

The Genealogist's Corner



Finding More Than Just the Facts

by Denis Ledoux

Genealogists spend long hours researching details—facts, dates, spellings. Hours and days disappear as we search for the data that will add even a small piece of information to what we may already know of an ancestor's life. When we find new details, there remains the task of uncovering corroborating data from second (or even third and fourth) sources.

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Yet even when we've authenticated dates and names, a fundamental question remains. Who were these people? What were their personalities, their choices, their preferences and ideas about life? We remain curious about what life meant to them, what light was guiding their way.

Ancestors are both curiosities that attract us as a light attracts a moth and mysteries that we cannot solve. Too often, after the research is done, our ancestors remain elusive, just names on the charts. How we long to know just a little more about them!

While we may never know the intimate details of individual ancestors' lives, we can know a lot more about the times in which they lived than you may realize. By making educated guesses based on research and reading, it is possible to come close to the truth in many areas of life.

One's general historical information can be used to create glimpses into ancestors' lives. It can also be used to access intuition (a real challenge for some of the detail types who become genealogists!) about elements of the lives they most likely lived.

I'd like to challenge readers who are genealogists to undertake the process of making a happy union of the left-brain facts and dates of genealogical work with the more right-brain, intuitive approach of Turning

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Memories Into Memoirs[®] to create lively portraits of ancestors. Together, these two selves—the analytical and the intuitive/creative—can produce lifestories that will live on as a dynamic family legacy to be passed on with pride.

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Exercise

- Combine the “hard” information (dates of birth and contracts, etc.) with what you know or can learn about the era in which a given ancestor lived.
- Visit your library for history books and historical “period pieces.” Beware of historical novels which often replace the sensibility of an era with anachronistic modern morés and unfounded but widely held assumptions. More is known than you may think about family life, occupations and society in various places and eras.
- Write a story from these two sources. It will be largely fiction because your ancestor may or may not have been typical of his/her times or his/her ethnic group. But it will, if you use your intuition and knowledge of your family plus authentic historical detail, be an interesting account of a possible life in a particular time.
- Include at the end of your ancestor story an appendix of the genealogical information that is certain and verified. That way the reader can easily distinguish authenticated data from friendly and well-founded conjecture.