

# Getting Started with Your Family History Project

Linda Koch, B.A., M.A., M.L.I.S., email: [lkoch@alleganlibrary.org](mailto:lkoch@alleganlibrary.org)  
Reference, Adult Services, Genealogy, & Local History Librarian  
Allegan District Library, 331 Hubbard, Allegan, MI 49010  
Phone: 269-673-4625; Library email: [apl@alleganlibrary.org](mailto:apl@alleganlibrary.org)

## Do a little Homework

Tracing your family history is not as easy as clicking on a leaf in Ancestry.com, but it is less difficult if you do your homework and know what you are doing before you jump in and try to do research without being organized.

Family history is often a fun hobby, especially if you are fortunate enough to include family members in your search. It helps to have another person, either family or friends, to share successes and also consult for advice.

## Paper, Pencils, or More?

Just as you would not expect to play a round of golf without golf ball or special clubs, a bag to hold your equipment, and other miscellaneous “stuff,” you also need equipment for your genealogy projects. If you have a laptop or iPad, download or buy a family tree maker program, and are able to scan in or take digital photos of documents and photos, your hobby will be much less frustrating.

Although you may start with a pad and pencil, having forms in which to record information soon becomes a necessity – and a timesaver. Google “Library of Michigan Genealogy forms” to find downloadable, printable forms for Family Group Sheets and Pedigree Charts. This site, among many others, offers census forms and other aids to assist you in your research. Many computer programs allow you to enter data into worksheets and the programs then show relationships. Consult the genealogy links on our home page to determine what software is considered useful for genealogy.

## Become Educated – Learn What to Do & Not to Do

Read a book on starting your family genealogy and/or take a beginner family history class, either online or at a library, historical society, or genealogy society. Joining a local genealogy society also has the perks of finding people to guide you and answer questions that arise. A mentor may be a goldmine of assistance.

## Your or Your parents’ Home -- a Family History Goldmine?

Before you go forth on your quest, you need to fill in any information that you are able to get from your home. This means filling in a Family Group Sheet for yourself, then filling in one for your parents. You need everyone’s full names of, including nicknames, maiden names, and names due to prior marriages. When you are writing down

locations, include specific locations, such as ‘Casco Twp., Allegan Co., MI, rather than just putting “Casco.” There is also a Casco township in St. Clair Co., MI. If you just put “Otsego,” the location could be Otsego, Allegan Co., MI, or could be Otsego County, MI, Otsego County, NY, or Otsego, Wisconsin...

## Searching at Home -- What Might You Find?

This is a good time to look in attics, on bookshelves, in photo albums, in old diaries, family Bibles, and in new and old scrapbooks. You are looking for full names of relatives, dates and locations of births, marriages, and deaths, burial places. You may find photos that you want to include in a family history book.

## You Have Nothing! What Do You Do Next?

If you have nothing beyond your own nuclear family, call to ask if your siblings or parents have any of the items mentioned above. They also might have school records, birth certificates, church records, and memorial cards from funerals. Find the family packrat and arrange for a visit to go through files.

People may be hesitant to let others borrow their precious photos and documents. Having a digital camera or a device that allows scanning the items on the spot will allay the photo owner’s fears and might let you have a copy of a key document. Ask if anyone has already completed a family tree or has scanned any documents that could be shared to a flash-drive or emailed to you. Remember to credit the person for having the information, and do NOT post any information online without credit and without the permission of the person who gathered the information. This is stealing, and the person who did all the original work is justified in spreading the news of your ill deed and requesting the place doing the posting to retract your information.

Remember to verify any family history trees done by other people and check to see if entries were documented by citations. The “trees” could be entirely accurate –or -- have misleading and incorrect information interspersed among facts. One tree I was shown had been traced back to Adam and Eve – I am not kidding!

## Family Interviews –Where You Find Personalities

Family interviews often are fun times, especially if the person answering questions or telling family stories is at ease. You may find that the seemingly dull uncle was a WWII hero, that your great aunt won the state Charleston contest, or that your ancestor first settled in Canada. One suggestion is to take paper and pencil to jot down vital facts or clues and supplement the interview by taping or videotaping the interviewee. If you are doing more than one person at a time, such as a couple, you may have to direct questions to the quieter member in order to have them participate. Don’t overwhelm with too many printed questions. Try to direct and ask informally.

