Genealogists as a "Community of Records"

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Abstract

Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History[1] presents the concept of a "community of records" as it applies to native Virgin Islanders. A "community of records" refers both to how records are (re-)created or reused within a community as well as its contextualization of records (through memory and narrative construction). This paper examines whether this intellectual construct and lens can be applied to other social groups and their relationships to records. Specifically, this article explores the connections between genealogists and records—how genealogists reuse, combine, interpret, and disseminate records to create a coherent narrative of their families' lives that gives added meaning to their own lives.

> So I try to . . . think of all the records that exist that you might be able to find and then try to get them all. (Genealogist 16, lines 516–18)[2]

Why Genealogists?

Although archivists and librarians in the United States often associate the rise of genealogy with the broadcast of the *Roots* miniseries in 1977, interest and research into genealogy has been traced back to the Middle Ages.[3] Genealogists were selected as the subject of this research for several reasons. First, genealogy is one of the few examples of information seeking in everyday life that requires intensive and extensive use of libraries and archives. Their ties to records are not dispassionate; genealogists are

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[1] Jeannette Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History* (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2003).

[2] Identifying information has been removed from the quotations. Also, elisions have been inserted where the normal speech patterns, such as repeated words and phrases, got in the way of meaning. We did this to improve the readability of quotations and to help readers focus on the interviewees' points. We have made every effort not to take the quotations out of context or to change the meaning through the elisions.

[3] Daniel Woolf, *The Social Circulation of the Past: English Historical Culture 1500–1730* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 73–98.

emotional and their emotions inspire and propel research. Second, genealogy is a broad-based phenomenon. The Pew Internet and American Life Project found that use of the Internet for hobbies has grown exponentially, and 24 percent of respondents went on-line to research family history or genealogy.[4] When related activities such as membership in genealogical societies, family reunions, and research in libraries and archives are taken into account, the number of people engaged in genealogical activities is even greater.[5] Third, although genealogists and family historians do interact with librarians and archivists, they have also developed their own social systems and networks to support their needs to seek, analyze, and manage information. These information practices have in turn influenced social systems and networks. Finally, their work includes both collecting and managing information in the present as well as strategizing ways to pass on the legacy to future generations.

Genealogists are an understudied group within the archival and library communities, although genealogy has been the focus of research in other fields, such as sociology. Sociologists examine genealogy as a cultural phenomenon, focusing on motivations for this activity and its underlying meaning to individuals or social groups.[6] The archival and LIS literatures largely conceptualize genealogical research from a managerial perspective.[7] One article by Wendy Duff and Catherine A. Johnson and another by Elizabeth Yakel articulate a different perspective, unique because they view the archives from the genealogists' perspective. Duff and Johnson found that genealogists' information-seeking patterns were as likely to work around existing archival systems as to use them and that genealogists' search processes relied more heavily on their own social networks than on professional archivists.[8] Yakel seeks to bridge the gap between the archival and the sociological approaches and examines how genealogists' information searches link as much to seeking meaning as to finding

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[4] M. Madden, *America's Online Pursuits: The Changing Picture of Who's Online and What They Do* (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2003), available at http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=106, accessed 12 February 2004.

[5] Maritz Research, *Sixty Percent of Americans Intrigued by Their Family Roots,* available at http://www.maritzresearch.com/release.asp?rc=195&p=2&T=P, accessed 12 February 2004.

[6] See L. Bear, "Public Genealogies: Documents, Bodies and Nations in Anglo-Indian Railway Family Histories," *Contributions of Indian Sociology* (new series) 35, no. 3 (2001): 355–88 and R. D. Lambert, "Reclaiming the Past: Narrative, Rhetoric and the 'Convict Stain'," *Journal of Sociology* 38, no. 2 (2002): 111–27.

[7] For example, see R. J. Ashton, "A Commitment to Excellence in Genealogy: How the Public Library Became the Only Tourist Attraction in Fort Wayne, Indiana," *Library Trends* 32, no. 1 (1983): 89–96; R. Boyns, "Archivists and Family Historians: Local Authority Record Repositories and the Family History User Group," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 20, no. 1 (1999): 61–73; and Roy Turnbaugh, "The Impact of Genealogical Users on State Archives Programs," *Library Trends* 32, no. 1 (1983): 39–49.

[8] Wendy M. Duff and Catherine A. Johnson, "Where Is the List with All the Names? Information-seeking Behavior of Genealogists," *American Archivist* 66, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 79–95.

facts.[9] None of these disciplines explores the essential nature of genealogical activity: the search for records and how genealogists construct meaning through their interactions with the records, their families, and other genealogists. This article examines these critical intersections using the conceptual framework of the "community of records."

The following research questions guided this investigation:

- What are the salient characteristics of "communities of records"?
- How might these apply to different types of communities, i.e., ethnic, geographic, national, social?
- Does this idea of a community of records apply on a more personal level of family identity or identification within a smaller social group?

Methods

This article is based on a series of twenty-nine interviews with and observations of genealogists. We conducted the interviews in the summer of 2003, engaging subjects in hour-long, semistructured conversations focusing on their family history activities. We made observations in conjunction with the interviews as well as at genealogical society meetings during the 2003–2004 academic year.

