

FINDING THEIR ROOTS

Genealogy starts as a hobby, becomes an 'obsession'

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Author: For The Patriot-News

Jim McAteer always heard that his great-grandmother's brother died in a bar fight.

Turns out the fight was about a piece of pipe. The uncle, Congressional Medal of Honor winner Alexander Quinn, dodged death when he gathered the wounded from a battlefield in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War, and while nursing victims of a typhus outbreak abandoned by a troop ship's medical staff.

But death came when, back in the Philippines in 1906, he angered a man who was repairing a bent metal bar. The man grabbed a machete and hacked Quinn to death.

"That's an example of how family folklore may be true, but not accurate," **McAteer** said.

McAteer, who lives in Lebanon County and started tracing his family history in 2003, is among the nation's newer genealogists -- a movement sparked by Alex Haley's 1976 novel "Roots" and embraced by the Internet.

According to Ancestry.com, use of the genealogical Web site, which was founded in 1997, has surged since July 2006, with more than 5 million users starting research. Ancestry.com's 850,000 subscribers put it among the nation's largest online paid membership sites, the company reports.

"I once read that genealogy begins as a curiosity, which becomes an interest, which becomes a hobby, which becomes an obsession," **McAteer** said. "I'm still on a hobby."

A stickler for accuracy, **McAteer** said that online tools, including chat rooms where genealogists share and seek intersecting research, have been valuable but have their limits.

"I've gotten a large amount of information, but you have to quote Ronald Reagan -- trust but verify," he said. "I've gotten a lot of bad information off the Internet, such as family folklore that's not true, especially from people on message boards."

New online tools include DNA-testing services and records postings, including censuses, passenger lists and the National Archives' military records at Ancestry.com.

The Capital Area Genealogical Society, founded in 1982, has documented information from gravestones, scanned old atlases and county histories, developed card files of historical names, and transcribed records of births, marriages and deaths. Some records are online, while others are in the society's archives, open on the second Sunday of every month, when the society meets at Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church in Linglestown.

Longtime member Molly Ulsh of Lower Paxton Twp. unearthed the juicy gossip of a great-uncle -- either an opera singer or proprietor of a cheap minstrel show, depending on the news account -- gunned down by his wife's lover.

Genealogy is "a fun thing, but you do have to be interested in history and geography, too," Ulsh said. "Some people really did travel around, but you have to know where the gaps in the mountain are to see where they traveled."

Old-fashioned detective work still yields valuable finds, genealogists said.

McAteer once contacted an Illinois library for family information and learned from the response that he had a cousin in town. He even helped connect a great-uncle's two stepchildren who had never met, he said.

"They had no idea they existed until I contacted them," he said. "Now they know each other."

The State Library's genealogy and local history collection provides access to family and regimental histories, county records, passenger lists, newspapers and other resources.

Ancestral researchers there "have questions about where do I look," genealogical librarian Richard Lindberg said. "How do I use the census, which is another major collection we have available on microfilm but also online."

Like many genealogists, Keith Nonemaker of Camp Hill might have found a genetic link to a prominent personality -- President-elect Barack Obama, through a Huntingdon County family named Duvall.

"If you go back 20 generations, you have 1 million ancestors, so there's a very good chance you'll be connected to almost anyone," Nonemaker said.

INFOBOX:

YOUR FAMILY'S HISTORY Historical Society of Dauphin County, Harrisburg,

www.dauphincountyhistory.org Cumberland County Historical Society, Carlisle,
www.historicalsociety.com Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society, Lancaster,
www.lmhs.org THE HISTORY OF YOUR FAMILY Curious about your ancestry?
Try these Web sites:

www.ancestry.com www.genealogy.com www.myfamily.com

www.onegreatfamily.com www.rootsweb.com

www.digitalarchives.state.pa.us www.pennsylvaniairesearch.com

Local organizations with genealogy information include:

Pennsylvania State Library, Harrisburg, www.statelibrary.state.pa.us
Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, www.phmc.state.pa.us

Capital Area Genealogical Society, meeting second Sunday of the month, Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church, Linglestown, www.capitalareagenealogy.org
Genealogy Club of the Greater Harrisburg YMCA, West Shore Branch, meeting first Sunday of the month, www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/3/8pawsygc

Caption: PHOTO

JOHN C. WHITEHEAD The Patriot-News Submitted photo Molly Ulsh of Lower Paxton Twp. is a longtime member of the Capital Area Genealogy Society. She said genealogists must be interested in geography and history. Her granddaughter Allyson Ulsh is 11. Molly Ulsh found this photo of her mother as a child. Ulsh said she has uncovered juicy tidbits about her ancestors' lives in her research.

Memo: AN INFOBOX APPEARS AT THE BOTTOM OF THE STORY.

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