Turn Your Genealogy Data into a
Fascinating Family History, Parts 1 & 2

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Summary: Many genealogists eventually come to the point when they want to transform their genealogy data (names, dates, and places) into a family history that breathes life into those people, places, and events and tells an interesting story. This is not an easy task. It requires a different mindset, and a different set of skills. But if you're interested in family history, you likely have pride in your heritage and want your children and grandchildren to understand and value their roots as you do. Most people feel little kinship with names on pedigree charts, but they *can* relate to a story about these people that places them in the times in which they lived. Here are some tips to get you started.

Getting Started

- Determine your audience: family? Family history centers? Anyone who's interested?

- Determine your scope: A family or individual? A few generations? The whole enchilada?

- Determine your style: Just the facts? Facts with speculation? Imagined scenes? Novel?

- Create a Family Chronology from the data you've collected.

- Notice where the gaps are and determine how to fill them.

- Analyze your chronology for clues. Ask questions like…

    - ✓ Why did they do that?

    - ✓ Why did this happen to them?

    - ✓ Was that common for that time?

    - ✓ How would they have felt?

    - ✓ Did they have control over what happened to them?

    - ✓ What would have been the long-range consequences?

    - ✓ How would I have felt if this happened to me? (Put yourself in their shoes.)

Use Secondary Sources to Fill in the Blanks

If you know little about your ancestors, there are all kinds of resources to help you understand what their lives may have been like. Books and websites describe the local history of the places where your ancestors lived, the daily life of people who lived in your ancestors' day, the battles they fought in, the houses they lived in, the food they ate, the clothes they wore, the way they tended their sick.

As a diligent and credible genealogist, you should document the background material you use to supplement your ancestor's life story. Compile a bibliography of sources as you go along. Footnote any information that you include in the written story that you borrowed from other sources.

Writing the Story
Plan that it will take you a lot of time and that it won't be easy. Once you understand that, relax and enjoy the process. Here are some suggestions to help make the process easier:

- Organize materials in a meaningful way to prepare you for writing. Folders? Notebooks?

- Make a tentative outline that assigns portions of your ancestor's life to potential chapters. Having an outline at the beginning helps guide your thinking.

- Work on one area of your ancestor's life at a time so you don't become overwhelmed.

- Allow yourself the freedom to write a lousy first draft. Just get something down on paper. Don't worry how good it sounds. The first draft is the toughest part of writing. If you stew about spelling and punctuation and sounding erudite, you'll never finish the project.

- Think in terms of telling a story. Incorporate the background information you gleaned from secondary sources to show what your ancestor's daily life was like.

Make It Interesting

- SHOW, DON'T TELL.

- Capture the "Look" of your ancestors.

- Find "character" in genealogy sources.

- Use your imagination: What do these facts say about this individual?

- Tell a story. Don't make it merely a recitation of events.

- Create "scenes" from their lives.

- Re-create their world.

- Describe the places where they lived the way they were when they lived there.

- Use "sense" details in your writing. How did things smell, sound, and feel?

- Include relevant local traditions, historical events that may have affected them.

- Describe a typical day. What was the routine of their lives? How did they dress?

- Include conflict and tension to sustain interest. Don't telegraph the outcome.

- Use your imagination.

- Be honest, but be fair. Don't judge behavior by the standards of our day.

Family Histories I Recommend Because of Their Good Writing

- Bill Griffith's *By Faith Alone*

- Leslie Albrecht's *The Journey Takers*

- Ian Frazier's *Family*

- Lisa See's *On Gold Mountain*

- Rick Bragg's *Ava's Man*

- Russell Bragg's *Growing Up*

- Bill Griffith's *By Faith Alone*

- Linda Tate's *Power in the Blood*

Tip: Create various kinds of charts to organize your information in new ways. You may see your ancestors with fresh eyes and develop ideas that may make a good story.

Create an Ancestor Chronology

1846	John and Mary Jane Ornduff migrate from Coles County, IL, to Jefferson Co., IA. There are 7 children in the wagon.	Iowa becomes 29th state. Mormons leave IL for UT territory. Batavia, IA, laid out in August and initially called Creaseville.
1847	Mary A. Ornduff is born in Locust Grove, Iowa, on Aug. 11. She has a twin sister, Martha, and five older brothers. Her parents are John Ornduff and Mary Jane (Willoughby) Ornduff.	When the Ornduffs arrive in IA, Jefferson Co. has a courthouse, jail, sawmill, and land office. County population is 8,463.
1849	Mary's mother, Mary Jane, joins Presbyterian church. Presbyterians organize church in Section 16, where David Parrott has a farm. Mary will eventually meet and marry David's son.	First school session organized in a log cabin. 3-month school subscription costs $2.50/student. Hurricane damages much of Fairfield, the county seat.

Analyze Place Information

Place	Time	Historical Events	Challenges	Developments	Terrain Weather	Landmarks	Meaning
Shenandoah Valley, Virginia	1740-1790	• German immigration • Rev. War	• Fitting in • Preserving culture • Rev. War • Illness • High mortality	• Agriculture • Roadways/ transportation	• Fertile soil (fruit trees) • Water source • Humid summers • Occasional snow	• Shenandoah River • Blue Ridge Mtns. • Appalachian Mts.	• New beginning • Accomplishment • Courage • Challenge
Parrottsville, Tennessee	1783-1814	• Indian uprising • Growth of Methodism • Statehood • War of 1812 • Migration	• Starting over • Isolation • Indians • Slavery • War 1812 • Soil depletion	• Education • Business • Methodist Camp Mtgs • Population growth • Social prominence	• Humid summers • Infertile soil • Plentiful water	• Nolichucky River • French Broad River • Clear Creek • Swaggerty Fort	• Independence • New beginning • Accomplishment
Fayette Co., Ohio	1814-1850	• Migration • Bounty land • War of 1812 • Canals • Steamships	• Starting over • Emigration • Malaria • Bank crises	• Family unity • Economic success • Railroads • Canals	• Marshland • Drought • Flat land • Harsh winters • Humid summers • Fertile soil	• Paint Creek • Sugar Creek	• Independence • New beginning • Accomplishment • Family pride
Jefferson Co., Iowa	1850-1925	• Gold Rush • Civil War • Frontier period ends • Growth of Masons	• Weather • Drought • Civil War • Emigration • Family unity	• Agriculture • Education • Railroads	• Flat • Harsh winters • Fertile soil • Nearby streams	• Mississippi 20 miles away • Migration trails	• Independence • New beginning • Accomplishment

Historical Timeline

Date	Local	State	National
1846	Batavia laid out as town	Iowa 29th state	Mormons migrate from IL to UT (20,000 trek across IA).
1847	County has courthouse, jail, sawmill. Pop. 8,463		
1848			Gold discovered in CA
1849	Hurricane in county. 1st school session in log cabin. Cross Lanes Church organized.		
1850	County agricultural society & library. Masonic lodge in Batavia.	Cholera epidemic. First state fair. Burlington & Missouri RR. State fair	Severe economic depression, U.S. pop 23 million, 3.1 mill. Slaves.
1851			Sioux cession removes final Native American claim to Iowa land.