

Beginner Advice

by Dee Gibson-Roles

October is Family History Month, making it a perfect time to start researching one's family history. Many folks indicate an interest in finding their ancestors but have no idea where to start. We'll try to provide information to overcome that with our topic this month.

There are a few supplies that every researcher needs, regardless of whether one is a new or seasoned researcher. One such item is a notebook to take notes when all kinds of research is conducted, whether it be oral history or a repository full of records. The first rule of thumb is to always write it down. Wise researchers never rely on memory alone.

Be sure to date any entry made in the notebook, and if recording information from a written source, note the title of the source, the author, the publisher and copyright date.

The next step is to obtain a supply of blank family group sheets and a blank ancestor chart, sometimes referred to as a pedigree chart. Most genealogical societies offer these for a very small fee or even free, and websites have them ready for download and printing. Just Google "free genealogy forms."

One good website for finding almost anything pertaining to genealogy is Cyndi's list, cyndislist.com, which has among its treasures a page with no fewer than 171 links to genealogical charts, forms and more.

A family group sheet is a single sheet of paper with sections for listing a couple and their offspring, with birth, death, marriage date, spouse, parents, etc., for each. Also listed may be occupation, religious affiliation, baptism, military service and other facts.

It is important to have a family group sheet for every family researched. This keeps the work already done organized and may prevent retracing your steps. Assign a number to each sheet.

An ancestor or pedigree chart lists the researcher first, then two parents, then four grandparents, eight great grandparents, and so on, working backwards in time. The chart enables the researcher to see at a glance what progress has been made, what remains to be done and which family lines need work.

The number of generations recorded varies with different ancestor charts. Most have space to list five or six generations. More elaborate charts can be obtained for a small fee, covering 15 or more generations.

Give each ancestor chart a number and, using a separate numbering system, give each person on the chart a number. Numbering is especially important when the research must be continued on another chart, so you can note, for example: "Person #1 on this page is the same on person #X on chart #X."

Data entered on any chart or sheet should be done in pencil, and a really good eraser is a wise purchase.

The researcher should begin with him or herself and list all vital facts. Then proceed to parents, and so on. For each couple, start a new family group sheet to list not just direct ancestors but also the siblings. Start a new family group sheet for coupled siblings.

Next, seek out other members of your family and interview them to glean more information. If possible, record the conversation. It's often best simply to ask what the person knows about a certain event or family and let the conversation flow naturally.

Oral history and family stories are wonderful and make our ancestors and their families come to life instead being merely statistics, putting "flesh on the bones" so to speak. But all information must be documented before it can be considered fact.

Most often there is a grain of truth in even the most outrageous family stories. It is up to the researcher to take this material and prove what is factual vs. "embellishment."

One of the reasons for interviewing older relatives and anyone who has knowledge of the family is that we can never know how long these folks will be with us. Family reunions are especially valuable events for researchers to speak with older folks as well as new cousins, who may have information to share.

The next step is to document the facts. Visit county courthouses, libraries, genealogical societies and records repositories such as archives and special collections, to name just a few. Record not only the facts, but the source of each, such as a death or birth certificate and where that certificate can be found. If researching in libraries, it is wise to photocopy the title page and copyright information from any book used.

With new digital images of primary documents becoming available almost daily on the Internet, many necessary documents can be found online and downloaded or the information on them recorded. Record the URL where the information was found for future reference. Keep in mind that family histories compiled by other individuals cannot be taken as fact unless supported by primary documents.

It is wise to study siblings as well as the direct line back in time. Many a researcher has found a cousin several times removed who is possession of a previously unknown family Bible filled with genealogical information.

Most genealogical societies are more than willing to help novice researchers. Some offer beginning genealogy courses, seminars and workshops.