### **Family Reunions – Golden Opportunities**

Sometimes a family reunion offers opportunities to tape family members who might not live close to you. Pick a quieter area, away from foot traffic and noise, and set up an interview station. Try to have someone watch small children of interviewees to minimize distractions. Check the lighting for videos and sound before recording. Family histories are more than facts – family stories and tales make a family history come alive and give personalities to the people who are in the records. You might promise to burn a DVD for participants to have for their family history to get more involvement. Be certain to get permission before recording anyone, and remember that people often are more at ease and starting a conversation when viewing a prop, such as a photo album or photo.

### **Plan and Prioritize Trips vs. Internet**

After you have filled in your pedigree chart and your family group sheets, there may be numerous blanks that need investigated. Go through your charts and try to determine what blanks have a priority. You may want to find grandpa's wife's maiden name more than you want to find the burial places of your third cousins. If time is a factor, decide what you are able to do from home, on the Internet, and by contacting nearby relatives. Try Internet resources at your local library (many have Ancestry LE, Heritage Quest, & everyone has free access to FamilySearch. For other online resources, check citations and verify "facts."

Try to determine likely places to find the information that you need. Visit websites of potential places, and phone or email to see if that institution probably has documents that may have the information. The person in charge may say that their institution does not have the information, but they may be able to direct you to a more likely place to search.

If possible, email the person in charge of genealogy at institution where you hope to find the information, asking for policy on copying and charges. Get in a supply of self-addressed, stamped envelopes to send with mail requests and ask about charges and limits of searches. Try to ascertain if a trip is worthwhile and check out hours, days closed, and public access to materials. Send in a thank-you note with payments for items emailed, faxed, or mailed to you.

### **Ask Correctly and Specifically for What You Want**

Please do not send a librarian a list, "Please give me everything you have on the following 10 family surnames...." This usually cause me to reply that while we do lookups for up to two obituaries, we do not have the staff and we do not do extensive family history research. Also, please do not send a librarian a list of names requesting obituaries for people when you have no death dates. Most of our microfilmed newspapers are not indexed. We need dates!

### **Use a Timeline to Keep Events Straight**

It is sometimes difficult to keep family members and events straight. This is especially true when some family members have the same names and co-exist at some time period. Sometimes we construct a timeline, usually starting with the oldest head of household (HOH), and then place events and records in chronological order. This would normally entail listing the HOH's birth to parents A & B, birthplace, etc. as the first listing, but I prefer to start with the person's parents, if possible, then list their births & birth places, marriage dates, births of children older than HOH or children who died prior to HOH's birth, then begin with the HOH. I use an outline form, with years, then a dash & space, then the person's last & first names, then a dash & space, then the event and superscript an abbreviation of the citation & can add notes; I indent to add his children Using a WORD 2007 document, I may easily insert years with names & events and list citations at the bottom of the timeline. It is convenient to add census records to a timeline:

#### **Partial Timeline Example (not real):**

- **1855** – BUSH – Edward – birth Aug 1855, MI<sup>1900\_Census</sup> [son of Albert Bush, b. NY, & Ann Cobb, b. VT<sup>1870\_Census</sup>]
- **1860** – BUSH – Edward – Census – age 5, living in Martin, MI, Allegan Co., MI, with father Albert, 32, mother Cynthia, 23, siblings Martin, 7, Sarah, 6, Al ,3, & Martha, 2<sup>1860\_Census</sup>
- **1870** – BUSH – Edward – Census – age 15, living in Martin, Allegan Co., MI, with father Albert, 41, mother Cynthia, 33, siblings Sarah, 15, & Martha, 12<sup>1870\_Census</sup>
- **1880** - BUSH – Edward – Census – age 25, living in Martin, Allegan Co., MI, with father Albert, 51, mother Cynthia, 43, siblings Sarah, 25, & Martha, 22<sup>1880\_Census</sup>
- **1882** – BUSH – Edward – marriage - age 27, Martin Twp., Allegan Co., MI, mar. Mary Sirt, age 17, Hopkins, Allegan Co., MI, in Martin, MI on 23 April, 1883<sup>Marriage\_Rec</sup>
  - **1885** - BUSH – Ed – birth 12 Mar 1885 Martin, MI to Edward Bush, b. NY, & Mary Sirt, b. MI<sup>Birth\_Rec</sup>

### **Organize for Your Sanity**

However you do it, have notes and results organized so that you may quickly retrieve facts and the documentation of those facts. After a while, names, dates, places, and events all seem to merge. If you are overwhelmed by your results, you will forget to look for pertinent data, lose data, and repeat searches you already have recorded. Use a three-ring binder or a computer program, but do organize!

