

Lifestyles

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Family history a consuming passion for local woman



JOHN PETERS/THE NEWS

Esther Johnson says the Internet is a wonderful tool for studying family history, but nothing replaces spending time in libraries and courthouses, poring over old documents. Doing that legwork, she said, gives a person more of a feel for their ancestors and their lives.

Local group serves genealogical study

Esther Johnson is the president of the Surry County Genealogical Society, an organization dedicated to the study of family histories. The group has a number of birth, death, and marriage records on hand dating as far back, in some cases, as the 1700s.

The organization has published a book called "The History of Surry County Churches" and two volumes of "The Heritage of Surry County." It also publishes a

quarterly digest which includes information on local family histories, clippings from old copies of *The Mount Airy News*, and additional local history.

The group's headquarters is at Surry Community College, and it holds meetings the second Monday of each month, at 7 p.m., at the college. For more information, visit the group's Web site, <http://juliemorrison.com/surry/>.

JOHN PETERS
EDITOR

If you spend much time with Esther Johnson, the question is inevitable.

She will look at you with sincerity in her eyes, and with a disarming smile she'll politely ask "Now, where are your people from?"

For Johnson, "your people" means your ancestors, the folks who generations ago provided not only the genetic make-up, but the personality traits, the very name, that makes you who you are today.

Johnson is president of the Surry County Genealogical Society, and as one might guess, studying family histories is more than a passing interest for the Surry County native.

"I've always been interest-

ed," she said. "As a kid, I wanted to hear stories about our family. I wanted to hear true stories."

Even as a child, Johnson said she was fascinated with many aspects of daily life for her ancestors. "I grew up on Riverside Drive, it was Galloway Street Extension at that time. I was fascinated with the fact that my family had lived there, my grandfather had a grocery store next to the tracks there, and people would walk as a child from the mountains to visit. We didn't have cars then, people just walked everywhere."

One relative, in particular, often made the trip, she said. "My grandfather's bother would walk down the mountain, from Willis Gap, and stay with them for a few days. He had no cell phone. His mother

had no way to check on him, but people lived just fine then."

It is the little details of life, like that, which give depth and breath to the old family stories, that add color to the hours upon hours of research she has put into studying her family lineage.

Of course, Johnson had a bit of a head start. Not only was she enthralled with old family stories, but once, more than four decades ago, she stumbled upon a family Bible which belonged to her grandfather.

"It was his grandfather's, Joseph Worrell's. Inside it had birthdays and wedding dates ... so I copied all of that down. That's when I got started with genealogy," she said.

Now, she can recite multi-

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JOHN PETERS/THE NEWS

Esther Johnson, president of the Surry County Genealogical Society, shows off some of the group's publications. On the table are the books "A History of Surry County Churches," "Surry County, Images of America," one volume of the two-volume series "The Heritage of Surry County," and the group's quarterly journal.

ple lines of her family history — Beltons, Ingrams, Draughns, McHones, Eppersons, Kings — and a host of other surnames that are common in this area. She can tell you how each family line married into hers, how they are related to others. But it's more than charts and facts that keep her at it.

Johnson said learning the hardships people faced two or three or four generations ago, figuring out how they survived, learning their personalities and their conflicts, gives life to the research she does.

Forty years ago, even 28 years ago when the genealogical society began in Surry, research could be difficult and time consuming, much more than today.

"It was different then," she said, explaining that delving into one's family roots often meant hours upon hours sifting through courthouse records, or just as much time in the local library. Some times, that research took the form of writing letters to far-away places, or government offices in other states.

"Now, people want to do all their research online, and that's okay, because there's a lot of good stuff online. But, I try to tell everyone the main

thing to do is document your sources. I don't care if grandma told you, if you just know it in your head, if you get it from a book at the courthouse, you have to write it down. Document where you get all of your information," she said.

Online research also tends to limit the experience of toiling through dusty old books, of visiting old home places and family grave yards. While some might think that's an advantage, Johnson said that's not the case.

"You need to do some (firsthand) research. You need to go to the library, to the courthouse, to the cemeteries. That's where you put the meat on the bones. You might go to a cemetery to see a grave marker and you see one nearby and you say 'I didn't know his brother was buried here.' Now you've got a whole new story."

That is part of the beauty of such research, she said. When you track down one family line, you run across many others. "It's always a mystery," she said. Sometimes, ancestors make an appearance in prominent local history as well, she said.

Once she was doing a program for the Patrick County, Va., genealogical society

when she came across the story of a man who was murdered there many years ago. While paging through old newspaper articles, she found three men had been arrested in the probe — three names she recognized from her own family tree — and Johnson had another story to research.

Ultimately, the three men were acquitted, but only after two years of court proceedings and a near hanging of one of the men.

Even when finding a few skeletons in the family closet, Johnson said family research can be enlightening and fun, though she finds it hard to pinpoint, exactly, what the fascination with studying family history is.

"It has always been important for people to know who they are," she said. "Why is that important? I don't know, maybe that's one of the mysteries — why is it important? For me, I think families are forever. Your name is the most important thing we have."

And, finding out how the people who gave you that name lived, and died, can be a lifelong pursuit.

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