

Discover your roots

By **Brooke Broadbent**

“Family history seems to be a disease we catch when we turn 50,” chuckles John Reid, a leader of the 500-member British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa. “With retirement you need to keep busy. Everybody has a need to belong somewhere (in communities).”



Family history embraces three types of communities: your community of ancestors who blazed the trail that became the super-highway you live on now; the community of family historians you can meet at family history meetings and the sub-communities dealing with DNA, writing, technology, scrapbooking, photography, the gamut of ethnic and linguistic groups and more.

Family history is a great way to make friends. But most of all, through learning your family’s history you get to create your personal narrative and in the process create who you are by the stories you choose to tell about your ancestors and yourself.

Speaking of which ... about three years ago I turned on my computer, fired up Ancestry.com and typed in the name of my great-great-grandfather, John Garrett. To my surprise, up popped a link to a coroner’s report.

My grandmother had told me that my great-great-grandfather died while sailing to Canada in 1870; however, the coroner’s report said he died in a Canadian jail in 1894. With additional research I determined that he assaulted his employer in 1875, became a vagrant in 1891 and was sent to jail for six months, the first of nine sentences. In Victorian times jail was often a “solution” for poverty, mental illness and an assortment of what we don’t consider as crimes today.

As the story of Garrett swirled in my head I wondered what he did, felt and thought during the eight times he was freed from jail for less than a week before he was arrested again, brought before Judge Dumble, convicted of vagrancy and sent to the hoosegow for another six months.

An image played in my mind of him walking away from the jail, while pedestrians gawked at him despairingly, as he made his way to the market in the hope of finding his son who Joseph hoped had come in from the country to sell his produce.

While the coroner’s report had revealed facts, my mind’s eye had spiced these up with social history like Victorian attitudes towards poverty and my imagination had started to channel the details of Joseph’s hike from the jail to the market. Discovering Joseph Garrett’s story, in fact and in historical fiction, has given me a new appreciation of the adversity faced by my ancestors.

This is my first monthly column for *FYI* about family history. In the others that follow, I will offer practical advice and examples. I’ll give instances from my research and others’ research and I’ll examine the full slate of resources available in the Ottawa area that help family historians learn about, research and write about our ancestors.

Whether you are collecting genealogical data to store on your computer, or writing a poem, a short story, or a book, about your roots, you’ll need a bushel of information. In researching the life of Joseph Garrett I sifted through census data, newspapers, laws, court proceedings, and because I wanted to write about Joseph’s jaunt from jail to market I learned how people he encountered would be dressed and the store windows he could have looked into as he trudged along.

That’s where a family history writer needs help to learn about social history, architecture, customs, and in general how people lived in the period being studied.

The Ottawa Public Library (OPL) has made a firm commitment to helping family historians. Librarian Diana Hall leads workshops where participants use the resources of the Web and the OPL. After one of the courses you can access the OPL website and launch the databases and other tools Diana introduces in the computer lab.

Also, OPL branches offer free access to the popular database Ancestry.com. In addition, OPL librarians will help you locate the resources you need whether they be articles, books or other sources. A few years ago I took the OPL genealogical workshop and later received individual coaching from Hall. She helped me track down the history of my family’s farm and also helped me get started on finding ships that my ancestors emigrated on.

If you’re seeking an inspiring hobby, give family history a test drive. You’ll ride with interesting people, stimulate your grey matter, learn about your roots and gather stories to pass to family members. And if you’re already bitten by the family history bug and looking for

ways to convey your findings in fictionalized stories, check with this column next month for more tips about spicing up genealogical data with social history and imagination.

Brooke Broadbent is an Ottawa resident with a passion for writing imaginative family history. He can be reached at brooke.broadbent@gmail.com His Web site is: www.brooke-broadbent.com

Crossword answers from page 4

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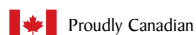
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