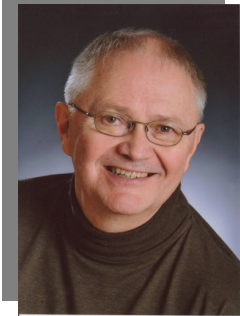


## Getting from Genealogy to family history

By Brooke Broadbent, MA



One of my cousins deserves a medal for spending seven years compiling an extensive family genealogy. I was amazed when I read the data about my great-grandmother and discovered that she gave

birth to six boys in nine years; starting two years after she married. The last two infants died and then she gave birth to her first daughter who never walked, talked or fed herself and was completely dependent on her parent for thirty-three years or until my great-grandmother was sixty-eight and my great-grandfather was seventy-three. Around the same time as her sons died, both my great-grandmothers parents became ill and passed away—and her father-in-law died in jail, a vagrant, in the same period. My great-grandmother had three more successful births and she named the third child Mary Baker Garrett. I suspect as way to express her appreciation to Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of the Christian Science movement since my great-grandmother was a committed Christian Scientist.

When I learned of the adversity my great-grandmother overcame, I felt compelled to capture her story and to share it with others. On the surface the genealogical data looked boring, like a calm lake, but when I looked below the surface the family story, like a deep bay, teemed with life, drama and love. My copy of the 250 page document my cousin prepared is now dog-eared from constant use as I carefully studied the data. In addition to broaden the picture I obtained photos of family; visited where ancestors had lived in Canada and abroad; toured pioneer museums; researched in archives; studied geography, geology, genetics; read newspapers, diaries, and court cases; researched additional information such as the ships they sailed on; compared dates of family events to the dates of world events like Prohibition, war, riots, economic depression—and along the way transformed began to paint a picture of the people and their times. There were many gaps in my knowledge and I had the pleasure of filling in these blanks with made-up conversations, events, fears, and tension that I invented from what I know about family values, the spirit of the times and what others wrote.

The study of genealogy is a wonderful way to connect with our past and to leave a legacy for your children. As a second step, building on the genealogical research, a family history puts flesh on the bones.

I've just given you on an overview of what happens when genealogical data and other information is used to create a family history. It's a major undertaking and if you're interested in being part of such an adventure here are a few suggestions on how to simplify your task.

1. Take baby steps.

Start with a person who interests you and write a short story of two thousand words or so. I wrote a short story for a writing course I was taking, received comments from other participants and in the course of four years that one story grew into thirty-four tales.

2. Engage others.

From the skills involved, identify what you do best whether it be researching, writing, interviewing, desk-top publishing and decide which skills you need help with. I've received critical help from others in the researching area, not only from my cousin's genealogical study but also from archivists and librarians.

3. Exploit resources.

There are plenty of workshops available where you will learn skills, become inspired by others and receive feedback on your work. Spread over five years I took half a dozen workshops where I improved my writing skills. I also participated in five writing groups where fellow writers provided feedback on my writing. As well, I read other family histories; talked to authors; read novels and memories for inspiration and studied several books about writing. For genealogical information the Ancestry database is a wonderful resource. You can access the Ancestry online databases for free at some libraries, or use the free trial period. A friend of mine was able to

conduct all the research he required using the trial period that Ancestry offers.

4. Make it fun.

Consider what interests you when it comes to family history and build that into you researching and writing. It might be travel, meeting relatives, making friends, learning about a specific ancestor, grasping the historical times, polishing your writing skills or all of the above. Whatever it is, give yourself the gift of enjoying the journey.

5. Make it serious.

It's an honour to revisit the lives of our ancestors and to try to understand what they did from their perspective. In a way when you write your family history you are also writing your personal history. What you think and write about your family will influence the way that you think and write about yourself. In most cases they were doing the best they could under difficult circumstances. Try to understand their times, their motives and the adversity they faced. Be compassionate.

Some say that genealogy is the most popular past time in North America today. The study of genealogy is a wonderful way to connect with our past and to leave a legacy for your children. As a second step, building on the genealogical research, a family history puts flesh on the bones.