

## **How to Investigate Conflicting Family Stories and Traditions**

Family traditions and stories can provide many hours of interesting and exciting entertainment. They can also be a source of immense family pride. Many future generations can be inspired to better themselves when studying how past successes played a role in forming the present family structure. However, as accounts are passed down through generations of groups of people, the original facts can become distorted. This process can begin when one person discusses a given incident with another family member or friend. That second family member or friend passes the information onto another person. That person talks about it to another and so on. The chain continues until the information has made its way to the end to the last person, and that person then states aloud what he or she heard. Frequently, what comes out at the end of the line bears little or no resemblance to the original facts.

Some stories and traditions can be outright falsehoods meant to destroy people's reputations or cover up criminal activities. Regardless of what the outcome can be, this situation when applied to genealogical research can be frustratingly problematic. The family traditions or stories passed from one relative to another can often get scrambled in the telling and retelling, until they may at some point bear little resemblance to the real truth. Perhaps you have encountered small differences that were easily understood or resolved with a little research. In other cases, though, you may have found that there were huge discrepancies, some so vast that the conflicting accounts bore little resemblance to one another. The road to explaining can often depend on whether the circumstances of the supposed real incident or event stems from a positive or negative setting.

### **Factors To Consider When Analyzing Evidence**

Human nature is such that the telling and retelling of a family story over generations or decades will change the content over time. Societal norms change over extended periods of time. In our modern era, there are those who consider any events or people who were famous prior to World War II as being part of "pre-history"! Different people in different eras hear things differently, interpret what they hear a little differently, and maybe have varying levels of storytelling skills. In other cases, of course, the passage of time dims the memory and recollections become less clear. In some cases, this is deliberate while in others it is simply a fact of life and part of the aging process. In instances where a family member may have purposely altered the facts for some reason, the rationale usually falls into one of the following categories:

1. An attempt to protect a reputation
2. Spare someone pain or embarrassment
3. Enhance their role in an important personal or historical event
4. To simply contradict the facts for all time (some people will ALWAYS take the opposing view for the pleasure of it)
5. Cover-up some form of wrongdoing on their part

Unplanned pregnancies, broken romances caused by feuding families or fraudulent incidents, estranged family relationships, marriages that never occurred, and fathers or mothers that ran out on their families have always been a fact of life. Some say these problems are more a creation of

the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If one takes the time to study human history, the evidence points to the reality that we simply are more open about these facts of life today than in previous generations.

Not only are these discrepancies challenging to resolve, but they also may cause a family rift when identified or exposed. Sometimes what is presumed to be ‘fact’ travels down parallel paths of different family lines and, over time, gathers completely different details. There may be a single kernel of truth or fact there. However, when two family members from different lines come together to compare notes, both believing their account to be correct, the confrontation usually results in tremendous anger and resentment. This is especially true if the family tradition or story in question has resulted in the individual or the event described in the story to be illustrious, famous, pious, or imminently noteworthy. If the event or person is alleged to have had a major impact on a given community or institution, this will only intensify the effect of unmasking the “true nature” of what really happened. Whole generations may have been raised to venerate the memory of “our illustrious forebear.” An intimation that the family idol may have been other than he or she was portrayed may cause tension, to say the least, and outright family revolution at its worst. This set of circumstances can place a genealogist in a very delicate situation.

### **The Investigation Process**

Whenever you encounter conflicting information, it is essential to look for the truth. This can be easier said than done but history has shown that no matter how someone may try to cover-up the truth, it will usually come to the forefront eventually. No cover-up has ever proven to be foolproof. As you begin the investigation process, it is essential that you understand the difference between primary and secondary sources.

Primary sources are those records created at or near the time of the event. Secondary sources are those records and other materials created some significant period of time after the original event occurred. Primary sources, because of their chronological proximity to the event, are more likely to be correct. Keep an open-mind when you encounter conflicting data no matter how sure you initially are that one version is likely to be more correct than the other. Record both versions. You may find a grain of truth in both events. Don’t automatically assume that one fact is correct and another is erroneous. Maintain a healthy perspective and remain open to the possibility that what you once thought was correct may really be incorrect.

Start your research by reviewing what you already have in evidence. Look at the documents you have, and the sources of all the information. Examine both written and oral data and accounts. Attempt to determine the source of each piece of evidence. Some good questions to ponder are:

1. Was the account published somewhere?
2. Was it a family story and, if so, passed from which person to which other person?
3. Are there any official documents, family documents, or both that you can personally review?
4. Is there any reason for someone to have falsified a piece of information?
5. If the evidence lends itself to this possibility, can you determine what motivation(s) he or she may have had?

All of these questions should be evaluated as you try to weigh the evidence. The companion handout ***How To Evaluate Genealogical Evidence*** may also provide some additional insights to supplement those in this handout.

Consider that primary sources are probably more accurate and stronger than secondary sources. If you cannot locate a primary source, look for multiple secondary sources. Do two secondary sources equal a primary source? While some researchers think so, there are strong arguments to the contrary:

1. When information is transcribed or abstracted from census, land, or probate records, errors are made
2. Dates may be transposed
3. Spelling errors in the index or text
4. The transcriber makes an assumption and inserts his/her own opinion, such as correcting what they perceive as an obvious spelling error

Unsuspecting researchers may have accepted the erroneous data as fact without personally reviewing and verifying it. This new researcher may publish or pass along the information, promoting it as fact thus magnifying the impact of the error.

As you proceed with the investigative process, you could come up with multiple primary and/or secondary sources, all of which conflict? Under these circumstances, you should document them all until time allows for further research. If there is one or more that you believe is/are the best, document and make notations on each source one to indicate why you feel one is better than another, based on your research and/or personal knowledge. And keep looking for more evidence to prove or disprove what you have found to date. Don't give up until you are satisfied you have the facts right.

### **Documenting the Truth**

Regardless of the circumstances, you will always want to document the correct (or most correct) information. If you and your relatives are in disagreement about the veracity of a story or fact, do your best to obtain factual primary source evidence and document your findings. Tact and diplomacy are always the best tools for disclosing your findings.

At other times, however, your discovery of the truth may be hurtful or embarrassing to someone living or to his or her descendants. You must always record the truth for you files. However, you should be sensitive to others and perhaps refrain from making the truth public until such time as the facts are no longer hurtful. Some researchers will deliberately withhold information if a very elderly family member or person is involved. They choose to wait until the person has passed away before revealing the truth. The phrase "damn if you do, damned if you don't" has certainly been applied to this situation more often than not. It is purely a judgment call. By the same token, another phrase can also apply "the truth will set you free".

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