

Collecting family history

Libraries offer resources to compile data, stories

By Jill Fuller

Before my grandfather died, I spent hours sitting on the living room couch next to his easy chair, a small, black tape recorder in my hand. We talked about his life — his childhood in Bulgaria, his escape to a refugee camp in Greece, his experiences as an immigrant in Chicago. He told me stories I had never heard before about his father, his baby sister, and even the river he loved to swim in as a child. Today, those recordings are some of my most cherished possessions, not only because they consist of family stories I will pass on to my own child, but because they evoke my own memories of the time I spent with my grandfather as he gave me the story of his life.

October is Family History Month, so I thought I would share some ideas and resources available to you from your local library so you can start collecting and sharing your own family stories. A great place to start is on AncestryLibrary, which has extensive collections of census records; birth, marriage, and death records; immigration records; military records; and more. Normally, AncestryLibrary is only available inside the library building, but because of the pandemic, you can search it from home until the end of December. Go to www.bridgeslibrarysystem.org/databases to find it; once you click on the link for AncestryLibrary, you only have to put in your library card number.

Official documents help you outline a person's history, but newspapers can provide details that let you sketch a picture of your ancestor's daily lives. Digital newspapers are a great place to start. With your library card, you can search newspapers in Wisconsin, including many in Waukesha and Jefferson counties, on the Archive of Wisconsin Newspapers. In fact, more than



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100 years of the Jefferson County Daily Union recently became available on the site. You can also search newspapers from across the country on Newspapers.com; access to both websites are available for free with your library card at www.bridgeslibrarysystem.org/databases.

Here are some other fun ideas to celebrate Family History Month:

Preserve family documents, photos, or videos through digitization. Several public libraries, including Mukwonago Community Library and Irvin L. Young Memorial Library in Whitewater, offer digitization services. Contact the library for more information.

Visit a family cemetery or search for family graves at Findagrave.com.

Host a virtual family reunion on Zoom and ask loved ones to share their family memories.

Learn about a family that isn't your own. Check out books or ebooks from the library on the immigrant experience, such as "The Distance Between Us" by Reyna Grande or "Americanah" by Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie. Learn more about slave genealogies with the Freedmen's Bureau Project or look up which indigenous nation's land you live on with the free Native Lands app. Ask a librarian for resources if you're unsure where to start.

No matter who your family was or where they came from, every family has a story. Find yours with the help of your library.

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