

AHEAD
In Covid Lockdown, the Family Historian Has a Captive Audience

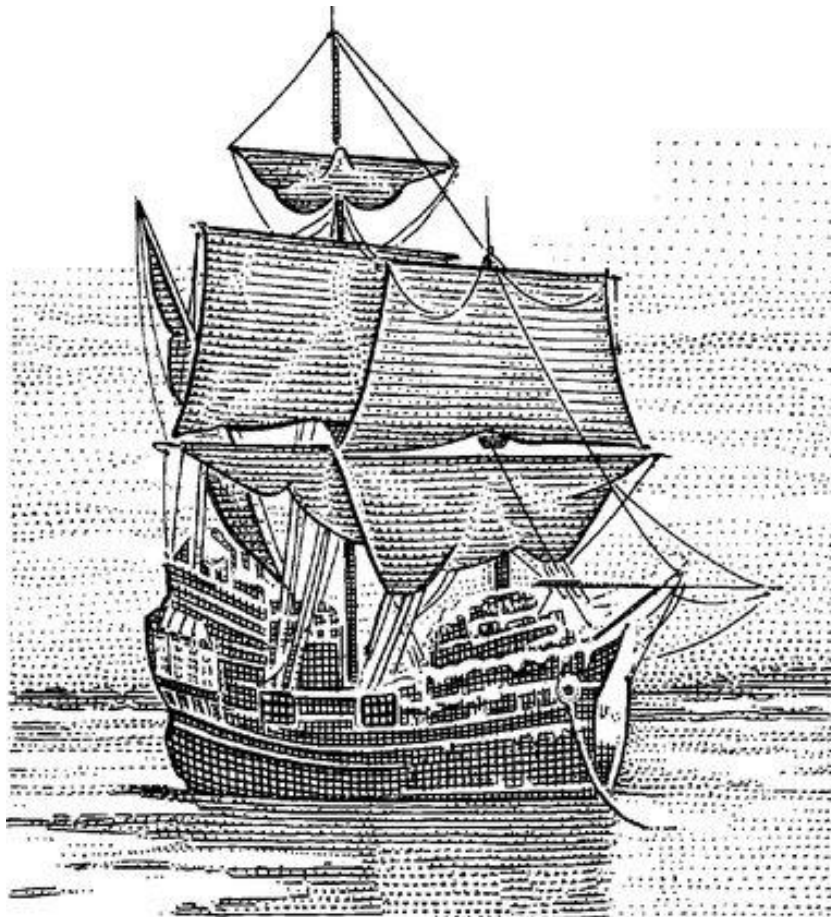
The ranks of amateur genealogists have grown during the coronavirus pandemic, and they're boring their sheltered relatives; 'I don't know why he isn't fascinated'



Pamela Haltmeyer used lockdown time to research family history, above, two of her ancestors. HALTMEYER FAMILY

By Kathleen Hughes
July 14, 2020 10:42 am ET

Many households already had that earnest and sometimes annoying member: the family historian.



Forebears aboard? Ask your family historian

July 14, 2020 – *The Wall Street Journal*

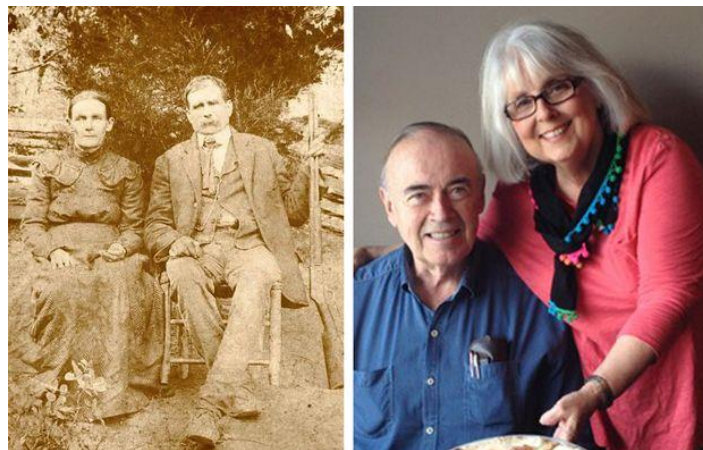
During [the pandemic](#), their numbers have grown, and they are spending endless hours tracking down ancestors, scanning photos, building family trees online—and attempting to share it all with everyone else.

Pamela Haltmeyer, 77, has been trying to interest her husband in her findings as they shelter at home in Garland, Texas. Mrs. Haltmeyer, a retired language therapist, has been working on her family tree, trying to identify other descendants of her great-great-grandfather, John W. Noble.

She may have found one and plans to send the woman a DNA kit as a gift, along with some cookies, just to be sure. Her husband, Norman Haltmeyer, isn't enthused.

