

Finding Family – April 2017

Confessions of a Genealogist's Spouse

By Michael Spencer Herzog

Hi. My name is Michael and I am married to a serious genealogist. I remember, years ago, asking my wife Mary how she would know when she was done assembling her genealogy. "That's easy," she said. "You're never done." I thought that was a glib answer to a serious question but now forty years later I realize she spoke the truth and she's delighted that it's never done. The search goes on.

As a person only marginally interested in genealogy, I may be able to provide some perspective on this all-consuming passion for family history research.

Ten years ago on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of my high school graduation, we drove to St Louis for the reunion festivities and to make contact with the few cousins who still live in the area. We then took six weeks to drive back to California, following, more or less, the route Mary's mother and family traveled in the 'teens and 'twenties in their migration westward. Mary's mother kept a journal and later wrote an account of those years, including a great deal of detail about the persons places and things they encountered.

We visited almost every location mentioned in the journal and searched for houses, churches, and schools. We were able to find many of the specific locations and take photos. In addition, we visited county court houses and record offices and cemeteries. Given a few names to look for, I became quite good at walking cemetery rows and finding grave markers. Many of the court houses had security concerns so I would find a comfortable bench outside to sit and wait. Most court houses, especially in the smaller towns, provided benches on the town square for loafers like me to sit and observe the passing parade. I have a battery-powered word processor to record my observations, books to read, blank paper for notes — all I need to happily pass the time.

All the while, Mary was indoors searching through records of vital statistics, property records, and city directories looking for traces of her family. In some cases they were in a particular location too short a time to have left a trail, but in others there were definite signs and hints to why they had moved on.

Libraries are another research information resource and very friendly to the non-researcher. I spent many pleasant hours in libraries reading my books or theirs and seeing how the people of the town went about the business of living there.

Often hours spent in searching come to nothing but sometimes there is major prize to be had. In one small museum in Kansas in a town the family lived in for only a year, Mary discovered a class photo showing her mother in junior high school. Mary was able to take a photo of the photo for her records and give the museum some corrections to the information on the caption.

Finding Family – April 2017

Confessions of a Genealogist's Spouse

By Michael Spencer Herzog

There have been many voyages of family history discovery around the United States and to England and the Azores. I enjoy it all in the unstructured time it allows us together. I still honestly confess that I do not care about genealogy but I can make myself useful to one who does.

And what sort of person loves the research process? I can only offer one example, but I'm sure she is not unique in tell-tale characteristics. Mary is a puzzle person. As a reward for finishing a project she'll happily sit down with a 1000-piece jigsaw puzzle. And for dessert she'll look in the back of a magazine for a word puzzle to solve.

And when she hits a dead end on researching a particular family line she'll switch to a different branch for a while or just help someone else with their research. It's the thrill of the chase as much as the results that are exciting.

As a genealogist's spouse I look forward to more of the same, a trip east in May and perhaps another visit to the family history mecca in Salt Lake City. The secret to happiness, I have found, is being able to make a good time out of the simplest raw materials at hand. Being the tag-along spouse provides all the materials I need to be happy and satisfied, and that's my confession.