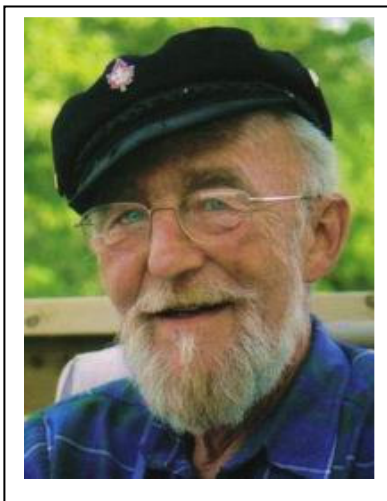


# The Family Historian

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## Getting Started



A number of people have asked how to get started with their family history research. Many of them have typed their family name into “Google” or some other search engine and have been inundated with thousands of hits that they don’t know what to do with. It can be fun to see how many hits your family name will generate but it’s not the best place to start.

The most effective place to start is with yourself, then work back to your parents, then grandparents, etc. The skeleton or supporting structure of a family history is made up of the names of people, their relationships to each other, and their ‘Vital Statistics’.

These vitals include the dates and places of birth, marriage (and divorce), and death. I feel that the location of these events is very important because it is easier to find vital dates if you know the place than it is to find the place if you only have a name and a date.

Furthermore, when interviewing people, they will more easily remember the places where events took place and often the date, if unknown, can be approximated from the place where it occurred.

Family historians will flesh out and clothe this genealogical skeleton with information on the individuals. What kind of people were they? What education did they have? What kind of work did they do? When did they move to or from somewhere and why? How did they amuse themselves? What was important in their lives? What did they look like? What did they achieve in life? How were they seen by others? What was life like for them?

The first line of attack in answering these and all the other questions you will have is interviewing your relatives. We will deal with interviewing techniques in a separate column but it is very important to get started as soon as possible. Every family historian I know bemoans the fact that he or she didn’t start earlier and that by the time they started a number of people who could have been very helpful had either died or become unreliable informants.

When I began my research in 1965, my mother and her parents had already died. Fortunately, her sister, my favorite aunt, had lived a good part of her adult life with my grandparents and was able to provide some help and to share some family folklore.

Interviewing is an art but, especially if you begin with people you already know well, you should be able to quickly develop your skills. Looking at photographs together is a good way to stimulate an informant’s memory and the photo can suggest questions that you can ask (where, who, when, why, etc.).

Some people send a tape recorder to an older relative so they can sit down and tell their stories. This may work for some people, but I have never heard of a case where it did. Your informant needs the stimulus of an interested listener, gentle guided questions, and the feedback of appropriate body language.

Many of your informants will be older people and will appreciate being treated respectfully. Don’t let yourself get impatient with their wandering from the point and try to avoid putting any pressure on them. You can also expect them to tire before you want them to and it would be a kindness to draw the interview or the interview part of your meeting with them to a close. It would be nicer to blame yourself, with a comment like “Wow, you have given me so much information, that it will take a while for me to assimilate all of it” rather than saying “You seem to be getting tired”, which really means “You are old and feeble”.

When you get home remember to clean up and date your notes, so that you will have a reference for the information in them.

Your local library will likely have books on researching genealogy and family history and they can be a great help. Library and Archives Canada also has an excellent booklet called *Researching Your Ancestors in Canada*. You can pick up a free copy at the reception desk in their building on Wellington Street in Ottawa.

Above all, there is no time like the present to get started and be prepared to enjoy yourself. Good hunting!