

Tracing **PASTS**

Making life simpler for future generations

By **MARY STAMPS BENNETT**

Bay County Genealogical Society

Someone said, "A pack rat is hard to live with, but makes a fine ancestor." I must confess that I am a pack rat myself and I really need to get better organized. So, here I am preaching and I am one to talk. Do as I say, not as I do.

I am the recipient of some wonderful boxes of family memorabilia after my mother-in-law Susanna James Bennett Stuart's death in March. But, working for a living really crimps my down time to fill out, organize, label and put things in some sort of order.

My venture into the history of the James-Bennett families really began several years ago when Susanna was cleaning out boxes. Susanna, knowing I had the lust for family history, asked me if I wanted to go through the boxes and see if there was anything I wanted to keep. A pack rat always keeps boxes even if the contents are unknown. It turned out to be an amazing collection of family pictures and newspaper articles. There were baby pictures of Susanna, pictures of her parents and siblings at younger ages, as well as various Bennett collections. Susanna had divorced her husband, Donald F. Bennett, in the 1970s, but never threw away anything. Their wedding pictures from 1952 at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church and the wedding reception at the Cove Hotel were all there, as well as pictures of both she and Don during their dating years. Both had graduated from Bay High.

So, with the help of my

husband, Richard, their oldest son, I have been organizing this for years, labeling and putting them into scrapbooks. Susanna and I did the majority of the labeling over the telephone. I would describe a picture and she would tell me the stories behind it. I now have six scrapbooks on Don and Susanna.

So, with the death of Susanna, I found many more boxes of family keepsakes. Susanna had taken possession of boxes of photos and newspaper articles from her parents at their deaths in the early 2000s. The Panama City newspapers really enjoyed the James and Bennett families, as article after article described family events and community service projects. Susanna is past president of the Panama City Junior Service League. We also have the family Bible dating back to 1852. I am up to four scrapbooks only on Susanna's parents, Wilbur and Sue James. Luckily, Susanna's siblings help me label these most recent finds. There again, we are doing it long distance, this time by emails.

So, my recommendation is to make life easier for your future generations by organizing, labeling and purging excess. Don't just throw the history into boxes. Give the future relatives a chance by organizing the family history. I choose scrapbooks to make mine look more like a history book with pictures and stories. Choose a way that makes it easier for you. But, please make sure the storage is archival and will survive time.