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UNEARTHING THEIR FAMILIES' PASTS

Paul Bonasera Special To Plus

Ron Wadsack's life would have been seriously altered if it weren't for what happened to his great-grandfather while he was serving in the Army in 1875.

“Great grandpa August Gussman came from Germany in 1868 to avoid being drafted into the Kaiser's army,” Wadsack, 66, said of his stepmother's grandfather. “The 1870 census found him in the U.S. Army boot camp in Kansas serving under Gen. George Armstrong Custer.”

Gussman went with Custer's 7th Calvary to Fort Abraham Lincoln and the black hills in then the Dakota Territory. His term in the Army ended in 1875. He reenlisted for another five years, but this time was assigned to Fort Johnston in North Carolina. And that's where he was when he learned that Custer and many of his friends in the 7th Calvary had been killed in fighting at Little Big Horn on June 25, 1876.

Unearthing that sort of detail about the past is what draws people to the study of their own genealogy and the Morris Area Genealogy Society. The society, which has more than 300 members, meets at 6:45 p.m., with refreshments at 6:30, on the first Tuesday of each month at the Morris County Library.

Its meetings are usually educational, featuring guest speakers, said Bob Stein, president of the Morris Area Genealogy Society. The Feb. 6 meeting, for example, featured workshops on beginning genealogy, New Jersey genealogy, PC genealogy, land records, Irish genealogy and DNA genealogy.

Over the past 10 years there has been “an explosion of genealogical information on the Internet and an enormous groundswell of volunteers doing genealogy research,” Stein said.

Genealogy society members Martha Corson and her husband Kenneth of Chatham got involved in family history in 1973 while in graduate school in North Carolina. They joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and took a genealogy course which was “very engrossing” in Durham, N.C., Martha Corson recalled. Kenneth was attending Duke Law School in Durham and Martha was a Latin and Russian Studies major at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Martha Corson's maiden name is Purvis. It's a Scottish-Irish name; many Scottish people settled in Northern Ireland during the 1600s and 1700s, she noted. Her family arrived in New England in the 1630s.

Her mother's great-grandfather, whose name was Glancy, was a whaling captain.

“What's neat is the feeling of kinship you get with last names you're connected with,” Corson said. “I met a lady in Madison, Anita Tilton Mott, who was a Mormon and she ended up being my 10th cousin. In 1680 we had a same ancestor.”

Martha Corson had Pennsylvania Quakers and Pennsylvania Germans on her father's side.

Her great-grandmother from Northern Ireland, whose name was Purvis, married in Manhattan a Purvis from Mississippi.

Kenneth Corson has deep roots in New Jersey; the book “300 Years of The Corson Family in America” by Orville Corson, published in 1939, details much of that history.

His family moved from New Amsterdam, which became New York City, to northern Cape May County in the late 1600s. The Corsons who settled there were whalers and the area is known as Corson's Inlet. It has a sign on the Garden State Parkway.

Ruth Daniels joined the Morris Area Genealogy Society shortly after it organized in February 1988. She had started studying her family's history at 16, said Daniels, who lives in Randolph.

“I started with what I knew and what my family knew,” she said. “I started making notebooks and charts.”

Her sources of information included the New Jersey Archives, the National Archives, which had a branch in Bayonne, and the Morristown-Morris Township Library. The Morristown-Morris Township Library has a respected genealogy section.

“There are always interesting and unexpected things that pop up when you're searching,” Daniels said.

She recently discovered that her grandfather had two or three brothers who traveled west on the “orphan trains.” Around the time of the Civil War to the 1920s there was a minister concerned about inner city children who organized placing children with farm families in the Midwest.

A year ago, Daniels found one of her grandfather's brothers in the 1900 census. He was with the family that adopted him in Nebraska.

The Family History Center in Morristown on James Street is part of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. It is one of more than 4,000 branches of the church's giant Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah. Wadsack and his wife Joan are volunteer directors of the center.

Wadsack helps genealogists use microfilms at the Morristown branch, which the Salt Lake City library sells for \$5.50 a piece.

This enables the public to search through copies of original records. Volunteers of the LDS church have collected hundreds of millions of records from around the world of individuals who lived from 1500 to 1900.

In the search of his own past, Wadsack's discovery about August Gussman was particularly important to him since his father divorced a short time after he was born and married Martha Gussman when he was three.

“I was very close to my stepmother,” Wadsack said. “She raised me.”

Al Zimmerman, past president of the Morris Area Genealogy Society, started researching family history in 1994. His brother spent quite a bit of time setting up a family tree in 1960. The tree carried all the family lines back to great-grandparents, Zimmerman, 76, recalled.

“When I retired I decided I was going to find out where everyone came from...from what countries, what towns, etc.” Zimmerman said. “I carried the lines as far back as I could.”

One side of his family went back to 1620 in Switzerland and the Zimmerman side back to 1780 in Germany. He visited the two towns, Heumaden, Germany and Cossonay, Switzerland. His great-great-grandmother on his mother's side, Jenny Desponds, came from Lussery, Switzerland to the U.S. in 1848.

He is working on Zimmermans in Germany, trying to determine whether ones that he met there a year ago are the same family that would be related through his great-great-grandfather Adam Zimmerman.

“The fun of it is in the chase, really solving a monster puzzle. And I just love puzzles,” Zimmerman said.

Stories about ancestors found in genealogy “make the people human, real people,” Stein said, “not just a name with a birth and death date.”

While going through 1779 funeral records of ancestors in northern Germany, Stein found a husband who lost his wife and three of their children to a plague in the same week. Claus Schriever was his fifth great-grandfather on his father's side. Schriever remarried in 1780. He had a total of 14 children.

“Usually in those days when a spouse died, the surviving husband or wife remarried within 12 months,” Stein said. “They couldn't afford to wait longer.”

A surviving husband needed a wife to look after the children and a surviving wife needed a husband to bring in an income,” Stein said.

“This gives insight into how people lived and how they died due to disease and hard times,” Stein said. “It also shows that a lot of people came to this country for a better way of life, to escape religious persecution, disease, war, famine and poverty.”

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