Preserving the past for the future

by Mrs. Paul (Virginia) Barden

Or more specifically: Preserving your past for your nephew's future, or your great-grandson's future. You think yours was a hum-drum past, not worth noting? That nobody's interested in it? Just your being here today indicates your interest in preservation of the past; And each of you represents one part of the mosaic of your family. You wouldn't deliberately discard one piece of a jigsaw puzzle that had your name on, would you?

Maybe your role in this family history preservation includes genealogy, but not necessarily so. We'll mention that genealogy question first and direct you to the specifics to follow if it interests you. No obligation.

For the last ten or fifteen years genealogy has been America's fastest growing hobby. Alex Haley's book Roots came along on the first wave of this tide but did not create it. Some of these amateur genealogists belong to genealogy clubs; some go on organized tours to Salt Lake City and to London; some unfortunately put a quarter in the parking meter, walk into the library and say, "I've got an hour. Show me everything you've got on my great-grandfather, Ebenezer Baker. Or maybe his name was Alonzo Baker. I never was any good at names."

Some of this country's best genealogists are men. If a man is hit by the desire to track down genealogical records, he goes at it with almost religious zeal. Usually men bring with them certain attributes that give them an advantage; they usually have abilities or training that enables them to sift ideas, to sort mentally the grain from the chaff, and to drop immediately the unproductive material. Usually a man does not surround himself with genealogical clutter.

A man finds the marriage of genealogy and computers quicker and easier than a woman does. Men don't have to ask somebody else for the use of the car.
Men don't have to stop in mid-page to make tuna fish sandwiches all round.

So a lot of people are digging into their own family backgrounds; a lot of them are using their summer vacations to go back to places where ancestors put down roots or just passed through.

As more people are asking more questions, the librarians in the local historical societies and the village libraries and the town clerks and the keepers of public records have a more difficult job. In spite of what researchers might like to think, town clerks and county judges are not elected to concern themselves with genealogy. The Surrogate judge has charge of wills, administration of estates, guardianship matters, much of which is a matter of public record but you have to do your own searching, and the town clerks have the responsibility for recording births, deaths, marriages, but also for selling hunting and fishing licenses, dog licenses, and other frivolous matters. So if you need to lay hands on grandpa's death certificate, you have to learn to locate it and then how to make proper request for it. In New York State those records are not open to the public to search through the books.

Genealogy isn't what it used to be, praise be. About a hundred years ago, there was a great interest in genealogy, following the centennial of the country. Many "mug books" were printed, county histories with a large section of flowery biographical sketches, often complemented by an engraving of the pompous, bewhiskered subject. These books were usually sold by subscription and people contributed to the cost of publication and of course contributed the material for publication. You'll find biographical histories today in the libraries and historical societies and in private collections, each a collection of dozens of local citizens, all affluent, all self-made, thus relieving the Almighty of a mighty responsibility, all righteous church-goers,
all devoted family men. There's not a blemish recorded, and that's the way people of the era wanted their relatives. Their memories were selective and their tales of their beginnings may have been less than accurate. If your great-grandfather is in one of these books, check yourself for accuracy. First and second generations were often reluctant to admit that their parents were transplants to this country.

Also making their appearance around the turn of the century were family genealogies done by spinster school teachers and elderly preachers spending their summer vacations "cousining" and writing down the who and the where by comparing notes with family members. Some of it was right, some of it was wrong, some of it was missing. These books, found in some libraries and many private collections today, should be stamped "Use with Care" but they are helpful to use for clues for further research.

Genealogy at that time encouraged a search for nobility and it was an era of famous name dropping. It was the beginning of DAR, in 1890, and of Colonial Dames. Many people wanted to discover descent from an officer of the Revolution, or to go back to William the Conqueror, or to Charlemagne, and the hog reeves and the fence viewers and the private soldiers of the Revolution had to wait to be discovered until the gentry got out of the way.

DAR wasn't careful about checking records until 1937, but now they pride themselves, and rightly so, on the scholarly research that goes into checking application papers. They have established a fine genealogical library in Washington, open to the public, and other lineage societies too offer the use of the records they have amassed.

In New York State we have one of the best and one of the worst systems for genealogical searching. The best is that New York is the only state with state-mandated historians. Begun in 1919, there is a County Historian for each county, and within the county, there is a historian for each township and municipality. Now, not always does
does one of these historians do genealogy, but most will at least point you in the right direction to find someone to help you.

And the worst phase of searching in New York State is the law governing use of local records. Since 1880 it has been mandatory to file births, deaths, marriages with the Town Clerk, but those are closed records, obtained only with difficulty and expense.

One thing I'm asked occasionally is "What do you know about Beatrice Bailey?" Certainly some of have received ads in the mail with an offer to buy a genealogy of your family for between $27 and $36, from Beatrice Bailey or Sharon Taylor. Sharon includes her photograph in her ad, she's sitting at her desk holding an imposing volume with a large benign dog at her feet. Homey and harmless. Beware. Those books which have trapped so many are only lists of names, your surname, from telephone books. So if you, Mr. Beadle, answer the ad with your check for $36, you will receive a book listing other people named Beadle taken from telephone books. Which is fine if you really want a list of names like yours.