We recruited interviewees through a variety of methods, including verbal invitations at genealogical society meetings and flyers posted at genealogical resource centers and senior citizen facilities. Our goal was to recruit individuals ranging in age, expertise in genealogical research, and family background. We also attempted to interview people who had different relationships to the multiple social networks of genealogists. In the end, we interviewed twenty-nine individuals. The average age of participants was sixty-two, although their ages ranged from thirty-one to eighty-five. There were eleven men and eighteen women. On average, interviewees had been engaged in genealogical research for eighteen years. One genealogist had been working on family history projects for thirty-three years; one for less than a year. Individuals were all of European descent and white, and all resided in southeastern Michigan. About half had done genealogical research in both the United States and Europe. In the end, two of our recruiting goals were satisfied: the participants represented variety in age and expertise. Their ethnic, racial, and geographic homogeneity, however, has implications for generalizing the results to other groups. A study of genealogy focusing on a sample of nonwhite, non-Christian, indigenous peoples, adoptees, or descendants of slaves would undoubtedly result in different perspectives and motivations.

[9] Elizabeth Yakel, "Seeking Information, Seeking Connections, Seeking Meaning: Genealogists and Family Historians," *Information Research* 10, no. 1 (October 2004), available at http://informationr.net/ir/10-1/paper205.html, accessed 28 July 2005.

We asked participants about their motivations and any triggers for initiating genealogical research, how they learned to do genealogical research, and the methods they utilized to interpret, analyze, and organize their research and family records and artifacts. Our questions also probed their information-seeking activities, including searching the Internet, working in libraries and archives, visiting historic sites related to family history, and networking with other genealogists. Methods of managing family history information were also explored in depth and included questions about very practical aspects of information management such as computer applications used, methods of organizing information, and filing practices. Finally, the interviews probed for data on information sharing, providing assistance to others, how documents were divided or passed along in families, and the creation of family history Web sites or books. (For a guide to the interview questions, see appendix A.)

Two types of observations were included in the study. When possible, we conducted interviews in the participant's home. We were able to visit homes and view information-management practices firsthand in 50 percent of the interviews. In the remaining cases, most participants brought along artifacts to the interview, including genealogical charts, scrapbooks, and other types of research data or family heirlooms. We also observed ten meetings of three genealogical societies over the course of the 2003–2004 academic year, which provided further data on information use, sharing, and knowledge of records within the community. During analysis we were able to triangulate these observations with interview data.

The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed professionally, and entered into a qualitative data analysis application, Atlas.ti, for coding and analysis.[10] For the analysis, we developed a coding system using several mechanisms. Initial coding categories followed the major sections of the interview guide, including codes for when people began to pursue genealogy, how they learned to do genealogical research, interactions with others, and methods for organizing research and family data. Codes emerged then from the interviews themselves, often at a higher conceptual level than the initial codes. For example, interviewees often illustrated answers with stories. Thus, codes emerged for triggering and precursor events, and in turn this analysis led to different categories of these events. From these narratives, we realized a personal introduction to genealogy was an important variable for genealogists—whether someone introduced them to genealogy and whether they had thought about identifying another family member to take on the family history mantle. Thus, *passing information on* was

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[10] Christine A. Barry, "Choosing Qualitative Data Analysis Software: Atlas/ti and Nudist Compared," *Sociological Research Online* 3, no. 3 (1998), available at http://www.socresonline.org.uk/3/3/4.html, accessed 28 July 2005.

coded. Codes also emerged concerning how participants viewed family history at different points during their pursuit, which led to analysis of the meaning and importance of genealogical work, and by extension, work with records in the lives of the participants.

Findings: Building on the Characteristics of a Community of Records

> She inherited a knowledge of the world that had depth and rootedness to it. It was a particular and local knowledge, largely useless anyplace else. When she moved out into the fields, roads, and lanes, she already had a head full of stories, which she gradually associated with the places to which she traveled. . . . It is these stories that the old copybooks preserve. The stories tell of things that the eye could not always see. In a land so poor, there was a conviction that riches lay not on the land but beneath it.[11]

Communities of records are rooted not just in physical localities but in social groupings and networks that share culture or experiences, that is, social memory. Bastian argues that a "community of records" refers to the individual and corporate entities that act as records creators and as a social group with shared values that contextualizes and uses these records.

> Through the relationship between actions and records, communities are defined. The actions of communities, expressed in a wide variety of prescribed ways, both written and oral, create a mirror in which records and actions reflect one another in documenting the activities and forming the memory of the community. At the same time, a community of records is also one in which traditions of recordkeeping are developed, manifested, and bounded by recognized and accepted conventions in the drafting of particular types of documents.[12]

This description of a community of records identifies several conceptual areas from which salient characteristics can be drawn, such as participation in activities surrounding access to records, the interactions among community members over records and the creation of a memory frame or shared meaning, shared traditions of recordkeeping, the interface between the oral and the written, and, finally, the interplay among records, meaning, and truth. This article next examines these concepts and discusses how they apply to genealogists and the genealogical community.

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[11] Richard White, *Remembering Ahanagran: Storytelling in a Family's Past* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 55.

[12] Bastian, *Owning Memory*, 5.

