

Virtual Reunion: Ten Tips for Connecting Your Family Online

Lisa Alzo shares some tips for connecting with family through the Internet

NOT LONG AGO, keeping in touch with relatives meant a short walk up the street for a chat with Grandma over a piece of home-made pie, or perhaps a drive across town for a Sunday family dinner. Today, with our increasingly busy lives, such leisurely visits are more of a luxury. Although our lifestyles may have changed, the need for interaction has not. But how do you maintain family ties with loved ones who live hundreds or even thousands of miles away? One way is to take advantage of modern technology.

Over the past few years, I have used technology to connect my own family online. If you would like to explore the idea of a “virtual reunion”, here are 10 tips:

1. Connect with Kin.

While e-mail is the most common communication tool, consider a few other ways to keep in contact with family such as setting up your own chat room, using a web camera (web cam), or making phone calls with your computer. Both parties need to have a computer, sound card, microphone and headset or speakers, an internet connection and a web cam (for video-based interaction).

Chat rooms: Most Internet service providers offer a chat feature. Chat rooms are internet sites that allow you to log in to a “real-time” conversation with another person via computer. Typically, users type text statements or questions and receive instant responses, but with advanced features sound and video chat are also possible. Many of the services offer an option to create a private chat room where only those who are invited may attend.

Web cams: If, like me, you were a fan of the popular cartoon series *The Jetsons*, you may have thought that the “VisaPhone” — a phone with sound and a moving picture — was a cool way to talk



Front page of the ALAFFFA (Abbott, Lizanov, Alzo, Figlar, Figlar, Figlar, Augenstein) website created via subscription through MyFamily.com.

with others. Today, such technology is now a reality, and available in an affordable device called the “web cam”. For more information on using web cams, consult manufacturer’s specifications, technology books, or the latest computer magazines.

Computer phone calls: PC-to-PC phone calls are made through Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). If your computer runs on Windows XP, there is a ready-made platform for making free PC-to-PC calls: the built-in Windows Messenger for Windows 95, 98, NT 4.0 and ME, users can download NetMeeting (www.microsoft.com/windows/netmeeting), this program comes built-in with Windows 2000. Windows 2000 or XP users can also try an application called Skype, which offers PC-to-PC calls with excellent sound quality. The program can be downloaded for free at www.skype.net. Mac users running Mac OS X can download a free 60-day trial version of iChat AV2.0 at www.apple.com/ichat (it comes standard with Mac OS X Panther) and with a web cam try iSight, www.apple.com/isight/.

2. Jumpstart Your Genealogy.

Undoubtedly, the Internet has rev-

olutionized genealogy. Popular sites such as Cyndi’s List (www.cyndislist.com), The Family History Library (www.familysearch.org), RootsWeb (www.rootsweb.com) and the Ellis Island Database (www.ellislandrecords.org), offer a convenient way to search for your ancestors from the comfort of home all day, every day.

Pay-for-access or subscription-based websites such as Ancestry.com and Genealogy.com offer access to information in census and immigration records, historical newspapers and other data collections

Mailing lists or locality- or subject-specific message boards offer another way to connect and network with others. A comprehensive resource for various types of mailing lists and message boards can be found at: http://www.rootsweb.com/~jfuller/gen_mail.html.

Finally, you may want to try GenSmarts (www.gensmarts.com), a new genealogy research software utility that uses artificial intelligence to analyze your existing genealogy file and produce research recommendations. It helps you generate and track to-do lists, print worksheets to record your genealogy data and plan research trips. For online research, GenSmarts produces links that already have your ancestor’s name and specifics embedded. A free trial is available. The full version costs \$25 US to download; \$35 US for the CD-ROM.

3. Post Your Pedigree.

Is your family tree online? If not, you may wish to post it to such websites as Ancestry World Tree (www.ancestry.com/share/awt/main.htm), My Trees (www.kindredkonnections.com), One Great Family (www.onegreatfamily.com) or Pedigree Resource File through FamilySearch.org (www.familysearch.org).

For most sites, you will need to register with a username and

password before adding your family tree. You will also need to save your file in the GEDCOM format for online posting. Most genealogy software programs available today enable you to "save as" or "export" to GEDCOM. Following proper protocol, you should never post any personal data about living individuals to a public forum, and request permission to post photographs or other information.

