



The 275th wedding anniversary of Thomas Carpenter and Jane Rugg with their 7th great grandchildren.

The “Cool” Parts of Genealogy: Engaging My Teenagers Case Study

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When you are trying to engage your family members with their family history, your teenagers will probably be your toughest audience. But even teenagers can be inspired by their family history and enjoy the loving family ties of their past. In fact teenagers may be the family members who need their family history the most. Family history can provide a scaffolding that will strengthen a teen’s self image and faith in the future during this challenging period of their life. Family history is one of the most important tools you can use to empower your teens and help them become well adjusted adults.

The Starting Point

We started with a Christmas present project. *The kids were motivated and we had a deadline-- both of which were crucial to our initial success.* We weren't trying to turn them into genealogists--we were just working on a one time project.

We picked a technologically easy project although not the most interesting one. We worked to digitize a volume of my Great-Grandfather's genealogy research as a Christmas gift to my parents. All five of us were assigned a different part of the book. You can see the details of the project at <http://thechartchick.blogspot.com/2011/10/i-come-by-it-honestlyour-teenage.html>. My log of the entire project can be seen at: <http://thechartchick.blogspot.com/search/label/teenagers>. In retrospect I should have picked something that was a little more fun. *If you engage a young person with the fun of family history, you can teach them the details of how to do it right later-- once they are engaged. If you bore them with the details right off the bat, they will never learn to do it right because they will never find it interesting enough to pursue.* We worked throughout the project to bring my great-grandfather to life as a person. We used a book my grandfather wrote about his father. That ended up being our lucky break. I was able to make the project more palatable because I had the resources to make it interesting. In the end we digitized 453 family group sheets. And when we asked if they were willing to work on other family history projects with us they said "yes." SCORE!

15 Year Old Boy

So the next trick was to find some projects that would interest them more. *I needed to play into their individual interests and abilities.*

We discovered my 15 year-old's interest when we decided to create some YouTube videos for my blog posts. We created videos of going to the library to look up some of the sources in our extraction project. He also went on to create videos about some of our family recipes. And then his interest was caught in creating a website and recordings of my great-grandfather's amberola. You can see it at <http://cadp.familychartmasters.com>. He also learned to cook Eggs and Soldiers—the perfect British soft boiled egg that my Great Grandfather enjoyed every morning.

Lately, when we were working on some other family history interests, he mentioned that family history was "boring." But when I reminded him about the "cool parts" he admitted that "yeah, some of it is kind of cool." Close enough for now.

13 Year Old Boy

My 13 year old son has always been our name collector. Even before our project he had surfed through FamilySearch a few times looking for the ends of lines and how far things go out. He is really intrigued with the really ancient stuff--kings and such. We've discussed the issues with documentation and credibility on these lines but he's enjoying the search. My grandmother had the same fascination with our royal ancestry and collected some of our family history along those lines. So he is working on matching up my grandmother's paf file that I inherited with FamilySearch through one of the FamilySearch certified softwares.

The genealogy is installed in a folder on his desktop called "Crap My Parents Installed on My Computer," but he hasn't uninstalled it. And every once in a while he comes in and tells me about some new discovery he's made on the lines. He is doing genealogy in a teenage way--just the way he should be doing it.

12 Year Old Girl

Every so often things come up in life that turn into family history learning opportunities. My 12 year old daughter seems to resonate best with those. She has spent some time reading the books my mother has written about some of our ancestors. And she was also intrigued with indexing and the 1940 census. She is always happy to help me with family history conferences although she has alot of ideas about how to make them more interesting.

Travel—The Cosmos Align

Traveling with children to a family history site is a natural way to really bridge the generation gap. It gives you a chance to teach your family about their family history but also gives you time to be together and strengthen family relationships. It is much more than just a family vacation--it is a chance for you to literally share common ground. There is something about being where your ancestors lived that reaches even the most disinterested youth.