Access to records

Access to records, or the lack thereof, is the pivotal issue for genealogists. They have lobbied successfully to increase physical access to records, and they also work to increase intellectual access through mentoring and educational programs.[13] For example, genealogists in Minnesota assisted in the transcription of death records and in creating an on-line index.[14] In the wake of increased restrictions on vital records, genealogists have actively lobbied to keep them open in several states.[15] The genealogists' ability to organize as a group and mobilize effectively around issues provides evidence both of their common goals and that this group can indeed be called a community.

Genealogists also regularly assist others in locating records, both on a one-to-one basis and as a group. All of our interviewees have provided assistance to fellow genealogists in locating or interpreting records. Much of this assistance was also instructional. The more experienced genealogists helped others by teaching them to interpret records, instructing them in search strategies and processes, and passing on other forms of both explicit and tacit knowledge such as the value of different types of records for particular queries. Reflecting on both receiving and giving assistance, one interviewee remarked:

> But it sort of depended on the kindness of the stranger, but it worked. In a couple of cases it worked really, really well. So the answer is yes. I've done a little bit of that. (Genealogist 24, lines 512–14)

Genealogical societies sponsor a variety of educational events, such as lectures at genealogical society meetings and field trips to state archives or to such centers as the Genealogical Society of Utah in Salt Lake City and libraries with local genealogical resources. An underlying ethos in the genealogical community—giving back—reinforces these types of activities. Ten of the genealogists interviewed specifically mentioned some type of volunteer activity in which they engaged, such as transcribing, posting information, managing a Web site, presenting educational sessions at genealogical society meetings, and working in a local genealogical library. Additionally, many genealogical associations offer research for a fee. Genealogists from afar can write to a local society whose research committee will perform research locally for their geographically

[13] Aprille Cooke McKay, "Genealogists and Records: Preservation, Advocacy, and Politics," *Archival Issues* 27, no. 1 (2002): 23–33.

[14] Minnesota Historical Society, Death Index FAQ, http://people.mnhs.org/dci/faq.cfm?CFID=7997&CFTOKEN=33281196, accessed 23 January 2007.

[15] Leslie Meitzler, "West Virginia Vital Records Access Restrictions Bill Does Not Pass," *Sunday Gazette-Mail*, 4 April 2004 (Charleston, West Virginia), available on the Genealogy Blog, http://genealogyblog.com/?p=1642, accessed 23 January 2007.

distant colleagues. These efforts can be quite professional and organized and provide additional access to records.[16]

Yet, these more visible activities have also increased access to records in the genealogical community in more subtle ways, such as by raising genealogists' expectations that records will be open. Increasing knowledge of records as well as literacy about archival materials within the community leads to greater access. Indirectly, as the group's expertise in conducting genealogical research grows, more potentially useful information is identified and publicized, thus benefiting the entire community.

Interactions among community members over records and information

> It's more than just the charts. . . . It's all of the things to learn about the times and where people lived. (Genealogist 10, lines 583 and 587)

Daniel Woolf divides memory into three types: personal, community, and social. Heritage, he claims, is the interaction among these three levels.[17] He also coined the phrase "historical culture" to denote "the perceptual and cognitive web of relations between the past, present, and future."[18] The genealogists in our study exhibited these interactions in two ways. The first concerns the trajectory of their individual searches, which broadened beyond the family as time passed. The second involved social interactions among genealogists, particularly "celebration" and group problem-solving activities, which were significant for genealogists because they involved interactions bridging individual and social worlds.

Genealogists in the study began their quests by searching very narrowly for information about their ancestors in records documenting interactions with the government, such as the census, vital records, land records, naturalization papers, or military discharge orders. As they continued their work, the genealogists' concepts of what constitutes appropriate information changed. As a result, their information-seeking process and interactions with both other genealogists and archivists shifted. By widening their information search, genealogists put themselves and their families into a broader historical frame. As a result, the genealogists looked for diaries, maps, local histories, and manuscript collections that would provide more insight into the historical context of

[16] Nancy Gray, "Tracing Family History," in *Historians at Work: Investigating and Recreating the Past*, ed. David Duffy, Grant Harman, and Keith Swan (Sydney, Australia: Hicks Smith and Sons, 1973).

[17] Daniel Woolf, "Memory and Historical Culture in Early Modern England," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 2 (1991): 283–308.

[18] Woolf, *Social Circulation of the Past*, 9.

their ancestors. Sometimes this search was closely linked to a family event and added specific information to the family narrative:

> It was 1845 when he died. He died and then two of his children: one daughter and one son, died the same year. . . . There must have been an epidemic or something. I'm going to try to go back in history and find out what was going on at the time. Was there cholera or something like that? (Genealogist 13, lines 227–32)

Other genealogists expressed a more diffuse interest in learning about a region; for example, one often attended elderhostels in places her family had lived:

> I only went to ones [elderhostels] in places that I really wanted to go. . .and you learned about the place that you were studying or that you were interested in and you went to see things in the area. . .it gave you a feeling of that place and then you could stay a little extra and go into the courthouse. (Genealogist 11, lines 678–82)

Richard White, an academic turned family historian notes, "There is a certain serendipity to research that no longer surprises me."[19] Accessing different types of records opens up new possibilities for what constitutes relevant information and thus makes genealogical research more serendipitous. These practices align with Bastian's comment that "a community of records may be further imagined as the aggregate of records in all forms generated by multiple layers of actions and interactions between and among the people and institutions within a community."[20] Yet, this transition should also be viewed as a pivotal point for archival or library intervention and assistance, as the genealogist's outward orientation usually entailed more widespread consultation.

