

Not so long ago an old sepia photo of my maternal grandmother, taken when she was a young woman, fell out of an overstuffed drawer. The photo must have been taken in the mid-1930s, because she was born in 1911. It was taken in a studio: My grandmother is standing upright in front of a canvas backdrop of leadlight windows and a small painting.

What struck me when I saw this photo was the amazing resemblance my twelve-year-old daughter has to my grandmother. They have the same stare, same nose, same mouth. It was as if I could suddenly see my daughter in her twenties.

For many people, an interest in family history often begins with discovering such a picture. Perhaps you're browsing faded photo albums, reading your grandparents' old letters or travel diaries and want to know more. Or maybe you have heard lots of extraordinary stories that have been passed down in the family or you're wearing a piece of jewelry that's been handed down from generation to generation.

You have some information, but pieces are missing and you want to fill the gaps. One way to do this is to make a family tree. Dutch author and gynealogy expert Pyter Wagenaar says that, if you are asking your family members more questions than they can answer, it might be time to start playing detective and delving into municipal and regional archives to find information. That's where you can trace family ties, sometimes going back hundreds of years.

THE FAMILY TREE AS A STEPPING STONE

Why would you go to all that trouble to research your family history? For one thing, it can be quite fun. Maybe you have a general interest in history anyway and you're curious about the role that your ancestors played in it. According to Dutch historian Johan

Huizinga, "History is the spiritual form in which a culture becomes aware of its past." Mapping out your family tree gives you insight into your past, and allows you to trace the route your family followed in recent centuries which led to you.

Have family members perhaps had the same profession as you have now? Or maybe they did or stood up for something that you are interested in now? Learning about your ancestors also presents an ideal opportunity to strike up a different sort of conversation with your parents, uncles, aunts and perhaps also your grandparents. These talks are often valuable in that you can learn things that you would never otherwise know.

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Tracking down the important names and dates from your past and trying to go back in time as far as possible is exciting, Wagenaar says, but it's even more exciting to see these details as a stepping stone to writing a family history. Ultimately, names and dates are just bare facts, but true discovery is more about what you come across on the way, because you can use that to weave a story that brings those facts to life. For example, there are the two envelopes crammed full of family documents my >



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father gave me when I told him I was writing this article. One document was a death certificate for my paternal grandmother, whom I'd never known. Such tangible evidence as that piece of paper made the story I already knew somehow more intense. My granny had died of tuberculosis during the war, and I now know she passed away on the day before summer began: June 21. After she died, my father had to go to an orphanage because my granddad couldn't care for twelve children on his own. Because her age at death was handwritten in full, it felt to me that she was even younger than she really was: only "forty-two years old."

TIPS

- * Keep notes of anything you find and where; then you can always go back to look something up or add to what you've already found.
- * Keep track of where and when you find nothing (to avoid duplication).
- * Music can be a good way to get people talking. Dutch writer and journalist Karin Sitalsing asked her aunts what kind of music they used to dance to when they went out. "Those were wonderful chats that really brought that period back to life, for them too," she says. "Sometimes, while writing, I'd put on some music from that era, and it would put me in the right frame of mind."

OLD NEWSPAPERS AND LETTERS

Dutch writer and journalist Karin Sitalsing wrote a book about the history of her great-great-greatgrandfather, who was one of a group of Dutch settlers-called Boeroes-that left the Netherlands in the mid-19th century to colonize Suriname. Describing her family history made Karin feel not only more connected to her mother's cousins, whom she started off looking for in Suriname, but also with her mother, "For example, when I called my mom for the umpteenth time in just a few days, she was already laughing in anticipation," Sitalsing says, "because I always came back to the question: 'Yeah, mom, but what really happened?' My mom told me so many things, even simple ones like what my grandmother's house looked like; things that made me wonder why I didn't already know them before that moment."

Sitalsing was also able to share new things with her mother. "I'd suddenly pop over with her grandfather's birth certificate," she says. "And for the first time we talked in real detail about how it was for her to come to the Netherlands. I'd never really asked her about that."

Sitalsing's family tree had already been traced to a large extent, so she dived into the archives mainly to find details about the lives of her family members. "I was running around like a headless chicken and came across lots of things that I couldn't use in my book, but that were still very interesting," she says. "I browsed through old newspapers and came across letters from my great-great-great-grandfather. There is so much to find on the Internet, but holding an actual baptism certificate in your hand is way better. While writing my book I often felt that my grandparents were there with me at my desk, and I had this feeling that I would miss them when the book was finshed."





FORGOTTEN TALES

The resemblance between my grandmother and daughter that I noticed in the photo has awakened something in me. What do I really know about her mother, my great-grandmother? Does my daughter look like her, too? And even though my father has always told us a lot about his happy childhood in the orphanage, I actually know nothing about his parents' own families. Maybe that will be a good project for this winter: To make my own family tree and visit my parents often to hear all the stories about the past that they still remember.

