

Learning his lines

Amateur genealogist digs deep, whether ancestor's a general or horse thief

By MELANIE SILL
Staff Writer

CHAPEL HILL — Genealogy has a reputation for lavender-scented ladies talking endlessly about great-great-grandfather Theodonus Jones who ALMOST signed the Declaration of Independence, and for outfits in South Dakota selling 300-page hardback volumes of Your Personal Family Tree for just \$6.95 plus postage.

Gerald Malone Oldham has been poking around his family history for 20 years, exploring libraries and graveyards and court records and letters for clues about his ancestry and his wife's family. He's wandered into the cobweb-shrouded anterooms of 19 other family shrines in the process.

Oldham, however, isn't selling any books or trying to get his family into the Huguenot Society or the Daughters of the American Revolution. For him, genealogy is an enjoyable way to learn about and document local history, and he'd just as soon talk about the scalawags in the clan as the officers and the gentlemen.

"A lot of folks will whitewash everything," says Oldham, a Liggett & Myers Tobacco worker. "Me, I put it down just like it is and let the chips fall."

The gently rolling farmland of Chatham and Orange counties has been home to the Oldhams and their relations, the Stones and the Coles and the Yateses and others, for at least two centuries. They have married, farmed, built houses, reproduced, gone to war, sinned, prayed and prospered, leaving little behind in the way of written history. What Oldham knows about them has come from land deeds, letters, Bibles and legal documents.

Last Tuesday, according to Oldham's records, was the 200th anniversary of the day — April 1, 1786 — when English immigrant John Oldham bought the land. So far, it's still in the family.

"I'm going to stay on it as long as I can," says Oldham, a rotund, genial man, settling into his easy chair with a cigarette.

Oldham and his wife, Margie, were living in Richmond, Va., when Oldham started trying to document some of the stories passed on by his father,

Staff photo by John Rotter

In his genealogical research, Gerald Oldham has collected 500 pages of information about a family only remotely related to his own

Genealogy brings past back to life

Continued from page 8A

the late Floy Oldham. Soon, Gerald Oldham became an addict of the personal history found in old letters, land deeds, birth and death records and family Bibles.

"Most folks have a hobby — they collect this or they collect that," says Oldham, 55. "I collect anything historical of this area that I can find."

Oldham later moved his family back to the Chatham County land where he was born and raised, the land his father and grandfather owned before him. Oldham's two brothers and twin sister live nearby on their parts of the same stretch of property a couple of miles outside Chapel Hill.

He built his own brick house there about 10 years ago. White columns in front, a curved wood staircase, wood floors in the entryway and parlor and a great stone mantel in the living room give the modern home an Old South flavor.

British-born John Oldham, as far as his inquisitive descendant Gerald can tell, ran a tavern of some sort during his life in Chatham County. His will of 1832 listed property such as a still, hogsheds and pitchers and mugs.

Since then, the Oldham family tree has spread and intertwined with others. It has borne good fruit and some rotten apples, like the doctor and landowner who first married "beneath his digni-

ty," married his housekeeper after his first wife died, and was arrested later for "cohabitating bed and house" with another woman who was not his wife. There might have been a horse thief in the mix in one of the family lines Oldham explored, and one of the slave-owning members on another line might have fathered a slave child along the way to the Civil War.

"Don't worry about me thinking I'm going to find any skeletons because I have found the same things went on then as today," Oldham says. "But the difference is that back then, if you were caught, you were ostracized from family and society. I'm more concerned about what some of them would think of us." Many of his predecessors were straitlaced, church-going folk, he says. "If they could turn over in their graves, there would be a lot of rolling going on."

Oldham, a devoted churchgoer himself, tells stories about his favorite family characters with a flair for the colorful, sometimes unsavory, details that transform them from faded ink on musty paper into lively images from the past. He punctuates his tales with cigarettes and pauses, turning his bright blue gaze on listeners to see how they react.

