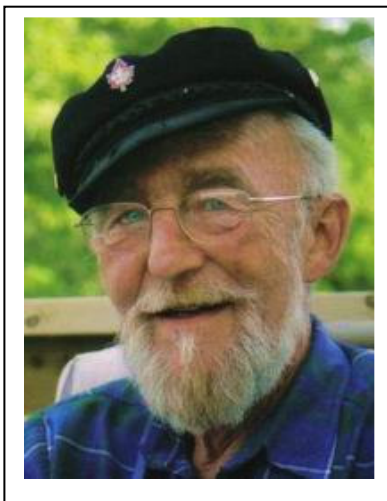


# The Family Historian

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Column #61

### Heirlooms as Evidence



Almost everyone keeps some 'stuff'. We have talked about photographs, medals, and family papers in previous columns but there is so much more that our ancestors have saved and may not yet have been thrown out.

Usually the big things go quickly. Furniture, paintings, closets full of clothes, find their way to the dump, to charitable organizations, church bazaars, etc. A few might have been saved by a relative, for whom they had sentimental value, and these are worth looking for. If the old family home is still in the family, then the possibility is much greater of finding things that will give us a little more insight into our ancestors.

Attics, basements, and outbuildings may have chests, trunks, and boxes of things that the family could not bear to part with. While little was thrown away in most early households, if an item was no longer needed as such, it would usually be recycled. If it was saved from recycling, that often meant that it had special meaning and, the poorer the family, the more special that meaning had to be.

There were other items of no apparent use. Locks of hair, ticket stubs from a theatre, a souvenir of the only trip they took, and other little things that brought back fond memories. These are known in the museum world as ephemera.

The only safe approach with all these heirlooms is to assume that they all have significance and that, despite their appearance, they are fragile. Approach the job as an archaeologist. Take your time. What has survived a hundred years might fall apart in an instant if you are not careful.

Deal with one container at a time and photograph and measure the container before opening it. Note its condition (rust, rot, mold, scratches, broken bits, etc.). Make sure you have a clear area to lay out the contents. The kitchen table won't do because it might have to be cleared quickly for supper. Then, one-by-one, remove the contents, providing support for the material, if necessary.

Most objects weaken with age, adverse storage conditions, and even the method of their manufacture. This 'inherent vice' is something to watch for all the time. Now you can examine, document, and photograph the item. If you are not sure what the item is, don't worry about it. Bring your photo and documentation to a museum and they will be happy to help you. Identifying 'whatzits' is a favorite activity of museum curators.

Conservation techniques for the heirlooms is beyond the scope of this particular column but, if there is interest, we can deal with it in later ones.

The next step is the 'interpretation' of what we have found. What do these things, and the way they were saved, tell us about our ancestors. Were they more sentimental than they appeared? Did they harbour secret dreams or ambitions? Is there any indication of what they did, or wanted to do, when they could afford a bit of time?

If you can match a dress to one in a photograph, then the size of it will give a better idea of the actual size of your ancestor. Is there insignia from a Lodge or Order that one belonged to?

Do they have mementos of their own parents and home in the old country? Challenge these items mercilessly to tell you everything they can.

Obviously this all involves an amount of conjecture and we have to be aware of that. Our big advantage is that we are looking at a lot of evidence. If the conjectures support each other, then we have a reasonable case and, perhaps, clues of where to look for further confirmation. If something doesn't really fit, it may be worthwhile to try to find out why.

Many years ago, when I was researching a biography of a French Canadian military officer, I found his uniform jacket in a museum in Montreal. I asked the curator how he knew that it had belonged to that person and he replied that the family had told him so when they gave it to the museum. I pointed out that the jacket was far too small for even me (136 pounds of solid skin and bone) and that the officer was a very large and barrel-chested man. However, it seems that the museum preferred not to let the truth spoil a good story.

Althea Douglas, an Ottawa based genealogist and historian, has written a very helpful book for anyone who has found or hopes to find 'treasures in the attic' It is available from the Ontario Genealogical Society and is called; *Help! I've Inherited an Attic Full of History*.

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