



Time Travel

Genealogy enthusiasts trace their roots to distant places, expanding their sense of family ✨ By Leslie Forsberg

IN A HIGH-RISE O’AHU CONDO OVERLOOKING the quicksilver waves of the Pacific, my cousin Kaethe clears away the dinner dishes and then hauls out a thick volume. “I’ve got a surprise for you,” she says. Carefully lifting open the faded, crumbling cover, I find myself staring at a pencil sketch of massive sailing vessels, sails billowing full, the words “HMS *Shah*” scrawled above. On the right-hand page, spidery inscriptions flow breathlessly, “... with our hearts light and gay having gotten everything on board we got up steam weighed and bid farewell to Spithead having to call in at Plymouth we steamed down Channel and hove in sight of Plymouth in the night. ...”

I can hear my heart pounding as I ask, “What’s this?”

“This is my grandfather, and your great-grandfather, Harry Coventon’s British sea journal, from when he served in the British Royal Navy, around 1881,” Kaethe says, eyes sparkling. She tells me that cousins in my hometown of Port Angeles, Washington, who had told few about the document, gave her the journal to digitize for family members. I’ve never heard anyone in my family mention such a treasure.



My husband, Eric, and I have traveled to O’ahu to visit Kaethe, a cousin I’d never really known but had been curious about since finding a letter among my father’s things after he passed away. It was a handwritten copy of a letter from my grandmother to Kaethe, giving her the names and address of our last-known English relatives, a section of the family that had remained in Europe as my paternal great-grandfather broke away for a new life in a new land.

When I booked my trip to O’ahu, it hadn’t yet dawned on me how little I knew about my family, and that by traveling to spend time with relatives a generation older than I was, I might discover nuggets of family history that I’d never heard in the stories told by my father. In fact, I discovered much more detail and even other perspectives on what I thought I knew about my family. I swiftly learned that each branch of the family has its own stories,

✨ Harry Coventon’s journal from his days in the British Navy, around 1881, has sparked an interest in genealogy generations later. The journal was digitally scanned in its entirety and copied to CDs for more than 100 family members, including the author of this article.

and that taking the opportunity to meet with others and share information creates a fuller and richer view of family, past and present. Traveling to visit family members—no matter how distantly related—not only greatly expands my understanding of my family history, but also offers insights about family traits that continue from generation to generation.

When I launched my genealogical journey, I didn't know that I would be riding a wave of genealogical interest along with millions of other Americans. And I hadn't known that my visits to Old World and New World places would be part of a newly recognized genre of travel: genealogical travel.

Carla Santos, a widely recognized expert in genealogical tourism and an associate professor in the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism at the University of Illinois, notes that genealogy is among the most-practiced hobbies in the United States. What many do with the information they acquire about their ancestors is what interests Santos. A relatively new trend is people traveling back in time, so to speak, to the places where their ancestors lived.

"Genealogical tourism is one of the fastest-growing markets in vacation travel," says Santos, and it's a market that is appealing to all kinds of people.

"We all come from somewhere," she says. "It could be that one of my family members was born in Philadelphia, so I'm going to go to Philadelphia. Maybe I go to the cemetery and the county courthouse, then I tour the town and get a sense for what it's like where they came from."

This type of tourism represents a shift, Santos says. "In the 1980s and '90s we thought of tourism as escaping or going somewhere exotic. Today, tourism is often about personal enrichment and nostalgia. It's about having experiences that enrich our personal lives."

Marion Hager, owner of Scottsdale, Arizona-based Hager's Journeys, a small boutique travel agency that specializes in heritage travel, agrees.



"More and more, we're seeing that baby boomers want enrichment, experiences, nostalgia," she says. "So naturally it goes hand in hand that they want to see the countries their grandparents came from. This has stimulated independent travel. Some will still book a standard tour, but genealogical travelers are more likely to want to go to places where most tour groups don't go."

Specialty tourism agencies such as Hager's Journeys have stepped in to fill the void, taking people on tours with personalized agendas, such as visiting the school their great-grandparents went to or connecting with a relative they've never met. Even hotels have stepped in to offer services to travelers in search of ancestral families.

In Ireland, a country that sent millions to the New World in the 19th century, The Shelbourne Dublin caters to visitors with Irish roots. The hotel's Genealogy Butler provides a personalized treasure map that includes a one-



✦ Fairhurst ancestral portraits (above): Ben Fairhurst on Oregon's Wallowa Lake and Oris Combes as a fire lookout.

Wilson family portraits: returning to Jen Wilson's grandmother's hometown in Croatia.





One of the nation's largest exhibitions is held annually in Washington, D.C. The National Archives' annual Genealogy Fair, held each April, has grown dramatically in recent years, from 3,000 attendees in 2010 to 5,000 in 2011 to 5,400 this year.

hour consultation (over tea, of course), a genealogical assessment, a proposed research program, an overview of Irish sources and a map to history repositories. The Scottish equivalent can be found at Dalmunzie Castle, a luxury lodging that describes itself as the first genealogy hotel in the United Kingdom.

