



Starting from Scratch

BY CONSTANCE PALMER LEWIS

No one in my family had done any family history. How should I begin?

I am a first-generation member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. My younger sister Betsy and I were baptized years ago, when I was 18. Before my baptism our family had never discussed our family's history. Three of our grandparents had died before I was born, and our one living grandmother had never spoken much about her family.

After a sacrament meeting talk about family history, I decided to record what I knew about my family. At that point I was just following instructions. I thought only people who wanted to prove they had distinguished ancestors would research their family history.

I Began by Asking My Parents

When I asked my mom about her family, she immediately referred me to her mother. My grandmother—we called her Gran—was born in Chicago in 1893. Both of her parents had come from Poland, but Gran had no interest in what she called “the old country,” and she didn't even know her grandparents' names. Her husband had been an immigrant, and Gran could tell me nothing about his family.

When I spoke with my dad, I had more success. He knew the full names of each of his grandparents and a little bit about each of their families. He said that one of his grandmothers “had Indian blood,” and one of his great-grandfathers had fought in the Civil War. One of his ancestors long ago had been murdered during an insurrection in Northern Ireland. One branch of Dad's family, the Whites, held annual family reunions with several hundred



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people attending. Dad gave me a booklet prepared by the White family reunion committee that listed living descendants of I. K. White, and I found my name listed in it! The booklet also included a brief history of the White family and some related families.

I obtained some forms to record my family history, and I filled out a family group record for my own family. I knew birth dates for each of my parents and for my brothers and sisters, although I had to ask my dad where in Iowa he was born. A “pedigree chart” sounded to me like something for purebred dogs; it hadn’t occurred to me that it could be used for people. As I filled out my own family tree on the pedigree chart, lots of blank spaces remained. I knew my grandparents’ names, with varying amounts of information for each of them. I even had names for five of my great-grandparents and two great-great-grandparents. But there was so much I didn’t know.

I Wanted to Learn More

I felt the responsibility to provide temple ordinances for these ancestors, so I began doing some research.

First, I sent for death certificates and marriage certificates for each of my deceased grandparents. Each of the certificates included a birth date, and three of them included parents’ names. I had extended my knowledge by a generation! I was disappointed that my maternal grandfather’s birthplace was listed only as “Poland,” but at least it was a start.

I spent a couple of hours every Sunday working on family history. This was 30 years ago, before computers made finding family history information much easier. I filled out forms by hand and began corresponding with relatives, some of whom I had never met. It was fun receiving letters and documents with new information. I felt like a detective.

I encouraged my dad to tell me about his parents. At first he said he couldn’t remember much about his

NOW I HAVE A RECORD



“When I was a young man, I asked my Aunt Lois about our family history, and she showed me an old diary kept by my great-uncle, U. S. Coleman.

The entry for October 12, 1948, began: ‘History of the Coleman family as I can remember from what I have been told, but of which I have no record.’ I treasured those few paragraphs of family history my great-uncle had written from his own memory, but I wished that a record had been kept.

“As a convert to the Church, it is my responsibility to make a record of my ancestors and to provide saving temple ordinances for them. Now I have records of my family history as well as my own journals. I want to make sure that my children and grandchildren will have a record of their ancestors.”

Elder Gary J. Coleman of the Seventy, Keynote Address, Brigham Young University Family History and Genealogy Conference, July 31, 2007.

mother, who had died when he was 12. But as he wrote down what he could remember, more memories came to him. The more he wrote, the more he could remember. As Dad told me about his parents, I realized that, unlike my dad, I was very much like them. I felt a sense of roots and belonging that I hadn't experienced before.

I organized what I learned by recording it on family group sheets, and each piece of information I found made me curious to know more. How could I find out where in Poland my grandfather was born? If my great-grandfather was a minister, where was his church? My great-grandmother lived in Illinois and was buried in Iowa. Why didn't either of those states have a record of her death?

