“NOVELIZE” YOUR FAMILY HISTORY STORY

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INTRODUCTION

How do you turn dry genealogy facts into a compelling story, especially when you don’t have any personal information about your subject? By weaving your own questions and conjecture into the story, you can create curiosity to get others interested. You can use background research and fiction writing techniques to add vivid detail, and use historical photos or drawings to add visual interest. Most importantly, you don’t have to have all the answers before telling the story. Here are some things to consider before you start:

WHY?

■ What is your purpose for writing this story?
  Presumably, you want to interest others in your ancestors, especially those who are not “genealogists.” If so, you’ll want to frame the facts within a story, creating suspense, drama, and above all, curiosity in the mind of the reader. Curiosity can create viral interest and even drive others to help contribute to further research.

■ What interests you about this person or family?
  What do you want to know about this person? What are your compelling questions? Whatever interests you is a good indication of what will interest others.

WHAT?

■ Novel, scholarly work or creative non-fiction?
  We will focus on writing a short story in a “creative non-fiction” style, not a “historical fiction” novel or a comprehensive scholarly history. The idea is to get your stories out there as quickly as possible to get others interested. If you want to later expand into a more comprehensive story, this process will give you the building blocks.

■ How do I balance accuracy with a compelling narrative?
  In a genealogical narrative, the idea is to be clear about what is objective fact and what is conjecture or opinion so as not to mislead the reader. (Be sure to include source references so your facts are accurate or at least find-able.) But understand that your own subjectivity is part of what can make your story interesting. Even professional historians/biographers have their own opinions about their subjects and don’t shy away from expressing them, even in a non-fiction work. (Thomas Jefferson is the subject of dozens of biographies, all conflicting in their depiction of his character and motivations.)
HOW? THE PROCESS OF BUILDING A STORY FROM FACTS

1 PICK A PERSON, FAMILY, OR EVENT
   a. What interests you about this person? (May suggest a theme.)
   b. Low hanging fruit—you don’t have to write stories in chronological order or by ancestral line. Pick the ones that you are the most curious about and start there.

2 START WITH WHAT YOU KNOW
   a. Create a timeline of your subject(s). This will help you see patterns and reveal clues about what the facts may mean. Try color-coding different characters in your story on the timeline.
   b. Keep track of sources for everything you know! Not just what, but where it came from. Names, date, relationships, locations, occupations, and photos/documents.
   c. Use your favorite method to keep track of your timeline, sources, and fact framework, and to write your stories. Excel, notetaking software such as Evernote, novel-writing software like Scrivener, or plain paper and pencil are all valid options.

3 GET CURIOUS
   a. What could this fact mean? Record your impressions and any further questions this fact suggests. These questions will drive your research and your story.
   b. Record questions that could be answered by some background historical research about the time period and location.
   c. The most important question is WHY? Why did they move or divorce or _____? What are the most burning questions you have? Even if you don’t find the answer, the question can become part of your narrative.

4 BUILD A FACT FRAMEWORK
   a. Add to your collection of easily-obtained facts with online genealogy sources, Google, or by contacting family members. Keep track of your sources, always!
   b. As you find more facts, add them to your timeline. Continue to record questions that come up.
   c. Don’t get stuck in this stage forever! Start putting the story together before you begin to tackle any more difficult research. The process of writing will help you clarify what’s really important to research later.

5 “BACKSTORY”—BRING IN HISTORY TO ADD INTEREST
   a. Now that you have your fact framework and list of questions, look up and record some background on what was going on in the same time and place as your subject. What was life like at this time period for people in their location/occupation/situation? What would they have perhaps looked like or worn or eaten? Adding these details will make your subject more real to you and your reader.
   b. Concurrent historical events (local/national); location; occupations; lifestyle/customs/
food/clothing; religion are all possibilities. Google, Wikipedia, & FamilySearch Wiki are good beginnings for basic background research.

6 WRITING THE STORY

a. *Know when to stop researching! Write sooner rather than later.* You can always add more detail as you find it.

b. *What is the theme?* Explain what you think the story is about in 1-3 words. Love? Fall and redemption? Triumph over obstacles? Courage? A quest?

c. *Who are the characters?* Who is the protagonist? Is there an antagonist? What other characters cause change in your main character?

d. *Use story structure*—every story has a beginning, middle, and end.

e. *Start with dramatic incident or hook,* not necessarily at birth or at the beginning, to grab the reader’s interest right away. Use flashbacks if necessary to fill in the story.

f. *Weave the interesting facts into the narrative* and use them to support your theme or drive the story forward. (If a fact is genealogically important but not interesting in itself, or is not part of your main story, put it in a footnote instead).

g. *Show, don’t tell.* Use detail to paint a picture in the reader’s mind. Historical research or photos can help with this. “A gilt-stamped studio photo shows an earnest, if somewhat mousy, face adorned with round wire-framed glasses and an upsweep of hair from which a few wiry curls escape.”

h. *Conjecture:* you don’t have to have all the answers! Use questions or your own theories as part of the narrative. “Did he he walk with Ethel in the moist August moonlight along the Ohio River? Did he charm Ethel’s father with firm handshakes and bring bouquets to her mother? Did he imply marriage to Ethel as a way of lowering her guard? Or were his intentions violent from the start?” When using statements instead of questions, be sure your conjecture is clear by using phrases such as, “We might imagine...,” “Family lore suggests...,” etc.

i. *Don’t be afraid to insert yourself in the story.* Your impressions, the meaning you find from the story, even your research epiphanies can add interest for the reader. Make sure your experiences or theories are not just digressions, but support the theme and purpose of your story.

