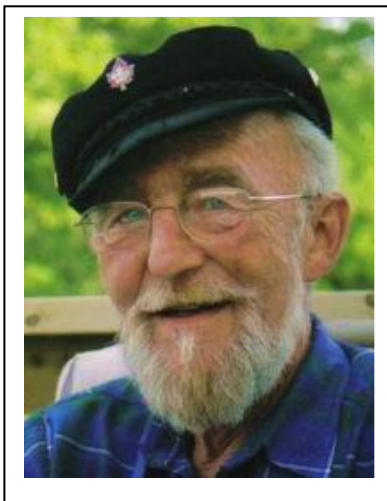


Family Papers Can Fill a Lot of Gaps



Family Historians spend a lot of time with public documents, censuses, church records, etc. but private family papers can be a real bonanza, if you can find them. Even people who couldn't read or write would sometimes have correspondence that others would write and read for them, especially about important events in their lives and they would sometimes keep copies of legal documents that affected them.

Family Bibles were often used as a repository for information on the births, marriages and deaths of the extended family and I understand that they are now a big item on E-Bay.

Many of the early settlers from Europe were unable to read or write but schools closely followed the clearing of the land and the literacy rate increased with an increase in the creation of written documents. But where are they?

The more prosperous members of the community and those with more education (merchants, professionals, clergymen) tended to have more interest in record keeping and perhaps a greater sense of posterity and many of their papers are available in archives and other repositories.

Most of us, however, come of poorer stock who had less education, time, and inclination for the development of family archives and many of their inadequately preserved papers have been lost or destroyed.

In my family it seems that generally the men kept the more formal and legal documents and one of the favorite storage places was the old-fashioned cigar box. Now, these cigar boxes were works of art compared to what we see today. They were made of solid wood, with dove-tailed corners and a metal sliding latch. I still have two of my grandfather's.

The women of the family tended to be the collectors and keepers of the more domestic family history but they had a serious problem of storage. They had no filing cabinets and precious little space for anything. One thing most of them had, though, was a cook book, often hand-written, and it was in some of these that I have found the letters, notes, obituaries, and other family memorabilia that was collected over time.

Other family repositories have been in prayer books and jewelry boxes, all things that were pretty much in her private domain. Even my mother, who had a lot more options for storing her papers, still used some of her mother's techniques and to this day I get a very warm feeling when, going through her material, I find these little treasures that she squirreled away.

The scrapbooks of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were also a form of archives. They are very important because one will often find notices of births, marriages, deaths, and other events of friends and neighbors, so it is worthwhile to check the local archives for scrapbooks maintained by others in your ancestor's community.

One very important consideration when one finds a stash of family papers is to resist the urge to organize them into some form of order. The archival principle of *respect des fonds* maintains that an order already exists and that it was imposed by the creator of the stash (or *fonds*). Something may be lost if that order is destroyed.

Try to look at the collection as a whole before focusing on the individual items in it. In some cases I have been able to date photographs and undated letters by their location in a fonds.

When all else fails, try to find out who got grandma's cook books.