



Where Worlds Meet:

THE
OAKLAND
CALIFORNIA
FAMILY
HISTORY
CENTER

By LaRene Porter Gaunt, Church Magazines

Patrons here often become experts in their areas of research and help one another find ancestors from all over the world.

The Oakland California Temple sits on a prominent hill overlooking the San Francisco Bay Area, a shining beacon to all the world. The large regional family history center just across the parking lot looks out on that world too, offering facilities to help unite the human family.

Leading the way is Ralph Seversen, head of the center. "As a regional family history center, we are the hub for surrounding family history centers," he says. "Our goal is to strengthen our relationship with these centers and share resources. In addition, we have joined with the California Genealogical Society to offer research classes here. This, and our invitation to non-LDS genealogy societies to meet in our facility, is all part of our community outreach."

If Ralph Seversen is the head of the family history center, then Marge Bell is certainly the heart of it. A friendly and knowledgeable woman, Marge has been with the family history center for more than 25 years.

"I have nothing but praise for the patrons who attend the center," she says. "They are the lifeblood of our work

here. As they become expert in their areas of research, many spend time helping others. Also as a regional family history center, we have online access to a few sites that are available only to centers like ours. Patrons are able to use these sites, which greatly enhances their research efforts."

Brother Seversen adds, "I have a testimony that, when we need it, we can have unexpected help from beyond the veil. Once while I was searching through books, two records with the information I needed fell out. Another time someone stole my briefcase filled with irreplaceable Portuguese research. To my amazement, the thief returned the research to my mailbox. Powerful experiences like these often accompany family history work."

You too can enjoy the excitement of family history research. There are 4,600 family history centers in 132 countries. To find the center closest to you, go to LDS.org and click **Family History and Temples**, then **Family History Centers**. Facilities will vary, but all family history centers have consultants who can offer support to those who are searching for information about their deceased ancestors. All are welcome whether they are Latter-day Saints or not. Beginners can learn how to get started. More experienced researchers can access microfilms from among the 2.8 million available from Church headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA.

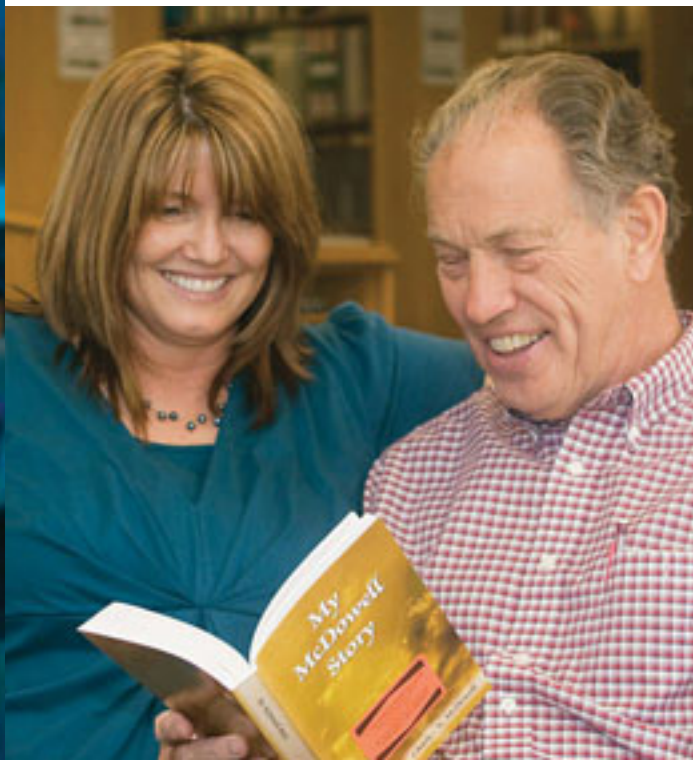
"WE MAKE A GOOD TEAM"

Bonnie McDowell Wathor, who at 18 was the only Latter-day Saint in her family, set out to gather up her four generations of family history.

"Before long, my dad was helping me," Bonnie says. "Now 12 years and five published volumes of well-documented family history later, my dad can't imagine his life without genealogy."

Chuck McDowell, Bonnie's father, is a retired physicist with the natural curiosity and skills of a scientist to seek out the who, what, when, and where of family history. His love for this work is obvious and reflected in his face as he lovingly recounts the minutia of his trips and German research.

"I'm not a Mormon," he says, "but I have experienced many things that I would call 'miracles' as I have done genealogy. I give Bonnie all the information I find so she can take care of the temple ordinances. We make a good team."



