

LESSONS LEARNED ON FOUR HOURS PER WEEK

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As I wrote in a previous column, "Genealogy on Four Hours a Week," I have resolved to spend a dedicated, specified four hours every week working on my own family research.

The first week was spent, in part, getting organized. I had a 2-inch thick hodgepodge of paper, plus several computer files. I cleared off a large table and sorted the papers into logical groupings, planning to process each stack systematically. I knew it would take more than one week, so I clipped the papers in each stack together and labeled them with sticky notes.

The problem was the stack labeled "misc." Rather than postpone the unpleasant, I tackled it first. Most of the papers belonged in a category I call NMF (Not My Family). I reviewed each sheet, and entered brief notes about some in the computer because it is possible (based on time and locality) that they might turn out to be connected.

In the "misc." stack there were also copies of several pieces of correspondence from a family file at a local society. In another article, I discussed the benefits of typing every word. I did not do so with these. I did, however, *read* every word. As is to be expected, I found a mix of what I call "real data" and poor conclusions about family structure.

This did not deter me from reading every word. Thus it was that I spotted the information stating that the family had four children baptized at a certain church. The name of the church wasn't exactly correct (the writer had merged two congregations into one), and the number of children disagreed with my "real data." I had baptisms for two. Given the errors I had already spotted in the correspondence, I could have ignored the discrepancy, but that isn't necessarily wise.

I am aware that according to the plan I outlined earlier, I wasn't supposed to be researching at this point, but I couldn't resist, especially as I had some resources at home that might help. They did. I found the other two baptisms buried under a significantly different surname spelling. The given names, however, fit perfectly into the family I had constructed from the father's will.

Lesson 1: Read every word.

Lesson 2: Don't assume information that conflicts with your information is wrong.

The sources I used didn't include baptismal sponsors. I would need to look for that information elsewhere. I needed a "to do" list. I checked the Family History Library Catalog and made a list of available resources. I might be able to find some of them at our local library, or perhaps I will order microfilm.

Lesson 3: Keep a detailed "to do" list, identifying specific sources to check.

Inspired by this new information. I finished reviewing the "misc." stack and began entering data from another stack. (I wisely began with the one most distant from my direct line.) I didn't get far before my four hours was up.

When I told friends of my four-hours-per-week plan, several said "but I have a spouse/children/parents/job/volunteer work/[fill in the blank]." I have a life too. On the second week of my Thursday plan, I had a conflict. But the core of my plan isn't Thursdays, it is four hours per week, so I rescheduled and stuck to my commitment.

Lesson 4: Life gets in the way, but don't use it as an excuse to break your resolution.

That second session was boring and unrewarding, but I got most of the documents entered and added items to the to-do list. (Did you think I would have some amazing breakthrough each week? Not so. This is reality.)

Although I wasn't quite done entering what was in my file folder, the microfilm I had ordered before starting on this plan had arrived, so I decided to devote the third session to the fun part, research at the library. You may have seen film clips of the "Dallas ice storm" on the network news. (See Lesson 4.) It was Friday before I could get up my driveway, but Saturday found me at a microfilm reader and checking indexes in books.

The fourth week involved what I call "clean it up and close it down." I had to finish entering the contents of the file folder, plus photocopies and notes from the library. I worked on the much-overdue compilation to send to my genealogy cousin.

Session four highlighted many loose ends, such as incomplete citations and lack of clarity as to such things as the time periods covered by some of the records I had checked. Furthermore, I can't read my own handwriting. I ended up making a quick, unplanned trip to the library.

Lesson 6: I need to be more organized at the time I am collecting information. I should take the laptop computer with me, even when I plan to check only a few things.

I threw away unnecessary papers, stacked documents in chronological order, and printed copies of the chronology, narrative, and to-do list on colored paper. I mailed the narrative and photocopies to the cousin and filed the family folder.

Lesson 7: It's nice to have a plan. It means I actually finish something occasionally!

My next project is preparing something for publication, so it won't be as interesting, but I look forward to the week when I can say "That's done, too!"