Among the interviewees, "celebration" was a community ritual involving an entire genealogical group. At the beginning of many genealogical society meetings we observed, new members introduced themselves and stated the names of the families they were researching. Existing members were then invited to share recent discoveries and "breakthroughs" in a public celebration of findings, which invited praise and acknowledgment.

This "public" acknowledgment of a successful search rarely happens in other kinds of library/archival research, though a quiet one-on-one conversation with the librarian or archivist in a corner of the reading room may occur. Bastian argues that public holidays and commemorations provide opportunities to view collective memory in action. This notion of commemoration can be extended to include genealogists' celebrations. On a day-to-day basis, collective

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[19] White, *Remembering Ahanagran*, 255.

[20] Bastian, *Owning Memory*, 5.

memory remains silent and unspoken; during commemorations or genealogical celebrations, the focus on memory provides a forum for things to be articulated.[21]

> The collective memory of the community is framed within the wide definition of the records that it creates, a definition that embraces not only written documentation but also the many forms of remembrance and recording that include oral traditions, public ceremonies, commemorations, artifacts, and markers such as public statues and private grave sites.[22]

Another important ritual we noted at genealogical society meetings was group problem solving. During these sessions, experts within the community acted as a panel and fielded questions from the audience. On one occasion, a man asked how he might identify the location of the ancestral homestead as he had found several properties owned by his family in the vicinity. The panel provided multiple approaches to the problem, each depending on the records available. Members of the audience were also as likely to contribute to the problem solving as to pose questions. In this way, the community provides a support system, distributes expertise in locating and utilizing records, and models search strategies. The phenomenon of asking peers for information is a theme throughout the library and information science and archival information-seeking literature;[23] however, this ritualized group problem solving is not associated with information seeking in other communities.[24]

The results of breakthroughs and group problem solving are sometimes published in genealogical society newsletters and/or posted on the Web sites of individual genealogists. These discoveries are also enshrined in published family histories. These examples illustrate that substantial emotion is attached to breakthroughs and finding information. This personal investment in the search is also apparent in published books that provide moving accounts of genealogical research.[25]

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[21] Bastian, *Owning Memory*, 53–54.

[22] Bastian, *Owning Memory*, 6.

[23] See for example, Helen R. Tibbo, "Primarily History in America: How U.S. Historians Search for Primary Materials at the Dawn of the Digital Age," *American Archivist* 66 (Spring/Summer 2003): 9–50; and Ian G. Anderson, "Are You Being Served? Historians and the Search for Primary Sources," *Archivaria* 58 (Fall 2004): 81–129.

[24] Karen E. Fisher, Elizabeth (Betty) Marcoux, Lupine S. Miller, Agueda Sánchez, and Eva Ramirez Cunningham, "Information Behaviour of Migrant Hispanic Farm Workers and Their Families in the Pacific Northwest," *Information Research* 10, no. 1 (2004), available at http://informationr.net/ir/10-1/paper199.html, accessed 23 January 2007.

[25] For example, see Neil Burke, *Pearl's Secret* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and Edward Ball, *Slaves in the Family* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998).

Traditions of recordkeeping: creating "houses of memory"

> So we went and found the original documents so that we have all of this, we're piecing this family together. (Genealogist 12, lines 412–13)

Jean-Pierre Wallot, the former Canadian national archivist and chair of the International Advisory Committee of the Memory of the World program, argues that archivists should aspire to "building a living memory for the history of our present," resulting in "houses of memory" to hold "the keys to the collective memory of nations and peoples. . . . The world's citizens can open the doors to personal and societal well-being that comes from experiencing continuity with the past, from a sense of roots, of belonging, of identity."[26] This impetus to record and document so as to build "houses of memory" is widespread, as are "efforts to repatriate archival materials, whether through copying or by actual physical exchange, [which] point to the self-affirming role of records as cultural heritage."[27]

Genealogists go through this process many times over. They search through archives, libraries, courthouses, and other "information places" to uncover, copy, transcribe, and bring home information about their ancestors. Yet, they also inherit and uncover family archives that have been passed down through the generations. This process of re-creation, of building, is key for genealogists. Several interviewees mentioned combining sources to create the family's history:

> And we were fortunate enough with my father's family that . . .my grand-mother and her family just saved everything. I have letters from World War II that are very, very rich in family history. I have, you know, just odds and ends that wouldn't mean a thing to anyone else but they're very important to our family. . . . I told you we found a lot of World War II letters. So I typed all of them and had spiral-bound books made at Kinko's and then gave them to my relatives at Christmas. And I'd like to do the same for my family except include photographs, include copies of birth certificates. You know like I have the ship's listing for when one of our ancestors came over. (Genealogist 27, lines 82–86 and 517–22)

With this compilation and amassing of materials comes the need to organize, describe, and store. Compiling records from multiple sources (family and archives) also includes combining oral sources with written records to create a coherent family narrative.

