

Have Ancestors, Will Travel

By Carolyn B. Leonard

In 1865 Horace Greeley said those famous words, “Go West, young man, and grow up with the country.”

And they did come West; on foot, on horseback, in covered wagons and later by train, pushing the frontier ever westward all the way to the Pacific ocean. That expansion westward was an exciting time in history. Boundless opportunity awaited the adventurous young men and courageous women of the time.

Now think about taking a journey to touch the places once familiar to those who provided your DNA generations ago. Genealogy is the most popular topic on the Web; it is a hobby that can lead to one of the fastest growing markets in travel. Genealogy tourism combines a relaxing vacation with an exciting research trip. Inspired by popular television shows like NBC’s “Who Do You Think You Are?” many family historians and young adults are taking these genealogy vacations not only in the United States, but also opting for trips abroad to visit those places their ancestors left to come to America.

Marian Pierre-Louis, a house historian and genealogical lecturer who specializes in southern New England research, says, “Names on a page come to life when you have the ability to touch your ancestor’s grave. You can imagine loved ones mourning at the same site and touching that very stone. Likewise, finding your ancestor’s home puts into perspective that your ancestor was a real person who lived much like we do today.”

Many states are seeing the wisdom of inviting genealogists or family historians, opening their archives and welcoming researchers. As an example, many searchers may find their road leads to Oklahoma.

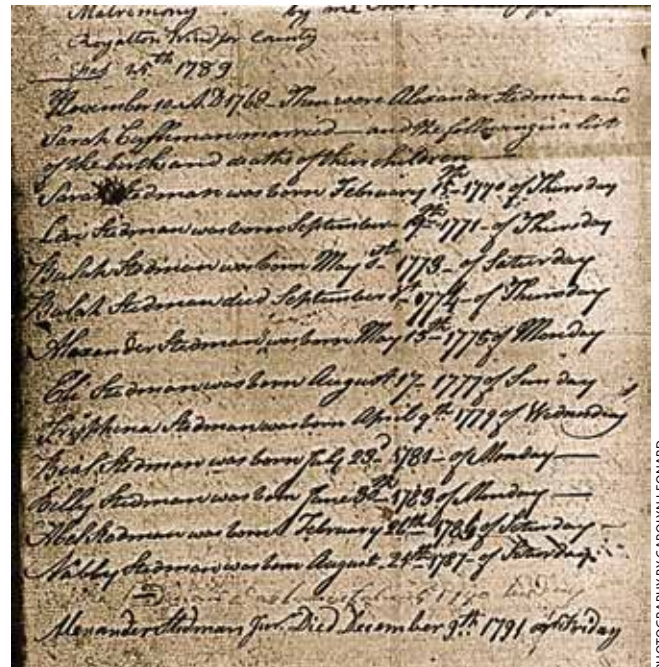
Here’s why. There was a great migration of Okies to California in Dust Bowl days, countless waves of settlers moving West across the state and those who homesteaded in the 19th and 20th centuries. Add the inflow of nearly 40 Federally recognized Indian tribes and the results is a treasure trove of records, mostly held in the Oklahoma Historical Society Research Center in Oklahoma City.

Many people believe they have American Indian ancestry but



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF CAROLYN LEONARD

A photo like this one from 1890 can either start or boost a search for family history. If you are lucky, there might be some identification on the back. If not, look for clues like name and location of photographer, then check your ancestor chart to see who might be a match. Another tip is to send copies to distant cousins to see if they have information on those in the photo.



PHOTOGRAPH BY CAROLYN LEONARD

In Ohio, a searcher for family information found reference to this document, which had been filed and accepted by the Mayflower society before 1814. It lists dates of birth for this family from the 1700s.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAROLYN LEONARD

When traditional online databases fail you, it may be time for a traipse through the cemetery, which may be more a family plot than a community burial grounds.

have no clue to which tribe they might have a connection. Searching the Dawes Rolls, available at the Oklahoma History Center (OHC), is essential if you are tracing Native American ancestors. The Dawes Commission was organized in 1893 to accept applications for tribal enrollment between 1899 and 1907 from American Indians of the Five Civilized Tribes who resided in the Indian Territory that later became the eastern portion of Oklahoma. The Five Civilized Tribes consist of the Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Seminole and Chickasaw. If you do not find any ancestors on the Dawes rolls, that only leaves about 35 more tribal records to be searched. Oklahoma has the largest Native population of any state.

County courthouses contain original land patents for pioneering settlers who made the various land runs into Oklahoma and many cemeteries have been walked, indexed and published. The research center might have everything you need, and not just on the state of Oklahoma. Their collection includes birth, death and marriage indexes, biographical and vertical subject

files, census records and more than 2,000 rare and unpublished family histories. A phone call to the OHC Research Center's friendly staff (405-522-0765) or a search on the webpage (www.okhistory.org/historycenter/visitor) can locate the best place and time to begin your search. There is no charge to use the facilities, and your non-genealogist companion could enjoy touring the Smithsonian quality historical exhibits in this state-of-the-art facility while you research in the library.

