

How I got Hooked on Genealogy?

By Debbe A. Hagner, AG



When I was young there was a wooden framed document dated 1866 from the King of Wuerttemberg to Johann Christian HAGNER hanging on the wall at my Grandparents house. I always wondered what that was, it peaked my interest. I found out that it was presented to my grandfather, Johann Christian Hagner, after the Austro-Prussian War (also called the Seven Weeks War, the Unification War, or the German Civil War). Wow! Now I really wanted to know more. I wanted to know all about all my relatives, where they lived and what they did. This one framed award and my Grandfather's family stories sparked my interest in genealogy when I was just 8 years old. Now that wooden frame hangs on my office wall. It reminds me of how I got hooked on genealogy.

My Grandfather had put together a photo album of various people in the family. Every time, I visited my grandparents in Florida, I would flip through the pages of the photo album and wanted to learn more about the people in the photo album. I had been born with a hearing loss that caused me to "miss" hearing many family stories; but seeing the pictures helped me learn more about my relatives. I depend on lip-reading to "hear" so having the person's name written under each picture made it easier for me to understand the relationships. One story I remember Grandpa telling me was that we were the "Von Hagners," but I could never prove it.

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I heard various names in the “family” – Aunt Martha, Aunt Rose, Aunt Bernice, Aunt Betty, another Aunt Rose, Uncle Eric, Uncle Ted, Aunt Meta, Uncle Bruno, Aunt Frieda, and Uncle Clinton etc. Growing up I heard names of people that I never met – Bill, Gussie, Adele, and Uncle Bruno.

I asked my Grandfather to write down the names and how these people were related so I could see the information rather than relying on hearing the stories. He wrote their names on paper, one by one, making a chart for me back to my great grandparents. Wow, this really opened my eyes...now I wanted to know more information. (This chart was getting me “hooked”)

I was still confused with the two Aunt Rose’s – one of them was really a Great Aunt Rose (who was my grandmother’s sister) and the other one was my maternal uncle’s wife (who really is related only by marriage). My family decided to make changes so we always knew exactly who we were talking about: my great aunt became Auntie Rose and the other one remained Aunt Rose.

The more I learned, the more I wanted to learn more, so I asked my Grandfather more and more questions. I finally got a better picture of the various names on the genealogy chart. One by one, we were covering all the different people. I was puzzled about Aunt Betty and Uncle Eric because they were not on the chart. I finally came to find out that they were not relatives — they were high school friends of my parents. Calling “friends” Aunt and Uncle was sort of a custom for my family. The way my parents explained to me was that they did not want my sisters and me to call them just Betty and Eric or Mr. and Mrs. Dumke. Since they were close friends, we

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added Aunt and Uncle as a term of respect. We recently went to visit Aunt Betty, who lives in California and is now well into her late 80s. She got a kick out of seeing us and that we were still calling her “Aunt Betty”. It was wonderful to see her after more than 25 years and she remembered many stories about my mother and father and her deceased husband, Uncle Eric. But I am now getting ahead of myself in my story of being hooked on genealogy.

Back to the beginnings....along the way, I heard many funny, fascinating and sad stories. I heard names of people that I had never met. I asked where and who they were. I found out that my cousin Adele was in the Navy, so that explained why I did not see her often. She died at 34 in the Veteran’s Hospital. I found out Bill was my cousin and that he lived in Milwaukee with his stepmother after his father had passed away. Then I heard the sad story of my Uncle Gussie – he was my father’s brother who died in 1943 when he was 21 years old of a rare disease called Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS), which was a form of polio or MS. Recently, my father gave me some letters, written to Uncle Gussie by some Army friends during his illness. The stories that those letters tell from 1942 were very enlightening. The more I find out about what happened to these family members, the more I want to know!

When I was in High School – my mother and mother’s sister (Aunt Martha) would receive letters from Germany. I was curious: who were these people? how were they related to me? This gave me whole another set of names that I never heard of. Now I am curious! The names on the list were my maternal father’s family; I never met him as he died before I was born. Except for Uncle Bruno, all my grandfather’s brothers and sisters were left behind in Germany. Why? I wanted to know the whole story: why they came to America and when. The more information I

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received, the more information I wanted. Every answer opened up a new question. Aunt Martha helped me write a simple letter in English asking for more information about the Helbig side of the family. It was not easy getting information as they were living on the East German side. I received a great deal of help from "Aunt" Ella who was a clerk in a church in Germany. She was able to get copies of various documents in German.

As I was growing up I did not know a lot about genealogy and family history. I would get my facts mixed up (sometimes because of my hearing loss and sometimes just because I had an imagination) like thinking our family came here on the Mayflower and arrived on Plymouth Rock or that we were related to some royal family. I am sure that after seeing a Thanksgiving play, many children imagine their Grandparents were Pilgrims. HA! As I got older and really learned more about my families' history, I discovered that most of my families came here to America during 1880-1890's.

Christ Hagner's real name was Johann Christian Hagner in Germany. He came to Chicago before the Chicago fire in October 1871 when he was about 25 years old. Like many immigrants, there were changes in the name. When I asked Grandma about her family, she would tell me that her maiden name was BRAUN. I immediately thought I was related to Eva Braun (Hilter's parter). I jumped to conclusion too fast! That is why when I got older I wanted to find out the real stories!