We've taken two family history trips together this last year. You can see my notes about them at <http://zapthegrandmagap.blogspot.com/search/label/Travel> and <http://thechartchick.blogspot.com/2012/08/teenager-update-family-history-trip.html>. It is so moving for me to see the breadth of the family I come from reaching out and then down into the next generation. Here are some of the things we learned:

1. *Prepare.* We put together a Google Earth Tour to show them where we were going and who had lived there. A very valuable tool that keeps their attention.
2. *Focus.* I would have loved to have traced all of the lines in the areas we visited, but the kids would have been completely overwhelmed. It was good to focus on one line so that they could really come to know those people.
3. *Be flexible.* Things will not go as planned. I could fixate on being disappointed in what we weren't able to see. But I can't let that overshadow how much we did see and learn.
4. *Look for aha moments.* We had several aha moments because of the recent research We've been working on.
5. *Sample the local culture.* It was fun to try the food, see the sites and be thinking of what our ancestors ate and did.
6. *Schedule down time.* Family History trips are go, go, go, learn, learn, learn. I think most family members of all ages will get tired at some point. Then they can't absorb as much.
7. *Let them pick a few activities.* I think most youth can pick some local sites they want to see on any family trip. Again, it is good to have some down time and let them process a little.
8. *Watch for serendipity.* It makes you feel like they are watching over you.
9. *Read in the car.* When you are traveling--especially by car, you have a captive audience. Use that time to read to them, show pictures, etc. Refresh their memories to make these ancestors become more real in the places you are visiting.
10. *Take a chart.* We all referred to the chart many times. It is useful to have the basic names, dates, and places out where you can see them. And even better to have the known pictures available right there together.

Other Ideas We Haven't Tried Yet

In my back pocket, I have a couple of other ideas that we haven't tried out yet. We're going to work next on incorporating some of the ipad and android apps, checking out Gothic handwriting (it's like a secret code) and more indexing. We're also going to work more on interviewing grandparents, creating charts (of course) and I'm sure we'll come across other ideas as we go. If you have come across any ideas that have intrigued a teenager please let us know at janet@zapthegrandmagap.com.

The 6 basic principles of sharing your family history with your children.

1. *If you make it boring it will be boring.* Start with an attention getter and make sure you are a good story teller. Anyone would be interested in seeing a picture of their great-grandfather who looked just like them. And any child would like to see his grandfather's school report card when he was their age. All children will listen to stories about the trouble their mother got into as a child. Start with photos, games, or engaging stories if you want your family to be interested in what you have to tell them about their history.

2. *Don't underestimate their abilities and interest level.* Working with children, I've been consistently amazed at how much interest they had even when I didn't expect it. When you expect them to be interested, but keep in mind their attention level, you will find that they will surprise you with their excitement about their history. If they aren't all that interested, return to the paragraph above and analyze the way you are presenting it.
3. *You may not inspire a self proclaimed genealogist but you will have a child that knows about their family history.* I'm not concerned about my children becoming zealous genealogists. I just want them to grow up knowing about their family of origin. Any child can benefit from the blessings of family history whether they become a zealot for the cause or not. Each time they encounter their family's history more and more of the benefits of knowing their past will come into play in their lives.
4. *Teaching about family history is a lifestyle, not a single event.* My mother eventually caught my interest by surrounding my life with family history. Every little encounter children have with their family history is a little more they know about their past. Encounters can be as small as a comment or as large as a full scale family event. Over the course of time, all the encounters with family history add up to a foundational knowledge about where the family came from and a more developed sense of self for the child.
5. *Family history is best passed down when you focus on the family members you are trying to involve.* Know the attention span of the youth you are working with. Know how they approach problems and what frustrates them. Know what interests and hobbies they have that might tie in to a project you want to do. Find something they have in common with an ancestor. When you bring the family history to the child rather than try to bring the child to family history, your child's connection will be much stronger and easier to forge.
6. *If you are excited about it, and if you have a good relationship, they will be more inclined to be excited about their family history too.* My kids joke that when they work on family history with me they get in my "good zone." They know that I am passionate about it, and they know that I love it when they get involved. They know that after working on family history with me, they can talk me into many privileges that I might have otherwise said no to because I trust that their souls are fed. I know they have already developed a love for family history because they love their grandparents. And hopefully their experiences with family history will be associated with joy because their mother was so happy with them when they were working on it.

And the Biggest Point I've Learned About Involving Youth With Family History:

Don't overprogram them. Just let them be curious. All too often I've wanted to jump in and instruct them--"do it this way, come see how you do this"--but when I go that direction I miserably fail. Counter-intuitive to my passion for genealogy, I need to let them discover it in their own way. The curiosity is what I loved when I started. As they get curious, I'm here to help.