4. Digitize Your Documents, Photographs and Slides.

If you have to miss your cousin's wedding or nephew's fifth birthday party, digital imaging offers a way for you to experience these events. As camera phones, digital cameras and scanners become more affordable, it is easy to acquire, store and share photographs electronically. Advances in scanning and software technology allow for one-touch scanning of older documents, photographs and 35 mm slides. You should choose a scanner that works well with your operating system and read the manual for recommendations on the scanning process. Typically, you will use a flatbed scanner for documents and photographs, and a separate, special scanner for slides and negatives. The scanning process will produce either a graphics file (.bmp, .jpg, .tif, etc.) or a word processing document file (usually .txt or .rtf). The document file is created by using Optical Character Recognition (OCR) capabilities typically built into most scanning software distributed today. Documents can also be scanned in a read-only document format such as Portable Document Format (PDF) using Adobe Acrobat, full version, (www.adobe.com). Photo-editing software enables you to crop or rotate images, adjust brightness, contrast and other elements to improve the appearance of older photographs. Software packages can vary from "high-end" (\$115-\$609 US), with a higher learning curve, to "freeware" (available at no charge usually via download and not as many features). One can also find moderately priced software (\$50-\$90 US) that will

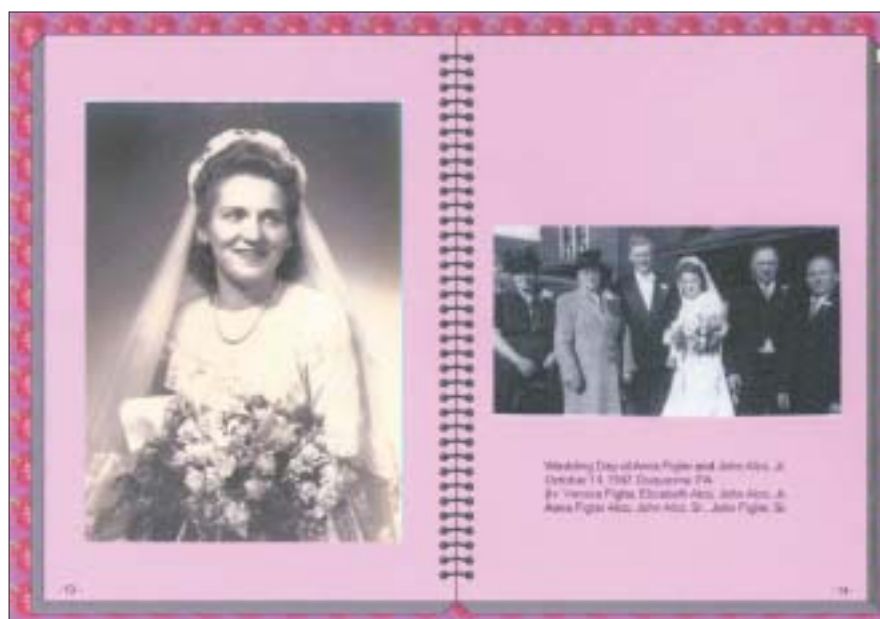
suffice for most genealogy-related uses.

Moderately to high priced software are Adobe PhotoShop Full and PhotoShop Elements (www.adobe.com), Paint Shop Pro (www.jasc.com), Microsoft Picture It Premium (www.microsoft.com) and Ulead PhotoImpact (www.ulead.com).

Freeware software programs available are Irfanview graphics viewer (www.irfanview.com), Vicman (www.vicman.net), Gimp (www.gimp.org) and PicPerk (www.picperk.com).

You should also choose a reliable storage medium and keep

reunion? Lower prices on camcorders, CD and DVD burners and multimedia computers enable anyone with time, patience and computer know-how to convert analog audio and videotapes into digital formats for distribution on CD, DVD, or VCD. This process requires an analog-to-digital converter, to digitize the analog signal of video tapes and carry it to your computer, either through a USB connection or the faster FireWire cable (IEEE1394). You also need video-editing software, DVD-creation software (sometimes bundled together or sold separately)



A digital photo album created with Flip Album Suite software. Photos, text and even music can be added to a user-customized background, to produce pages that turn automatically. The album can be burned onto a CD for easy sharing with other family members.

one or more back-up copies (preferably on a different type of media, for example on CD and a second hard drive). For more details on scanning and restoring photographs, consult the *Family Chronicle* articles "Getting the Best from a Scanner" and "Restoring Damaged Photographs" featured in the *Family Chronicle Year Four Collection*.

5. Give Family Movies, Audio and Videotapes a Makeover.

Wouldn't it be great if everyone in the family could have a copy of your old home movies, or the videotape of the latest family

and a DVD burner. For help with video editing, consult www.videohelp.com.

PC users can check Pinnacle Systems (www.pinnaclesys.com), for software and peripherals, Macintosh users with Apple (www.apple.com). Non-technical users can also try the affordable program, Family History CD (PC only, running Windows 95 or higher) at www.familyhistorycd.com.