“It seems like Norman would be fascinated by the tidbits that I share with him,” she says. “It's history. I don't know why he isn't fascinated.”

Mr. Haltmeyer, an 84-year-old retired psychology professor, explains: “Other people have other things to do,” he says. “Life now is more important than what happened 20 ancestors ago.”



Mrs. Haltmeyer's great-great-grandmother, far left, with her second husband. Right, Pamela and Norman Haltmeyer.

PHOTO: HALTMEYER FAMILY

The distant past can seem very present to family historians, particularly those with [endless hours at home](#). Ancestry, the family-history website, says it has seen a 37% increase in new subscriptions year-over-year during the pandemic.

But being trapped at home doesn't mean the rest of the family is interested, as Sherry Gooden discovered. The former waitress was quarantined with her husband and children aged 5, 8 and 20, in La Porte, Texas, when she took her first "deep dive" into family history.

In April, she opened the [Tupperware](#) bin, stored for years in her mother's shed and then in her closet, confronting hundreds of old photos. She spread them across her bed and took pictures to post online.

"I plan on sharing every piece of everything I can for anyone in the future," says Ms. Gooden, 43. "I have become obsessed with it."



'I have become obsessed,' says Sherry Gooden, here with family photos.

PHOTO: C.J. CURRY

When she showed her family the photos, they looked but quickly left to do something else. “I couldn’t catch them with anything,” she says, “even the cool stuff from my great-uncle with the CIA.”

Her son C.J. Curry, 20, says the spy finding was “pretty interesting,” but: “The random stuff isn’t interesting.” Husband James Gooden, a 49-year-old pipe-fitter, says: “Once she got past the great-great-grandfathers, I lost interest.”

Focus on the scandals, and everyone will be interested, say some professional personal historians, who are paid to help people research their histories and create books and videos.

“Let’s be honest about this topic,” says Peggy Greenwood, 76, one such historian in St. Louis. “Genealogy is boring. But everyone loves a good story and family history is filled with very good stories.”

Great stories aren’t always easy to uncover, found Chris Strickler, 58, a retired industrial buyer in Akron, Ohio. He caught Covid-19 early this year and was in bed a couple of weeks, he says. He spent hours every day tracking his ancestors to the late Middle Ages.

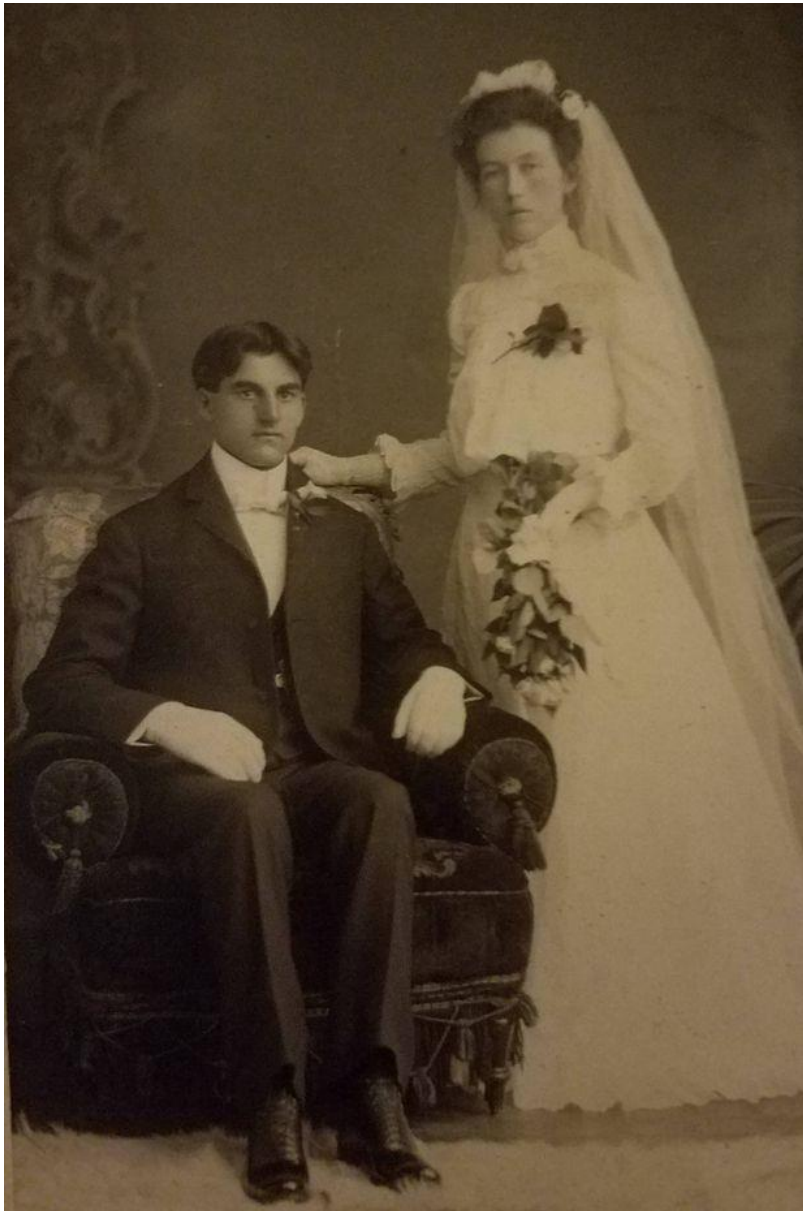


Linda Andersson and son Jacob. ‘He just looks at me and listens,’ she says.

