coming together through

Family History

BY LISA B. HAWKINS AND CYNTHIA DOXEY
ILLIONS OF PEOPLE, FROM TEENS TO GREAT-GRANDPARENTS, ARE ENJOYING FAMILY HISTORY AND GENEALOGY AS SOME OF THE MOST POPULAR HOBBIES IN THE UNITED STATES. THEY MAY BEGIN BY THINKING THAT THEY WILL LEARN MORE ABOUT THEIR ANCESTORS, SUCH AS WHEN AND WHERE THEY WERE BORN, MARRIED, AND DIED, OR HOW THEY WORKED AND LIVED. THESE RESEARCHERS CAN BE SURPRISED TO LEARN THAT FAMILY HISTORY draws them closer to their living families as well. FAMILY HISTORY CAN BECOME A SOURCE OF LOVE AND APPRECIATION IN THE IMMEDIATE FAMILY AND IN THE EXTENDED FAMILY.

"Family history has brought my family closer together by helping each one of us become more knowledgeable of our ancestors. Through sharing old stories, my family found that our lives parallel those of our ancestors in many ways."  

People usually begin their search by asking living relatives for information and stories about their ancestors. Families can enjoy a feeling of unity as they focus their efforts on a common project. Family members can develop loving bonds between generations as they realize that we are all connected to the people whose lives shaped our past and present.

GETTING STARTED ON THE INTERNET

http://ce.byu.edu/is/famhist/secure/start.htm
free tutorial for beginning researchers from Continuing Education at Brigham Young University

www.ancestry.com
online classes, access to databases, sharing information online with other researchers, other resources-subscription fee or purchase cost required for access to some resources

www.cyndislist.com
thousands of links to family history web sites on the internet, including links by geography (worldwide), ethnicity, experience (beginners), surnames, religious groups, sources (census records, diaries and letters), libraries, and even, "Hit a Brick Wall?"

www.familysearch.org
computerized family records (35.6 million lineage-linked names, and growing) submitted to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, card catalog of the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, UT, sharing information online with other researchers, finding a Family History Center near you for personal help, links to thousands of databases, and genealogy products to purchase

http://familytreemaker.genealogy.com
access to databases, instructional articles, online classes, links, other resources—subscription fee or purchase cost required for access to some resources

www.mytrees.com
this Kindred Konnections® site includes access to databases, other resources—subscription fee or purchase cost required for access to some resources

www.usgenweb.org and www.worldgenweb.org
web sites based on location (countries, states, counties, and towns) containing maps, cemetery inscriptions, county courthouse records, and information about how to contact local researchers and county officials for many localities throughout the world
"Ever since I have begun to be involved in my family’s history, I have seen and felt a type of family bonding happening. Grandparents, uncles, aunts, and many others are not just willing, but wanting to help in any way they can."

**Computer Resources**

Among the great revolutions in studying family history have been the personal computer and its link to the wider world, the Internet. Software is available to record and share family information on pedigree charts, family group sheets, and other written records, as well as computer disks. The technology allows us to avoid the time-consuming, error-prone hand copying or re-typing necessary a decade or two ago.

The Internet contains thousands of web sites that provide genealogy instruction, access to others’ research, and a place to store and share one’s own data. Technological advances have also made it possible for many databases of original records, such as the census, vital records, and immigration records, to be available for searching on the Internet or on compact disk (CD).

While technology makes life easier for the family history researcher, there is more to family history than sitting at a computer. Interviewing older family members and finding distant cousins who are researching your common ancestors can be as rewarding as discovering a related “surname site” on the Internet. In addition to the names and dates and places that family members know or have in their records, family stories can provide interest and clues to the identities of earlier ancestors.

Life in Grandmother’s time—farm and household chores, experiences at school, memories of parents and extended family, fun and fights with siblings, favorite activities, dreams, how grandparents met and courted, life as a young married couple, religious observances, family traditions—all these things and many more memories are priceless stories that, recorded on tape or video or written down, will be cherished for generations. Your cousins who are researching common family lines may have access to an old family Bible or a packet of letters that could include information that you need to solve a family mystery. Meeting and coming to know these distant relatives could lead you to information about family traits and give...
your extended family the knowledge and resources to preserve a family cemetery or take a trip to the “old country”—whether that’s Florida or France.

“I realized that by learning about your ancestors, you learn about yourself. Some people may feel lost in life because they don’t feel like they are part of anything. Learning about your family helps you feel a part of something important.”