If doing genealogy interests you and you need help and encouragement, stop at the McClurg Mansion on Tuesday afternoons and see Miss Crocker in the new genealogy room. You can join Western New York Genealogy Society, whose office is in Hamburg; you can sign up for the seminar in Jamestown on Saturday, September 15 at Jamestown Community College, sponsored by the Chautauqua County Genealogical Society. This is an all-day seminar called "Who do you think you are?"
Genealogical research isn't everybody's dish of tea, nor should it be. If somebody else is carrying that ball, and one genealogist per family per generation is enough, if you'd rather be playing golf, then by all means leave this for somebody else. But there are a couple of aspects of this preserving the past that you really should contribute for the future.

1. You might encourage, yea, promote, a family reunion. Reunions are extremely valuable in keeping alive the history and the interest of some particular family. And then please, see that a copy of the minutes of the reunions are given to this historical society.

2. Who has custody of those old albums of photographs? Oh, you do! Well, those pictures aren't identified, are they? Get busy. Write in pencil on the back, close to the edge, pencil because it doesn't fade as ink does, and because it doesn't cause an impression to come through to the right side. If you have the only known photograph of great-grandmother and the house she grew up in, have the picture copied. Put the negative of the copy in an envelope, properly marked on the outside, put it in a safe place, but have enough copies made, small ones, but copies to share with those who share your heritage.

3. Whatever memories you have of your childhood, of your growing-up years, of your family and neighborhood, those memories are unique. The particular slant that your ray of light puts on them is different from somebody else's. Even if you're absolutely the end of the line, and few of us are, somebody somewhere will rise up and call you blessed if you write down things you remember.
Our neighbors in Cassadaga, John and Ruth Smith, have done just that with their book, *The Way we Heard it, Stories to Tell your Grandchildren*, but you don't have to write a book for publication, just write in pencil in a little notebook about the things you remember, but *write*.

Do you have a sister, a cousin, a friend who shared some of your growing-up experiences? Invite her to spend a week with you and nudge each other with "Do you remember?" and then write it down.

What do you know that nobody else knows? Did you overhear a conversation while you were growing up that you weren't supposed to hear, which you never forgot, which you never told anyone? A bit of family gossip, a divorce, or lack of one, an 'adopted' child whose origins were never mentioned?

Would it really harm anyone now if you told your granddaughter about it? You find it difficult to talk about such things? Well, write it down.

Begin a journal, not a diary, a journal of things you remember and your feelings about some of those things. Handwritten on ruled paper is fine, but just make sure that somebody else will one day have access to it. No sense in writing it down if the first one to find it will toss it on the bonfire.

What do you remember?

I remember my first teacher who was as old as Ausable Chasm; she had wattles that shook when she was angry. While our learning was structured, it was flexible, swaying with the weather. I remember a heavy snowstorm that came on in the middle of the day, and instead of worrying about how we'd ever get home, we shelved our arithmetic books and memorized a poem. Not only memorized, but at seven I learned the words Chanticleer, Carrara, and gloaming.
The snow had begun in the gloaming
And busily all the night
Had been filling field and highway
With a silence deep and white

And one day in September we picked a couple of gnarly apples off
the old tree and cut them open to find that the pattern of the seed pods
was the same shape as last spring's blossom had been.

I remember how that same teacher was the possible cause of my losing
a prize of greater value than my imagination could envision. An uncle
had offered my sister and me a prize of five dollars to whichever of us
could learn first the entire poem "The Night Before Christmas."
Being a year older, I expected to learn it faster and more accurately than
Jane did. She used the book found in the attic; I used the book provided
by our teacher. We finished about the same time and when he came to visit,
we recited for him on the same day.

I lost. The book which I had used was missing a page. Our teacher
had removed a whole page, the page that said, "His little round belly
shook / Like a bowlful of jelly." Removed that page because nice people
don't use that word. It was many years later that someone articulated
my cynicism: Nice guys finish last.

What do you remember?

My sister has started writing down things we remember hearing people
say. Our maternal grandmother who had twelve children said to say,
"You've got to winter and summer with a man to get to know him."

One grandfather would allow only one child at a time in his garden
to help pick up potatoes. He'd say, "One boy, one boy / Two boys, half
a boy / Three boys, no boy at all."
Mother used to say, "If people don't like my gate, they don't need to
swing on it. And "No matter how tall your father was, you've got to
do your own growing." And "A dog that'll bring a bone will carry one."
Our father used to say, "More than one woman with a guilty conscience would soak her feet in a pan of hot water and drink a bottle of gin." And "It's just as handy as a pocket in your shirt, or "Just as smooth as a school marm's ankle." About the jug of hard cider among the ice-cutting tools on the pond in mid-winter, he'd say, "Just as good as an extra man."

What do you remember? Did your grandmother say she was just going to throw the orts to the hens? Or cast down someone in the neighborhood with "Well, she's no better than she should be!"

