

PASSING IT FORWARD: HOW TO ENGAGE THE YOUNGER GENERATION(S)

Dave Obee

Dave@CanGenealogy.com

Quick now – why did you start working on your family history? What was the motivation to search for information on your ancestry, and to discover all that you could about the lives of your ancestors?

Did you have a mentor? Did you have an older relative who encouraged you? Or, perhaps, one who discouraged you? (Either approach has been known to motivate a person into genealogical research.)

As you try to find someone to continue your work, it might pay to consider your reasons for your interest in family history research. That would be a starting point. It might not be enough to trigger a lifelong passion in another person, but it could get the conversation started.

There has been a lot of talk lately about how to get younger people interested in what we do. A couple of sessions at this year's RootsTech conference are devoted to the topic. But don't think that this is a new phenomenon; for decades, genealogical research has been, for the most part, something done by people who are retired, or close to it.

That's a shame, considering that the first mistake we all made was starting too late. Younger genealogists have a chance to learn from elderly relatives. Those memories might be lost if people delay starting their research until they are in their sixth decade.

What about me? I had been interested in local history when I was in school. I took a night school course on family history when I was twenty-four years old. I had two reasons for doing that: I was interested in learning more about my family history, obviously, and I thought that a genealogy course would be a fine place to meet single women. (The class had single women alright – widows in their sixties and seventies.)

After taking the course, I did not do much with what I learned. That changed a few years later, for a couple of reasons. First, one of my cousins started working on family history, and sent my father (but not me) a pedigree chart that showed the names of ancestors I had never heard of. Those names were later shown to be wrong, but that doesn't matter now – they were enough to get me interested.

The second reason was a business trip that took my father to Salt Lake City. I tagged along – and once I got there, I realized I had to kill three days. I checked the tourist guide in the hotel room, and realized that the big genealogy library was just a few blocks from me! So I decided to go there the next day.

I walked in, asked what they might know about the Obee family, and was offered a tour of the library as well as some tips on how I could start my research.

The rest, as they say, was history. I spent an hour or two looking at microfilmed parish registers and census returns. I explored maps, looking for parishes that were adjacent to the ones in Kent where I had found the Obee names. I marvelled at the many people in the room, all with their heads down as they searched for names. There was a hint of Bengay (or Ben-Gay, as it was spelled then) in the room; all those older people needed relief as they wound the handles of those microfilm readers.

I was hooked. In terms of my interests, this was it. I knew on that first day that I would be back, again and again, for years to come. (I was right. Over the years, I have been to Salt Lake at least forty times, spending at least a week there every time.)

On my first visit to the library, I was one of the youngest patrons. On a visit a couple of decades later, I looked around and decided that yes, I was still one of the youngest. It was like I had discovered the fountain of youth.

So, to recap: I had an interest in genealogy. I had taken a course, I had checked out charts, I was curious about what else might be found. But I did not get really involved until I was thrown into the deep end, figuratively speaking, able to explore the largest genealogical library in the world as an absolute newbie.

How do we encourage people to work on their family history? How do we stir their interest? I inherited my father's keen interest in local history, so I visited museums with him, and went to visit older relatives and local pioneers. What interested me? Old cars. Old music. Other people might have other ideas.

I was a teenager at the time, but it can be argued that people should start even younger.

At RootsTech last year, [Amanda Terry and Jana Rasmussen](#), managers at Family Search, International, led a session entitled Cool Kids: Connecting Young Kids to Their Ancestors. They suggest starting with toddlers and preschoolers with activities such as decorating cookies to represent family members, using building blocks to create family history scenes, and looking for physical characteristics in family photographs.

Terry and Rasmussen suggested that children aged six to 10 could also use family photos to build interest, play games based on family history, and build family memory boxes.

RootsTech also featured [Sharlene Habermeyer's session](#), 33 of the Best Activities for Families to Understand and Connect to Their Ancestors. The ideas included exploring nature, planting gardens, applying meaning to flowers, hosting a Victorian tea party, and crafts such as fibre arts, embroidery, and quilting.

Older children and young adults can be inspired in other words. Were relatives, or their times, featured in popular movies? What about music – were songs recorded in ancestral villages? Anything that can connect your family history to the interests of your family members would be good.

Do they love true crime shows on television? Do they like reading mysteries? Perhaps they would be thrilled at the chance of solving a true puzzler that involves their ancestors. It doesn't have to be a crime, of course – although a family member with a criminal past might stir a bit of interest.

Genealogy societies can help. Make meetings and seminars more engaging. Get some of the younger members to organize events. Turn cemetery tours into treasure hunts.

It would be hard to convince someone to start research if they have no genuine desire. They might do a few basic searches; they might grab information from trees online; they might do more harm than good. We need to ensure that the people who pick up where we are leaving off will have the same commitment to accuracy, if not the passion, that we have had.

We don't want all of our work to go to waste, so we need to find a way to make it accessible to others. We need to ensure that our work is clear and follows the basic guidelines of research. Then we need to teach younger people what we know, and how they can make more progress.

How do we do that? Easy! Consider the five basic points in every genealogist's best friend, the Genealogical Proof Standard. The GPS shows the minimum that genealogists must do for their work to be credible, boiled down to these five elements:

1. Reasonably exhaustive research has been conducted.
2. Each statement of fact has a complete and accurate source citation.
3. The evidence is reliable and has been skillfully correlated and interpreted.
4. Any contradictory evidence has been resolved.
5. The conclusion has been soundly reasoned and coherently written.

And a reminder: Any proof statement is subject to re-evaluation when new evidence arises. Some elements of research can be carved in stone, but much of it might be changed over time. Keep your mind open.

The basics are important because there will be a rush of new resources that will allow people to make progress faster than ever before. But if people rush to add to our trees, it might be tempting for them to accept new information without ensuring its accuracy, or that it applies to our family. Teach them to avoid accepting information without question.

Family historians in the decades to come will have better access to records than we ever did. More will be digitized, and more comprehensive indexes will be available. These records will not always be on the standard family history sites – FamilySearch and the major commercial ones – because sources we can't imagine today will be available to them.

(Let's not try to predict specific changes; anyone a decade ago, asked to forecast what 2024 would be like, would have been too conservative, too extreme, or would have missed the mark entirely.)

Artificial intelligence, also known as AI, will play a more important role. It has been used by genealogy sites for years, in features such as MyHeritage's photo enhancement work and Ancestry's ThruLines, as well as the auto-complete function on a Google search.

It's hard to imagine what research will be like in a generation or two. But we must do what we can to prepare younger genealogists to carry on what we have started.