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID C. GAUNT, EXCEPT AS NOTED; PHOTOGRAPH OF OAKLAND VISITORS' CENTER BY CRAIG DIMOND

"I LOVE MAPS"

As a young man, Jeremy Frankel mapped his hometown on the edge of London because he was curious about the history of the houses. His skills led him to a career as an engineer in England. He also mapped waterways in America—most notably the Erie Canal. Researching his ancestors came naturally to him, and he soon became a skilled genealogist. As president now of the San Francisco Bay Area Jewish Genealogical Society, Jeremy has helped others discover the resources at the Oakland center. "Those of us involved in Jewish genealogy have several wonderful locations in the Bay Area where we can do research," he says, "but this center has some things we can't find elsewhere. I especially like the map section."



"I SIMPLY COULDN'T FIND THEM"

Wayne Cowley of Medford, Oregon, needed a Swedish family history specialist. "I had tried for years to locate where our family lived in Sweden, but I simply couldn't find them," he says. "When we were called to serve a mission at the visitors' center in Oakland, I had no idea I would meet Beryl Van Noy, who would help me discover my Swedish roots."

Beryl had searched her Swedish ancestry for years at the family history center. She also volunteers as a Swedish specialist. "I believe I was sent here to meet Beryl," says Elder Cowley. "We have had amazing results gathering my family history."



"I LOVE HELPING OTHERS FIND THEIR ANCESTORS"

Electra Price is a volunteer African-American specialist. She has an energy and excitement that belies her 83 years. Her laughter is contagious and draws people to her.

Like many patrons at the family history center, Electra is not a Latter-day Saint. "I started coming in 1989. We learned together that family history is the same for everyone no matter what your background. You start with yourself, establish where you are from, and then search the

records from there—remembering, of course, to document everything."

Electra's initiative and leadership ability had already helped with the formation of the Bay Area African-American Genealogical Society. Now she serves as a bridge between the society and the family history center.

"We now have a large group that meets monthly in a 60-person multimedia classroom at the family history center," she says. "I love watching others awaken to the excitement of finding their ancestors."





WARM AND INVITING

Though the center is downstairs in the visitors' center, it is on a hill so two of the back walls boast floor-to-ceiling windows that fill much of the center with light. With dramatic landscaping outside and large vases filled with fresh flowers throughout the room, this family history center is warm and inviting. Add to that the friendly, knowledgeable staff and patrons, who are all focused on discovering their ancestors, and it's like coming home.

Patrons come here to work, and they settle down quickly to take advantage of every minute they have. Some pull out books, others go immediately to the computers and log onto FamilySearch.org. Still others load microfilm or microfiche onto readers. As in any other family history center, large or small—patrons are focused on identifying their deceased ancestors. (See oaklandfhc.org for more information about this regional family history center.)



Left: While his wife helps patrons with their family history research, Milan McDowell spends his time repairing books, which are a part of the center's 10,000-book collection. Right: Carol Hoyt is one of 70 volunteers at the center.



"NEW FAMILYSEARCH OPENS THE WAY"

Mary Finau serves on the staff at the family history center and helps patrons learn to use new FamilySearch. She also helps those of Tongan ancestry do their family history. Up until a century ago Tongans had no written language. As a result, Tongans memorized and passed on family history by word of mouth. Dates were often approximated and locations were simply stated as "Tonga," but relationships were well-known. This pattern of oral histories exists in several other cultures besides Tonga. Meeting the goal of providing temple ordinances for deceased ancestors has been difficult for Latter-day Saints whose family history has not been written down.

"With the new FamilySearch," says Mary, "names can be submitted for temple work based on relationships. This means that Tongans and others with oral family histories can be fully involved in family history and temple work."



"MY HEART IS ROOTED IN MY NATIVE AMERICAN ANCESTRY"

Debbie Smith is a Church service missionary and a Native American specialist at the center. Though she has the fair skin and blue eyes of her German and Irish ancestors, her heart is firmly rooted in her Sioux and Apache ancestry. Debbie's mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother were Native Americans. Each of these women married a German or Irish man and remained on the reservation, where Debbie was born.

"I have a strong love for my Native American ancestry," she says. "I have done much of my research through travel, but I bring what I have learned to the center to help others. As a cataloguer here, I love being a part of a group that helps make records available for everyone."



"I DISCOVERED MY CHINESE ANCESTRY WENT BACK TO THE SEVENTH CENTURY"

Patriarch George Huang left China as a child, but longed to know of his Chinese ancestors. He visited China to seek them out and discovered his genealogy intact. "Now my family is actively involved in performing the temple ordinances for them in the Oakland temple," he says. "It is a great blessing in our lives."