PHOTO: JACOB ANDERSSON

“I was blown away,” says Mr. Strickler, now recovered. “I never knew I had relatives in Bavaria.” He told his family he was descended from the Counts of Parsberg in Bavaria.

Bavarian nobility, but no stories or scandals. “My wife couldn’t care less about my discoveries,” says Mr. Strickler. Tracie Strickler, 42, says that when he got sick, she didn’t have time for Bavarian forebears: “I had my hands full taking care of him and the kitties.”



Linda Andersson’s great-grandparents.

PHOTO: ANDERSSON FAMILY

He later researched her family, tracing it to Jamestown. “That was more interesting,” she says.

Fay Lehmann, 72, a therapist in Melbourne, Australia, has been working during lockdown on the fourth draft of her family-history book, “Being a Bosworth, A Rich Tapestry of Life.” She asked her daughters, both in their 40s, if they would maintain the history stored in eight archival boxes. “Oh Mum, I don’t think we will do anything on it ourselves but I’m willing to store it,” she says the older daughter, Rami Ryan, told her.

Mrs. Ryan, 43, a property manager and yoga teacher in Perth, West Australia, says she is glad her mother is writing the book, but: “If I sit with Mum, I want to hear about her. I don’t want to hear about all these people I haven’t actually met.”

Most people don’t become interested in family history until their 30s or later, when they have children, says Pam Cooper, a family therapist and professional personal historian in Cambridge, Mass. By then, the older generations may be gone.

“With the pandemic, there are older people are at home with extra time and they want to make sure they tell their story,” says Ms. Cooper, 69. “It’s interesting to us now because we’re afraid we’re going to die!”

To escape her small apartment, Linda Andersson, 59, drove from Campbell, Calif., to a Wisconsin cabin with her 24-year-old son last month. They drove five days. Ms. Andersson mostly talked about her search for her great-grandmother.

“I have been trapped in a car with my son for five days and he is so tired of hearing about his great-great-grandmother in Norway,” says Ms. Andersson, a technical writer. “He just looks at me and listens.”

Her son, Jacob Andersson, a student, says he wants to be supportive, although “I have been kind of indifferent to it for a while.”

Zoom can help tell the younger generation the stories, says Sister Allyn Marie Horton, 71, a Catholic nun and former librarian living in Joppa, Md. When she brings up family history, she says, her brothers' response has usually been, "Oh, there she goes again."



3 1797
 Copy Department of the Interior
 Bureau of Pensions
 Washington, D.C. March 26-1927

Andrew Bacon a soldier of the Revolutionary War - Information as contained in his application for pension on file in this Bureau -

Date of Birth	Age at Death	Place of Birth	Place of Residence	State
Apr. 1774	1 year	Virginia	Shute	MD

He then enlisted under Paul Wayne and while on a foraging was ordered out with a rifle Co under Capt. Corbett and was in an engagement at Sumter Bridge Oct. 14-1778. Received two bayonet wounds one of which entered his left side and came out near the feet of his stomach - The other was thrust into his back bone and then broke off leaving about four inches. He was carried as a prisoner on board an English man of war in the Delaware, then removed to a prison ship and conveyed to New York where he remained in the Bethel Hospital until exchanged. The wounds rendered him a cripple for life.

Battle engaged in - at Port Mifflin, Red Bank and M^onticello
 Residence of soldier at submission Salem N.J.
 Date of application for pension July 5-1811 his claim was allowed
 Residence at date of application Salem N.J.
 Copy of date of application 28 years signed S. Thurston Commissioner

Sister Allyn Marie Horton and grandnephew on Zoom; an interior-department letter about the ancestor she says fought in the Revolutionary War.
 PHOTO: JESSICA LOPEZ

She found an appreciative audience in her 10-year-old grandnephew, who was home in Burke, Va., after schools closed. She did a Zoom call with a story about an ancestor who, bayoneted during the American Revolution, survived on a British prison ship. Six more Zoom history calls followed.

"We both enjoyed it," says Sister Allyn. "I am planting the seeds. I suspect my grandnephew will take part of my collection and be interested when he retires."