

## **Don't Say I Didn't Warn You**

There's an addiction out there that is beginning to take over an entire generation. As with most addictions, it looks harmless at first. It's not until one starts going without food or sleep to feed this habit, that the true nature of the obsession becomes apparent. Unfortunately, there's not even a 12-step program to address this problem. What is this devastating new problem? It's not exactly a new one; it's just that it seems to be growing. It's called writing family histories or doing genealogy. And places such as Big Spring are not immune to this obsession.

The fixation appears to be particularly prevalent in the now retiring baby boomers. Why are these children of the 60s more prone than others, you ask. For one, they suddenly have time, and this addiction sucks hours from one's life. But more importantly, these boomers are suddenly becoming interested in their own past. They have lived long enough to develop a perspective. One of the responses to this perspective is the sudden interest in tracing one's history – finding all the grandparents and great grandparents who came before. It seems that those who have left behind their heritage in West Texas towns are particularly prone to this. It's just that no one has told them what dangers lie along this path.

If you think you might find it fun to jot down a little information about your family – just an afternoon's task – remember that I gave you fair warning. What you are about to discover is an engaging, distracting, and powerful new experience. Your life and those around you will never be the same once you begin. Food and rest will become unimportant. Television will lose your viewership (unless it's the Roots program). Family members will have to drag you away to participate in life's experiences such as Sunday dinner or visiting friends. Regardless of these issues, you are about to enter a world filled with people who have the same interests and who understand why you are screaming "yes" at your computer as you finally find a missing relative. You will find that folks who lived a 100 years ago seem closer than your neighbors. You will never look at cemeteries in the same way. Welcome. Come share our addiction. We are glad to have you among the possessed who call ourselves genealogists.

If, laughing to yourself at my ridiculous warning, you decide that it might be interesting to do a little of this genealogy thing, where do you start? Today. Begin by asking everyone who can remember what they know about names, dates, places, burial locations, and other family details. Go visit your relatives. Take careful notes citing the name of the person who provided the information as well as the date and place in which the information was recorded. Record everything. Even the most unimportant detail years later may provide a clue that you jotted down just because someone mentioned it. Tape recorders and video cameras are a good means of recording conversations, but don't record and then file it. Instead, watch and listen after you have completed the recording and take notes as you hear and observe.

What should you ask about? Everything. Below is a family group sheet (see, you are even learning the lingo) that includes the kinds of information you are seeking. However, don't limit your questions just to these facts. Stories about your ancestor's life are more valuable and more interesting than dates and places. It's just that dates and places are the most obvious details to

begin with. Families often forget the hardships that their ancestors endured to come to this part of the state.

<<may want to make below as a side bar>>

**Family Group Sheet Information**

**Husband:** \_\_\_\_\_

parents: \_\_\_\_\_  
date of birth [day-month-year]: \_\_\_\_\_  
place of birth [city-county-state]: \_\_\_\_\_  
date of death [day-month-year]: \_\_\_\_\_  
place of death [city-county-state]: \_\_\_\_\_  
burial place [cemetery-city-county-state]: \_\_\_\_\_  
notes \_\_\_\_\_  
[add anything of interest such as military service or occupation]: \_\_\_\_\_

**Wife:** \_\_\_\_\_

parents: \_\_\_\_\_  
date of birth [day-month-year]: \_\_\_\_\_  
place of birth [city-county-state]: \_\_\_\_\_  
date of death [day-month-year]: \_\_\_\_\_  
place of death [city-county-state]: \_\_\_\_\_  
burial place [cemetery-city-county-state]: \_\_\_\_\_  
note: \_\_\_\_\_  
date of marriage [day-month-year]: \_\_\_\_\_  
place of marriage [city-county-state]: \_\_\_\_\_  
number of children: \_\_\_\_\_  
notes: \_\_\_\_\_

**1. Name of First Child:** \_\_\_\_\_

date of birth [day-month-year]: \_\_\_\_\_  
place of birth [city-county-state]: \_\_\_\_\_  
date of death [day-month-year]: \_\_\_\_\_  
place of death [city-county-state]: \_\_\_\_\_  
burial place [cemetery-city-county-state]: \_\_\_\_\_  
date of marriage [day-month-year]: \_\_\_\_\_  
place of marriage [city-county-state]: \_\_\_\_\_  
Spouse [use maiden name for women]: \_\_\_\_\_  
Notes: \_\_\_\_\_

**Add other children as needed**

Once you have started filling in these group sheets, you will realize that dates and places have gotten lost in the family memory. One way to begin to reconstruct these details is to go through your mementos looking for baby announcements, wedding invitations, and newspaper clippings. Make photocopies of the ones that your relatives have tucked away. Ask about family Bibles and marriage licenses. Stir up the dust in your attic and those of anyone who might have information. In short, become a genealogy pack rat. Look for photographs and then find out whom the people are that are populate these ancient pictures. Ask about date and place. (It's heartbreaking to find families with wonderful old pictures of people they can't identify. Asking now may make older relatives take the time to tell you who each of the people are in their cherished photographs.)

It won't be long before the obvious occurs to you – that you will need a filing system and places to store these materials. Personally, I recommend hanging file folders. Throw away those flat folders that tend to slide down whenever you move them. Invest in lovely colored ones and get a file cabinet. If you don't start filing now, you will find yourself losing papers on your desk and in drawers. You'll also waste countless hours searching for that note you know is somewhere, but you just can't find it. Do it the easy way the first time. You'll see enough of your life slip away as it is. A good filing system will rescue some of this time.

Now that you have all this information, what are you going to do with it? Most folks think they can just jot it all down and create their own records. You can, but a better plan is to use a computer program such as Family Tree Maker. And, yes, that will mean you will need a computer. In addition, you will want high speed Internet access. You are going to be searching for and finding some huge files. You will be sharing large files with others. A dial-up just won't do. And as long as you are spending money (did I say that this addiction wasn't cheap), go ahead and invest in a scanner. You'll need it to digitize photographs and documents so that you can share these and add them to your genealogy program. A digital camera is also helpful. You are going to want to photograph headstones to add to your records.

And that's a place to start. Now take a deep breath before we move on to the next step.