> As far as collecting information, I guess you start picking up family information so early in life that you really don't recognize where. I can remember

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[26] Jean-Pierre Wallot, "Building a Living Memory for the History of Our Present: Perspectives on Archival Appraisal," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 2 (1991): 282.

[27] Bastian, *Owning Memory*, 6.

prior to my teens listening to stories, listening to arguments between my grandparents exactly what happened, when and where. . . . And so as far as physically collecting information, probably I'd have to say twenty-five years ago. (Genealogist 8, lines 4–10)

Genealogists in the survey report reconstituting their own family archives from many other archives by sifting through repositories and taking just what pertains to their own families as well as by creating their own records, such as oral histories. This quest and this recreation (re-creation) further characterize the genealogical network as a community of records. This type of personal re-engineering of the archives mirrors the work of the early state legislatures that appropriated funding for individuals to travel to Europe to copy documents.[28] Just as these states and the federal government sought and kept copies to foster greater state and national identity, individual genealogists re-create the family archives in their (or their family's) image. Bastian picks up on a similar theme identified by Benedict Anderson on the relationship between records and identity, noting:

> Linking memory, heritage, and identity, he argues that documents in the form of newspapers, books, maps, and census records were essential in both forming national identity and the establishment of independent nations in the late eighteenth century by creating shared experiences and ideals among persons who never met but inhabited the same document space and time.[29]

The importance of family records was demonstrated again and again in our interviews, both in terms of the value of the records themselves and in the need to ensure that they were passed down appropriately. Two genealogists used the term "Holy Grail" to describe a family record—one an ancestor's original Civil War discharge papers that had been handed down (Genealogist 8) and the other, a long-sought-after photograph of a paternal grandmother (Genealogist 19). This statement reflects that reverence for family records: "I picked up papers from her niece who said it was a sacred trust to continue" (Genealogist 32, lines 11–12).

Passing along family history information, perhaps more precisely termed "passing on the family legacy," is an implicit part of building houses of memory. Archivists associate continuity and preservation with repositories; families, however, serve this function for their own records. Genealogists, therefore, must identify someone in the next generation who will take on the "sacred trust," necessary both for preserving the family history and for replenishing the genealogical community. This process of identification takes various forms. Some gently

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[28] Nicholas Falco, "The Empire State's Search in European Archives," *American Archivist* 32, no. 2 (1969): 109–23.

[29] Bastian, *Owning Memory*, 36.

expose the next generation to family history. Reflecting on a trip to Poland to uncover family roots, one woman rued a lost opportunity, "I abruptly realized when I got there all by myself that I should have brought the kids" (Genealogist 25, lines 85–86). Most genealogists we spoke to, however, waited for some hint of interest:

> Well, my son has a whole story. Basically he's young enough and I'm old enough so that it's not like I could come up with a plan and say okay, now I'm going to implement this plan. It's more like I wait for curiosity and then if he shows curiosity then I'm ready to sort of like come up with a plan that will take advantage of that curiosity. (Genealogist 5, lines 539–43)

Another budding genealogist was encouraged through the gift of some genealogical software:

> I have a nephew, my sister's oldest son, he has shown some interest. He's asked me some questions regarding [genealogy] from time to time, and I actually went so far as to buy him some genealogical software. (Genealogist 21, lines 222–25)

In other instances, though, the younger generation readily took up the mantle. One woman discussed how the genealogical work had been passed down through the women in the family:

> So then of course life happened and I was still interested in it but in preparing for that project in school I did talk to all of my relatives that I could and I tried to write down all the information so that really was the beginning. And then my mother picked it up and when she died in 1983 I "inherited" all of her information. And then for the past ten or fifteen years I've been really, really researching with my oldest daughter. And we go to various libraries; we've been to Salt Lake City to the Mormon Library ten or eleven times. (Genealogist 27, lines 12–19)

Some genealogists felt that family members would not care for or about the family archive, so it became important to create some kind of written product to pass down at least the basic information:

> I've decided I'm not going to get a book written . . . I'm just going to start writing up different things that I have discovered, giving the genealogy, the people, the children, and that kind of thing, and then some of the stories that I found out. I'm just going to type them up, you know, and put them in plastic in a notebook and then if anybody wants it. (Genealogist 9, lines 682–87)

Several other genealogists reported taking over the family history and archives or researching with a parent (Genealogists 1, 3, 10, 11, 24, and 27). Finally, one genealogist appeared ready to assume responsibility for the family archives and anticipated not only receiving the materials, but also projected how he would care for them:

I have become so heavily involved in this I can't imagine that he [an uncle] would will those materials to anyone but me. There's just no one else of my generation who's remotely interested. . .I sort of just assumed that he would give me the stuff and I would . . . archive it and store it in a much more orderly way than he does. (Genealogist 24, lines 670–75)

Searching, compiling, and organizing records—creating the family archive—are key activities with both intellectual and emotional aspects. Making sense out of the materials is carried on in tandem with carrying the burden of the sacred trust. Yet, genealogists do not build these 'houses of memory' on records alone. Oral history and family stories interact with the records to create the family narrative.