WANT TO READ MORE?

- ☑ "Who Do You Think You Are?
 Encyclopedia of Genealogy: The
 Definitive Reference Guide to Tracing
 Your Family History", by Nick Barratt
 (Harper Collins, 2008)
- M "Advanced Genealogy Research Techniques", by George Morgan and Drew Smith (McGraw-Hill Education, 2013)

DIY Your Own Family Tree

These tips can help you on your way.

1. WHERE TO START?

One of the basic rules of genealogy is to work ackward in time, step by step. Start with yourself and then move on to your parents, grandparents and great-grandparents.

*Collect the **primary data** about your family: full names; dates of birth, marriage and death; and occupational data. Ask your parents about the details, and explore their attic to see if you can find any old birth announcements, bereavement cards or marriage certificates. Ask the family if anyone else has ever started a family tree. *Supplement this info with **secondary data**: education, property, hobbies and so on. Add photographs and family stories, and then you'll have a mini biography of each family member. *While you're collecting, you'll soon see how quickly the information mounts up, so first consider which part of the family you want to investigate. You can do this in several ways:

- **A. Ancestors:** Again, working backward in time, collect data on your two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, sixteen great-great-grandparents and so on.
- **B. Kinship lines:** Here, you only focus on the straight line from your father (patrilineal) or mother (matrilineal), rather than on all your ancestors. For example, if you are interested in finding out the origin of your surname, follow the straight male line (your father, your father's father, his father and so on).
- **C. Descendants:** From your oldest known ancestor onward, follow all the descendants in the male and female lines (i.e., from past to present).

2. STORIES AND ARCHIVE RESEARCH

Once you have collected the family data, it's time to add personal stories. "My first priority was to talk to older family members, because they won't be around for as long," says Karin Sitalsing. "When I went to Suriname, I took pictures with me to help trigger people's memories and it really worked; I was told so many stories."

Once you've collected your stories, start delving into the archives. Exploring paper documents always feels like a process of discovery. Visit your local government office and ask where you can find the municipal archives. Data on your most recent family members should be there—birth, death, marriage, legal records. How far you'll be able to go back in time will depend on how much your family has moved throughout the generations. It's simpler, of course, if your family has stayed in one place for centuries, but if they've moved around a lot, the most recent local government office is the best place to start.

What do you need to search the civil registry? Surnames at the very least, but preferably also birth and marriage dates, to ensure you start your research with the correct ancestor.

How do you go on from there? Start with the names of your grandparents, for example.

3. SEARCHING ONLINE

The most popular international online search tool for exploring family trees is ancestry.com, a subscriber service that allows you to explore family records from all over the world. While not cheap, it's fairly

comprehensive and easy to use. It will supply you with birth, death, marriage, census and military records; documents from international immigration, such as passenger lists and border crossings; and even relevant newspaper clippings. The website also offers opportunities to explore your ancestral DNA, to create printable family trees online and to discover surname meanings. (Please note: The homepage relates to the US, but if you scroll down to the bottom righthand side, you can change country search to find websites for other countries, as well as related websites for similar search tools.)

Worldvitalrecords.com is a more straightforward search tool that allows you to input names, birth dates and other known data into a search engine and explore results in 44 countries worldwide, including China, Turkey Jamaica and the Congo. There's more data available for the larger countries, such as the US and UK, but you can usually at least search the "My Heritage Family Tree" section to find existing family trees that might be connected to yours—this part, however, is only available with a subscription.

4. FILLING IN YOUR FAMILY HISTORY

Birth dates, places of residence and professions are often all you know about your ancestors. To bring their history to life a little more, imagine how they lived and what their homes or towns looked like. You can do this by consulting history books and atlases; but don't just look through national history, include the story of a village, town or region, too.

"Read books about the daily lives of your ancestors. Even if it's only tiny details, these will help you see your family walking around at that time," suggests Sitalsing. "Another good idea is to collect photos, drawings, paintings and postcards from that era to discover, for example, what people were wearing in those days.



MORE USEFUL BOOKS'

* "Family Tree Memory Keeper: Your Workbook for Family History, Stories and Genealogy", by Allison Dolan and Diane Haddad (2013)

A nice place to pull together information, this workbook helps you think about how to complete the whole family picture. In addition to places to jot down basic genealogy data, it provides space to note special family memories, traditions, newsworthy moments, important dates, family migrations and immigrations, and even old recipes.

* "The Family Tree Problem Solver: Tried-and-True Tactics for Tracing Elusive Ancestors", by Marsha Hoffman Rising (2011)

Especially helpful for American history, this book will help you in the more advanced stages of geneological research, particularly when you hit a dead end and can't seem to find out anymore information about a certain family member or a whole family line.

* Both published by Family Tree Books

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