Europe isn't the only place seeing a surge in genealogical travel. Throughout the United States, travelers are seeking the towns and landscapes where their ancestors once lived. Alice Fairhurst, the president and a researcher at the Southern California Genealogical Society, flew to Portland to join her son and grandkids on a memorable road trip to Eastern Oregon, where her husband's grandfather was once the mayor of the town of Enterprise.

"My husband's mother, Oris, raced palomino ponies and could ride with the best of them," Fairhurst says. "They often stayed in cottages at Wallowa Lake. So of course we visited there, to see the lake and the cottages. To see what it was like where my son's great-grandmother lived, to find her high school and then even to find a picture of her in a book in a local museum. ... It had a huge impact on all of us," she says.

The Southern California Genealogical Jamboree, the society's annual convention, held in Burbank, is one of the largest in the nation. "We usually have 1,700 or so people attending from across the U.S. and other countries," Fairhurst says. "People get to the age of 40 or 50—though lots are interested in their teens—and all of a sudden mortality comes knocking, and people are interested in finding out about their roots. And that's when they come to places like this, to learn how to do genealogical research."

Genealogical conferences are held regularly throughout the United States, offering an abundance of information for those just starting the search or for those who want to dig deeper than the resources they've been able to find on the Internet.

"We're the national center for federal records, so we've always had a strong genealogy program," says Diane Dimkoff, director of the National Archives' Genealogy Fair. "We find that there are always so many new people every year. Haven't we reached everybody yet?" she asks with a laugh. "There can't be any new people left, yet every year there are hundreds or thousands more. We outgrew the building, so we hold the fair outside in tents on our plaza."

The fair offers scores of speakers on topics ranging from preserving family records to researching

✦ The National Archives' annual Genealogy Fair in Washington, D.C., left, is a useful resource for searching federal records such as (clockwise from top left) U.S. War Bounty Land Warrants, military discharge papers, Seamen's Protection Certificates and Civil War enlistment records.





✦ Finding the initials of Heinrich Peters, which have graced the balcony of a Swiss mountain resort for generations, was a highlight of the author's genealogical journey to Europe.

Civil War pension files.

"The records we have are those someone would have if they interacted with the federal government," Dimkoff says. "If you were an immigrant and you went through Ellis Island or another port, we'd have information on that. If someone was living in

the country during one of the census periods, that would show up. If they acquired federal land or were in military service, from the Civil War forward, we have information on that."

A lot of the records are on microfilm and available in regional archives, but the National Archives is the one place where everything is available.

Roots-related travel has become exceptionally popular in the past few years, but what prompted this surge of interest? For many Americans, the notion of searching for one's ancestral family started with the TV show *Who Do You*

Think You Are?, an American adaptation of a British documentary series, which had a two-year run in the United States beginning in 2010. During each episode, a celebrity—such as Gwyneth Paltrow or Spike Lee—traveled to far-flung locales while tracing their family trees, led by expert genealogists.

"I noticed that when *Who Do You Think You Are?* started airing, we had a huge surge of interest in our genealogical society," says Lori East, library director of the Tuolumne County Genealogical Society in Sonora, California. "The show made it look easy to do such research, as though you can just walk into the National Archives and they'll do it for you," she notes. "That doesn't really happen. You have to do it for yourself."

After quizzing family elders for information, most people start with the Internet. That's how I got my start, on the most popular site in the United States, Canada and Australia: Ancestry.com has 2 million paid subscribers. (The company's latest foray into genealogy includes DNA testing.) Within minutes of keying in my name, and my parents' and grandparents' names, small quivering leaves appeared beside names, suggesting "hints" that might lead to scans of official records, such as birth,

marriage and death certificates, or suggestions of a connection to someone else's family tree that has an individual of the same name and vital statistics.

In a few days of inputting information, I'd grown my family tree significantly and discovered documents offering the names of my great-grandmothers on my mother's side—women whose names my mother didn't even know. One passed away before my mother was born, the other when my mother was still a child. Hannah, from an English family in Ontario, Canada, and Sophia, from Hanover, Germany, suddenly seemed real to me.

My Internet research fueled my imagination and made me wonder what life was

“The old women schooled me in what life was like for my grandmother,” Wilson says. “They taught me old recipes, how to gather herbs and flowers for tea, how to knit with five needles. ... It was a beautiful thing.”

like for these people. How much of who I am comes from those who came before me?

“We all want to know where we came from, what makes us who we are,” Dimkoff notes. “People want to know how history affects them in their lives today,” she adds. “I hear people say, ‘That’s why I’m so stubborn. ... He never gave up.’”

“Doing your family genealogy offers a sense of belonging and community,” says Dimkoff. “It’s a deep passion, and fundamentally, it’s emotional.”

Merrill White, a librarian at the immense Family History Library in Salt Lake City—a collection of more than 2.4 million rolls of microfilmed genealogical records from the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 174

FROM PAGE 46 United States, Canada, the British Isles, Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa—says he sees tears and jubilation daily.

