



Photo of Jane Gardner Aprill courtesy of Carter Stevens

by Kathleen Green

If you've ever wondered about your ancestry, you're interested in genealogy. And if you've tried tracing part of your family history, you're a budding genealogist.

"Genealogy is about connecting people," says Jane Gardner Aprill, a professional genealogist in New Orleans. "You can do it by going back—for example, starting with yourself and then your parents, their parents, and so on. Another way is to pick a person, perhaps a famous person, and then come forward in time, listing children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren." Either way, the number of people involved grows rapidly.

But the speed with which family connections grow does not translate into fast research. In fact, researching genealogy is time consuming because everything must be independently verified. "If you want to add a branch to your family tree," Jane points out, "you have to make sure it's the right branch."

Like most genealogists, Jane begins a project by basing her research on a fact usually supplied by the client who hires her for the genealogical research. A fact is simple—your grandmother was born, for example—but provides the springboard for researching

---

Kathleen Green is managing editor of the *OOQ*, (202) 691-5717.

# You're a what? Genealogist

questions surrounding it—such as where and when your grandmother was born.

Jane then devises a plan for researching that fact, studies available sources, and reaches a conclusion. To complete a project, she summarizes her findings in a report to the client. Planning, source examining, and report writing each consume about one-third of the time required for a project.

In devising a research plan, Jane considers the available resources, including both home and published sources. She first inquires after home sources, such as personal letters, photographs, and information relatives may have. Then, to expand on the home-source information, she turns to published sources such as books, bibliographies, and collections of records. "The best source is the one that gets you closest to the event or fact recorded," says Jane. The plan reflects her decisions about which sources will be most useful to her research.

Retrieving these sources first requires tracking them down. Home sources may be available locally or might be spread among many family members throughout the country. Published sources are in a number of places, including public and repository libraries, State archives, and city, county, or State offices of public record.

Sometimes, Jane gets the information she needs via phone, fax, or mail. But she usually visits the source site herself to review, evaluate, and verify each piece of information. That's a lot of trips to a library or courthouse. It also means spending many hours there, because most sources are reference materials that cannot be checked out.

Jane makes notes and copies of the

information she finds, organizing her research at the end of the day. Documentation—noting where information came from, such as volume and page numbers—is the key to good research. When satisfied she has all available sources for a project, Jane begins analyzing the results of her search to reach a conclusion. Each project concludes with a report, which states what was requested and what was and was not found.

Completing a project is very satisfying, Jane says, but by far the most enjoyable part of her work is the rush of adrenaline that comes from finding an item she's looking for. Especially fulfilling is uncovering a fact buried in volumes of, say, unalphabetized, handwritten records. "Whether I'm doing research for myself or for someone else," she says, "the reaction is the same: 'Ah, there it is!'"

Gaining satisfaction from researching for others is a benefit Jane never expected. That's because she never expected to do genealogical research for anyone other than herself. Like many genealogists, Jane's interest in the field began with a curiosity about her own roots. As a child, she enjoyed figuring out her relationship to maternal aunts, uncles, and cousins who lived nearby; members of her father's family, who lived farther away, came to life in photographs she grouped and labeled.

Jane continued tracing her ancestry sporadically as she grew up. The familial fascination was always present, even into adulthood: driving through a town might include a stop to inquire about her father's family.

Finally, in the late 1980's, Jane became a serious student of genealogy. She took courses through the Institute of Genealogy and Historical Research at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, one of a handful

of genealogy institutes offering classes in the United States.

After completing genealogy coursework, Jane began attending conferences, subscribing to journals, reading books, and networking with other genealogists. Through the Board for Certification of Genealogists, she earned the designation of Certified Genealogical Record Specialist. She is a member of the Association of Professional Genealogists, serving as its secretary and Louisiana Chapter liaison. To educate the public about genealogy—an Association objective—Jane sometimes gives talks on a variety of topics.

As busy as genealogy keeps her, however, Jane works at it only part time. And according to a 1997 Board survey, she's in the majority. The survey found that of certified associates, 57 percent work part time and 34 percent work full time; nearly all are self-employed. Another 9 percent are hobbyists.

Counting genealogists is more difficult. The Board estimates that there are currently about 320 certified genealogists. But because certification is voluntary, the number of genealogists is much higher. There are 1,100 Association members throughout the country, with another 100 members outside the United States. The Federation of Genealogical Societies has about 550 member societies representing 500,000 people, but many societies do not belong to the Federation. A still greater number of genealogists are not members of any such societies. How many are full



© Rights reserved

or part time or hobbyists also is unknown, as is the number who collect fees for their services.

Genealogists who charge for their work usually do so by the hour; they also bill for out-of-pocket expenses such as travel and photocopies. According to the Board survey, hourly fees for certified associates averaged about \$25, with noncertified survey respondents charging \$23. As with any occupation, fees may be higher or lower depending on a number of factors, including experience, credentials, specialty, and geographic area.

A project's total cost is determined by the number of hours it takes a genealogist to complete it. That depends on the project, but Jane says it ranges from 1 hour for a marriage record search to 1,000 hours for a 3-generation family history. Such estimates can startle new clients, who usually have little idea of the time required.

Sometimes, Jane and her clients agree on a maximum number of hours she should work on a project. Jane lets clients decide whether they want her to continue when she reaches the threshold. Usually, they say she should. "Most people have no concept of how long it takes," says Jane. "They'll tell

you, 'I want everything all the way back to Adam.' You need to be patient and willing to explain again and again why requests like that just aren't practical."

In addition to patience, genealogists need other qualities and skills to do their work well. They should be inquisitive, have good organizational skills, and know how to use a library. Math, accounting, and communication ability also are a must for figuring out dates, tallying hours and expenses, and explaining research results clearly. Knowing the history of a region is often essential to research. Depending on genealogists' specialty areas or geographic location, they may need other skills; Jane notes, for example, that researchers in Louisiana must know some French and Spanish to decipher old records.

Basic computer knowledge also is important. Some libraries have created databases and digitized their records, making select searches faster and the information more accessible. But Jane says some clients have misconceptions about the power of technology. Electronic research is another tool for—not a replacement for traditional methods of—finding information. "An Internet search may give you facts," she says, "but it usually doesn't tell you where those facts came from."

Identifying and documenting facts is the root of genealogy. For Jane and genealogists like her, it's a thrilling challenge—despite the slow pace of the work. Says Jane, "As an old woman once said, 'Genealogy is like water dripping on a rock: it'll make a hole, but it'll take a long time.'" 