



OPINION

To understand where you came from, and leave behind who you are, save your family history

BARRY RUEGER

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED YESTERDAY

Barry Rueger is a writer living in Vancouver.

Even though I knew my grandmother for more than 50 years, I had never heard this story of how my family moved from Hagersville, Ont., to the wilds of Western Canada. Some time around 1912, my great-grandfather, Wellington Millard, was afflicted by serious asthma. Because he could no longer live near the smoky Hamilton steel mills, the family decided to leave Ontario for the clean air of Dorintosh, Sask.

While my great-grandparents and six of their children headed west, my grandmother Hazel stayed behind with her mother's mother, Margaret Dale. Margaret believed the far-fetched stories about blood-thirsty wolves, harsh winters, and the general lawlessness of the West and wanted to be sure that at least one family heir would survive if her fears proved true.

The only reason that I know this story is because my cousin, Crystal Oliver, made a point of recording it in the years before Grandma died.

And, in an unlocked safe in her bedroom, an urn with my father's ashes, together with the ashes of three of her previous cats.

Kathy and I didn't try to make sense of all of this junk. Instead we spent hours looking at family photos. In corners throughout the house we found dozens of photo albums, each packed with pictures of family, both close and distant, each page stirring memories of things that happened decades ago. We looked at pictures of relatives, all looking young and hopeful with their lives ahead of them, many of them now dead. And we looked at similar pictures of ourselves, as children, and teens, and as young adults.

What struck me though was the almost complete absence of anything to do with my father, Ralph. It was not a good relationship, and apparently Mom had quietly purged anything to do with him. Or perhaps there were just never very many pictures of him. All that I know is that at some point he no longer played a large part in my mother's history, which means that my sister and I can only rely on our own memories to fill that gap.

It was late on Monday when my sister Kathy finally left – saying to me for the first time in her life, “I love you.” Ours is a family that doesn't say such things for fear of ridicule. That, sadly, is the legacy of my father.

It was only after Kathy left that I found the last box of old documents – letters that I wrote home 40 years ago, more old pictures, wills from several relatives and finally a big, fat Cerlox bound book about my grandmother. *Where a Rose Once Bloomed* is the family history that I never knew existed.

I did not know that my cousin Crystal was a writer, but in 104 pages she told the entire life story of my grandmother Hazel. In the two years before my grandmother died, Crystal somehow uncovered dozens of anecdotes and stories that I had never heard. and dozens of

And at that moment I came to the realization that my own family has only a part of that knowledge. There are no letters or documents. We have only scattered memory of old stories and family history. We have pictures, but most often no context within which to place them. Even when we recognize the people in old photos, we have no way of knowing the places and times, or why the pictures were taken.

Thanks to Crystal we now have a good history of my mother's side of the family, but we have literally nothing to tell us our father's story. We know next to nothing of his childhood and youth, and even less about his first wife. I certainly can't tell you what motivated him, or what made him so damaged. I can't tell you why Madge, the nearly mythical first wife, killed herself by walking in front of a train. I am sure that there once were paper records that might have led us to answers, but they all seem to be gone.

And now that my mother is dead, I can see no way to ever collect that history. This makes me very sad.

Surrounding ourselves in those memories was the best thing that we could have done to honour my mother. Each of those tiny images on paper, some colour, some black and white, and some faded almost to nothing, captures a specific moment in time and preserves it in way that is almost lost by our streaming culture. TikTok will never replace Polaroid and Kodak for permanence, and a Facebook post can't possibly resonate the way a 5-by-7 inch photograph does. Scrolling on the internet will never be as evocative as the tactile experience of turning pages in a big black photo album and pointing to pictures and sharing the stories behind them.

If there is one lesson to be learned from my experience, it is this: Take the time and effort to talk to family members and collect their stories. Interview your parents and grandparents.

Instead of abandoning your family history to Facebook or Instagram, print it out and save it in a drawer or a shoebox. Computer hard drives crash, and even the biggest social-media companies can disappear. A cupboard full of books and albums in your home can last forever.

Crystal is urging me to take up the challenge and begin building my own family's history. I don't know if it's even possible, but she is making me believe that I may be able to do it.

I'm hoping it's not too late. I surely understand why it's so important.

Keep your Opinions sharp and informed. Get the Opinion newsletter. [Sign up today.](#)

© Copyright 2021 The Globe and Mail Inc. All rights reserved.

351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

Phillip Crawley, Publisher