



HEAR THEM SING!

SOCIAL HISTORY IN YOUR FAMILY NARRATIVE

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Tune Up: Gather Facts

Start your narrative by **collecting facts and documents** created by or about your ancestor. **Organize a simple timeline** to put their lives into perspective. Create the timeline based on the date of the record, the events in the record, where they lived, and any significant family or friends involved in the record. Next, **populate that simple timeline with any national or local events** that may have affected your ancestor's life. In the sample to the right, a simple timeline was created, then national events were added (in italics).

DATE	LOCATION	EVENT & RELATIONSHIPS
1917	Salt Lake County, UT	John born to Edward & Emily
1920	Salt Lake County, UT	census
1928	Salt Lake County, UT	brother died of Muscular Dystrophy
<i>1929</i>	<i>National</i>	<i>The Great Depression</i>
1931	Millcreek, SL County, UT	attended Granite High School
1933	Provo, UT	sister died of epilepsy
1934	Millcreek, SL County, UT	John heart attack at school
1934	Millcreek, SL County, UT	John graduated high school
1940	Salt Lake City, UT	married Mary
1941	Millcreek, SL County, UT	John's father died of stroke
1941	Millcreek, SL County, UT	John's son born, wife Mary died
<i>1941</i>	<i>National</i>	<i>Attack on Pearl Harbor; WWII</i>
1942	Millcreek, SL County, UT	John hospitalized for heart condition
1942	Millcreek, SL County, UT	John died, age 24

Theme Song: Pull out Personality

Including social history is about getting to know more about your ancestor's personality and environment. Go back through the documents, photos, and family stories to pull out details that may be interesting to expand on in your history and that you would like to research. Look for occupations, illnesses, anecdotes, musical preferences, personal politics, hobbies, school events, and more. Use this as a list to spark ideas and ask yourself questions. A sample is below.

PERSONALITY CLUES	RESEARCH IDEAS	SOURCE & TIME PERIOD
John was youngest and only surviving son; older brothers died of muscular dystrophy and sister of epilepsy	<i>What effect on the family's finances (medical expenses) and emotions at losing five children?</i>	Siblings' death certificates 1910-1928
John was musical – sang played guitar, & harmonica. Acted in church plays.	<i>What music was popular when he was a teen? Was radio affordable?</i>	Family stories & photos 1930-1940
John was 12 when the Great Depression hit.	<i>How did this affect his family's way of life and John's teenage years?</i>	National history 1929
John was in the engineering club at school and learned carpentry from his father	<i>What was the income of a local carpenter in that area?</i>	School scrapbook & family stories

Weave in Melody: Research General History

Just like genealogical research is about a specific person, social history research is about a specific idea, event, or area. Look for sources that can give details into the history of your ancestor.

- Newspapers for local flavor and mood
- Books on events like the Great Depression, immigration, or musical styles, etc.
- Websites about specific events, medicines, inventions, or fashion
- Local history books for customs, celebrations, and culture

Inferred Historical Context

General history is valuable for putting your ancestor their time period, but it is important to let the reader know when you are generalizing. Instead of “John was a carpenter who used these tools in the 1930s...,” use “Tools that carpenters like John most likely used in the 1930s were...” This is known as inferred historical context. Be careful to keep your story about the ancestor, not the history. Have you written a long, detailed description about flappers in the 1920s because Aunt Myrtle was a flapper or did you write a story about Aunt Myrtle being a flapper in the 1920s? There is a difference.

Harmonize: Research Specific History

Delve into the specifics about places your ancestor went or lived and events that shaped their lives. Specific social history research involves:

- Newspaper stories about your ancestor and community
- Scrapbooks, diaries, letters, school yearbooks, documents, and family stories
- Photos and maps of places your ancestor lived or frequented (school, church, town)
- Relative history of ancestor’s school teachers, employers, or friends

Hear Them Sing: Bring out their Voice

Bring together the story, interwoven with images, photos, and documents. Images keep the reader interested. Anecdotes make them laugh or pull at their hearts. **Combine in your narrative specific events in your ancestor’s life with inferred historical context** to help your reader empathize with the ancestor, his or her situation, challenges, and the social customs.

Idea: “The Hook”

Writing your ancestor’s history in chronological order is easiest to write and most easily understood. But at the beginnings of some chapters, try taking an interesting story or anecdote out of order to “hook” your reader with.

Narrative Voice

How will you “converse” with your readers? Choose a style combination and stick to it. Formal – Conversational – Simple – Poetic – Anecdotal – Infographic (relying more on images than narrative).

Active Voice vs. Passive Voice

Active voice writing keeps the reader involved; passive voice sentences can be laborious. Read about and practice writing in active voice (Bibliography 1 & 18).

Past Tense is Best

The worst thing a writer can do without realizing it is to constantly switch between past and present tense in their writing. Unless you are quoting directly, write your ancestor's story in the past tense.

Just Write!

Writing is a process, don't expect to have it perfect in the first draft. It will improve with each edition, but not if you don't start. Start by writing simply – turn your timeline into simple sentences, turn that into an outline for your story. Edit, research, re-write. Begin your writing as if you are just telling the story to a friend and edit and refine later.

Cite Your Sources

Take the time to cite all your sources, whether it be a census, vital record, photo, or your great-grandmother's eyeglasses that were part of your narrative conversation. If it's a fact, back it up with its source (see Bibliography 11 & 13). In family narrative writing, some prefer footnotes on each page, but most prefer endnotes at the end of each chapter or at the end of the book.

Genealogical Summaries

Consider including (at the end of a chapter or as an addendum at the back of your book) numbered descendant and relationship lists. A formal genealogical summary is best in Ahnentafel, Register, or NGSQ style (Bibliography 6 & 8) rather than an independent style that may be misunderstood.

Summary

No one can write their story like you can. Involve your younger family members in the process – have them help you with the research or technical aspects and they will learn to love your ancestors almost as much as you do! Not only will you each “hear them sing” but you'll be able to hum the tune right along with them. Next, plan to publish! Share your ancestors' story with your living family. There are many options for inexpensive DIY publishing available, and additional information is included in the bibliography.

Bibliography

Website References

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6. Stratton, Penny. "Writing and Publishing Your Family History." *American Ancestors*, New England Historic Genealogical Society. [No date], <https://www.americanancestors.org/education/learning-resources/read/writing-publishing>. Register Style and Ahnentafel format templates are available with this article under the heading "Genealogical Formats."

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DIY Book Publishers

17. **Publishers** (*the author does not recommend one over another; is this not a complete list of available DIY publishers*):
 - CreateSpace, <https://www.createspace.com/>
 - Lulu.com, <https://www.lulu.com/Templates> at <http://www.lulu.com/create/books#templates>
 - MyCanvas, <https://www.mycanvas.com/> (scrapbook style); works with Ancestry online trees

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