

Add Story to Your Family History

by Deborah Wilbrink

A family history that showcases the immense, precise work of genealogy should include stories to attract and keep readers interested through the generations to come. How can one find, attribute and develop story? Let's turn to both genealogists and personal historians to learn more. Candace Cox is both, and she says, "Genealogists are researchers. Personal Historians are writers." Cox and Patricia West cofounded the Tennessee chapter of the national Association of Personal



Historians on February 23, 2012 at its first meeting in Chattanooga. Personal historians specialize in recording the stories of family history, then producing heritage books or recordings. Their quarterly meetings include an educational aspect, and the website, personalhistorians.org, has lots of resources. What can the field of personal history bring to add zest and sparkle to your family history?

Finding Story

Find the stories first. Many family stories are oral history, told and retold. These are gold! Write down what you remember, or course, and then start asking. As you call relatives for genealogical information you will find some more willing to talk than others; some with better recall. You may find a *kinkeeper* – one who enjoyed collecting information about the family and networking its members. When you hit this rich vein, mine not only for who birthed who, when, and what's in the family Bible and cemetery. Ask for memories, stories, oral tradition. You'll find two kinds. First-hand stories or primary accounts are those witnessed by the teller. Oral tradition are those stories which are told and retold through generations. The original participants are long gone. Stay alert to opportunities to preserve these, even if you are not sure they are true. When your source dies, and you too can no longer repeat it, that story will die. Save the stories!

WWII veteran and Tennessee Aviation Hall of Fame pilot, William H. Pickron, Jr. of Maryville, Tennessee, wrote *From Stearman to Starfighters, A Pilot's Memoir* with his daughter, Patricia Pickron West. A personal historian, West recorded, transcribed, and lightly edited his stories over several years, but "Suddenly, he was gone. And his book was not finished. Dad and I had made it through his 'flying years' and discussed what should be included of his retirement years when his 90-year old body finally gave out and he left us in late 2013." West became obsessed

with completing his book; the family helped; and she did finish and publish her father's story. The actual people are invaluable primary resources when it comes to genealogy, personal history and story. Living treasures must be pursued and valued.

Documents and records are another source of story. Perhaps the story is folded into a letter – a few lines that bear expansion or are riveting as a direct quote. You have been lucky and have a primary source story! But you may also find stories in documents through deduction. Stay alert when you are researching. If you are at a dead end with plenty of effort put in, use your intuition and imagination to fill in some plausibility, always with a caveat.

Sourcing or Attributing Story

If you are dealing with a told story with characters who are still living, certainly ask their contemporaries for verification. There are other means to study the past, as genealogists well know. Patricia West was able to research and verify family stories and suspicions which she then could include. “First, our family had always suspected that the family's last name, Pickron, was actually a misspelling of Pickering. Second, my father had always heard that some of the family came to Texas in a boat, but lost all of their belongings when the boat sank.” Patricia Pickron West verified both of these stories via Ancestry.com.

Candace Cox, personal historian, went on an exciting hunt for a sister of her great-grandfather's grandfather, mentioned in a letter as Nancy Hoyt, d. 1866. After lots of tracking Cox had a hunch. “Nancy Moulton and Nancy Hoyt were, most likely, one and the same!” In the end a gravestone confirmed her story. Not only does Candace Cox have the story of Nancy's moves, marriages, and widowhoods to add to her family history. Cox also has a great story about her own pursuit of a family story! The verified story should include sources and references in standard genealogical tradition and conventions.

What about a story that you cannot verify with a safe surety level? This won't hold water getting registered with the DAR, but it may add buckets of excitement to your family history. Personal historians know that memories will vary, and a story is truth as one remembers it. Sometimes embellished, especially if your family has good story-

tellers! Simply say, “Grandmother Lilly White told this story about ...” or “Uncle Henry Talbot heard this story from his father, who heard it from his father before him...” **It is quite alright to include an interesting story that is hearsay if you indicate that it is.** Why leave out a good story, or leave it to your own retelling in hopes someone will repeat it? Will someone in the future read your notes? Include the story now and don't let your family stories die. Family traditions and legends have a place in making the family what it is and so are also historically important. Seek the



Bill Pickron in his P-47. 1944, Reykjavik, Iceland

dramatic stories inherent in family history and attribute the tellers.

As a genealogist, you know the joys and frustrations of finding family connections. Investigator, detective, scribe, you've faithfully written only what you could verify into your family tree and pedigree charts. Those gaps – you've hypothesized and you've intuited about them, and sometimes you've been proven right. Other times they tantalizingly linger just outside the boundary of irrefutable truth. There are ways to add your hunches, and call them just that.

