

Becoming a true genealogist

By ANN JONES

Bay County Genealogical Society

TRACING Pasts

When I retired a few years ago, I was enjoying my unstructured life while I leisurely pursued my favorite hobbies. One day my husband was busy on the computer, deeply engrossed in a project. I asked what he was working on, and he replied, "I'm making my family tree. You should try it." I was sure it was a waste of time; after all, I knew where my family originated: England and Canada. To pacify him into leaving me alone, I logged on to the free Ancestry.com site. It didn't take me any time at all to enter the info for my parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. And then, up popped a waving leaf indicating there were records (i.e. source documents) on my family. That aroused my curiosity. The only problem was that I had to upgrade my membership to be able to view world records. I was curious, so of course I paid the fee. And that's when I got hooked on genealogy.

Now I could access everything. I found photocopies of original church records for baptisms, marriages and burials, each containing a drove of information. For example, baptismal records had the name of the child as well as the parents and godparents; marriage records listed the groom and his parents along with the bride and her parents and the witnesses; burial records listed parents and/or spouse, and of prime importance the age of the deceased in years, months and days.

I learned that Gabriel Drouin had gathered vital information mainly from church registers dating back

to the first settlers in Canada in the 1600s. The collection became known as the Drouin Collection and later was filmed by the Institut Généalogique Drouin. In Ancestry.com I could view photocopies of these old records.

Of course, the original records are all written in French. However, that did not pose a problem for me as I had attended a bilingual school for 12 years and was somewhat fluent in French — although I had not spoken it in a long time. I could not tear myself away from the computer; finding records on mes aïeux (my ancestors) kept me looking for more. It was addictive, and I could not quit. Eventually I traced some of my family to France.

That led me down another path. Why did these people leave their homelands with its schools and governments and other indications of civilization? Why Canada, an undeveloped wilderness with nothing but forests and Indians? Why did the new settlers have such large families, 10 or more children? I needed answers. I wondered why I had not paid more attention to history and geography when I was in school, because I surely needed that information now.

My search led me to the internet and to history books. I thought I wanted to know more about the history of Canada, but as it turns out it was really the history of North America. I had forgotten that the new inhabitants settled along rivers. Their villages extended from the far

north in Nouvelle France (as French Canada was called) and New England (the eastern states settled primarily by the English) to the south in what would become Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida and other states.

The habitants encountered many hardships. They were not used to the cold winters and many perished either from the cold or starvation. Some of the native inhabitants proved to be helpful, sharing their stored food and showing the immigrants how to plant corn and other crops. However, others invaded the settlements, killing or kidnapping anyone they could. The new colonists were alone and defenseless — but that's another story.

In my quest for information, I learned that the Church of the Latter-day Saints has a massive world-wide data base (free, I might add), but I knew my family were strong Roman Catholics so I didn't believe I could find any useful information there. Was I ever wrong! For anyone looking for source information, that's a good place to start, and you can access their database online, including the information in the Drouin Collection. I've also found many other free sites for useful forms, tips on doing research, and family trees. The Bay County Genealogical Society is a local active group with many years of experience and a willingness to share their knowledge and assistance.

I once heard someone say you know you are a true genealogist when you go on vacation and one of the first places you go is to the library to see what genealogy treasures you might find. Just call me a true genealogist.