

WHERE THE MURDERERS ROAM: HISTORY AND FAMILY STORIES

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TELLING A STORY:

- Telling a story can be the most rewarding thing about family history, but wait, there is more...
- Trying to write a narrative can allow you to see your research from a different angle and allow you to see errors, oddities that need explanation, or holes that you might be able to fill.
- Writing a narrative can also push you into looking at records you might not even have thought of otherwise and push you beyond dates and places.
- Creating a story can also force you to place your ancestors in historical context. That context can point you in new directions or reveal problems.
- Writing keeps you going. There is always something new revealed that points to something just beyond what you know.

MAKING A NARRATIVE RECORD:

- Encourages others to preserve your research.
- Some things you know just don't fit on a family group sheet but could fit in a narrative.
- Stories give another way to convey information.
- Stories express connections and context in ways that raw data and group sheets can't.

CREATE INTEREST:

- People enjoy stories far more than raw data.
- People can and will remember and spread interesting stories.
- Images in context capture attention, sadly, microfilm printouts don't.

NARRATIVE AS A RESEARCH TOOL:

- Can be part of the research process.
- Help you spot inconsistencies.
- Help you spot holes where you would like to know more.
- Help you focus on the context of your ancestors' lives.
- New ideas can come from the change in perspective from researcher to writer.
- Researching those small details can lead to big discoveries.

FAMILY STORIES:

- Family stories are remembered for specific reasons: drama, humor, danger, strangeness...
- Sometimes stories are forgotten despite being memorable.
- Stories also change for reasons. They might be made to be more dramatic or to evade something that was thought best not to be remembered.
- Because we remember stories that follow familiar, and even useful, story arcs, sometimes family stories evolve toward those familiar stories. Without research you can't tell if a story that follows a familiar plot line is remembered because it follows that plot line or has evolved toward a plot line to which it was close.
- Family stories may be quite far off from the actual event they supposedly record and yet still be important. First they mark the possibility that *something* important happened. Second, details in them may be closer to the truth than the story as a whole. Third, even the incorrect parts may be incorrect in a way that allows you to use the information as a clue.

STORIES DON'T OCCUR IN ISOLATION:

- To understand a story about our ancestors may mean at least some understanding of many stories about our ancestors.
- For example, the prelude to the story in this presentation is an entire story unto itself.

RECORDS:

The sources used to tell this story come from many places and include:

- Ancestry.com
- Local libraries' history and genealogy collections
- Family History Library
- Google Books (books.google.com)
- Internet Archive (archive.org)
- Lake County Illinois Genealogical Society Reading Room
- The National Archives and Records Administration
- Newberry Library
- New England Historic Genealogical Society (<https://www.americanancestors.org>)
- New-York Historical Society
- Kansas State Historical Society
- Fold3.com
- Tri-Counties Genealogy & History (<https://www.joycetice.com>)
- Library of Congress

and consist of:

Family stories
Local Histories

Letters
Tax Records

Headstones	Land Records
Maps	Federal Census
Newspapers	State Census
Diary Entries	Historical Context
Heirlooms	Federal Tract Books
Laws	Moon Phase Calculation
Insurance Records	

The Bureau of Land Management’s site (<https://glorerecords.blm.gov>) can be used to find land patents, including successful homestead claims. Unsuccessful claims can be found using the Bureau of Land Management’s Tract Books (www.familysearch.org, search the catalogue using keywords “tract books”). These books are difficult to use and require knowledge of the legal description of the land (Township, Range, Section...). The book *Land & Property Research in the United States* (Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 1997) by E. Wade Hone is a good place to get an understanding of how the tract books are organized, and which books you might need to use. With the legal description of the land, the land entry file can be ordered from the National Archives. (Fold3 has Nebraska homestead land entry files.)

THE HOMESTEAD ACT:

Much of this story revolves around the provisions of the Homestead Act of 1862. Roughly speaking, the provisions were:

- Anyone 21 years of age or older, or who was head of a household, and who had never born arms against the United States could claim 160 acres of Federal land under certain restrictions.
- The claimant needed to file their claim.
- The claimant was not allowed to claim land that was adjacent to other land in the claimant’s possession, if the result would be more than 160 acres in total.
- The claimant needed to live on the land continuously for five years.
- The claimant needed to make improvements, e.g. build a home and outbuildings, clear the land, build fences.
- The claimant needed to file for a title to the land once all requirements had been met.

For the full text of the act see United States Statutes at Large (<https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwsllink.html> select volume 12 and go to page 392)

THE PUBLIC LAND SURVEY SYSTEM / RECTANGULAR SURVEY SYSTEM:

Most of the United States was surveyed according to the Public Land Survey System. When an area (often a state-sized area) was surveyed, a principle meridian (north-south line), and a baseline (east-west line) were surveyed first. Distances from these lines are specified in six-mile increments. A survey township is specified in terms of it’s “range,” the number of six-mile increments east or west of the principle meridian, and, confusingly, its “township,” the number of six-mile increments north or south of the baseline.

Ideally, each survey township would be a square whose sides aligned to the four cardinal directions, were six miles long and which could be divided into thirty-six equal one square mile blocks

THE MOON:

The full moon may not cause extreme behavior, but it may facilitate it. Before the electric light became ubiquitous and seeing headlights in the distance became common, when a person may not have wanted to carry a lantern and, therefore, stand out in the darkness, the moon might be the light source of choice. On the night in question, the moon was only hours short of being full, providing ample light for men who chose to roam that night. (see <http://www.moonpage.com>)

PHOTOGRAPHY:

Two types of 19th century photography play a roll in this story.

An ambrotype was an underexposed negative image produced on glass. The glass was placed over a black background for display. Parts of the glass that were not exposed to light allowed the black background to be visible and thus appear black. Parts that were exposed to light obscure the black background and appear lighter. Ambrotypes were introduced in the 1850s but lost popularity in the 1860s to the tintype, which was cheaper and more robust.

The second type is not actually known but required collodion. Ambrotypes required collodion but had gone out of popular use by the late 1860s, when collodion was mentioned in the story. Tintypes (actually produced on iron, not tin) and the production of glass plate negatives also required collodion. It is likely that one or both of these was the unknown technique.