What do you remember?

I remember the immigrant Jew who came through the country buying veal calves, butter, chickens, and the time he brought the rabbi with his special knife and I watched him slaughter the calf so it would be kosher. I remember the rag picker who came through every spring.

What do you remember? Write it down.

Did your grandmother wear two aprons, so that if someone caught her by surprise, she could whip off the outside one and have a fresh white one to face the caller with?

Do you remember trailing arbutus and whippoorwills and fringed blue gentians? Did your grandmother have a camphor bottle and your grandpa a bottle of bitters? Do you remember the men who mowed the roadsides using a scythe, whetstone in hip pocket, striped galluses over light blue chambray shirts? black footeel...?

Do you remember that women wore teddies and men wore BVD's? If you ever found out what those three letters stand for, share the secret with me.

Do you remember the taste of Premier salad dressing?

Do you remember that there was no shortcut to taking cod liver oil only with a spoon from a disgusting bottle and the aftertaste lingered all day?
Do you remember how your dad put gas in the Model-T Ford? Everybody out of the front seat, remove the seat cushion, use a ruler to measure the gas in the tank under the driver's seat, crank the gas pump by hand.

Do you remember Harvest Home Sunday in the little country church? The organist pumped away at the little organ, her pompadour unwashed and bouncing importantly, her falsetto voice leading the hymn, Bringing in the Sheaves. And people from each family processed to the altar rail with samples of the Lord's bounty, a six-quart basket of brown eggs, two shocks of corn, a huge Hubbard squash, a couple of pumpkins, and always placed in the center, a crate of Rhode Island Red roosters who sounded the antiphony throughout the rest of the service. All these representatives of the year's crops to be blessed and then carried to the minister's house.

Remember? Well, write it down.

Our grandchildren deserve to know what my mother said when I told her I was going to get married. My parents didn't know Paul and when I went home and said that I was going to get married, Mother said, "Just remember, young lady, the best of them are none too good." She was right too. I know I've got the best there is.

And I'll end with a family legend of a family scandal, but perhaps my generation found it more scandalous than the principals did. Here they are: my grandparents, Hiram and Betsey, and the hired girl Amy Ann. The older I get, the more I think Grandma Betsey looks downright smug in this picture, rather than the wronged wife. This is the way I've set down the story for our grandchildren as my father reported it to me.
Grandpa Hi took a broad view of the uses of a "hired girl." Amy Ann Edmonds joined the Washburn household in 1860 when she was fifteen, and by day she peeled potatoes and washed for the family, easing the load of Great-grandma Betsey with a five-year-old (my grandfather, John) and the ill ten-year-old Josephine who would live another two years.

For many years Hiram shared Amy Ann's bed in the back bedroom off the kitchen, and no hint of Grandma Betsey's attitude toward the arrangement has come down to us. Hiram's blood cooled with the years, but to the end he maintained a loyal responsibility for Amy Ann. Even he found her contentious and not always pleasant in the household, but he'd always say, "I ruined her, and I'll take care of her."

In his will Hiram named as co-executors his son John and Amy Ann, and he bequeathed her a four-acre wood-lot and a thousand dollars. In the summer of 1894 Hiram fell from a load of hay and broke his arm; a few days later he died from pneumonia.

Sensing the axe about to fall on her secure position, Ann used her inherited money to buy a small house at Dimick's Corners, a mile away from home she had known for thirty years. She kept in touch with the family through my father as he went to and from the little red school house at her very back door. Often as he left school, she would raise the pantry window and call, "Ernie, want a cookie?"

When Ann had lived there alone for probably ten years, my grandfather, John, met her on the road one day, and said with malicious intent, "Amy Ann, why don't you get married?"

Her only answer was, "My Lord, John, who'd have me?"

And he said, "Why, Pratt would."

Known always by his last name, Forrest Pratt was the current hired man, a good fifteen years younger than Ann. Pitching hay into the hot
mow, John lay the proposition open for conversation, mostly for the amusement of the other men forking hay and listening.

"Pratt, why don't you go call on Amy Ann? She's got a nice little house, she'd make a nice wife for you."

Pratt's immediate response was, "Do you suppose she'd have me?" and just as immediately, John said, "Let's go see."

The haying continued that afternoon with two fewer workers as John and Pratt stashed their pitch forks and walked the mile to Dimick's Corners. John went alone into Ann's neat kitchen and said, "Pratt's come to call."

Flustered, Ann said, "Why, John, what'll I do?" and received the practical answer, "Go put on your best dress and invite him into the front room."

Having staged his practical joke, John walked out and went back to resume his haying.

After supper Pratt returned to the Washburn household and announced, "Me and Amy Ann's engaged."

And a comfortable pair they were, too, until the end of their days in the little white house at Dimick's Corners. Today they lie buried side by side, Forrest Pratt, Any Ann Edmonds Pratt, Hiram Washburn, Betsey Gamble Washburn, all sharing the plot first broken for the twelve-year old Josephine.

There, such is the drift of my remembering.

Go thou and do likewise.