

HOW DO YOU

▶ WRITE YOUR FAMILY HISTORY?

Family history is more than names, places, and dates. Describe ancestors in their historical, cultural, and economic milieu to understand and best chronicle their lives. Find the stories that will enliven your ancestral book. Go where your ancestors lived. Tramp musty courthouses. Visit town libraries. Seek local sources. Travel, study, interview. Explore the Internet, but do not accept anyone else's work unless they adequately support it with source references that you can verify.

Research must be a continual process. Discover ancestral generations and how and where they lived, as you link them to known forbearers. Research progress is like finding and fitting jigsaw puzzle pieces, but more satisfying. Seeking and finding forgotten generations will be as rewarding for you as the results will be for the readers of your narrative.

Do not fret if your forebearers were ordinary people. Their challenges and solutions, failures and successes will fascinate you, as you reflect that they are the root while you are the branch. They survived so you could unearth them and relate their life story. Introduce them in your account as the flesh and blood persons they were. Expect surprises, disappointments, and brick walls as part of the search.

Busy young people should not wait to interview and record memories and tales of older relatives. Do so before they leave. Failing to do this will be your biggest regret. You can always write your family history later.

Gilbert Drendel '58 was Cornell student body president and a member of Phi Beta Kappa. He graduated summa cum laude, attended Harvard Law School, and practiced law in suburban Chicago. He is a former chairman of the Cornell Board of Trustees now serving his 20th year on the board. Drendel is writing his seventh family history book.