

"DOWN HOME" HISTORY: TURNING
STUDENTS ON TO HISTORY WITH THE FAMILY HISTORY PAPER

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This presentation offers one answer to the perennial question that history teachers ask: "How do you get young people interested in history?" How do you cause youth whose primary interests seem to be money or the opposite sex to turn on to history?

An answer that I propose is one which has worked for me in the past five years - the family history paper. Family history is one unifying thread that runs through every student's life. All students have a family past that belongs uniquely to them, yet makes them part of a tradition that goes beyond themselves and their time. Requiring students to trace their family history allows them to discover their tradition .

Conventional history written before the 1950's usually dealt with the rich and powerful -- presidents, generals, kings and such -- who were white males. During the 1960's, the people of the United States observed numerous "rights" movements. These focused historians' attention on other groups. And they began to include such groups in their historical accounts. One of the natural outcomes of this trend was to use the family as an organizing principle, and family histories became popular. In 1977, after millions viewed the television series, Roots, writing family history became a passion for many.

I wanted to channel such enthusiasm for family history into my survey courses. In 1981, I bought Allan J. Lichtman's, Your Family History. Lichtman led me to introduce an abbreviated family history assignment that a student could research and write during a ten-week quarter. Because I chose to assign this paper in United States History classes, I asked that students only trace their family's past in this country, unless they were recent immigrants. Since a ninth generation citizen, like some students could be, comes from 256 different family lines, I obviously had to limit the number of lines a student could cover. Because I wanted to involve my charges' parents in the paper, I decided to require that only two family lines be covered -- one on their father's side and one on their mother's.

So that students could keep their paper simple, I asked that they use one family name from each parents' lineage. This required them to trace their heritage through males. Also, I requested that they limit themselves to direct lines and not get

involved with brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and cousins in each generation unless those relatives are or were especially famous or interesting personages. I specified a required length of from three to ten typed pages which seemed to work well. Anyone who interviewed their parents and included his own life could meet this last requirement easily.

To summarize, then, the limits I placed on the paper were these: trace two lines only -- one on the father's side and one on the mother's side, sticking with one family name in each line; treat only direct descendants; cover the family since its coming to America; make the paper from 3-10 typed pages in length.

You may be thinking, "How do I grade such a paper?" If one student can trace all the way back to 13th century England (as one of mine named Buckingham could do) and another student can go no further back than his grandparents, how do you grade them fairly? Well, I grade according to how a student writes the paper -- whether it is clear, whether the characters are kept straight, and whether it is understandable. To insure that students interview their parents and grandparents, I grade them on whether or not they answer, in their narrative, most of a list of questions I give them. (See questions at end of this article.) Of course, there are other sources students should use beside family members' memories -- census records, diaries, letters, etc.. In doing this assignment, I think students become detectives piecing together ideas from many sources, and, of course, they must do the work of the historian by putting all their information together into a coherent story. They become a historian of their family; they learn by doing.

Another word about grading. Rating these papers is not as difficult as grading essay exams. Each one is different and there is usually a surprise or an interesting idea in each. For example, one student wrote that during the depression his family ate robins. They cooked them for three days to tenderize them he said, but "even the gravy was tough." And you have to wonder about the naive college freshman who wrote, "All my life I have wondered how did I come to exist in the world." One student claimed, "As for my father's side of the family, births, deaths and marriages are unknown." Well, even if that were true of his family, there are plenty of other families where births, deaths, and marriages were not unknown. Then there was the husband who had two sisters as wives in the same house at the same time. He had three children by one and seven by the other. He pressed his luck, though, for while trying to seduce his mother-in-law, he was killed by his father-in-law.

Students learn about irony as they trace their ancestral history. One family had a legend about the O'Neals settling Ireland. The heads of the O'Neal clan and another clan supposedly met somewhere offshore to decide who would rule the

land they planned to claim the next day. They agreed that whoever first touched land with his hand would rule. On the next day, the head of the O'Neals saw that the other clan leader was about to win the race. To prevent that, he drew his sword, cut off his own hand and threw it onto shore. In that manner, he became the ruler. Another of my charges told how his grandmother worked hard for many years to be included in Cincinatti's Blue Book, a list of 400 socially prominent families. She finally made it just after she passed away.