Herman and Patsy Lawson are professional storytellers in Hendersonville. Their newly written family history is called "The Story of Us." Patsy Hatfield Lawson wrote, "Our memoir is more 'story based' than 'fact based' because both of us are storytellers. Storytellers are not to be confused with liars. Storytellers focus more on the people than on the facts." The couple have pedigree charts for the Lawsons and the Hatfields of east Tennessee in two invaluable "Family Tree Books" but wanted a more



Storytellers Patsy and Herman Lawson

accessible supplement for their sons' families. They share stories that they witnessed in Hancock County with glee or poignancy in a delightful manner. Tales of their ancestors are often gleaned from charts and newspapers, but also from stories oft-told by their elders. One Appendix entry is titled "Stories about Link Greene." Herman Lawson carefully sets these simple stories as *hearsay*, not fact. "Link was a colorful figure and I heard many stories about him. Here are some of those stories: 'He made his own coffin. When visitors came he would get in it and display himself...'" If someone remembers differently, they are welcome to share with Lawson, but they can't accuse him of getting the facts wrong. Lawson knows what he *heard*. The stories of Link Greene and other Greens are about the lines of Lawson's family, and the Lawsons offer a story-telling program garnered from oral tradition and documentation about the Greene-Jones Feud. Hearsay attribution is a useful way to include important and/or interesting stories which might otherwise sink into obscurity.

Writing Your Stories

Cinamon Collins is a professional genealogist in Franklin, Tennessee who often encounters story in her research. Sometimes what she finds can be a surprise to a client. "Right now I'm looking for details on a murder," she says matter-of-factly. Collins writes a report with her notes from the investigation, a summary, and suggestions for follow-up. The report also includes the evidence she has found in her research. "What I'm doing is just reporting facts. It's not up to me to embellish, even though I do sometimes find out things which are unexpected or even

shocking.” Last fall she encountered graphic first-person descriptions of Andersonville Prison while researching a Civil War soldier. These facts are what her clients want and pay for. They will provide the structure of the family history. Does Collins’ collect her own family stories? “I do tell my family story within my Log,” she says. “But I’ve not published. It’s on my to-do list.”

When you are ready to write, consider these points. A great story will have a theme, and your family history should have one. Is it simply survival? Is it struggle? Is it accomplishment? Is it one of hard work rewarded; education valued? Is it one of hard luck and trouble? Whatever your theme, your story will be stronger if you remain alert for its emergence as you research and write.

A story has a beginning, middle and end. It has a place and time, characters, descriptions, details. It may have some imagined or remembered dialogue, or quotations from letters and articles, to punch it up. A good story develops anticipation and tension, with a conflict or challenge. A great story is archetypal, like the hero’s journey of facing danger in order to gain knowledge for the greater good. An equipment list of tools for survival, a mentioned means of transportation to the next home site – these bones can be fleshed out to story. Researching the specific, studying the general can add detail. Staying alert to the uncommon can add plot, and change is a pivoting climax when looking for a story. Write what you know, then fill in with some stated supposition for story.

Sarah Peery Armistead of Brentwood, genealogist, has authored or co-authored eighteen books found in the Tennessee State Library and Archives. Most are researched collections of materials, such as *Articles from Nashville, Tennessee Newspapers, 1800 to 1850*. A few are genealogy books about specific families such as *Genealogy of Edward West and Andrew Erwin* published in 2011. Armistead also writes for this *Journal* albeit in a very different style. She adds story. In the Winter 2014 publication, Armistead linked primary sources together by writing paragraphs that made “James Americus Woods of Westwood and Craggie Hope” into a story. She left citations simple and within the text, so the flow of story was uninterrupted. Armistead had published more than one book about the Woods family, but began finding more information: letters, diaries of neighbor Maggie Vault, information from and about another family site, Craggie Hope. Says the genealogist and author, “For me, you have to start something, think about it a while, leave it and come back. It’s not something you just start and finish. Take what you have and try to put it in order.” Armistead’s documents make a good read, but it is her transitional paragraphs, still factual, between the extended quotations that keeps one reading. Armistead is an avid reader herself of historical fiction, a hobby that reinforces storytelling and writing. While she enjoys exciting plots, she admits, “The ones you want to keep on reading, those aren’t the best ones to read at night. You can’t go to sleep!” Your mission, writers, is to keep your readers awake and turning your pages.

If you enjoy research more than writing, it’s possible to find a personal historian to help. Using complementary strengths, genealogists and personal historians can work together for the best possible family history. Stories can only strengthen the call to preserving family history. Find the story, properly source and attribute, and use writing skills to transition, provide meaning, context, and excitement. Including story assures that your heritage work will gather enthusiastic readers, not dust.

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