

All In The Family: Researching Your Family History
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I was first bitten by the genealogy bug when I watched the television series *Roots* in 1977 with my husband. At that time I had a boring government day job and my husband was a bass guitarist in a well-known Queensland rock band so most of our excitement was at night or weekends when we did various gigs. However after *Roots* my life was not the same and I ended up doing a number of university degrees in history since then and since 1981 I have had a career in archives and libraries all revolving around my interest in family history. Sadly my first marriage did not survive my genealogy bug nor did the second I might add, but that is another story.

So what is this genealogy bug and why does it take such a hold over people? I am not sure that I can explain it but I do know that it has provided me with enormous satisfaction over the years and given me a number of close friends around Australia and a research network not only within Australia but also overseas.

My own parents' family were nothing out of the ordinary – they emigrated from countries like England, Scotland, Ireland and Norway and led fairly ordinary lives here in South Australia and Queensland. A number of ancestors on my father's side (and I will always remember Mum saying "Thank God they weren't on her side") ended up in prisons in Queensland – both males and females, young and old. Mum didn't really escape – I managed to find a few relatives convicted of horse stealing and robbery under arms up on the Charters Towers goldfields but strangely enough she thought that was really exciting. What is so attractive about a bushranger? So as you can see I have nothing to really brag about in the family history stakes, no connections to royalty or famous people, but my research has brought these long forgotten people back to life and we can try to understand their struggles in a new land and the hopes they had for their children.

When my son was born in 1987 I had been doing my own family history for ten years so I decided to research his father's family so that my son would know both sides of the family. I could hardly contain my excitement when I found out that my son was descended from two convicts and I spent the next few years tracing those lines and learning about early colonial Australia. Two of those early Sydney lines came to Victoria and were in the Bendigo and Ballarat area in 1854 and I like to speculate that they were in some small way associated with the Eureka uprising and wonder what they thought of it all. They were gold miners and went on from there to the Gympie goldfields in Queensland before moving further north to the Gladstone fields. For a while I lost some of the family but then inspiration struck and I remembered the 1890s gold rush in Western Australia and sure enough, there they were in Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie.

Having been with my current partner for five years now, I thought it was time to check out his family and despite his struggles, he is also starting to show signs of the genealogy bug. His family were Third Fleet convicts who ended up in the First Settlement of Norfolk Island and were later removed to Tasmania in 1807 when the NSW colonial government decided to close down Norfolk Island. We are currently

involved in the bicentenary planning celebrations and plan to be in Norfolk Island and Tasmania next year.

Even if you don't have multiple partners to give you additional families to research, your own family provides you with 16 great grandparents which is 16 different lines of research. Some people only do the paternal lines, some only maternal and others like me do every line. You can go back only a few generations or you can go back as far as you possibly can. For example I can trace my mother's Cornish ancestors back to the 15th century but my father's Irish families only to the 19th century. Surprisingly I was able to trace my father's Norwegian family back to 1688 despite the language difficulties.

My Norwegian grandfather who came to Queensland in 1873 with his wife and two young children and sadly both children died during the voyage out. One can only imagine their heartbreak and struggle in a new land. His father and some of his step siblings had left Norway in 1850 and gone to America where they ended up settling in Minnesota and are buried in Harmony. Interestingly Harmony is just down the road from Walnut Grove which was the location for the Little House on the Prairie television series of the 1970s which some of you may remember. I used to love watching that show (and not just because of Michael Landon) because I had a fascination with the pioneering life. Little did I know at the time that my own ancestors had lived exactly that kind of lifestyle in that exact same area.

In some ways it is almost impossible to run out of people to research. You don't have to only do direct lines of ancestry – many people research collateral lines which means finding out about brothers and sisters and their families. Many people I know try to trace all descendants of an emigrant couple. My mother's immediate family is of interest as she was the last of ten children born over quite a long time period. Many of her brothers and sisters were already married by the time Mum was born in 1934. Her father had a brief involvement in World War 1 in New Guinea but two of his brothers had fought in the Boer War in South Africa both in colonial and commonwealth regiments. The two brothers went over twice and one then stayed on in South Africa and married the widow of a Boer soldier. He ended up dying in German West Africa during the First World War. Yet another brother served in France during WW1 and was severely gassed and led the life of an invalid on his return to Australia.

As you can see from that example by placing your family within the times they lived, you can build up an interesting family profile and learn an amazing amount of Australian history. Think about your own lives and all the changes you have seen in technology and the impact that has had on you and your family. Think about the events of history that you have experienced or witnessed on television – I'm sure you can all remember Neil Armstrong walking on the moon. What are some of the Australian or world events your ancestors might have witnessed or known about from newspapers?

Starting Out

So how do you start looking for your own family? The golden rule is always start with yourself and work backwards – you don't want to end up doing the wrong family because of false assumptions based on family stories. Familiarise yourself with family

history text books and specific research texts on your country of origin and learn all about libraries and archives and what they can do for you. How do you keep track of all your research? Well all I can say is that right from the start, record what you have looked at otherwise you will find yourself repeating searches over time as you simply cannot remember everything. These days there are any number of computer software programs that make it very easy to record and display family history information.

Getting Assistance

One of the best things that I recommend you do is join the local family history or genealogical society. Over the years I have lived in various states, but I have always joined the local society where I am living as you will learn more over a cup of tea at a meeting than you will reading a book or even doing Google.

One of the really nice things about family historians is their willingness to share their knowledge and experience with newcomers and even people like myself who have been doing family history for years, can often benefit from fresh insights. Volunteers who staff the family history society libraries are always helpful and willing to assist in solving brick walls. In fact they thrive on challenges so don't hesitate to check out the local society and get to know other family history enthusiasts.

Family history and genealogical societies all maintain libraries that are simply full of resources not only Victoria, but also for all the other Australian states and overseas as well. It is now quite possible to research English, Scottish or Irish ancestors here in Melbourne without having to visit the UK – in fact if you are lucky you can do it all here and then simply do the tourist thing when you do get around to making that overseas trip.

Where Do You Research?

Here in Victoria you are very lucky with a very active and helpful Genealogy Unit in the State Library of Victoria and perhaps one of the best genealogical collections in Australia. The Public Record Office at North Melbourne houses the state archives of Victoria and it is there that you will colonial and state records relating to immigration, education, land and other records. PROV shares a joint reading room with the Victorian office of the National Archives of Australia that makes it very easy for researchers to move between state government and commonwealth records. NAA have defence records and of particular interest are the soldier dossiers of World War 1 and 2.

There are two main family history societies in Melbourne – the Genealogical Society of Victoria and the Australian Institute of Genealogical Studies who maintain research libraries and hold seminar series and other activities of interest to members. All of those research institutions have very useful websites for those starting out in family history and I recommend that you visit the websites before visiting the libraries or archives because the more planning you do before a research trip the more successful your research is likely to be.

What Happens When You Finish?

Although I don't think it is totally possible to ever finish your family history, (even after fairly consistent research over 30 years I still have heaps to do), at some point you do need to sit down and write the story so that all the information you have obtained is kept for future generations. It does not have to be a literary masterpiece as

long as the story is told and you deposit copies with family members, libraries and family history or genealogical libraries. It would be a shame if all your dedicated research was lost just because the next generation may not be as interested – their children may be and you need to ensure that the information is available for the future.

Conclusion

This has been a very brief personal insight into the world of family history and I hope that I have inspired some of you to at least think about your grandparents and their grandparents. The stories of all Australians interweave into the greater story of Australia and it really is a fascinating and all consuming story. Thank you.

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