Along with increased interest in family history, researchers have benefited from an abundance of newly available records in the past thirty years. Abraham Lincoln tried but was unable to trace his genealogy beyond his mother and his paternal grandfather.¹ Now, with a few clicks of a computer mouse, we can trace Lincoln’s heritage back thirteen generations, to the 1400s on many lines.³ People whose ancestry was considered impossible to trace a few years ago, such as Native Americans or African American descendants of slaves—or anyone whose ancestors lived where the courthouse burned down—are finding records and ways to deduce information that lead to a growing family tree.¹ More important, the stories they discover and share with their families increase pride and understanding of their heritage.

**Authentic Information**

As family history research grows in popularity and records become available, authenticity becomes increasingly important. A person seeking his or her history may too readily accept information that seems to “take the family back” a couple of generations. The more you know about the time and place you are researching, the less likely that an unrelated person with a name similar to that of your ancestor will be mistaken for your ancestor. An open mind about names may prevent you from assuming there could never be more than one Micajah Pennington, for example, and then beginning to research two or three people as though they were one. If you know that an epidemic or migration or war occurred at the time and place being researched, that may explain why some family members are missing from the census where they had been living before or why the children were sent to live with relatives. Just comparing dates for common sense—is it likely that a young man fathered his first child at age 15 with a woman who was 25?—will help eliminate mistakes, or at least bring up questions that should be answered.

If the family stories won’t fit with the original records you find, start looking for an explanation. An example of this is Alton Hail, who insisted that his great-grandfather was David Hail of Ozark, Arkansas. But the David Hail on the records in Ozark was too young to be the father of all the children that family tradition had assigned to him. A researcher found the answer in the Franklin County courthouse in Ozark. She found the papers that gave guardianship of children (whom the family thought belonged
made mistakes. If the research is not well documented, turn to original records to verify any information that seems confusing or too good to be true. For example, even though it would be wonderful to be related to royalty and have your genealogy handed to you on a silver platter, you may want to make sure that the compiler did not depend on legends or make leaps in logic to connect you to that royal ancestor.

A record of an event—a
birth or christening record containing the baby’s parents’ names, for example—is more likely to be accurate if the record was made as a required part of the event by someone whose job it was to keep records for a government or church. Family records, especially family Bibles, are often rich with information recorded at the time births, marriages, and deaths occurred. Other records, such as probate records (wills, guardianships), military records, and property records can have important family history information, although you may need to learn to read early handwriting or understand legal terms. Similarly, census takers spelled names the way they thought was correct and sometimes used initials instead of first names. (Starling Wells of Virginia, without the Southern accent, might have more accurately been recorded as Sterling.) Ellis Island clerks spelled names as they heard them, or may have translated the names into English. For example, German Schwartz became Black, Zimmerman sometimes became Carpenter, and if your name was impossible for the clerk to understand, he might have declared your American family name to be Roberts, regardless of what it was in Hungary.

When a genealogist or other writer compiles records (as in county histories and family histories), the writer should include the primary sources used and their location. Refereed journals, such as the New England Historical and Genealogical Register, hold their contributors to strict standards so that sources are reliable. Researchers who are fellows of the American Society of Genealogists (FASG), who are Certified Genealogists (CG) by the Board for Certification of Genealogists, or who are Accredited Genealogists (AG) through the Utah Genealogical Association have demonstrated their research ability and knowledge of ethical practices. Some genealogists have not earned accreditation or other formal recognition, but still do an excellent job of helping people with their family histories. While you may want to find a professional genealogist to help your research along when it gets difficult, there is much that even beginners can do that provides the satisfaction of finding new information for yourself.

“Studying and researching my family history has deepened my respect for my ancestors and has increased my love for them. I feel much closer to my parents and grandparents because I now understand them so much better than before. Family history truly does bind generations together.”
Completing Your Story

Most people are delighted to learn more about their family histories. Some families make a presentation on the family—complete with copies of records for everyone—the centerpiece of a family reunion. Beginning genealogists may become involved in the Old Settlers Reunion in their ancestral hometown because they discover a part of their history began there. Others make a family trip to Accra or Athens or Aberdeen and feel a sense of belonging that was missing in Abilene or Arcata. The joy of bringing the family together in this world, as well as the next, is more exciting than any book ever written—because it is your story.

"Family history gives me an intense understanding of self. It makes me feel, not just know, my heritage. I gain so much respect for myself through it because I am the summation of everyone before me. I also gain a gratitude for those people who left me with that heritage." - Lisa B. Hawkins, J.D.

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References

1. All quotations in italics are anonymous written responses from students in Dr. Doxey's Family History class, Winter 2001, Brigham Young University. They were asked, "How has studying family history influenced you?"