of Alexandria set fire to the ships in the harbor to break the blockade. The fire swept onto land and the library was burned. In modern times, we don’t know what was in that library and have nowhere near a hundred thousand volumes from that time period. All we have are the precious things, like religious texts, of which many copies were made. So, for genealogists, the rule of the Library of Alexandria is that the more copies there are of something, the more likely some will survive. Search out every opportunity to share your research: with relatives, databases, libraries, and historical societies.

My great-grandfather’s genealogical work was passed down through one line of the family and has not been entered into any databases. Had my father passed away before I became interested, I would not have known to find those cousins who are also working on our genealogy and would have been left to start from scratch because the information hadn’t been shared in my part of the family. Likewise, I have three children and only one copy of my grandfather’s book, but because my grandfather donated it to several libraries and archives, my great-great grandchildren will not have to know which member of the family has my actual book in order to find the information. Give copies of anything you collect or write to your family for Christmas—that gives you a deadline and creates interest among your family. Even if your relatives never show interest, there will still be another copy of your family history work in case of fire or the occasional computer crash.

And finally, don’t forget to write your own history, be it long or short. I tell my father that if he doesn’t write his own personal history, I get to tell my version of his life, and that may not be the version he wants to have passed down. If you don’t write your own history, someone else might do it. Also, don’t forget to record your experiences with family history. You become a great link between generations when you leave a love for your ancestors to your descendants.

CONCLUSION

So where do you start? Make a list of what needs to be done and try just one aspect that interests you. I have a two-and-a-half page family history to-do list and some

days I think that is all my children will inherit. But even if that is all they get, they will have some pointers to where things are and who has what.

I can't promise you it will be easy, but I can promise you it will enrich your life. My great-grandfather Joseph Hatten Carpenter wrote, "One arises from the study of genealogy with a clearer and more charitable conception of the whole brotherhood of man." I agree. Irrespective of what I accomplish, genealogy gives me a greater perspective on life that makes my efforts very rewarding.

JANET HOVORKA received a B.A. in Ancient Near Eastern Studies and a Masters degree in Library Science from Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. She accepted teaching and library positions at BYU and Salt Lake Community College before having her three wonderful children. She and her husband, Kim Hovorka, own Generation Maps, an online genealogy chart printing service. Janet is a member of the Genealogical Speakers Guild, and loves to motivate people with her great passion for family history work.