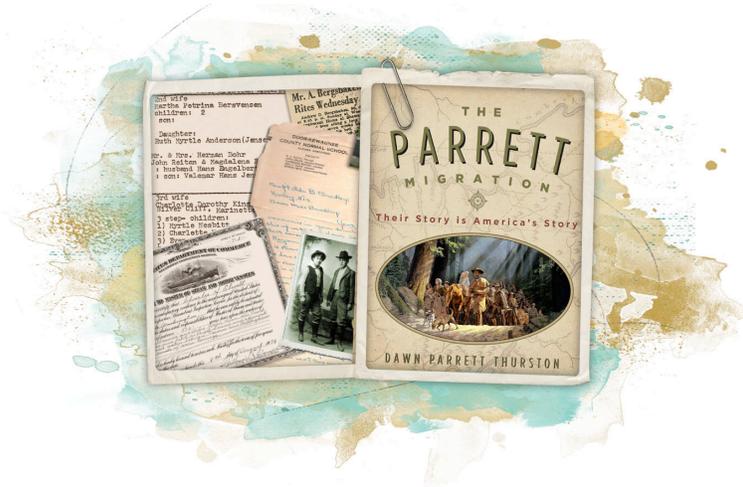# How I Turned Sparse Genealogy Information into a Great Big Family History*

*And You Can, Too!

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My Goals:

- To acquaint my family with their ancestors by turning my genealogy research findings (mainly names, dates, and places) into a story that would engage their interest.
- To breathe life into my ancestors (and thereby honor them) by making them more than names on a pedigree chart. I wanted more than "Mary Smith was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1855, the daughter of blah, blah, blah…."

My Problems:

- My ancestors were ordinary folks (farmers and coal miners, mostly) not the typical kinds of people that make great stories.
- I had no personal information, engaging anecdotes, letters, or diaries to provide a glimpse into who my subjects were and what their lives were like.

My Approach: After many false starts, here's what I ended up doing. Maybe some of my ideas will work for you, too.

- Pick your subject—A person? A family? Multiple generations?
- Determine your audience—Who are you writing for? Who beyond your family do you want to read your story?
- Determine what information you have, what's missing, and how you're going to fill in the holes.
- Visit the places you're writing about.

Creative charts helped me see my subjects in new ways:
- Life and historical chronologies
- Location charts
- Generational comparison charts

Organizing my research clutter helped me envision the light at the end of the tunnel:
- Filing systems
- Book and chapter outlines

Before I began to write:
- I became familiar with what's out there.
- I chose a structure.
- I chose a point of view. First or third person?
- Chose a writing style. Conversational? Scholarly? Footnotes? Bibliography?

What I struggled with:
- Procrastination
- Taking on too many families
- Filling the holes where I had little information
- Bringing my ancestors to life

How I pulled it all together after I finished writing:
- Editing
- Images and charts
- Formatting—book size, paper, font style, appendix, front matter, etc., etc.
- Printing and publishing

Options for you:
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Resources: To help you decide the kind of story you're going to write, acquaint yourself with what's out there. Here are some well-written family histories I admire, along with some additional resources.

Exemplary Family Histories
- Ian Frazier's *Family*—The author captures the complexities and eccentricities of his family history against the backdrop of American history. His family members, long ago passed on, seem like real people in Frazier's skillful hands.
- Leslie Albrecht Huber's *The Journey Takers*—Demonstrates how you can create memorable scenes to bring to life ancestors long gone.

- Bill Griffith's *By Faith Alone*--TV journalist Bill Griffith focuses on the ancestors who formed his Protestant heritage, and along the way we learn a lot about America's Protestant roots.
- Linda Tate's *Power in the Blood: A Family Narrative*--Focuses primarily on two interesting women, Tate's grandmother Fannie, and her great-great-grandmother Louisiana, who tell their own stories with the speech patterns and vocabulary of their locale. These women feel like real people.
- Lisa See's *On Gold Mountain*—Combines stories from the author's childhood in Los Angeles' Chinatown with a mountain of research to produce a compelling multi-generational history of her father's Chinese-American family.
- Rick Bragg's *Ava's Man*—This is about the grandfather the author never knew, but somehow Bragg makes you feel like they had a long history together. Beautifully illustrates what you can do when you combine imagination with research, family and community stories and, of course, a gift for writing.

Writing Helps available from Amazon
- Dawn and Morris Thurston's *Breathe Life into Your Life Story*
- Stephen King's *On Writing*
- William Zinsser's *Writing about Your Life: A Journey into the Past*
- TheArmchairGenealogist.com—Lynn Palermo offers classes, videos, and manuals to help you write your family history