The teacher of my Sunday School family history class was making a trip to Salt Lake City, and she offered to look up ancestors for us. Although we can find this information easily online at FamilySearch.org now, at that time it required a personal visit to the Family History Library. I was surprised when she returned with several family group records for my Kendall ancestors, who were from New England. I had found their names in my dad's family reunion booklet. Some of their temple ordinances had been performed, and I rejoiced that I had cousins, albeit distant cousins, who were members of the Church.

I found several generations of the Kendall family recorded in books at the university library, and I carefully prepared many new family group records. Later I found out that some of the information in the family reunion booklet was in error. I had spent hours learning about someone else's family! As a result, I learned to research only one generation at a time, verifying as I proceeded.

The Schwanz Family

My elderly Aunt Harriet had some interest in family history. Her father was Herman Schwanz, son of Lewis Schwanz, who had fought in the American Civil War. I decided to learn more about Lewis and his family.

Aunt Harriet said that Lewis and his wife, Hannah, had come to the United States from Germany, and she showed me some old tintype photographs of them. When I checked passenger lists, I learned that Lewis was his American name; in Germany he had been Carl Ludwig Schwanz.

I sent for his military records. His enlistment record told me that he was five feet six inches tall, with dark hair and blue eyes, and it even included his own signature. He had enlisted in August 1862 in the Iowa 29th Infantry unit, but his company did not begin active duty until December. Each month's muster roll described where he had served.



GETTING STARTED

Are you ready to learn about your own family history? While each person's situation is unique, here are some guidelines that everyone can follow:

- A family history consultant in your ward can help you get started. Arrange to have him or her visit you to help you organize your information and determine what to do next.
- Get to know older family members. Ask them about their parents and grandparents.
- Use the FamilySearch.org Web site. It is frequently updated with information that will make it easier than ever to identify your ancestors. It can also tell you whether your ancestor has received temple ordinances.
- Your family history consultant can help you submit names of your deceased family members for temple ordinances.



In July 1863, just seven months after he began active duty, Lewis Schwanz was killed at the Battle of Helena.

Aunt Harriet had his son Herman's original christening certificate from 1859. She told me that Lewis and Hannah had two other children, Mary Louise, born in 1860, and a boy who died in infancy. Searching cemetery records told me more about this little family.

On November 12, 1862, Lewis's wife, Hannah, gave birth to a baby boy, George W. Schwanz. I wonder if the "W" was for Washington—I like to think it was, because that would tell me that Lewis loved his new country. Shortly after George's birth, Hannah died, leaving Lewis with three young children. A few weeks later, when Lewis was called to active duty, he left his children with his brother, Frederick, who also had immigrated to Iowa. The day before Christmas, baby George died. When Lewis was killed the following summer, only little Herman and Mary Louise remained.

By putting small pieces of their story together from several different sources, I learned to love this family. I ached for this young father who lost his wife and then had to leave his children to fight for his newly adopted country. I wanted to comfort those little children who were orphaned at such a young age.

For me, this was what Malachi had prophesied—that the prophet Elijah would come to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to their fathers (see Malachi 4:5–6).

Loving My Ancestors

As I become better acquainted with my ancestors, I love them more.

I see myself as part of an eternal family that includes not only my parents and my children but generations of grandparents and grandchildren. My husband and I have had the sacred experience of going to the temple to perform saving ordinances on behalf of many of my ancestors, sealing us together as an eternal family.

During my mortal life, I have had the privilege of knowing only a few of these family members. By doing my family history, I become acquainted with many more of them.

Family History Today

Doing family history is easier now than it was when I began in the 1970s. The microfilm collection of the Church has more than doubled in size and now includes more than 2.5 million rolls of film. It is available through the Family History Library in Salt Lake City and at more than 4,500 family history centers throughout the world. Microfiche, computers, and the Internet have made it much easier to find information about our ancestors. Family history consultants in each ward are there to help those who are starting their family history.

With the resources available in the 1970s, it took me years to learn about my family history. Today, if you are starting from scratch with your family history, you already have a head start. ■