Interface between the oral and the written

The information that my mom had collected was really rich in stories and anecdotes, and had real substance to it, not just sort of names and dates and so forth. (Genealogist 2, lines 34–36)

Bastian notes that the oral and written traditions have a symbiotic relationship.[30]

As communities move from orality to literacy, the records produced increasingly become vital building blocks of collective memory through researching and writing history and constructing formal historical narratives.[31]

The genealogists we spoke with also demonstrated interest in this intersection: "So just examining that, the oral history versus what can be documented, that's of interest to me" (Genealogist 21, lines 92–93). The process of creating historical narratives by mixing oral history and records is central for genealogists. One noted that "the secret is to begin early by talking to parents, grandparents, and any other relatives, then to ask questions, hopefully that lead to memories and stories" (Genealogist 11, lines 105–107). Another alluded to the interconnections of oral and written sources in the search process:

You start with yourself, gather all the information you can in terms of documents about yourself . . . like . . .graduation announcements, birth announcements, just anything. And then go to your parents and then the other thing is to talk to people as soon as you can because you just don't know how long that information is going to be available. And they may not have facts for you but they'll have some really good stories that are fun to pass on. (Genealogist 27, lines 553–58)

[30] Bastian, *Owning Memory*, 10.

[31] Bastian, *Owning Memory*, 36.

In some cases, tension may exist between the records and the stories. In one account, a mother was confronted with the archival research done by her son that contradicts her recollections. She responded: "How much I am finding out about myself."[32] The son, Richard White, concludes that

> In forcing my mother's stories and the memories they represent to confront both other memories and a history that I can recover from places outside living memory, I may be not so much enriching the stories as diluting them and washing the meaning out of them.[33]

This quest for meaning and the levels of meaning and metaphor will be discussed later in this article.

Comparing records to the stories, the genealogists in the survey often found records lacking. "Her records are a little bit dry. I mean births, . . .deaths, and marriages. . . . I love stories. . .They catch me up, the stories do, much more than. . . just the dates and names" (Genealogist 32, lines 288–89, 295, 299–300). The stories can also be hard to resist without explicit evidence contradicting them:

> This [name] family in the Niagara peninsula. . .were. . .Loyalists. . . I was reading the history. . . . I asked [the archivist] at [the archives] if it was a good history and he said yeah, from their point of view. But it deals with [a Loyalist], . . .he doubts . . . the story about . . . [the Loyalist] carrying the message from her house to the British forces . . . walking through the night in a swamp . . . because she had overheard American soldiers making plans. . . .You know it's a nice legend but he doesn't even think it is true. Those things I always watch for. But I haven't run into anything that I know is just downright fiction. (Genealogist 32, lines 358–72)

While all of the genealogists interviewed recognized the importance of records to substantiate facts, they also recognized that the oral history—the family stories—had qualities that the records lacked. Richard White describes the relationship between stories and records well:

> The history that matters most to me now, in understanding my mother's and father's romance, lies neither in the story in the pardon file or in the story my father told me. It is within the space between these stories, the space where somehow one becomes the other. It is this transformation that I want to know, and it is this transformation that I can only guess at and never recover.[34]

Stories enabled the interviewees to connect with their ancestors in a way that records did not. "They flush out the records, the records are. . .terrific,

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[32] White, *Remembering Ahanagran*, 156.

[33] White, *Remembering Ahanagran*, 302.

[34] White, *Remembering Ahanagran*, 280.

that's exactly what Uncle Ed said. The stories make them three-dimensional" (Genealogist 25, lines 566–67). The stories also allowed for imagination. "Absolutely, it's the stories that interest me. I'm not expecting to find any hidden treasure or prestige, or anything like that. It's very, very much the stories. I want to flesh these people out and to humanize them somehow" (Genealogist 21, lines 437–46).

In addition to this fluidity between records and oral tradition, the social nature of the information also connects modern and early modern genealogists:

> [H]eraldic and genealogical materials. . .were socially circulating commodities, continuously in a process of revision, not a set of static historical "facts" intended to advance the development of scholarship. What mattered most in the enhancement of genealogical knowledge was not the individual fact or document. . .but rather the availability of multiple sources of information and their free transmission from one interested individual to another.[35]

The narrative process was often a part of the family tradition. One participant reported "my grandmother. . .had written a biography of her life, and when she was eighty, she wrote this. And, so then, we gave my dad a blank book and told him to write his" (Genealogist 20, lines 32–36). She went on to say, "my son gave me a computer, the one who is interested now, he gave me a book, and he said here, you write your story. So, I'm in the process" (Genealogist 20, lines 327–28).[36]

Through stories, the genealogists in the survey ascribed motivation and imbued their ancestors with personalities, even going so far as to rationalize past actions:

> I was telling my sons that my grandfather, . . .when I knew him and probably always, was a sensible type of a person, I mean not frivolous or anything particularly, but he had a. . .tattoo. . .of an anchor and I was thinking about that because he was not the sort of guy that you would think would go out and get a tattoo and I decided that he probably did that when he was a teenager in some port with his buddies and, you know, so you sort of can put some of it together like that. (Genealogist 26, lines 202–10)

These genealogists intertwine stories with documents to create the fabric of their past. They understand the records within the frame of the story and filter the story through the existing records. In the absence of records, the story takes on mythic qualities, as in the case of the family with a purported Native American ancestor.

