



Finding Your Roots

People of many ages often experience a thrill in locating lost relatives, understanding earlier chapters in their lives, and broadening their sense of belonging. Researching one's family history -- genealogy -- is one of the most popular hobbies and doesn't require physical stamina, just curiosity. It can be fulfilling and help you understand history through the vibrant personal experiences of your relatives. Perhaps most important, it can help knit your family closer through the discovery of shared stories and roots.

Today's Internet makes piecing together your past much easier. Did you know . . .

- You can search for Ellis Island passenger arrival records at www.ellisland.org?
- A coat of arms doesn't belong to a family surname? Each coat of arms was assigned to an individual. However, you can find free coats of arms claimed by someone with the same surname as you at www.freecoatsofarms.com.
- The records from the 1930 Census are now available? (The first U.S. Census was conducted in 1790; for privacy, individuals' records cannot be released to the public for 72 years.) Visit www.census.gov or call 202-501-5500.

Beginners may wish to start at www.genealogy.com. This site offers a wealth of content, including expert tips (What does "first cousin, twice removed" really mean?), free online genealogy classes, and intriguing family trees of celebrities such as Fred Rogers, Ava Gardner and Rod Stewart.

Numerous other sites require memberships or payment, and for a price you can find advanced research assistance or resources (be sure you understand what information or materials you're paying for in advance). For instance, www.ancestry.com boasts "the largest collection of family history records on the web." You have to pay for its high-powered search capabilities with an annual or quarterly subscription, however, you can see preliminary findings before subscribing (a few test searches proved this site's comprehensive reach into the past).

You can also pay a professional genealogist, such as those at Lineages, Inc. (www.lineages.com), to conduct your search (or you can purchase a gift certificate to give research services to a history buff). Lineages, Inc. also offers helpful information at no cost — such as how to interview aging relatives about their life histories, background about obscure diseases and medical terms, American pioneer routes, and a free genealogical tool kit.

You can also do a lot of legwork on your own investigating U.S. Census, probate, court, land, tax, immigration, and naturalization records, and documents associated with birth, marriage, death, religious events. Don't overlook your local library or historical society.

Your genealogical discoveries may delight, surprise, or even disappoint you, as no one's pedigree is perfect. Try to learn as much as you can about the economic, social, religious and other factors that shaped your relatives' experience.

A word of caution — genealogy is an infectious hobby that can quickly become an obsession. You might want to mow the grass first.

Additional resources:

- *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Genealogy* , Christine Rose and Kay Germain Ingalls
- *Genealogy 101: How to Trace Your Family's History and Heritage*, Barbara Renick
- *Family Tree Magazine*
- *Genealogical Helper Magazine*
- National Genealogical Society: www.ngsgenealogy.org

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