“People who come here find connections, often after they’ve been looking for years. Whenever anybody finds an ancestor in a record, the second they see them on a piece of paper, there’s an instant feeling of joy. ‘That’s him! That’s my family!’ is what they all say. It’s an instant connection; it’s a piece of them that’s suddenly real.”

The library and its mammoth collection of genealogical data is owned and curated by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Family History Library averages a half-million visitors a year from around the world. In summer, the library averages 2,000 visitors a day.

Megan Smolenyak, the author of six books, including *Hey, America, Your Roots Are Showing* and *Who Do You Think You Are?*, a companion to the TV series, was the person who traced President Barack Obama’s roots to Moneygall, in Ireland.

“The Internet and all of the records that are available today are great,” she says, “but if you want to know your ancestors as living, breathing people, you have to go to the places where they came from.”

Smolenyak’s roots are in a tiny village in Slovakia. “When we visited relatives, we increased the population by 10 percent,” she says with a laugh. “When I go to Slovakia, I’m treated like family ... because I am. We really do treat family a little differently. Even if you’re fourth cousins, there’s an extra ounce of consideration,” she says. “Millions of people are doing that and recognizing how truly interconnected we are.”

Jennifer Wilson of Des Moines, Iowa, author of the 2011 book *Running Away to Home*, began her search for connection in 2008 when the last of her immigrant relatives passed away: Sister Mary Paula Radosevich, her mother’s aunt, was almost 100 years old.

“The nuns gave me Sister Mary Paula’s personal papers, and as a new parent I became obsessed with this little village that seemed suspended in amber since my

great-grandparents left it. My family had no stories, no recipes, no language from this place. At the time the economy was crashing, and I thought, ‘There’s no better time to return than the present.’”

Wilson and her husband packed up their family, including 7-year-old Sam and 4-year-old Zabie, and they lived for 4½ months in the ancient mountain village of Mrkopalj, Croatia. “It was a reverse immigration, back to the beginning of our American family, as I knew it, and it was hugely intimidating for me at first,” she reflects.

Soon after they arrived, Wilson’s husband was “ferried off to the local bar by the guys in the village.” Wilson suddenly felt very alone. Yet, once villagers learned why the family was there—that they really wanted to know what their ancestors experienced—people came out of their houses and welcomed the small family.

“The old women schooled me in what life was like for my grandmother,” Wilson says. “They taught me old recipes, how to gather herbs and flowers for tea, how to knit with five needles. ... It was a beautiful thing.

“My kids fit right in,” she continues. “They got to have the childhood experiences that we and our parents had. They had freedom in mountain meadows climbing trees and eating apples.”

“[The experience] really re-jiggered our understanding of what family was,” Wilson says. “We found that the connection remains. We can’t forget that as Americans we’re from all over the world. They still saw us as family, and were deeply moved that we came home after 100 years.”

I’ve had many of my own “coming home” moments as I’ve traveled in search of my own roots. In a small town in British Columbia, I greeted a cousin and his wife whom I met through Ancestry.com, only to learn that they had regularly traded Christmas cards with my father, and had photographs of my beloved Grandma Nessie to share. I was thrilled to meet a Montana cousin who was once a congressman who played a prominent role in national environmental issues. In Kid-

derminster, England, I visited distant relatives of Grandma Nessie's, a lovely family related to me so far back in time (dating to my fourth great-grandfather, born in 1788), that the connection has expanded my definition of family.

Yet it was in Switzerland that I had my ultimate genealogical travel experience: I'd traveled with my husband and 18-year-old daughter, Kirsten, to the historic resort of Gyrenbad in the foothills of the Alps. Through genealogical research, I'd learned that the resort had belonged to my paternal great-grandmother's uncle, Heinrich Peters. When Peters' brother (my paternal great-great uncle) emigrated to the United States in the late 19th century, he bought farmland in Port Angeles that he named Gyrenbad Ranch—which became part of the family farm on which I grew up. My great-grandmother, Alwine, left Switzerland at age 18 to join her uncle at Gyrenbad Ranch, where she raised three children, including my grandfather, Clarence Forsberg.

I'd let the resort managers know I was coming to visit Switzerland, and the elderly proprietor, who spoke no English, met us in the lobby. She excitedly gestured for us to follow her onto the balcony, where I was puzzled to see her pulling aside thick vines from the railing. Suddenly the ethereal past became very real as I glimpsed a message from centuries earlier: the iron-scrollwork initials H.P., for Heinrich Peters.

Moments later, Kirsten was settling into her room where the sashes were thrown wide toward Swiss cows grazing in a lush pasture, the music of their bells drifting in through the window. In the hallway outside her room, my eye was caught by an early-20th century photograph, and the fine hairs on the back of my neck stood up. In the picture, standing proudly in a lower window of the hotel was Heinrich Peters. My great-grandmother Alwine posed in another window, and in another window was the unmistakable visage of my Grandpa Clarence as a young boy, next to his brother and sister. "Hi Grandpa, I'm here," I said, softly. ▲

Leslie Forsberg is a freelance writer living in Seattle.