

## THE STUDY OF FAMILY HISTORY: RESEARCH PROJECTS IN A SENIOR SEMINAR

Zdenka Gredel-Manuele  
Niagara University

This paper is about the study of family history and its value as a tool in developing skills necessary for students who want to acquire an insight into the nature and methods of history.<sup>1</sup> My findings are based on my teaching experiences over a ten-year period as a member of the history department at Niagara University.

Niagara University is a liberal arts university founded by the Vincentian order in 1856 in upstate New York. It has an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 2,200 students and an additional 500 students in its Graduate Divisions.<sup>2</sup> Its History Department consists of six full-time and four part-time members and serves about thirty history and social studies majors. The culmination of a history major's study is his performance in a senior seminar which is designed to test the research, writing, and analytical skills in a major historical research essay.

I first began using the topic of family history for the senior seminar for history majors at Niagara as a test project. Traditionally, the topic for the seminar was chosen by the individual instructors and was based on their expertise in their fields of study. For me that had been Twentieth-Century Europe with an emphasis on Modern Germany. I found quickly that in order to provide students with a suitable topic that would not be completely virgin territory, I would have to open up the selection to include other historical fields in which I had little preparation to guide research. At the same time the problem arose regarding access to source materials, as well as that remote, but nevertheless real, chance that somewhere along the line plagiarism could occur. I found also that if I limited selections, there always existed the possibility that the topics might be met with disinterest and apathy, not to mention the lack of background preparation to tackle the job within the assigned time of one semester.

In the fall of 1977 I proposed that the incoming senior history majors should embark upon the study of family history. Their curiosity seemed to have been aroused by the general climate of the time of Alex Haley's *Roots* and the rise of the "new ethnicity" that had found acceptance in American society. The rationale behind my proposal was that if students could realize the relationship of their own selves to their families' past, they could better understand the role of history.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, because of the personal nature of the topic, I felt that they would be more motivated to accomplish the goals and objectives of the seminar. Not surprisingly, the majors decided to try the topic after very little discussion.

The number of students in the seminar was under ten and therefore conducive to a primarily tutorial format. The early part of the semester was spent together in seminar while towards mid-semester individual sessions took place. Students were required to read a selection of books for background, such as Thomas

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<sup>1</sup> Senior Seminar papers are on file in my office. Due to the private and confidential nature of these projects, names are either altered or omitted by this writer.

<sup>2</sup> See Niagara University, *Undergraduate Catalogue*, 1989-1990.

<sup>3</sup> David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty, *Your Family History: A Handbook for Research and Writing* (Arlington Heights, IL: AHM Publishing Corp., 1978).

C. Wheeler, *The Immigrant Experience*,<sup>4</sup> and June Namias, *First Generation*.<sup>5</sup> Allan J. Lichtman, *Your Family History: How To Use Oral History, Personal Family Archives, and Public Documents to Discover Your Heritage*,<sup>6</sup> served as an introduction to the many facets of the study of family history.<sup>7</sup>

While the theme of the senior project was a serious and comprehensive compilation of the student's own family and its roots, a student could opt not to undertake the topic in case of personal hardship. In such instances, students could choose a topic in the area of American ethnic history relating to their ethnic backgrounds. In the ten years during which I taught family history, this option was only exercised twice. In both cases it was due to personal family circumstances (i.e. death of a close family member and adoption).

The project was divided into the following segments:

1. Proposal - research possibilities.
2. Resources - statement of source availability and listing of resource persons.
3. Oral interviews - utilization of questionnaires.
4. Collected data - letters, diaries, newspaper clippings, birth/death certificates, baptismal and marriage certificates, naturalization documents, etc.
5. Analysis of historical validity of oral and written sources.
6. Outline of essay.
7. Writing of essay.

The required format of the final essay consisted of:

1. A title page that contained the student's name and the name or names of the family researched.
2. An outline of the essay.
3. A precis of the essay or an introduction.
4. A footnoted essay.
5. An annotated bibliography.
6. Appendices that included a genealogical chart or charts, completed questionnaires, relevant xeroxed documents and photos, and any other data.

The starting point for the project was that each student had to select two readings from a bibliography on ethnic groups that would give him insights into his family's ethnic background or backgrounds.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of such readings was to provide the student with a historical framework in which to place his family and ancestors. Students were encouraged to search for such things as relationships between economic hardships and immigration to this country, settlement in ethnic

<sup>4</sup> New York: Penguin, 1971.