7 PUBLISHING THE STORY

a. *Don’t wait to publish until you have all the answers!* The sooner you get your story out there making other people curious, the better. When you have a reasonable first draft, run it up the social media or family flagpole. You may attract others who can contribute valuable insight and further your research efforts. Include your sources! As you learn more over time, you can always update the stories that you have posted.

b. *Add visual images if you have them,* even if they are historical depictions and not actual photographs of the actual people. Images draw people into the story.

c. Once you have a collection of stories, you may want to think about compiling or formalizing them into a volume, book, or website. Or not! It’s fine to leave them as is.

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I chose my cousin Lula Ethel Coe, b. 1881, for my subject. This photo of Ethel, and a letter written by her uncle about her out-of-wedlock pregnancy, is the only surviving artifact we have about Ethel’s life. It has always made me wonder. What happened to Ethel, and her baby? My research is outlined here, and you can read the letter and story draft in FamilySearch Memories.

WHAT DID I DEDUCE FROM THE LETTER?

■ Ethel Coe was the daughter of Will and Addie Coe of Belpre, Ohio. Her father’s brothers are Joseph (Parkersburg, WV) and John Coe.

■ Ethel, was a student at University of Wooster in Ohio, became pregnant out of wedlock and was expected to deliver in May of 1902. She probably conceived in August of 1901.

■ She likely did not see a physician until sometime in February, when she was six months along. She was then sent home from Wooster in disgrace, her family devastated.

■ Ethel was reared in a religious household with high moral standards. Her parents had invested in her “training and accomplishment.”

■ The family was not poor, as they had means to purchase a piano and send their daughter to college.

■ The father of Ethel’s baby was a piano man from Marietta, Ohio by the name of Beebe, who had sold a piano to Will Coe. Beebe likely had three other “victims.” He refused to marry Ethel. Will planned to prosecute Beebe.

■ The Coe brothers had a close bond and cared about one another.

WHAT DID I LEARN FROM FAMILY SEARCH, ANCESTRY, AND GOOGLE?

In just a couple of hours of searching readily available documents such as census records, birth/marriage/death records, city directories, and school yearbooks, I learned some interesting things that brought up more questions:

■ Ethel was just 18 when she attended her first year at University of Wooster in 1900. She was halfway into her second year when she was found to be expecting and sent home. She never went back to school, nor did she complete an education elsewhere.

■ A piano tuner named Pearl Beebe lived in Marietta from 1900–1902. He is not found in any other records after that. (He apparently spent time in Will Coe’s home in Belpre in about August of 1901, when Ethel conceived. Did he seduce her or rape her? Was she a willing or unwilling participant?)
I could find no easily-obtained evidence of Ethel giving birth in 1902, which is not surprising given the circumstances. I also did not see an infant of the correct age show up in the households of any family members. (Did she give birth in a home for unwed mothers? Was her baby adopted? Did she have a miscarriage? WHAT HAPPENED TO THE BABY?)

In Ohio in 1906 Ethel married Frank Spencer Holdcroft from Richmond, Virginia. The couple live with Frank’s parents for a few years and later rent various homes in Richmond for 30+ years. There is no evidence of them having any children together. (How did she meet Frank in Ohio? What was he doing there? Did he know about her earlier experience, or did she keep it from him? Why did she never have children?)

Frank has several jobs in Richmond over the years. Ethel works for several years as a secretary for the Family Service Society of Richmond, a volunteer organization that provides services to children and families. (Did her previous experience draw her toward serving families in need?)

In 1920 Ethel’s mother dies, and in 1925 her father Will Coe inexplicably moves to St. Petersburg, Florida, where he marries a widow named Anna Wagner in 1925. He owns a home there worth $6000 in 1930. Anna dies in 1931. (Why did Will move to Florida? He does not seem to be employed. Did he head for warmer climes for his health, or did he have connections there?)

Will Coe, after Anna’s death, moves to Richmond, VA to a rest home. He dies in 1933 with “senile dementia” and Ethel is the correspondent on his death record. (Why did he spend his last days with Ethel, rather than any of her siblings? At what point did he forgive her for her past?)

Frank and Ethel move to Macon, GA sometime between 1936 (when Frank’s father dies) and 1940. Frank is employed as the director of the Public Welfare Dept of Bibb Co. and Ethel volunteers as a hostess at the Cherry Street USO in Macon. (Why did they move to Macon? How did Frank get the job there? Did it have anything to do with WWII or Fort Wheeler?)

Sometime around 1945, Frank and Ethel move to St. Petersburg, FL (to a different address than Will’s home). Frank is listed as a fruit grower at Holdcroft Grove. (Why did they move to Florida? Does it have anything to do with her father having lived there 20 years earlier?)

Frank dies in 1949 in St. Petersburg. Ethel, 68, takes over the fruit business and survives her husband by another 22 years, living in the same home. Her sister Lillian and a nephew also live in St. Petersburg at the time of her death. She never remarries. Ethel dies in 1971 in St. Petersburg at the age of 89. (What was Ethel like as an old woman? What kept her going? Did she wonder about the baby? Did she ever know what happened to the child?)

FURTHER RESEARCH

Obviously, the main question—WHAT HAPPENED TO THE BABY?—remains unanswered. It could possibly be solved by more research into maternity homes, adoption, even DNA. But for now, the story is published without an answer. You can read the story draft on FamilySearch Memories, Lula Ethel Coe, ID# M12J-MRZ.