

Tell me what you remember

BY SUSAN WEINBERG

NOTE: This is the first in a series of articles by Susan Weinberg on how to learn about family history. Genealogical research often starts at home or with family members. Follow Susan through the process that allowed her to uncover generations of her family history from a variety of sources. Hennepin History Museum has several aids for helping with research. Learn more about it in upcoming articles or contact Hennepin History Museum's archivist for more information.

THE STARTING POINT for any genealogical search is oral history — learning the memories and stories that have been passed down through one's family. Even though my grandparents were long gone, fragments of stories were known by the next generation. Many years later, my mother shared with me a few pages of history written by my grandfather. I was captivated! I began to search for the documents to support them. If I could have had a conversation with my grandfather, my first question would have been about names.

Who were family members named for?

Many countries and heritages had specific naming patterns. For people from Great Britain there was a pattern of naming the first son after the father's father and the first daughter after the mother's mother. A proscribed pattern followed, which accounted for children named after grandparents, parents, and parent's siblings. Ashkenazic Jews from Eastern Europe frequently get their

given name from a deceased grandparent or great-grandparent.

Naming patterns give you clues about relationships as you work back through generations and help validate connections. You will find that given names repeat, even if in somewhat Americanized forms.

If doing an oral history, be sure to ask if they know who they were named after.

What surname did family members have when they came to America?

The surname you go by may not be the surname under which your family entered the country. Immigrants shortened their name or Americanized it, often wanting to blend into this new culture, sometimes to avoid prejudice. Different branches of the same family may have adopted different names or different spellings. You will need to identify the original name if you hope to find an immigration manifest and work back to an ancestral town.

My grandmother's maiden name was Rothchild, but it wasn't until I spoke with my father's cousin that I learned the original name was actually Raichel. The first family member to come to America had changed his name and everyone else followed suit. I later found an immigration record of that early immigrant's father coming to America. Indeed, his last name was Raichel, but he reported he was going to live with his son, a Rothchild. If oral history fails to reveal their original names, documents might. If your

family member got naturalized after 1906, the naturalization record will ask what given name and surname they entered the country under.

Are there any family letters from grandparents?

Look for letters! They may reveal important facts. After fruitlessly searching for my grandfather's immigration record, my mother remembered that he had written to her that he had changed his name. She produced his letter from her family history file. In it he reported that he had changed his name because it was too hard to spell. That letter led me to his immigration manifest. In addition to valuable facts, letters may also reveal your ancestor's personality and values.

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In this letter, Susan's grandfather wrote about his name change and leaving the Ukraine to avoid being drafted. Finding this letter inspired her to learn about genealogy. Provided by author.

...of the ... age 22 year old.
 here I'm sure - positive sure by the trend examination I would be taken
 in military service. — but it ~~happened~~ happen I married, — and
 my wife's father — Mr. Abraham Kislynsky advised to go to America.
 and in the year of 1911 I, Mr. Benjamin Shicher was
 my name — it was too hard for me to spelling so I started to call myself
 Joffe. — and till to this day.