<sup>5</sup> Boston: Beacon Press, 1978.

<sup>6</sup> New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1978.

<sup>7</sup> For further information on finding one's family roots consult Timothy Field Beard, *How to Find your Family Roots* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1977); Gilbert Harry Doane, *Searching for Your Ancestors: The How and Why of Genealogy*. 5th edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980); P. William Filby, *Directory of American Libraries with Genealogy or Local History Collections*. (Wilmington, DL: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1988); Lois C. Gilmer, *Genealogical Research and Resources: A Guide for Library Use* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1988); Jeane Westin, *Finding Your Roots* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> See bibliography of ethnic groups below.

ghettos, and the occupations of early immigrants. At the same time, students were encouraged to familiarize themselves with the geographic locations from which their ancestors came and relate them to those of the national immigration picture of their specific ethnic groups.<sup>9</sup> Since a small segment of the student population of Niagara University belongs to racial minority groups, the majority of the students dealt with Italian, German, Irish, and Polish immigration.

The next step was to write a one-page precis that would delineate the scope of the student's family resources. Students were encouraged to identify at least one family member who could provide the student with information of other family members who could be of help. In some cases, students had vague recollections of the existence of a family Bible, or that some research had been done by a family member. These leads were to be pursued later. Some students were unaware of relationships within their families and one of the most effective means that they explored early was the establishment of dialogues with family members. In most cases it was the mother who was the immediate resource person and who gave direction to the structuring of the research materials. The next assignment was a listing of the resources. This consisted not only of the names of people who would be interviewed, but also availability of documentation to which the student would have easy access, such as vital records, statistical data, photographs, or newspaper clippings. This preliminary research enabled students to identify in which direction their overall research would be going. For example, a student might conclude that more material would be available on his mother's side of the family. This would be acceptable, since at the same time his research would already have proven that on the paternal side there would be limited data available. As long as the student clarified this in his introduction, this finding would be sound.

Research differed from student to student. Some families had saved old newspaper articles relating to family events, birth, marriage, and death certificates of ancestors, military records, or property deeds. Collections of photographs proved to be most valuable since not only did they identify family members but also their domiciles, activities, and occupations. Although the easiest start of any research began with an informal conversation with an immediate family member, such as a parent or a grandparent, the importance of such private possessions cannot be overemphasized. Such documentation provided the starting point of the investigation. From a birth certificate, besides the obvious information it contains, the researcher could find, for example, the maternal family name. This in turn might lead the researcher to probe further the maternal side of the family. The discovery of a family name, especially two or three generations removed, might lead to further research. Therefore, oral interviews might clarify or amplify archival findings, and at the same time provide further direction for research. Students were encouraged to substantiate oral information with written documentation such as vital statistics. At times these had to be requested from public repositories. This type of documentation was crucial since it provided a test for the credibility of sources.

A significant segment of the research project would deal with the compilation of a valid questionnaire that would be either mailed to identified resource persons

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<sup>9</sup> Stephan Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, MA, 1980); Roy Bryce-LaPorte, ed., *Source Book on the New Immigration* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1980).

or used in conducting oral interviews. Such questionnaires were structured by the student, bearing their own family situations in mind while at the same time striving for objectivity and validity. If tapes were used, the student was required to enclose them as part of the appendix of the essay.<sup>10</sup>

Up to this point, the research processes took about two months to complete. After the general framework of the course had been discussed and preliminary data had been submitted, students met individually with the instructor every week and conferred on the progress of their research projects. At times the conferences were short and took the format of straight progress reports. At other times, the conference could be lengthy, helping the student analyze conflicting data given by interviewees, searching for locations that have disappeared, or translating of documents. Although these sessions were time-consuming, I found them most fruitful in clarifying to students historical methodology. At the same time, these discussions provided a measure of their skills of inquisitiveness, analysis, and scrutiny of sources. However, the most beneficial aspect of this type of research project was that students were tackling a field of study that they had to develop from primary sources<sup>11</sup> and therefore to create a historical narrative of their own. As one student said so aptly:

In September when I heard of the details of my senior project I panicked. I was not looking forward to studying something as boring as my family. After reading a few works on the ways of approaching a family history and background on the Irish and German immigrants, I was still bored but not as scared. It was not until I spoke with my Grandma Nolan that I started to realize what I was doing was going to be somewhat exciting. Hearing more and more about my grandmother's history, looking through photographs and finding out information that I never before known was all a part of my excitement.<sup>12</sup>

