

PUT THE Family IN FAMILY HISTORY

By Sally Johnson Odekirk

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When Debra Fotheringham of Utah, USA, attended a local historical pageant, she realized her family could organize a similar celebration about their ancestors. She says, “I had spent many hours and days researching and compiling wonderful stories of our ancestors and knew that many of them could easily be developed into short skits. I felt the yearnings of my heart for those ancestors, and I wanted to share my testimony with my children and grandchildren.”

Her grown children were enthusiastic about the idea, and as they planned their family history pageant, they considered family budgets, children’s ages and abilities, and when and where the pageant should be held. They chose a town where several of their ancestors had settled, and for the pageant they presented five short skits about ancestors whose graves could be found in the cemetery.

The pageant included plenty of interactivity. Debra recalls, “My husband involved everyone in a game of pancake toss as he told the crowd about pioneer children who grew tired of riding in their wagon and began to throw pancakes out of the back in a contest.” A daughter-in-law sang a favorite song of one of the grandmothers, and family members placed small flower arrangements on their ancestors’ graves.

“To my delight, my children suggested that we begin a tradition of family history pageants each year,” Debra says. She adds, “A new grandbaby born later that year was

How do you get your children excited about their heritage? Let us count the ways.

named after one of the ancestors portrayed at the family pageant largely because of the memories developed while learning about his namesake’s story of faith and courage.”

Debra and her family know that family history is about building unity that extends across the generations, binding us together with love. It is a literal fulfillment of the last verses in the Old Testament:

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord:

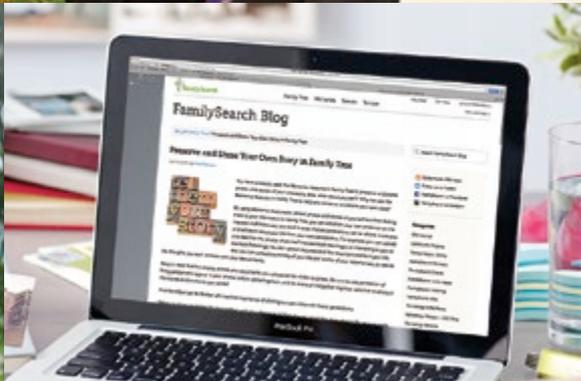
“And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (Malachi 4:5–6).

At a time when the structure and importance of the traditional family are increasingly questioned, we can create a sense of heritage and strength by learning more about those who came before us.

“If you want a happier family,” writes *New York Times* family columnist Bruce Feiler, “create, refine and retell the story of your family’s positive moments and your ability to bounce back from the difficult ones. That act alone may increase the odds that your family will thrive for many generations to come.”¹

Here are some ideas to help your family thrive as you work together to build your family’s story:

- Look at family history websites, especially FamilySearch.org, to find information about your family's history. You can see what has already been discovered about your family or start your own family tree and collaborate with relatives to fill in the branches. Using historical records, work together to find ancestors who need to have their temple work done. Find out what a fan chart is and make one for your family (see, for example, "Fan Chart" at FamilySearch.org).



- Take your children to visit the temple or do baptisms for deceased ancestors. Paige J., 18, of Utah says, "My dad takes me and my siblings to the temple regularly. Sometimes we go early in the morning so we can be back in time for early-morning seminary. It's a sacrifice sometimes to go to the temple or to sit down and look for names, but when I think about all the sacrifices that our ancestors made for us so that we can be here today, it makes the effort all worth it."

- Visit important family sites—such as old homes, schools, or cemeteries—and treat them with respect. Tell about why those places are important. When visiting cemeteries, share the stories of those buried there. If traveling is not possible, you can use the Internet to see where ancestors lived. You may also be able to find family graves online at websites like findagrave.com.

- Pass down stories about your ancestors. Ben and Emily Marble of Idaho, USA, collect their family's faith-promoting stories and tell them to their children during family home evenings or as bedtime stories. "We started telling our children about experiences family members have had with the whisperings of the Holy Ghost," Emily says. "It helps them settle down at night, and it has also become a tradition on camping trips. They love it and are starting to share their own experiences." You may also want to preserve loved ones' images and voices by recording their stories on video or audio files. One of the features at FamilySearch.org lets you add written stories to your ancestors' records.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION OF FAMILY IN CEMETERY BY JUPITERIMAGES/BANANASTOCK/THINKSTOCK

- Display family photos. Social media makes it easy to share photos with extended family members, and FamilySearch.org has a new feature to add photos to your family records (see familysearch.org/photos). Consider looking for online photo enhancement sites that enable you to create drawings of ancestors for children to color as they learn about them.