### **Use Public Libraries and Genealogy Societies' Access**

Our library, and many public libraries, offer free access to Ancestry Library Edition. We also have free MeL databases (for MI residents), and FamilySearch is free.

## **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FAMILY HISTORY RESEARCH**

**You may not be able to answer all the questions completely. Answer as best as you are able. Choose a FEW to ask others.**

### **Yourself**

Use data to fill in Family Group & Pedigree Charts; use the rest of the questions to write a family narrative.

- What is the full name you were given at birth?
- When were you born? Where? Hospital or at home?
- Were you named after a relative or family friend? Why was your name chosen? Have you ever had a nickname? Were you known by the nickname at home? At school?
- Where did you attend school? Highest grade completed? Any certificates or training?
- Did you move when you were young? Where did you live? Do you remember street addresses or names of rural communities & locations of farms?
- When, where & how did you meet your husband or wife?
- List your children, full names, birthdates, where born...?
- Did you have pets? Describe them and tell their names. Which pet do you remember best?

### **Your Spouse**

(If you have ever been married; if more than once, make a different set of answers for each spouse)

- What is your spouse's full name? Where & when was your spouse born?
- What were your spouse's parents names? Where born?
- Where did you meet your spouse? Where & when were you married? Where did you honeymoon?
- Was your spouse previously married? Name of prior spouse if spouse was divorced, or widowed?
- One memorable event or impression of your spouse.
- Describe your spouse physically and temperament.
- Names & ages of spouse's children when you married.
- Names & ages of children you had when you married

### **Mother**

- What is your mother's full (maiden) name?
- When & where was she born?
- What is one story or vivid memory of your mother?
- Is she alive? Where does she now live?
- If she is not alive, when & where did she die? Do you know the cause of death? Do you have an obit?
- What is the name & location of the cemetery where she is buried? Is there a family plot?
- Did she work outside of the home?
- Where did she attend school? Any memories?
- Did she belong to or was active in organizations (Sunday school, DAR, Order Eastern Star, PTA....)?
- Are you able to describe your mother (tall, short, thin, stout, hair & eye color)? What was her disposition (sad, cheerful, helpful, tired, supportive)?

- Was your mother divorced or widowed before or after she married your father? Do you know the name(s) of her spouse(s) & where she was married?

### **Father**

- What's your father's name? When & where was he born?
- What is one story or vivid memory of your father?
- Is he alive? Where does he now live?
- If he is not alive, when & where did he die? Do you know the cause of death? Do you have an obit?
- What is the name & location of the cemetery where he is buried? Is there a family plot?
- Where did he attend school? Any memories? Describe your schools? Do you remember the names of the schools? Were any of them one-room-schools?
- What was his occupation? Did he work at different places or for different employers?
- Did he belong to or was active in any organizations (Sunday school, Masons, VFW, PTA, UAW...)?
- Was he a veteran? If so, what was his rank & unit, & where did he serve? Was he disabled?
- Are you able to describe your father (tall, short, thin, stout, hair & eye color)? What was his disposition (sad, cheerful, helpful, tired, and supportive)?
- Was your father divorced or widowed before or after he married your mother? Do you know the name(s) of his spouse(s) & where he was married?

### **Siblings**

- What are the names & birthdates of your brothers & sisters? Any have nicknames? Order by age?
- Any of your siblings half-brothers, adopted, or foster siblings? If so, who were their parents?
- Were any of your siblings born at places different from your birthplace? Where were they born?
- What memory or memories do you have of your siblings as children?

### **Grandparents**

- What were the names of your mother's parents?
- When & where were they born?
- Where did they live?
- What did they do for a living?
- What story or memory do you remember about them or were told about them?
- What languages did they speak
- What were the names of your father's parents?
- When & where were they born?
- Where did they live?
- What did they do for a living?
- What story or memory do you remember about them or were told about them?
- What languages did they speak?

