

Finding her family roots

Who am I? This is the question many people are asking as genealogy becomes a fast growing leisure pursuit. Indeed, the urge to uncover the truth about her ancestors has proven so compelling for Karen Everett, 84, that she has been digging into her roots for the past 40 years. "The more you get into it, the more you realize this is part of you, a piece of where you came from," she explained.

Everett, a retired librarian and Education Director of the Hamilton County Chapter of the Ohio Genealogical Society, began her research by gathering information from her parents, and then visiting rural courthouses in Virginia and Kentucky, home of her mother's family. A later branch, she discovered, was among the first families in Hamilton County in 1800.

Her painstaking search yielded exciting results on a trip 15 years ago to a small town in Germany that she read about in her family Bible.

"We wanted to take pictures of the village," Everett said. An 'aha' moment occurred when the Everetts stopped for refreshments. "A waitress who recognized my family name and my grandparents' hometown led us to a man who was best friends with one of my father's descendants.

Overnight we had the history of our family dating back to the 1590s, which this descendant's wife had obtained through the Lutheran Church and she offered me a copy," Everett related. "It was a miracle. We didn't think we'd find anything." She discovered that her great-great-great-grandfather was a Dutch soldier in the Swedish army.

Everett found that genealogy helps people identify themselves because everything that happened in earlier generations has brought them to where they are today.

For example her love of sailing, nature, wildflowers, travel and desire for adventure leading her to get a pilot's license 60 years ago, was something she inherited from her ancestors. "I'm a mixed bag of all these people. It turned out we had ship captains in the early days of our family." Her brother also loves sailing and her son gave up his office job to become a captain on a Mississippi boat.

Everett's personality and love of nature and wildflowers, she discovered, was inherited from the grandfather she never knew, a happy-go-lucky artist who took kids on walks and taught them about trees, wildflowers and animals.

Of course, she admitted there were some unexpected surprises along the way. Old Kentucky church records, for instance, revealed that one of her ancestors got kicked out of church for drinking and another was jailed for being a horse thief. She loves the town characters and the kooky ones she uncovered, saying, "They must have been fun."

Piecing together the past, noted Everett, requires one to become an information gatherer, keen observer, a hardened skeptic who proves everything, a detective to sort fact from fiction, a snoop who discovers information hidden in families, and an historian who knows what was happening during the time of their ancestors. "You have to realize, for example, that Kentucky was Virginia at one time," she pointed out. "And Germany was once part of France."

To help people get started on the adventure of exploring their family trees, Everett teaches tips and techniques classes at the public library and its branches. "It's as easy as writing down everything you know starting with yourself and then doing the same for your parents and older generations," she explained.

However, Everett emphasized the importance of screening and sorting oral stories, using them as clues, and then finding documents to support the stories, "Our public library downtown has one of the largest genealogy collections in the country," she pointed out.

Patricia Van Skaik, manager of the library's Genealogy and Local History Department, explained the range of free resources. "We cover all 50 states going back to the colonial era and early settlers of Ohio, as well as close to 25 foreign countries.

We have ship passenger lists so people can make connections with their homeland, an African-American resource collection including original documents such as plantation records on microfilm, research databases that are costly and/or unavailable at home, information unavailable on the internet and computer labs." Introductory department tours are offered on the first Saturday of the month.

Since church records predate government records, Everett also found those helpful. "What I got from the Mormon church records was very exciting because they were copies of actual documents for my family back to 1590."

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