April 2006

Family Chronicle

The Magazine for Families Researching their Roots

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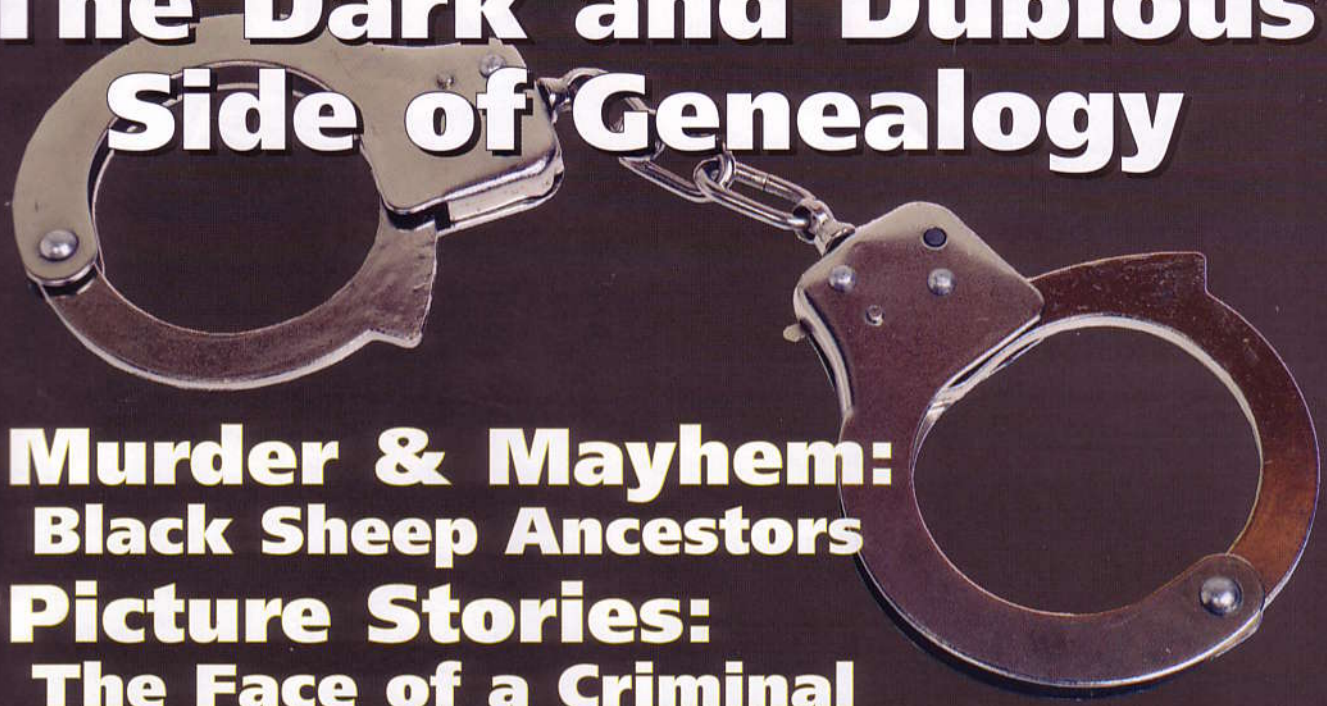
Special Issue!
The Dark and Dubious Side of Genealogy



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Express Genealogy:
50 Family History Tasks You Can Do in 15 Minutes or Less

Lisa A. Alzo shows how you can make the most of your limited genealogy time

EXPRESS LANES AT the supermarket. Express lunches at our favorite restaurants. Express workouts at the gym. Express genealogy?

These days, we seem to have less and less time to devote to things like shopping, eating and exercising, along with our other daily activities, so it is no wonder that those television advertisements offering us a quick meal, firmer body or faster check-out times at our favorite store capture our attention.

