



Lovin' life on the flip side of 50

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The Unbreakable Thread

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BOOM it

They never talked much about their past. Parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, each with stories to tell, somehow never felt compelled to pass on that information to us.

Little tidbits stuck in my mind. My mother told me about grabbing a pickle out of the barrel in grandpa's butcher shop. An uncle lost a son in a bicycle accident -- a son who, like my father, was named David.

Why did these details matter? My oldest brother just turned 60. He and I have been on a quest for the past year, since the death of our father, to find out as much as we can about our family history. With both our parents now gone, so are the stories and the facts. It's a small family, so it shouldn't be hard to find everyone -- or so we thought.

There are many genealogy Web sites, and a great many sources of information. Tracing our family has proven more similar to putting together a jigsaw puzzle than a logical process.

The pickle story led us to great-grandfather Isaac's kosher butcher market. The accident led to Uncle Lou. More often we'd go along our way finding out everything we could about a "relative" only to find it was a person with the same name, but not related.

After six months of constant emails with my brother, who lives more than 500 miles away, we began to build a chart.

Isaac married Kate who gave birth to Simon. Simon married Henrietta and they lived with Henrietta's family, raising my mother and uncle. Simon, Henrietta and the kids moved just about every year. Oh, so confusing. Names and more names, spelled five different ways as the census takers took notes.

There are lots of file cards, emails, a notebook full of scribblings and phone calls to piece it together.

45 years later -- it's still called home

Then we both decided we must meet in our hometown of Albany, N.Y., a city I left when I was 12. Brother Steve would drive 10 hours to get there. I'd hop a Greyhound from Boston and arrive in a mere three and-a-half hours.

The library was a treasure trove of city directories, showing who lived where and with whom. A marriage announcement from the Albany Times-Union described grandma in her plum-colored going-away suit and black velvet hat with canary yellow plumes. I remembered only her knobby old fingers, playing ragtime piano in a flowered dress and stockings knotted at the knee, yet she was once young and beautiful and had quite the wedding.

An entire day was devoted to walking the grounds of six separate cemeteries and recording anyone with the surnames that matched. There would be time later to do more research, to translate the Hebrew and to learn that Isaac was the son of Joshua and Kate the son of Joseph (which takes us back to the mid-1800s.)

A front-page newspaper article's headline "I'm Not Afraid of Any Man," tells the tale of Aunt Ethel, who at the age of 18, fought off an attacker during a walk in the park. I knew the women in my family were feisty. Here, with her picture in a flapper-style hat, was proof.

A quick tour around the city and we had pictures of each residence. Did grandpa really live in that tiny brick row house with seven other relatives? We found our family moved many times, but stayed in a radius of four city blocks. We could only picture them packing up their suitcases, going through the yard and setting up shop in the house across the street.

Putting the pieces together

As my brother and I share the tale of our excursion with other family members, each remembers a tiny bit of information. Off we go again to research it. One uncle, we learn, changed his surname, a practice that was fairly common. We easily find him under one name, then the other, who he married and the names of his children. Progress.

The next week my brother calls to say he's made phone contact with a potential second cousin, now 85 and living in New York City. Did I know we had an Uncle Moe? Add him to the list. But, alas, the poor man can't seem to remember other names that would prove a link. So, maybe we've traveled the wrong path?

On other counts we are lucky that the New York Times deemed engagements, marriages and obituaries of some of our kin worthy of print. We found more "begats" through their online archives dating back to 1851. It's strange to think we are connected to this complete group of strangers.

My brother and I smile and share the excitement of discovery through short emails with subject lines such as "I found Aunt Sadie!" and "We're related to these folks!"

We're about to take our second trip, this time to Manhattan, with reading glasses, notebooks and camera in hand.

Retracing and reconnecting

There's nothing magical to what we are doing. Tracing your family tree is becoming one of the most popular hobbies. What is special is the new connection that my brother and I have formed.

We've lived apart our entire adult lives. We've established our careers and relationships and have no common friends. But, what we had -- and now have again -- is a bond that nothing can break.

Steve's back in Virginia now, typing all this newly-found data into his genealogy database. There will be more questions and more answers, we hope. But most of all, there will be more contact with my oldest brother and we'll go through the next phase of our lives connected as never before.

You can do it!

There is no one way to do your research. There are numerous sites that provide information for free and many more that charge for access. At some point you'll decide when the investment is worth it.

One place to start is by posting a tribute in the Eons obits section. Share the real story of someone you knew, so that future Web researchers can get to know that person too.

You can begin with a few simple steps:

Gather and write down every piece of information you have; names, birthdates, places of birth, etc.

Ask questions of all your relatives to find out what they might remember. A seemingly insignificant piece of information might be a missing link.

Look through files and photographs to discover old newspaper clippings or dated pictures that might lend a clue.

Record all your information so you'll remember it and can refer back to it easily.

Follow-up now!

You may want to start your research on the Eons obits section, which includes information from the Social Security Death Index. Not all people are listed, but you could find a relative, their date of death and the city or town where they are buried. Perhaps you'll find someone in the same town that could be a relative.

Ancestry.com is a vast source of information where you will find a lot before having to pay, including birthdates and U.S. Federal Census information through 1930. If you choose to subscribe, you'll have access to the hand-written census records, complete with misspellings, undecipherable names of towns in Europe, but also a potential mother lode of puzzle pieces.

Another treasure trove is Familysearch.org, a site compiled by the Church of the Latter Day Saints. Although LDS put it together, it's very extensive and not limited to those with ties to the church.

If your relatives came through Ellis Island, you may find the passenger lists helpful. EllisIsland.org. And NewEnglandAncestors.org helps track the myriads who filtered through New England.

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