To put together his detailed notes, Oldham has spent uncounted hours hunched over records in

the state archives, compiling thousands of pages of notes crammed into his desk. He has 500 pages on one family alone, a family only tangentially related to Oldham's own "lines," as he calls them.

"I've got more stuff here than Carter's got blue pills," he jokes, pulling folder after folder out of the stack on his desk in search of one tidbit.

He recalls being a poor student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, but Oldham has pored patiently over old newspapers and books to learn about "my families." He also has looked at records and books by the Works Progress Administration, which did historical documentation during the Depression, and the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Oldham also has traveled hundreds of miles to call on people for information and even telephoned the British Embassy once to see if he could find out anything about his English ancestors.

"Can you imagine a poor old farm boy like me just picking up the phone one night and calling the British Embassy?" he says, chuckling. So far, he's been stalled on the English history of his family.

"It's not a science," Oldham says. "It's just a matter of looking. You've got to have a little bit of detective blood in you, too."

Most of Oldham's family and

friends, including his daughter and son, leave the genealogy to him, showing only a fraction of his interest in the subject. But Oldham has a stack of Christmas cards, presents and letters (he won't accept money) from people who have come to him and gone home with new knowledge about their families.

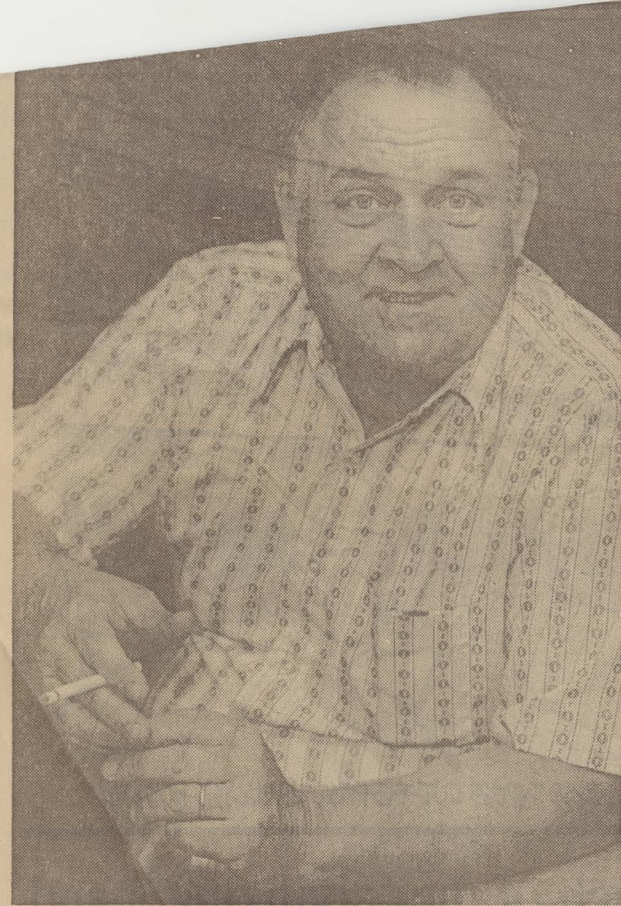
Oldham delved into the history of his church, Lystra Baptist, and wrote a five-act play about its 1852 founding. Last May, church members dressed up in 19th-century clothing to re-enact the first service according to Oldham's script, says Lystra pastor, the Rev. Bryan J. Chestnutt. Oldham, in black suit and stovepipe hat, and his wife drove to church that day in a neighbor's horse and buggy.

"I'm trying to preserve some of the history of my community," Oldham says.

To get the information he needs, he has even threatened to seek court orders when clerks refused to help him unearth hard-to-find records.

One of his projects was a search for records of an epileptic man who died after being hospitalized in a mental institution.

"There were no records to show that he passed through this life," Oldham says. "I guess that's why I'm so hard-headed about it. Here are people you've known, I guess, the greatest proportion of your life and no written report to show they've passed through this life."



Staff photo by John Rottel

Gerald Oldham: 'I have found the same things went on then as today'