For more information on a county-by-county basis in Oklahoma, go to this website: www.TravelOK.com/genealogy. You will find quick links to information available on research libraries — where to find local genealogical and historical societies, museums and repositories, cemeteries, ghost towns and old school houses, as well as tourism destinations in each county.

The National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum is a great place to find photographs of relatives involved in rodeo. It contains one of the country's largest rodeo photograph collections.

The Museum's Dickinson Research Center can be accessed with a visit or online at www.nationalcowboymuseum.org. Visitors can stop by Monday through Friday from 1 to 5 p.m. or make an appointment by calling (405) 478-2250, Ext. 273.

Almost every state in the union offers material in their historical centers, but call first to check on hours of operation. Know before you go what you hope to find so you don't waste valuable time chasing rabbits. Local historical museums, historical societies and genealogical societies offer regular free seminars and workshops that assist nonmembers as well as members with genealogy research, which you can learn about by "Googling" the county of interest. Many monthly society meetings feature prominent genealogical speakers.

Combining a summer vacation with a genealogy research trip can be rewarding and fun for a family. As an example, Oklahoma City (population 1.2 million) is one of the nation's best-kept secrets as a fun and inexpensive tourist destination.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAROLYN LEONARD

County courthouses like this one in Harper County, Kansas, are a great resource when searching for records on marriages, probate and divorces.

From rock-climbing to dinner cruises on the Oklahoma River, there is something to appeal to every age — just as you can find anywhere if you take the time to look.

Travel agents are learning family historians have an entirely different image in their minds of a really great vacation. While many work-weary tourists dream of emptying their brains while lying on a beach somewhere, family history searchers display a passion in looking for long-lost family connections. Some travelers may plan their vacation solely for that reason, others include in their schedule only a day or so to check out a cemetery or look at the local church records for a recognizable name or a marriage date.

Connecting dots as you follow footsteps backward in time becomes a journey of self-discovery while meeting the people, places and landscapes that helped shape your ancestors. The Internet makes research much easier, but no amount

of online searching, staring at microfilm or even private luxury tour can match the actual discovery of, say, hugging your great great-grandfather's headstone in a long forgotten burial ground, or visiting the tiny chapel where your ancestor was christened more than a century ago. This is the thrill of genealogy tourism.

Don't go unprepared. Before you book a flight or gas up the car, spend time collecting the names and vital records on the ancestors you want to trace. Download a free Ancestor Chart from the Internet and fill in as much as you can with your family's names, birth, death and marriage dates and places, immigration and land ownership, as well as towns of origin, before leaving home.

Document completely where you find the information so you or someone else can find it again. Ancestry.com is the best place online to pursue genealogy research and you can use it free at the OHC as well as at most public libraries. Not all information on the Internet is correct; remember the old GIGO (garbage in, garbage out), but you may find something that gives you a good idea where to look when you hit a brick wall. Record the source and pursue a paper document to verify the information. Check *The Handy Book for Genealogists* at your local library for contact information to request what you need.

Go through the research you have already compiled on the family and use this to create a list of facts or theories that you would like to prove or disprove, and a "to-do" list of records you would like to check. Study the area where you want to go, with both present-day maps



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JON HEAVENER

When the author first located her great-great-grandfather's tombstone in rural Wayne County, Illinois, the stone was broken off the base and laying face up on the ground, exposing the engraving to weather damage. Returning a few years later with tools to repair the marker, she found someone already had fixed it.

and those from the time period of your ancestors.

Prepare a detailed itinerary including driving time and rest stops, taking into consideration the length of time you have available and the time you will need at your destination for research.

A growing number of travel companies and genealogical experts are revolutionizing vacation travel by offering trips that focus on discovering a person's heritage. So get busy and start planning your genealogy vacation. With a little imagination, you can add events to entertain a companion with less interest in genealogy. Who knows — you might even inspire that companion to become a genealogy addict, too. ■

Carolyn B. Leonard is author of the book, *Who's Your Daddy? A Guide to Genealogy from Start to Finish*. She has been the family scribe for more than 30 years and often presents workshops on her two favorite subjects, writing and genealogy. www.CarolynBLeonard.com



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Old family Bibles should be stored in acid-free archival sealable bags, available from a photography store. The bags should be large enough to hold each Bible separately plus plastic sleeves for individual documents. You might also toss in one of those little desiccant bags that come with electronic equipment to prevent moisture. This Bible contains records dating back to the 1700s, before other birth and death registration was required.