Some eras seem to generate more family stories than others. For example, there are numerous Civil War vignettes in the papers. One student told of an ancestor who was wounded when a bullet hit a dime in his pocket sending it through one leg and into the other. The soldier saved the dime, and the family has guarded it closely to this day. Another family owns a prized quilt from the period. The mother who made the bed cover promised it to her younger son if his elder brother failed to return from the war. The older son did not survive, but no family member has ever used that quilt.

Enough of these stories. What have students said about the papers in their course evaluations? As you might expect, opinions run the gamut from opposition to support. One individual thought family history not pertinent to the discipline. I obviously failed with him. A second complained because I corrected grammar, a task he thought should be reserved for English papers. Another student objected since they considered such a paper too personal, while still another termed it "not anybody's else's business." It should be noted that I try to deal with the question of invasion of privacy in my initial instruction session. I point out that I will be the only person to see their paper and that I read so many I cannot remember one from another.

The overwhelming majority of my charges have only good things to say about the family history assignment. One especially liked the personal aspect of the project. Upon investigation, I found that this paper has actually brought some family members into closer relationships. One female student noted that the paper had brought her closer to her divorced father and given her the chance to finally meet a half-brother. Another young woman with a tear in her eye told me that the paper had given her a reason to get in touch with the father who abandoned her and her mother ten years earlier. The father visited her and they were friends again. A young man described what happened to him more bluntly: "This paper helped tighten some family knots." He continued: "My curiosity has been whetted. I thank you, for founding a worthwhile hobby for me." Another charge had a similar goal. He planned to set aside some time the next summer to investigate his family more fully. Several vowed to continue tracing their ancestors. Here is one

comment I prize: "I have broadened my horizons in a variety of ways by doing this paper." One student through the paper developed empathy for his forbears: "I knew," he said, "that life for my grandfather was not easy, but I never knew how hard it was until I did this paper." Yet another person was inspired to a greater sense of family pride. He hoped he could live his life so that his grandchildren would be as proud of him as he was of his ancestors. One coed admitted: "It has been an experience. I would never have done it on my own, though, so I am glad someone made me do this." One individual evidenced his enthusiasm for the project by demanding that every student be required to write a family history. Even that was not extreme enough for one student who appealed to my department head to make me keep requiring the paper.

Other than arousing some student excitement about their past and importing a sense of irony, there are additional benefits derived from the family history paper. First, students almost always encounter a lack of records. As a result, they see the importance of documenting family developments and preserving heirlooms. Second, this assignment sometimes piques the interest of other family members and they continue the project. Some students, through interviewing relatives and gathering information, gain a better understanding of who they are and why they have evolved to that point. For others, writing a family history paper can be a therapeutic exercise. Finally, I think the main benefit derived from this type project is students learn that they can ignore or criticize their roots, but that they can never change or destroy them. Peoples' heritage remains regardless of what they become or where they go, so the healthiest attitude is to seek an understanding of it.

Practicing psychiatrists say that the individual who "understands the patterns of thinking and feeling that emerge over generations of family history is likely to function better as a secure, responsible, self-directed person." At Georgetown University Medical School, students in psychiatric training under Dr. Murray Bowen, a pioneer in family therapy, are given the assignment of writing their own family histories. After dealing with family problems over many years, Dr. Bowen stated that "it became increasingly impossible to see a single person without seeing his total family sitting like phantoms alongside him." So as I've read my student's papers I've met some phantoms: A boy named Ruby, a girl named Dimple, and others more famous -- Lee, Grant, Washington, Andrew Jackson, "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman, and, amazingly, Ngo Dinh Diem. In my view, one of the favors we historians can do for our students is to start them on their way to a better understanding of their "phantoms" and thus of themselves. And, we can always hope that this knowledge will steady them as they face life.

(Student Handout)

Guidelines for the Abbreviated Family History Paper

I hope this will be a paper you will want to save for your children and grandchildren. You probably will also want to give copies to your close kinspeople now.