- Gather and display family heirlooms in your home, cook old family recipes, or plant a heritage garden with flowers and vegetables your grandparents might have had in their gardens.
- Create a calendar with birthdays of special ancestors. Celebrate with a party and tell stories that demonstrate some of their personality traits. You could even dress up and act out family stories to help bring them to life.

- Learn about an ancestor's homeland, including the area's history and traditions. Find out about games and music that were popular when and where your ancestor lived, and try them out with your children. For example, during a reunion at a family homestead, one of my cousins, Jerry Odekirk, gathered sticks and twigs and helped the children weave baskets and make twig art, just as previous generations had done. The children still have fond memories of that experience.

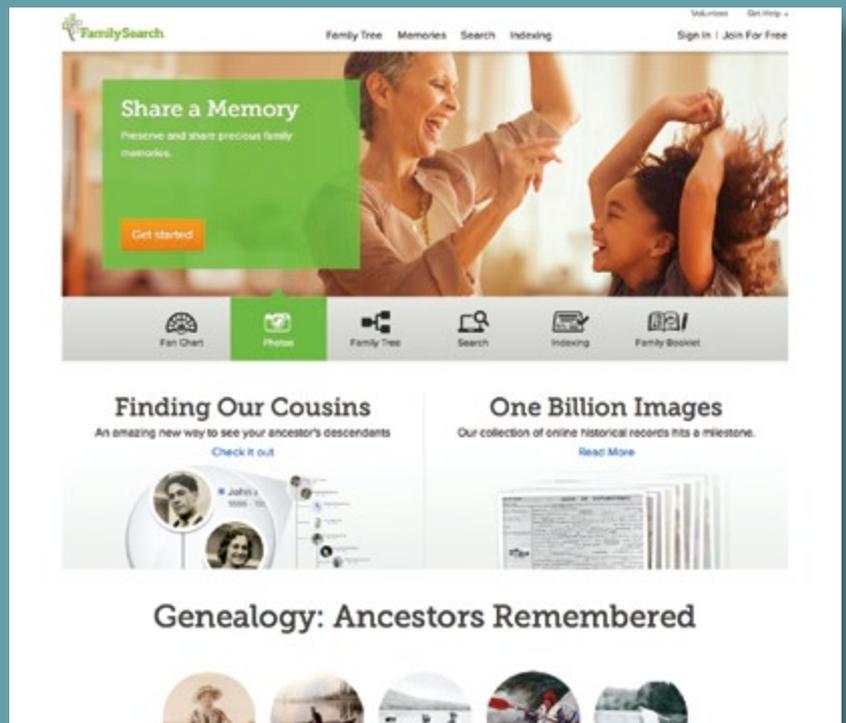
- Index records at FamilySearch.org. Even indexing for a few minutes blesses lives. Madeline W., 15, of Idaho says, "I have been indexing since I was 11, with my mom's help, and have made it a part of my Sunday activities. When I index on Sundays, I have a goal to do at least two batches, and while I work on it I concentrate and think of all the people I am helping on the other side and that those names were real people."



Visit FamilySearch.org for more ideas on enriching your lives with family history. See also lds.org/topics/family-history/family-history-is-for-everyone.

- Keep a photo record of family traditions you're creating now. Remember, building family unity is what family history is really all about.

- Preserve current and past family history with digital scrapbooks and blogs. Remember that uploading stories and photos to FamilySearch.org helps preserve them and make them available for family members.



- Attend family reunions and family organization meetings. These are a great way to get to know extended family and learn about your family's history together. Some family organizations include web pages, regular newsletters, and books giving details about their families. Regular get-togethers help unite even large, distantly related families.

NOTE

1. Bruce Feiler, "The Stories That Bind Us," *New York Times*, March 15, 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-us-this-life.html.

SHARING FAMILY PHOTOS, STORIES, AND DOCUMENTS

Regarding family photos, stories, and documents, the Church's FamilySearch website explains: "These personal reminders of loved ones and days gone by add life to your family tree and help link the generations. FamilySearch provides simple tools to preserve, identify, and share these priceless family treasures."