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[35] Woolf, *Social Circulation of the Past,* 121.

[36] Interestingly, a recent book by Stephen Pavuk, *The Story of a Lifetime: A Keepsake of Personal Memoirs,* helps individuals structure the family narrative process (Santa Fe, N.M.: Triangle, 2000).

Yet, most of all, the stories help our genealogists to imagine their ancestors' lives as well as their thoughts and motivations. "I don't know. I just find that genealogy is a really interesting way to find your way almost by chance into worlds and places and times that you never knew existed and never would have picked to think about" (Genealogist 2, lines 534–40). The stories are also compelling, as she reports:

> I mean, the things I like to find the most are where people are fallible and I think we have this idea that our ancestors were all these noble people and I really like to find. . .the things that you find often don't indicate the fallibility of people because that's not the thing that they want to make public when they're writing their one little paragraph about their family in the county history book. I really like to feel that people are similarly fallible through the ages. That's why I like the stories. (Genealogist 2, lines 554–60)

Records, meaning, and truth (seeking truth versus seeking meaning)

> My husband always says I never let the facts get in the way of a good story. But I have been faithful about not making things up when I don't know what's going on. (Genealogist 18, lines 549–51)

> There is nothing my mother has told me that is without some basis in the past. But neither, at least in those cases where I can recover the historical scraps, is there a story that to a historian sifting through the evidence clearly happened the way she remembers.[37]

The genealogists we surveyed revealed a complex relationship with the family narratives they construct and tell. Having the records, in a way, frees them to search for meaning, rather than simply establishing the facts. As a result, they are less concerned about every story being true and can seek identity through more subtle and perhaps metaphorical meaning in the stories.

We found that while our genealogists reveled in the stories, they viewed them almost as allegories. As noted by Bolande Awe, in the absence of written records, oral traditions also constitute archives (or part of the community of records) because they transmit values, ideals, and cultural practices.[38] Yet, genealogists in the survey did not see these stories as necessarily transmitting truth. "Old family stories can be totally warped out from reality but there's got to be in there somewhere a seed of truth that got this whole thing started" (Genealogist 25, lines 342–44). Another genealogist was particularly eloquent about this topic:

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[37] White, *Remembering Ahanagran*, 5.

[38] Bolande Awe, "The Concept of Archives in Africa: A Preliminary Survey," *Janus* 1 (1996): 73.

> My mother was full of stories about all kinds of things. And of course I was just taking this with a pinch of salt; I didn't take it very seriously. But a lot of it was funny and intriguing, and she had one particular story that shows that we were related somehow to a very distinguished British civil servant of the early nineteenth century. So whenever I would come across references to him I would follow that up, you see. And later on when I really got more serious about this and really tried to document relationships and so on, I put a lot of time, an enormous amount of time, trying to document a relationship with him and his family, but I've never been able to find it; that's one thing, where my mother, as I would say, was once again wrong. But then in other areas she has turned out to be unexpectedly correct, you see. . . . I might have to modify my view of her, long after her death. . . . In the usual way one finds out the family stories that she told us have a germ of truth at least, but they were not fully accurate. For example, there was a story about my father's grandfather. . .and the legend about him was that he worked in a gunpowder factory and was blown up. . . . And what happened for what it's worth is that he was working in a gunpowder factory, that was the correct part of the story, but he wasn't blown up. He got his arm caught in a machine and had to have it amputated and subsequent to that had a stroke. That is what killed him, so I think that is quite typical. This thing gets modified in the course of time, a different story. (Genealogist 19, lines 31–42; lines 308–15; lines 341–46)

As a result of access to both the narratives and the records, genealogists have the ability to find alternative truths in which they can believe. In one case, a genealogist, when confronted with the record, must face an ancestor's desertion:

> And, I had a great grandfather who was listed as a Civil War vet and I can't find him. I mean I know where he lived and all of this but I can't find. . .his war records. And then my grandfather's foster father, who was supposed to have been in the Mexican War, or so he told my grandfather, my grandfather said, "you're eligible for a pension." So he wrote for him and the letter came back and said he wasn't eligible for a pension, that he was AWOL. . . . But I can't find him. Sometimes these stories are, you know, there are a lot of facts to them and sometimes there's not. (Genealogist 20, lines 102–9)

This is not to say that records can be taken completely at face value. The interviewed genealogists knew of errors in census records, in immigration records written by officials with little understanding of accents or foreign spelling conventions, and in birth dates midwives provided to clerks long after the event. Interrogating the records is part of the work genealogists do, and this becomes part of the space between these stories, the space where somehow one becomes the other:

> Very often. . . the years are different by one or two years and sometimes I make, when I cannot really decide what's. . . the more reliable record, I make

a note of it but I sometime try to make a decision what is the most reliable record. For example, if you have a death index and tombstone inscription, I would expect that the tombstone inscription, because relatives ordered that tombstone, would be more reliable than the death index where it may have been mistyped. But that's really a judgment call. (Genealogist 31, lines 100–107)

In other cases, our genealogists lived with multiple truths. One reflected on his grandfather's records:

His death certificate says he was eighty years old when he died and his tombstone says that he was sixty-five. . .and the census says that he should have been about sixty-seven. . . . Now, how old was he when he died? Well, my grandmother always said my grandfather did his death certificate and he was never good with dates. And so with that, there's so much that even if you have written facts it might not be fact at all. (Genealogist 8, lines 459–64)

Even in the presence of records, we saw that genealogists, too, had trouble letting go of family legends. The following passage, concerning the existence of Native American ancestors, has become mythic in one family history. The interviewee returned to this story many times; it was definitely a means by which he identified himself:

Well, I actually tried and was never able to get any written record but there is enough anecdotal information that there's not really any question and my dad said there wasn't in his mind either. A cousin that he was working for in Toronto told him and that he asked my grandfather and my grandfather never denied it to him. . . . I really investigated this at one time. . .somebody in Fortune told me. . .that the [name] who raised my grandfather. . .they had a sawmill at the head of Big Squaw which is at the head of Fortune Bay. . .and that there was an Indian village right next to that lumber camp and so that, you know, puts them in proximity. (Genealogist 26, lines 406–19)

In this case, stories had the weight of evidence and became underlying family narratives through which all other events were viewed. The weaving of these narratives was part of the process of creating and sustaining self-identity and was necessary for understanding one's place in the community.

Conclusions

Access to records, identifying information in records and transforming it into personal meaning, interactions with others in the genealogical process, and the re-creation of the family archives define genealogists as a community of records. Access for genealogists is more of a search for meaning than for documents. Although genealogists promote increasing physical access through both political

and social mechanisms, the focus of genealogical activities is on gaining understanding through interpreting archival records and family narratives.

Notable in this community is the lack of participation of archivists and librarians although they are enablers of the community. The interviewees did not place them centrally either in educating genealogists about records and the search process, or in the creation and disposition of family archives. If communities are defined by both participants and nonparticipants, this lack of participation is an important consideration for the archival community. Genealogists are supportive of archival activities; they do not, however, rely heavily on archivists for education, either about searching for records or about preserving family records. This is not to say that archivists do not engage with genealogists by lecturing at genealogical society meetings, teaching workshops, and providing one-on-one instruction during reference exchanges. But, archivists were not foremost in our genealogists' minds when they discussed these activities.

By creating mechanisms to foster continuation of their genealogical work and preservation of the family archives, genealogists ensure that records and stories survive for future generations. Their collective memory work is deliberate and proactive. They often transfer not only the family archives and their genealogical search knowledge, but most importantly, the role of family historian. This gift also involves remembering and retelling the stories. Handing over the genealogical mantle has physical (material culture), intellectual, and social aspects that make the continuity of collective memory tangible and meaningful across generations.

Finally, communities of records are characterized by their unique interplays between records, meaning, and truth. As revealed by the genealogists interviewed, self-identification and self-discovery through the role of family historian are important dimensions of the genealogical research process. Family history is more than seeking names and dates through the location of birth, death, and marriage records. While this information is essential to complete the pedigree chart and research family lines, genealogists need to fill in the story between or within those lines. This aspect of the process also begins to address genealogists' underlying need for meaning, not just information. Genealogists are seekers of meaning as much as they are searchers for records. As seekers of meaning, they are less invested in proving the truth of stories and records, but more in uncovering coherent narratives. The records and the stories contain both truth and fiction. In the words of Richard White, the genealogist investigates the space between the records and the goal is to knit these together so "one becomes the other" with some coherence for the person. As such, genealogy is this process of connecting—connecting the past with the present and connecting within the present to family and the genealogical community— and creating a community (or linked communities) of records.

A p p e n d i x :   I n t e r v i e w   G u i d e

1. Beginning
   a. How long have you been doing family history?
   b. What got you started?
2. Learning how to do genealogy
   a. How did you learn how to do genealogy?
   b. What genealogical "how-to" books do you own or do you rely on heavily?
3. Information seeking and selection
   a. How do you decide where to begin?
   b. What types of information are you looking for?
   c. Do you search for genealogical information on the Web?
   d. What Web-based genealogical sites do you use?
   e. What other Web-based sources of information do you use?
   f. How do you select information or decide which information might be relevant for your family research?
4. Citation practices
   a. When you collect information do you note the source? How?
5. Role of social networks in information seeking
   a. How important are other family historians in assisting you in your research?
   b. How important are other family members in helping your family research project?
   c. Do you belong to a genealogical society?
6. Family documentation
   a. What types of family history documents or information do you keep? (Probe for form and genre of records, e.g., death records)
   b. How long have you been collecting family information?
   c. Where did you get the family documentation?
   d. Are you aware of other family members that have other documents or photographs?
   e. Do you share documents or photographs with other family members?
   f. What are your plans for passing on family materials?
7. Recordkeeping practices
   a. Do you organize your family history materials?
   b. Do you have any type of inventory of your materials?
   c. Would you describe/show the organization to me?
   d. How aware are you of best practices for genealogical record-keeping?

8. Technology
   a. Do you use a software package to manage your genealogical information?
   b. What version of this software do you have?
   c. How did you select this application?
   d. How would you rate your computer skills?