

ON THE ROAD TO...

Family History Research

with Linda Johnson

*The On the Road to...column is an opportunity for a Quarterly Speed Bump writer to sit down with a hobbyist and talk about how to get into their particular hobby and what they find to be rewarding about it. In this issue we're on the road to **family history research**. We were pleased to sit down with Linda Johnson to learn more.*

QSB: Do you think of yourself as a *genealogist*, *family historian*, or other?

Linda: I tend to lean toward the family historian label. *Genealogist* and *family historian* seem to be used interchangeably today but genealogy to me seems to be more the science of tracing one direct line of your family back.

QSB: What about family history appealed to you?

Linda: I always liked history and was lucky to have family members still around. I heard stories from my great grandmother about her childhood in Norway. I am close to my family and wanted to hear the stories. So, at first I was just learning more about the people in my life.



▲ Linda's Great Grandmother is the tallest young woman standing in the back row. This picture was taken a few years after the Semeling family arrived in America from Norway.

QSB: How long have you been doing this type of research? And how did you get started with the formal research?

Linda: Since 1988. I enrolled in a class at Sacramento State University. I needed to fill a time slot to get financial aid. The class is no longer offered but it was part of the liberal studies and library studies programs. It was a night class and most of the students were a little older. I actually chose my career as an archivist because of the genealogy class. It was the first time I ever went to an archives to do research and it was fascinating.

QSB: What do you recommend to others who might be interested in taking up the hobby?

Linda: Pick up how-to books. *The Source* [Ed. note: *The Source: A Guidebook Of American Genealogy* by Loretto Dennis Szucs and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking] is a good one with information for beginners as well as more advanced researchers.

Record information from your own family. I was fortunate to have great grandparents and two sets of grandparents to talk to. Start with family first and don't think that you'll be able to get back to Adam & Eve at the beginning of your search.

QSB: What tools do you use and what tools would you recommend to a beginner?

Linda: I use a software program called Legacy (free standard version at LegacyFamilyTree.com). There is Personnel Ancestry File (free on FamilySearch.org) and Family Tree Maker. If you have the ability to use a software program, use it. I used to use the Ultimate Family Tree program but it was bought out and I had to import the data to a new program. A lot of these programs have user groups that can be very helpful.

I also highly recommend a system to organize paper records--it's pretty easy to organize the electronic records but the paper files can get out of hand. I use the Family Roots Organizer system for the paper files (Mary Hill is the developer) and, if you use Legacy, you can color code digital files to match. The Mary Hill system is the one I started out on so I find it works really well for me.

A Newbie should also join a local genealogical society as

well as a society located in the area you're doing research. Also check to see if there is a single name association. If you have a somewhat unusual surname, see if you can find the association for your surname.

And don't expect everything to be online!

QSB: What was your most memorable research find and why?

Linda: Every once in a while I do a Google search. I was working on my 3rd Great Grandfather, Samuel Kingsley,



who is one of my "brick walls." I do know he moved from New York to Michigan in about 1852. Lo and behold, up popped a little website that showed the house he built. It now houses the historical society for Romulus, Michigan. I'm an archivist so I got excited. The house is a nice example of the architectural genre and maybe was a stop on the Underground Railroad though I haven't been able to confirm that.

QSB: Is there a research breakthrough you'd most like to make?

Linda: I want to get the Kingsleys "back over the pond." I can't find my 3rd Great Grandfather's parents. Samuel Kingsley was born in 1810 and his parents were born in New York. You look back about twenty years for a generation. He seemed to follow his wife's family as they moved around so that may be an indication that he was orphaned at a young age. Online, I found another Kingsley house in the same area and they might be related. They were all Wesleyan Methodists.



QSB: Did doing family history research match your expectations? Or what has surprised you the most?

Linda: I think starting out I really didn't know what to expect. I found a lot of my early information through letters to others family members and online and in books.

I have been surprised how much interest my family shows.

I started just for myself but it's amazing how much people are interested and want to know the stories. Three of my nephews had to do research for classes and interview family members. They were able to get information from my dad who rarely talked about his time in the Navy. But he talked to the boys about his time on board the ship and about a fire on board after a munitions explosion. He had to escape through a porthole or whatever the windows are called on a ship. I never knew how close he came to not making it.

My nephew Carlos is also learning Norwegian and I'm looking forward to having him help me translate 18th and 19th century Norwegian parish registers.

What my plan is for when I retire is to return to where my family came from and trace their migration west. I also plan to compile what I've found.

QSB: What have you gotten from doing family history?

Linda: A sense of self and a sense of accomplishment. My family has never been rich and fabulous nor do I want to connect with someone rich and famous. It's a sense of being a part of this big thing.

QSB: What are you working on now?

Linda: I'm cleaning up citations because I'm not always very good about keeping up on that. It's really important to cite sources so you can get back to that original document.

QSB: Are there any other books or websites that you've found to be particularly useful?

Linda: Free sites like Cyndi's List [www.cyndislist.com]- she's compiled literally a list of every genealogical site she can find. She's got them arranged in various ways so you can search by names or location or other subject.

FamilySearch [FamilySearch.org] is, I think, the best free search for people just getting started. USGenWeb [usgenweb.org] has websites for all the states. FindAGrave [www.findagrave.com] has a lot of cemetery information. You have to remember that anyone can add to it so take the information with a grain of salt unless there's a photo that proves a tombstone is actually there.

There are a couple of books by William Dollarhide that are good. His US Census book [*The Census Book: A Genealogist's Guide to Federal Census Facts, Schedules and Indexes*] has state pages that give former county boundaries and tell what information is available for each state.

A book that explains townships is also good, like John Andriot's *Township Atlas of the United States*. If you're not familiar with the Township and Range system--especially in the West where there are so many wide open spaces that Township and Range is very important, then this book will help. It's not as useful for the East where they use Metes and Bounds.

QSB: It there anything you'd like to add?

Linda: I want to emphasize: Start now. Don't wait until your elders pass on. We know people aren't writing letters and diaries like they used to. Don't be afraid to ask questions. But be gentle--especially with people in their eighties or older. Try not to put your personal opinions and beliefs on what someone did in the past because you don't know what really happened. Some people can get so embarrassed about what they find in court records or some such but you don't know.

Have fun. When it stops being fun, put it away for a while. I've had to put it away for a while for a different reason: When I get working on something, sometimes it's all I want to do.

Linda Johnson, our interviewee, received her Master's Degree in Public History from California State University, Sacramento in 1993 and has been an archivist at the California State Archives since 1997. She has given many talks about genealogy and genealogical resources in the years since. In her spare time she continues to do her own family history research as outlined above. She's traced some of her Norwegian line back to the 1720s.

Start Your Own Family History Research ►

Fill in the 4-generation chart on the next page with your name, your parents' names, and so on. Beneath the names fill in as much information as you can find regarding **birthdates**, **birthplaces**, **marriage dates**, **death dates**, and **places of death** when applicable. You may wish to assign a number to each individual for tracking purposes. Remember, this is just one way for you to collect the basic information that will give you clues on where to look next (many other ways of organizing such information exist--find one that's right for you). Talk to any older relatives you may have. If you have no one left to talk to, start with what you remember and then do some basic online research at the sites Linda recommends above.

◀ Previous page photo spread: The Samuel Kingsley home with the last Kingsley owners pictured out front.

Four Generations of My Family