### **Aunts and Uncles**

- Other than your parents, do you know the names & birthdates of your grandparent's children? These would be the siblings of your parents.
- Do you know where your aunts & uncles lived or the names of their spouses? If so, list them
- If your aunts & uncles had children, they would be your first cousins. List any you know by name & nickname, & list birthdates or other information

### **Great-Grandparents**

- What do you remember or have been told about any of your Great-Grandparents?
- Were they living when you were born, & did you ever meet them or spend time with them?
- If they are dead, in what cemetery are they buried?
- Did your great-grandparents or ancestors emigrate from another country? Where? On a ship? Name of ship?
- When did your ancestors emigrate? Become citizens?
- What languages were spoken in their homes?

### **Older Family Friends and Past Neighbors**

- What do you remember most about my family/ parents/ grandparents/ great grandparents?
- How long were you're their friend/neighbor?
- Where did they/you live? What kind of neighborhood?
- What did you do when you got together or visited?

**Consider adding memories to your family history.** A family history is more than dates of births, marriages, deaths, and pedigree charts. Family histories should reflect the lives of people and give insight to the activities taking place during their lives. Family stories and memories give life to dull facts.

Some of these questions may relate better to your parents or grandparents, so do ask them about their childhood memories, using these questions. These are memory triggers, so consider the ones that apply to you.

### **Your Childhood at Home**

- What do you remember about the place(s) where you grew up? Did you live in the city, in a small town, or on a ranch or farm? What do you remember most about where you lived and your home?
- Did you grow up in a modern house (electricity, indoor plumbing, refrigerator, gas or electric stove)? Or did you have to haul water from a well, use an outhouse, take baths in a washtub, and use a lantern or candles for light, cook meals on a wood stove & buy ice for an icebox?
- Was your house heated by a furnace, or did you chop wood to heat the house by a wood stove or fireplace? Did you help with the wood?

- Did your family have a garden? Did your family can vegetables &/or fruit? Did you help with food preparation or preservation? Did you learn to cook?
- Did you make your own butter? Did you raise your own pigs or beef for meat? Keep a cow for milk? Raise chickens for meat & eggs? Sell the eggs?
- Did your mother sew? Did you learn to sew? Did she or female family members crochet, knit, spin, embroider, or make family clothing?
- Were family members assigned chores to help with ironing, cooking, cleaning, yard work, fieldwork? Do you remember who did what? Your jobs?
- If on a farm, what crops did you raise? Who did fieldwork? Did older children work in the fields? Were there hired hands to help with farm work?
- Did you or family members hunt deer, rabbits, or squirrels to supplement your family's meat?
- Did you regularly see a dentist? Who pulled your teeth?
- Were you or family members ill or hospitalized? Do you remember your family doctor? Did he make house calls? Who took care of you during illness?
- Were there any deaths in the family or in your extended family (grandparents, uncles, cousins...) when you were a child? Do you remember the funerals or cemeteries where people were buried?
- Did your family have an automobile, or did you go to town in a horse or mule-drawn wagon? Did your neighbors or relatives have cars?
- If you moved during your childhood, tell when & from where you moved and to where. Why did your family move? Was it due to a change in your father's job, a divorce, a death, or be closer to aging parents, etc.
- Describe houses & places you lived. Any photos?
- Do you remember your first time on a train? A plane?
- Do you have a family photo album to jar memories?

### **Your School**

- Did you walk very far to school? Did you ride a school bus? Did your folks drive you to school?
- Describe your schools? Do you remember names of the schools? Teachers? Were any one-room-schools?
- Who was your favorite teacher? School subjects?
- What games and activities took place at school?
- Did you belong to any clubs? Band? Orchestra? Chess Club? Glee Club? Did you hold any offices?
- Did you date or have a "steady" in school?
- Any honors or achievements in school?
- Do you still see or contact anyone from school?
- What did you usually do during summer vacations?

### **Friends and Games**

- Did you have a best friend or special friends when you were young, in high school, or in the military?