"Fear" and "Excitement"! There was no doubt in anyone's mind that there was that fear of the unknown that most students felt. There were no books to read and "borrow" from. There was no specific format to follow. They had to prove themselves and use their knowledge of historical methods that was part of their discipline. However, the thing that propels historians to prove the secrets of the past was there--a sound sense of curiosity. Curiosity surmounted the fears and insecurities of the task. The end result was that, because it was such a personal experience, their benefits were not only scholarly but also personal. As one student put it:

At this point, still close to the research, I cannot say if I will ever be able to regard the experience of researching my family history as "edifying." I can, however, state without qualification that the experience has been more frustrating than any other project I have yet attempted. Thankfully, this frustration has not been without many rewards. Probably the most important of these is the intangible feeling one gets from the knowledge of what the family is all about.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> James Hoopes, *Oral History: An Introduction for Students* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> Hoopes, *Oral History*.

<sup>12</sup> Senior Seminar Essay, Mary Brigid Smith, December 1984.

<sup>13</sup> Senior Seminar Essay, James Carroll, December 1985.

And he goes on further to comment that another reward of his research has been a sort of reunion with his father's side of his family. He wrote:

Though the family is small and members are not geographically dispersed, ties have, in my opinion, never been strong. Doing oral interviews with my aunts and uncles has allowed me to get to know them, and perhaps begin to understand them better.<sup>14</sup>

Another student wrote:

In the execution of this task, I believe that I have gained valuable insights into much more than methods of research, and the selection and compilation of data. I have, additionally, come to better understand not only my family's experiences, attitudes, values and motivations, but my own as well.<sup>15</sup>

I found after the initial frustrations and apprehensions, students became personally involved in these projects. They established dialogues with parents, family members, and distant relations. They found out things about themselves and sometimes even "family secrets." They realized that there existed family resemblances and idiosyncrasies. At the same time they were able to place their own family unit into the vast picture of American social and ethnic history.

The humorous side of these research projects became obvious when one student who had spent Thanksgiving recess with distant relatives in New York City in order to conduct interviews, returned home in dismay lamenting about her added poundage. She recounted that this branch of her family was only interested in feeding her while all she wanted to do is to complete her research. Another student was frustrated over the size of this family, exclaiming that his family had multiplied like "rabbits."

Prohibition hit home when one student discovered that an ancestor had been jailed for making moonshine! Another found that the romance between his Irish grandmother and his German grandfather led to the latter's conversion to Catholicism. Then there was the famous hair potion patented by a family member that insured hair growth for those suffering from baldness and made this inventor famous! Lastly, one student recounted with fascination his family's past involvement with a circus--unbeknown to him or the rest of his family.

How would one evaluate this type of project? My evaluation of a student's work did not rest solely on the final essay. Rather, I continually evaluated each student's application of methodology and research skills in executing this project. At the same time this afforded me the opportunity to guide the research and correct any erroneous techniques. Although it was a most time-consuming procedure, students benefitted greatly by this method. The investigations of some students resulted in little information and produced modest narratives. Others found more information than they had anticipated, and their papers were ambitious. However, it was not the lengths of their papers but their mastery of the skills of historical inquiry that became the basis of my evaluation process. This proved to be most effective.

In general, the performances were high in quality--even among students who may have been more lax in courses in the past. Some students viewed this as a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Senior Seminar Essay, Patrick Smith Bergan, May 1986.

beginning of a whole new interest and years later wrote that they have been adding on to their histories. One student concluded his paper by saying that he hoped that his paper would stimulate future research within his own family that has already begun as a result of the questions and questionnaires circulating because of this family research paper.<sup>16</sup>

At the Ordination to the priesthood of one of my former students, I met his family, and it was an interesting experience to personally acquaint myself with the "characters" of his senior project. Also, judging by the reaction of this young man's relatives, many family members enjoyed participating in the project and sharing their experiences.

In retrospect, I can say without reservation that the study of family history proved a successful venture in training and testing history majors in their discipline. It may be that family history can also bring historical scholarship from its ivory tower long enough to kindle intellectual fires in young historians that can shed lights on future historical research for decades to come.

#### Bibliography of Ethnic Groups

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<sup>16</sup> Senior Seminar Essay, David Sylvester, May 1984.