Similarly, with a little imagination, this "shortcut" approach can be applied to genealogy. When it comes to your family history research, do you find yourself putting off tasks for your latest project that you just can't seem to finish, or for that matter, even begin? Perhaps now and then you can squeeze in a half-hour or more to make some progress in the search for your ancestors.

But what if all you have is 15 minutes each day to devote to genealogical pursuits? Here are 50 family history tasks I discovered that can often be performed on a limited time schedule, in approximately 15 minutes or less.

#2 — Write a letter.

1. Create a Research "To-Do" List.
One of the key components of successful family history research is to have a plan or "research strategy." Take 15 minutes to create a simple list of short term research goals. For example, "This week, I plan to find out how to obtain naturalization records for my grandmother's brother," or "By the end of the summer, I plan to visit the cemeteries where my ancestors are buried, take digital photographs of the tombstones and upload the photos and record the information into my genealogical software program."

2. Write a Letter.
Start composing a letter to a newfound family member or a relative you haven't corresponded with in a long time. Jot down the key points you want to make.

3. Start an Ancestor Data Sheet.
While pedigree charts and family group sheets are essential record-keeping documents for genealogy, the ancestor data sheet serves as a mini "bio sketch" for each new ancestor you begin to research and serves as an outline to write about the ancestor. Using a simple word-processing program, pull out key pieces of information such as birth, marriage and death dates, immigration information, place of burial, etc. If possible, try to include a photo of the ancestor in the top right-hand corner. Then print a copy of this sheet and place it at the front of a research binder for easy transport to the library or courthouse, or anywhere you plan to conduct research. You can always go back and fill in the details later.

4. Catch up on Filing.
File loose research documents into sheet protectors, and then place them in an appropriately designated binder for the line you are researching.

5. Use a Message Board.
Post or answer a query on a message board such as RootsWeb, Ancestry.com or Genealogy.com.

6. Master those Mystery Photos.
Submit a mystery photo to any number of sites such as: *www.ancientfaces.com*, *www.deadfred.com* or *www.familyoldphotos.com*.

7. Write a Brief Character Sketch.
Jot down a sentence or two about a favorite ancestor (perhaps taking the information from the ancestor data sheet in #3) For example, I wrote this mini profile about my grandfather, Janos Figlyar, who was a prisoner of war during WWI: "During the war, János spent time in a Russian prison where his ability to repair carriages and make wheels saved his life. Eventually he managed to escape and returned home to Czechoslovakia on foot in 1920."

8. Google!
Do a Google search on an ancestor's name or village and print the results of any relevant hits to study later. For example, a Google search on my grandmother's village, Milpos, leads me to a website the village has created, *www.milpos.sk* that provides useful contact information for the mayor, photographs and other data.

9. Develop a List of Contacts.
Make a list of your living relatives that you want to contact for information.

10. Locate Addresses.
Look up the addresses of those living relatives. Look in old address books, search online using Google, or online telephone directories such as *www.SwitchBoard.com*, *www.WhitePages.com* or *http://people.yahoo.com*.

11. Search Online Telephone Directories.
As noted in #10, do a quick initial search for surnames you are researching and print the results.

12. Prepare for Oral History Interviews.
Make a list of five oral history questions for a family member you would like to interview. Try to make the questions open ended to achieve the best responses. Some examples; "What do you remember about the town where you were born?"; "Describe your experience coming to the United States/Canada. What were the conditions like on the boat, train, plane, etc?"; "What was it like growing up during the Depression, during WWII, etc.?"

13. Start a Timeline.
Compose a timeline for one of your ancestors, using either your favorite genealogical software program or a specialized software program like Genelines *www.progenysoftware.com/genelines.html* include both personal and historical events.

14. Recipe for Success.
Scan or begin to retype a favorite family recipe. Then, later on when you try out the recipe, take a photo of the prepared dish.