- What did you do for fun when you were young? Go fishing? Play video games? Play with dolls?
- In what sports or recreation did you participate?
- Were you a member in what or youth organizations (FFA, 4-H, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Campfire Girls, etc.)?
- What were your favorite books and music/songs?
- What were your hobbies? Your siblings' hobbies?

#### **Family relations, responsibilities, conditions**

- Did your family keep visit or correspond with your extended family –grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins?
- Who do you remember was a frequent visitor or correspondent? Do you keep in contact with them? Does anyone in your family keep in touch with others?
- Does anyone in your family have a family Bible, photo album, yearbooks, or a collection of letters, postcards, and scrapbooks? If you don't know, ask!
- Has anyone in your family done any work on a family history or making a family tree? Ask! With today's digital cameras, scanners, flash-drives and email, people may share without lending original documents.

#### **More Family Memories**

- What do you remember about how your family spent dinner and family meals? Did you have a formal Sunday dinner? Were friends and relatives at those dinners?
- Did you/your family attend church Sundays or holidays?
- How did you celebrate Christmas? Birthdays?
- What is one special gift that you remember getting?
- Did your family go on picnics, to the beach or a lake?
- Did your family attend family reunions? Does someone in your family have photos or remember reunions?
- Remember vacations? What one(s) are memorable?
- Who was your favorite family member? Who was the zaniest person in your family? Who was not liked?
- Looking at your own children, could you recall a story about each one's birth and write/ tell something special about their childhood.
- Do you have any family stories about events, silly times, memorable events and mishaps...?
- If you have photos, these are great for sparking talk about people and events in the photos, and events not in the photos. Tape recorders help document memories.

#### **Why do it?**

Putting together a family history for your children or grandchildren can be a joyous experience. You may come across photos that spark memories. If you are able to do your work without a rush, you may have a wonderful book filled with family stories that add personalities to your genealogical data. While speaking with my mother, I found that when she was in elementary school, she sang the opening or closing song at each assembly. I enjoyed her

singing numerous folk songs to me when I was a child, but I never knew that she had ever sung a song in public. We looked at a photo of her, age 2, and Mom said that her mother had the photo taken because the doctor said that Mom might not live after eating a piece of glass. My mom also told stories about relatives or places in her photo album, and I treasure those memories.

I have written up several of her stories to put into a family history book. I also need to write up many events in my own life that explain why we moved to certain places, how we chose names for our children, and how we survived a hurricane, typhoon, floods, fallen trees across roads and fog on a scientific trip to collect plants in Mexico. There is the time I took a graduate herpetology class and my father was surprised when a pillowcase by the washing machine moved. It contained a snake, and he did *not* like snakes.

One of my library patrons looked into his family history, and I encouraged him to write down his memories. He told me that he had a really dull life. His son encouraged him to write, and when I read his stories, I found that during WWII his brothers had each enlisted in different branches of the military and that he had been in the Merchant Marine. He told how he had become ill, hospitalized in England, that his letters to his brothers had been delivered after his ship sailed, how he unexpectedly met a brother in a pub. They traveled to visit a brother in the Air Force and helped load bombs onto planes. Later his new ship docked in California, and a brother in the submarine service took him along when the new sub was still had test runs in the bay. His stories told of the hardships his family faced in his early life, as well as descriptions of tropical ports, of his return from service, of his early married life, his work, and his retirement. He left behind a collection of rich family stories about a man who thought there was nothing special about his life.

Each of us have our own special stories, and some of the best ones are about everyday memories of loved ones: a ride on Grandpa's lap as he pushed his wheelchair onto the porch, keeping watch on a brother who would jump up and down in front of the oven, hoping the cake would fall, a trip to the beach that was a misadventure, a little lamb at a Christmas pageant who got scared and ran to his mommy, a cooking disaster, winning an award or ribbon....

Write down your memories to preserve them. You might think that some of the stories are dull, but they might tell your great-grandchildren something about their ancestor that is more than a name and date. Relate the funny, embarrassing moments, the proud moments, and what your everyday was like. Your descendants may be surprised to learn that great grandma wasn't so dull after all. Give copies to everyone, and deposit copies with libraries or genealogy societies where they will be protected. Do record or write down your memories and stories. If you do not preserve them, they will be lost forever.

Linda Koch