

Researching the Family Tree

—by Shirley Collins

Looking for family origins has become a growing national pastime. If you want to begin a family search, there are many resources at your disposal.

First, begin with your relatives. Talk to your parents, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, cousins, even the friends of your relatives. It's amazing how much information people will give if they see that you are eager to listen. Do you know where they were born? Where their parents, brothers, sisters were born?

As you get the information, write it down. Ask questions to clear up points you are confused about, but never question to the point of suggesting someone is wrong. Ask to see any written documents like birth, marriage and death certificates; even the family bible or letters can hold important confirming information about dates and lineages. Family photos are especially good sources of information and are terrific for jogging memories of events both special and common. Always ask your source to identify the people in the photographs. (And please, never write in ink on the back or front of a photograph. Use a soft lead pencil. Never paste or tape photographs into a book. A future article will deal with caring for old photos.) Keep a record of your work by indexing surnames on cards; record oral history and anecdotes in a logbook.

After family histories have been gathered, town or county records can be requested, usually at the court house. Town or county records can be used to verify or follow up on information provided by relatives. Be sure to use full names, dates and places when making requests in order to receive prompt service. Visit the local church, synagogue, etc., and ask to see their records. Talk to the oldest member of the community.