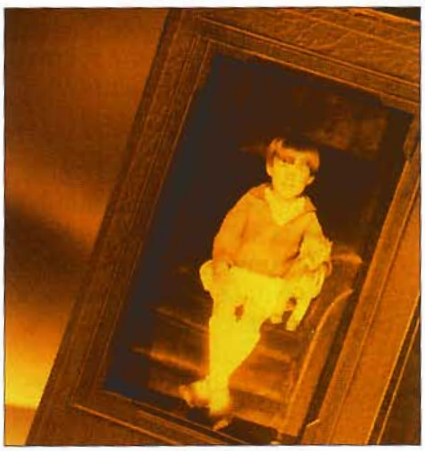
15. Check Online Library Catalogs.
Look for online versions of catalogs from your local public or university library, and print information on any resources you find. Then schedule an appointment to visit the library and check out books or use the reference materials you identified.

16. Walk Down Memory Lane.
Make notes about a person, place, or item significant in your life. You can do this either by scribbling some notes down on paper, or by making an audio recording using a tape or digital voice recording device, or your cellular phone if it has this feature.

17. Share What You've Found.
Have you located your grandfather's military record or discovered who was in that mystery photo found in a shoebox in your cousin's attic? Did you locate some information about your ancestral village that may be of interest to a fellow genealogist? Why not copy or scan the record or photo and send it to a family member or research colleague?

18. Join a Genealogical or Historical Society.
Take 15 minutes to explore their website, download a membership application form and send it in.

What to do with old photographs? See suggestions #6, #19 and #20.



19. Label Photographs.
As the genealogist in your family, have you inherited boxes of photographs with no little or no identification? Do you have your own photos that need to be labeled? If this project seems insurmountable, start by taking 10-20 photos and sort them into themes and store in an archival sleeve in a photo album or binder. If you have another extra 15 minutes, try to label the pictures as best you can and put them into the plastic sleeves.

20. Scan a Photograph.
Scan one or more photos you found doing task #19. Do a quick editing job. Use a photo-editing software program to adjust the brightness, contrast, crop the picture, etc., and save it to your computer.

21. Start a Scrapbook.
You can work on a traditional scrapbook page or set up an online page using any number of software packages.

22. Take an Heirloom Inventory.
Perhaps you have your grandmother's wedding ring, or your great-grandfather's military medal or uniform. Heirlooms are an important part of your family history and it is important to date and document them. You can start with one item at a time. Take a digital photograph that can later be uploaded to your computer and inserted into your word processing program. Put a tag on the item that gives a brief description of the item, who it belonged to and when. For example, "Grandma Figlar's wedding ring, 1924" or "Dad's junior high school book report, 1936." These can serve as a basis for a story about your ancestor down the line.

23. Check out Steve Morse's website of One-Step Web Pages (*www.stevemorse.org*).
Choose from a number of great search tools including: Ellis Island Search Forms and Ship Arrivals, Castle Garden (and earlier) Search Forms and Ship Arrivals, Other Ports of Immigration, Census and Soundex, US Phonebook Lookups in One Step and much more! Bookmark this site to revisit when you have more time to do the searches!

24. Upload Audio Files.
Upload a segment of an oral history interview (see #12). This is simple if you have a digital recorder. However, if you are working with old audiotapes, you will need to find a device that will let you convert and transfer the analog files into digital format. Alternatively, you could transcribe 15 minutes worth of a taped interview.

25. Explore eBay.
Do a quick search on eBay for

genealogy items. For example, a family Bible, high school or college yearbook, historical postcards or other memorabilia from your or your ancestor's hometown. Add any items of interest to your eBay watch list.

26. Create a Genealogical "Wish List."
Write down a list of items you might like to purchase or can present to family members or friends for birthday or holiday gift exchanging. For example, new books, subscription to an online database, genealogical software, etc.