Old movies (8mm or 16mm) may also be converted to digital format if you have a projector and a digital video camera. This time-consuming process is usually best left to a professional because of

the technique involved with producing a clean, flicker-free copy of the movie for digital editing. You can find professionals listed in your local telephone directory, on the Internet or genealogy magazines. Also, see the article, "Creating a Family Biography" by David A. Beardsley in the March/April 2004 issue of *Family Chronicle*.

6. E-Scrap Your Keepsakes and Photographs.

Scrapbooking has long been a favorite hobby for those who want to preserve their family's history. Today, many scrapbook enthusiasts are embracing the recent trend of e-scrapbooking — memory albums created digitally rather than on paper. With e-scrapbooking you can create a virtual photo album of scanned documents, photographs and other keepsakes, or digitally photographed heirlooms such as furniture, clothing and jewelry, to send to relatives postage-free. Enhance your images with clip-art, self-created or pre-formatted backgrounds and other embellishments available from various websites, including Computer Scrapbooking (www.computerscrapbooking.com), Creating Keepsakes (www.creatingkeepsakes.com), Escrappers.com (www.escrappers.com), Old Time Clip Art (www.oldtimeclipart.com), Scrapbook-Bytes (www.scrapbook-bytes.com) and Wendi Speciale Designs (www.wendispeciale.com).

You can purchase software specifically designed for creating a digital scrapbook or virtual photo album. Prices range from \$10 to \$130. Some include Adobe Photoshop Album (www.adobe.com), Brilliant Labs (www.brilliantlabs.com), FlipAlbum 5 Suite (www.flipalbum.com), Paint Shop Photo Album (www.jasc.com), Scrapbook Factory Deluxe by Nova Development (www.novadevelopment.com) and Ulead My Scrapbook Edition (www.ulead.com).

7. BLOGS.

Do you wish your parents or grandparents had left memoirs? What about your own memories or experiences? Weblogs, or

"blogs", provide a forum for you to write about your ancestors and/or keep a diary or journal in cyberspace. A blog is a webpage of usually short, chronological and frequently updated posts. You can create a family blog where relatives can share personal news and stories. Weblogs have been around since 1997, but have recently grown in popularity. Some "blogging" sites to visit are Blogger.com (www.blogger.com), Diarist.net (www.diarist.net) and Genealogy Blog.com (www.genealogyblog.com).

8. Start Spreading the News.

Online newsletters report family news, and can also feature photographs, history, reunion plans and other pertinent information. Prepare your newsletter by using software, such as Microsoft Word or Publisher or Adobe PageMaker, which contain templates for creating family newsletters that can be e-mailed or posted online. Adobe Acrobat software allows creation of the PDF documents (see tip #5), which significantly reduces production and mailing costs.

9. Tell Your Family's Story.

Today it is easier than ever to record your family's story on digital media which can then be posted or shared online. The Association of Personal Historians is an organization that assists individuals with recording their memories (www.personalhistorians.org). Also, check Story Corps, www.storycorps.net, a company building soundproof recording booths in certain cities throughout the US. You can also publish your family history as an electronic book (e-book) through a variety of online publishers or to your own webpage (see tip #10).

10. Make Your Mark in Cyberspace.

A family website is one of the best ways to implement any of the tips noted above. Websites can be public or private and password-protected.

A public website is typically designed from scratch using store-bought webpage creation and editing software, and buying stor-

age space through your Internet service provider, or opening an account with one of the many home-page host services that provide "free" online space (in exchange for running ads on your site). One person typically serves as the site administrator, who is responsible for site design, maintenance and security. The administrator needs a keen eye for graphics, and must be tech-savvy with a working knowledge of HTML (the coding language of writing webpages), other supporting computer languages and advanced features for implementing a navigable site. For assistance, consult books on webpage design, or check Cyndi's Genealogy Home Page Construction Kit at www.cyndislist.com/construc.htm.

Internet-based sites such as MyFamily.com or Info2Web.com, offer hosting for a fee or subscription. The site is "invitation only" and each participant has a username and password. Instructions are generally user-friendly and pre-formatted templates aid in posting items to such sections as photos, family calendar, family news and file cabinet.

While it can never replace face-to-face interaction with your relatives, using the Internet to stay in touch offers a creative and effective option when you can't be there in person. As technology continues to evolve so will its role in family communication and genealogy. You can use one or more of these tips individually, or combine several or all of them to develop or reestablish connections with your family — building ties that will last a lifetime.

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