You may use you own memory. You should sit down and interview your parents and grandparents separately. If some of these are dead, interview aunts, uncles, great aunts, and great uncles, and cousins or someone who has known family members.

The first question you will want to ask is if they have letters, pictures, diaries, wills, mementoes, etc. that will show you what the family was like in the past.

Then here are some sample questions. You don't have to use all of these but I expect you to use most. Of course you may think up questions of your own.

1. Ask for the date and place of birth, date and place of marriage and date and place and cause of death for each person in the line you are tracing. What age were they when they married? Where are they buried?
2. What country did the family come from? Why did they come?
3. Where did the family settle? Why?
4. Did they have trouble getting into the U.S.? Did the earlier settlers discriminate against them?
5. Did they move up in status and wealth in this country? What was their income, their wealth, their land holdings?
6. What does the family name mean? Has it been changed? Why?
7. Did they and do they presently have family reunions? Describe what goes on at a family reunion.
8. Do relatives visit often and stay in close contact?
9. Did family members spend much time with each other?
10. How were widows and orphans cared for by the family? How about the elderly?

11. What was the size of households?
12. How did they meet their spouses? (circumstances of the meeting)
13. Was the father or mother dominant or did they share the power?
14. Did the parents fight? Did brothers and sisters fight a lot?
15. What professions were the parents involved in? Did the son follow the father in his job?
16. How much education did they have? Where did they attend school? What were some important school achievements?
17. What religion were they?
18. What special achievements did they attain?
19. What skills did they have?
20. What recreations and hobbies did they have?
21. Are there any special family beliefs or myths? (Such as that the family was descended from kings or nobility)
22. What family traditions are there?
23. Does the family have any special proverbs that have been passed down on how to make it in life or how to have peace of mind?
24. What family heirlooms do you possess? Why are they valuable to you? What is their history?
25. Do you feel it is important to maintain the customs and traditions of your ancestors?
26. What were their political opinions? Did they vote or hold office?
27. How did they survive the Great Depression? What did they think of the New Deal? Of Franklin Roosevelt?
28. Did they have any strong feelings about other Presidents of their day?
29. Did they meet or know any famous people?
30. Did they witness any extraordinary events?

31. Did they survive any natural disasters like hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, etc.?
32. What were the major events in their lives?
33. What was their most vivid childhood memory?
34. When was their first paying job?
35. At what age did they begin dating? What were dates like when they were young?
36. How were they disciplined when they were children?
37. How did the Civil Rights Movement or the women's liberation movement affect your family?
38. How did the wars affect you and your family? WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, etc.?
39. Do you have ancestors that served in the military during any of our wars?
 - a) If you have an ancestor that fought in the Confederate Army in a Georgia unit you can write the Georgia Department of Archives and History, 330 Capitol Ave., Atlanta, GA 30334 to get his military service record. You need to tell them his name and county he is from and his unit if you know it. The whole contents will cost you \$1.50. Allow two weeks for reply.
 - b) If your ancestors fought for another southern state write to its archives using the above procedure.
 - c) If your ancestors fought for the North in the Civil War or in any other war or did military service before 1916 use a form that I will give you to write National Archives and Records Services, Military Archives Division, Washington, D.C. 20408. Give the veteran's full name, date of birth, branch of service, and approximate dates of service. Give their military service number if you know it.
 - d) If they were in service after 1916, you can get information about their military service by writing the National Personnel Records Center, 9700 Page Boulevard, St. Louis, Missouri 63132, ATTENTION: their Branch of Service. Give the above information in (c) as well as their Social Security number or military service number if they had one. You also need to ask the veteran or his next to kin for a letter of permission to see the contents of the file.

Other Sources

National Census Records on microfilm in the Library, for every 10th year since 1790. If you know the county that they lived in, you can find out at least the name and age and occupation and place of birth of each family member. If you are checking on an ancestor in another state, you'll need to go to a larger library for the census records after 1820.

The above should help you begin to answer questions like Who Am I? Where did I come from? How did I get to be as I am? Where am I headed?