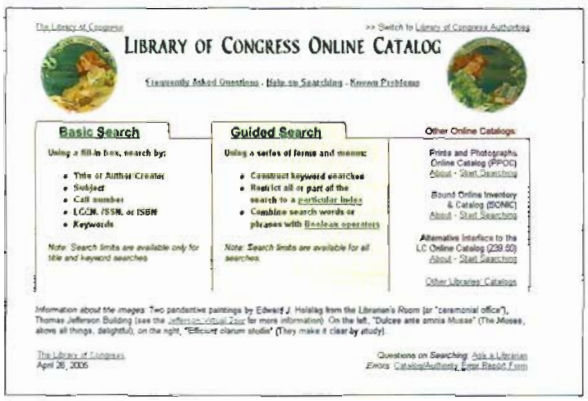
27. Sign up for an Online Genealogy Course.
There are a number of courses (some free and others fee-based) offered through the following organizations: Brigham Young University (*http://ce.byu.edu/is/site/special_offers/freecourses.cfm*), Genealogy.com (*www.genealogy.com/university.html*), MyFamily.com, Inc. (*www.ancestry.com/learn* and click on the genealogy training sites link), the National Genealogical Society (*www.ngsgenealogy.org*) and the National Institute for Genealogical Studies (*www.genealogicalstudies.com*)

28. Register for a Genealogy Conference.
There are many great genealogy conferences (local, state and national) held throughout the year. Start by perusing the Societies & Groups category on Cyndi's List, *www.CyndisList.com/society.htm*.

29. Browse a Genealogy Magazine.
Scan the table of contents of your favorite genealogy magazine for articles of interest and quick tips on research leads to pursue later.

30. Subscribe to a Genealogy Mailing List.
Mailing lists are a great way to stay informed on current topics of interest in the genealogical community. Check out *www.rootsweb.com/~jfuller/internet.html*.

#10 — Locate Addresses.



#15 — Check Online Library Catalogs.

31. Organize Obituaries and Memorial cards.
Sort your obituaries and/or funeral home memorial cards according to family, alphabetize and place them in sheet protectors. For normal size cards and clippings, baseball card sleeves work great.

32. Search a Virtual Cemetery.
There are a number of volunteers who compile names from and/or photograph tombstones located in various cemeteries throughout the world and upload them to the Internet. Start by looking at the GenWeb projects at *www.rootsweb.com*.

33. BLOG!
Take 15 minutes and read or contribute to *www.genealogyblog.com* or start your own weblog at *www.blogger.com*.

34. Keep a Research Log or Diary.
A written or electronic log or diary will help you track your progress with projects. Cross off items from your "to-do" list or add new tasks.

35. Search the Social Security Death Index.
Scan the SSDI for ancestors for free at: *http://ssdi.rootsweb.com*, if your search is successful, use the "SS-5 tool" to generate a letter requesting an SS-5 application (the current cost is $27 US if you have the SS# and $29 US if you don't).

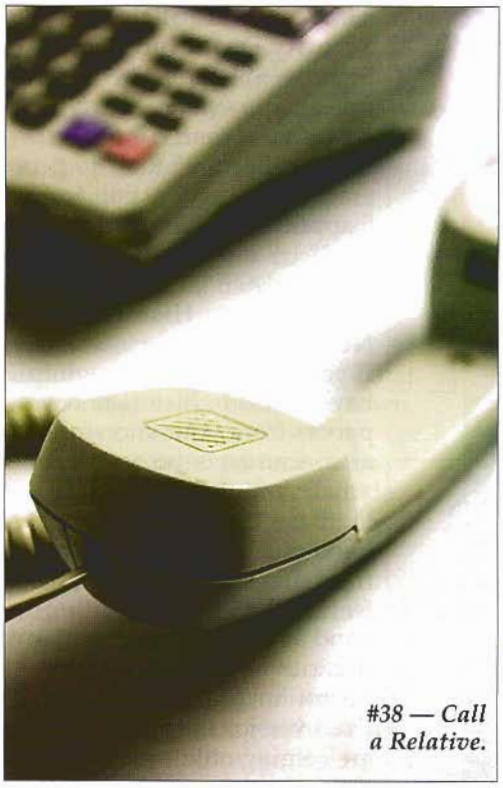
36. Peruse an Historical Newspaper.
If you're fortunate enough to have access to historical newspapers from your ancestors' area, scan an issue or two for articles of interest. Even if there isn't one from their hometown, reading a paper from that era can give you a feel for the times and a first-hand account of history. Many libraries keep old copies on microfilm, or check for digitized versions (a vast number are coming online every day through various subscription-based services).