In 1981, I got a job at IBM in Binghamton, New York. I soon I bought my first computer. Now I could start compiling my family history. I purchased genealogical software called "Roots" by Quinsept, which no longer exists today. I entered about 1,000 names. I really thought I had

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completed my Family History! But I soon realized that there was, and still is, so much to discover. So much more to learn and uncover!

I eventually switched to Family Origins and then to Rootsmagic as Roots was no longer being supported. It is much easier to keep track of all the names if you have a computer program to help you and there are many to choose from. During that time, I took informal classes on genealogy in Binghamton, New York. The instructor had a scrapbook with different documents. The scrapbook gave me ideas about the various kinds of documents and I started collecting them about my family and recording them into the computer. Now, I not only had names but also documents. I was really getting “hooked”!

My Dad invited me to go to Salt Lake City with my stepmother who does genealogy. She and I would help one another with our genealogy. Since then I have found much information on the family, especially on the German lines. To help me learn more, I took informal classes in New Port Richey, Florida after I was laid off from IBM in 1991. In this class, I learned about the local LDS Family History Center. To this day, I still work there 3 days a week on genealogy. I was getting better at understanding the record keeping and learning how to use the Family History Library Catalog, which contain the records that are kept at the Family History Library (The Church of Jesus Christ of Later-day Saints or Mormon) in Salt Lake City, Utah.

In 1994, I decided to take some formal courses from Brigham Young University in Family History. I received a Certificate in Family History and I finished the two years home correspondence program in 6 months. From one of courses, I was able to really learn how to

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read German handwriting. This was important because both sides of my family were from Germany.

I attended several genealogy conventions on various levels – local, state and national. Every time I went, I met wonderful people and I learned a great deal about the field of genealogy. There is always some new information being released or discovered.

I began to accumulate paying clients and every year I would go to Family History Library in Salt Lake City to do research on my family and those of my clients. I met several genealogists who specialize in German and I really helped me to learn more are German genealogy. I decided to work on my accreditation and specialized in the Midwestern states. Since my family did not arrive to Midwest before 1870, I had to use another family for my portfolio. I used my cousin's wife family, since they were in Wisconsin and Iowa back in 1840's. I had to fly to Salt Lake City to take the 8 hours written exam. The exam covers several areas in the Midwestern states – Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Missouri, Minnesota and Iowa. You had to pass the exam with 90 or better in order to receive the accreditation. I am only the second hearing-impaired person to receive their accreditation from the Family History Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint. You have to re-new the certification every 5 years. Today, the accreditation program is under International Commission for the Accreditation of Professional Genealogists (ICAPGen) located in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Currently, I have more than 25,000 names in my genealogy database. One of the lines go back to the 1400's and the remainder to the 1600's in Germany. I have been to the Family History

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Library in Salt Lake City over 20 times and every time I go there, I always find something new! I have over 8,000 documents, which support my genealogical data. I still have several more to find! Once you get into genealogy it is very easy to get “Hooked” — you just want to find more and more. I always found great pleasure in finding a “paper trail” on your ancestor that you have never met. It is just amazing what that one paper can tell you and that it can lead you to many more papers and more and more.

My Dad always asks me “Are you done yet” I would tell him, “NO”! I know I will never get back as far as I would like to. I have most of my line as far back as I can with what information is available today from the LDS films. The Family History Library has over 2.5 millions films... Over the course of 25 years, I have looked at over 2,000+ microfilms. I have three lines that are my “brickwalls”. A “brickwall” is a term for a place in your genealogy that seems to get stuck on or end! But does it really END?? I believe over time as the records become more and more available – I just might find a break thru. Every now and then, I try to work on something – as there always something to do - keep up with new babies born and new marriages or divorces and those that pass. I try to keep up with my German lines, as it is easy to forget the handwriting and the language if you don’t keep up. To continue my education, I am going to study how to read Latin because some of my families were Catholic and many of the church records are in Latin. That will be a little challenging to me.

My brother-in-law’s family comes from Italy. In order to research his side of the family, I wanted to learn to read Italian, so I am also studying reading Italian. See there is always something new to study and learn!

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My schedule now includes giving speeches and classes on genealogy in many cities, around Florida, Milwaukee and in Salt Lake City. I want to help others get “ Hooked”, by sharing my experiences and offering support like I have received. I gave several classes in sign language for the Utah Deaf Genealogical Association in Jun 2008. I enjoyed helping other hearing-impaired genealogy enthusiasts. I offer several classes from Beginners to Advanced Genealogy and several specialized topics in the New Port Rickey, Florida area. I am also involved in several genealogy societies. I held various positions as President, Vice-President, Membership Chairperson, and Publicity Chairperson.

I have written several articles that can be viewed on-line by using Google:

1. Ancestry Quick Tip - Organizing Your To-Do List To Be More Effective

on 25 Aug 2007

2. Ancestry Magazine - Record Those Records on January/February 1996

3. Chicago Genealogist periodical - Gustav Hagner meets Anna

Waldschmidt, 1890, IL: Winter 2002. Vol. 35, Issue 2

4. The Deaf Family History Conference In Salt Lake City By Debbe Hagner,

AG at <http://utdeafgen.blogspot.com/>

Hooked on Genealogy? Yes! I guess you can say that, thanks to love, support and continued help of many people and family.

So are we done yet? N E V E R