37. Investigate DNA Testing.
Take a look at these websites for useful information about DNA testing, *www.geneatealogy.com* or visit Dave Dorsey's DNA Collection website, *http://davedorsey.com/dna.html*.

38. Call a Relative.
If you haven't spoken to an aunt, uncle or cousin in awhile, give them a quick call just to say "hello". Let them know that you only have about 15 minutes to chat, but that you wanted to "keep in touch".

39. Watch a Family Video.
If you have a videotape or DVD of a family reunion or your cousin's wedding, watch it for 15 minutes and make notes of who attended. Be sure to also make a note of where you stopped so that you can easily pick up on watching the next time.

40. Search the Family History Library Catalog (*www.familysearch.org*).
Print your results, or download a PDF outline or wordlist from the Research Helps/Guidance section, or check the International Genealogical Index (IGI) for specific surnames.



#38 — Call a Relative.

or grandmother's death certificate and scan it. Save it in your format of choice (I usually do both a PDF and a TIFF file) in a special folder on your computer's hard drive. You can always go back to adjust or edit the document at another time.

47. Sketch a "Story Board." Create a draft layout for a family history CD or DVD.

48. Create a Family Website. You can create a private, password-protected website in about three minutes at *www.myfamily.com*. [You can try the site free for 30 days and then choose the subscription rate that best suits your needs.]

49. Search in an Unusual Place. Look up an ancestor in an obscure database. For example, try searching the National Archives Record Administration's (NARA) Access to Archival Databases (AAD) Electronic Army Serial Number Merged File, 1938-1946 "World War II Army Enlistment Records" at *aad.archives.gov/aad/title_list.jsp*.

50. Renew Your Magazine Subscriptions. Renew your subscription to genealogy magazines so you can stay up to date and informed on the latest developments.

By doing the various tasks for this article, I discovered just how much can be accomplished on my family history projects in just 15 dedicated minutes per day. Multiply those 15 minutes by seven days and you are spending at least one hour and 45 minutes on your genealogy each week.

It may not seem like much, but something is better than nothing.

Ideally, we eventually will find larger blocks of time now and again to spend on research. For now, I plan to carve out some 15 minute segments in my daily schedule, set a timer and go to work!

How about you?

41. Transcribe Census Record Data. Transfer information from a census record for one of your key families onto a blank worksheet. These forms can be downloaded for free at *www.ancestry.com*. By recording the data you just might uncover a fact you missed.

42. Note Those Brickwalls. Make a list of your brickwalls and the sources you might consult for help with the problems.

43. Check out USGENWeb (*www.usgenweb.org*). These pages have a wealth of information. Take a few minutes to get up to speed on new projects for your city/county/state/province.

44. Take Another Look. Look at an alternate source again for data you may have missed (for example, a bridal book, old address book, yearbook, etc.).

45. Practice "Automatic Writing." Write down your thoughts as they are happening. Are you thinking about a particular ancestor? A current research problem? Don't worry about editing; just let your thoughts flow.

46. Scan a Document. Take your grandfather's passport

FC

Lisa Alzo, M.F.A. is the author of Three Slovak Women *and* Baba's Kitchen: Slovak & Rusyn Family Recipes and Traditions, *both published by Gateway Press. She works as a freelance writer, lecturer and instructor of genealogy and writing courses.*