

Your Family History: Getting Started

By President Boyd K. Packer

How to Begin

It is a matter of getting started. You may come to know the principle that Nephi knew when he said, “And I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do” (1 Ne. 4:6).

If you don’t know where to start, start with yourself. If you don’t know what records to get, and how to get them, start with what you have.

There are two very simple instructions for those who are waiting for a place to begin. Here’s what you might do:

Get a cardboard box. Any kind of a box will do. Put it someplace where it is in the way, perhaps on the couch or on the counter in the kitchen—anywhere where it cannot go unnoticed. Then, over a period of a few weeks, collect and put into the box every record of your life, such as your birth certificate, your certificate of blessing, your certificate of baptism, your certificate of ordination, and your certificate of graduation. Collect diplomas, all of the photographs, honors, or awards, a diary if you have kept one, everything that you can find pertaining to your life; anything that is written, or registered, or recorded that testifies that you are alive and what you have done.

Don’t try to do this in a day. Take some time on it. Most of us have these things scattered around here and there. Some of them are in a box in the garage under that stack of newspapers; others are stored away in drawers, or in the attic, or one place or another. Perhaps some have been tucked in the leaves of the Bible or elsewhere. Gather all these papers together and put them in the box. Keep it there until you have collected everything you think you have. Then make some space on a table, or even on the floor, and sort out all that you have collected. Divide your life into three periods. The Church does it that way. All of our programming in the Church is divided into three general categories—children, youth, and adult.

Start with the childhood section and begin with your birth certificate. Put together every record in chronological order: the pictures, the record of your baptism, and so on, up to the time you were 12 years of age.

Next assemble all that which pertains to your youth, from 12 to 18, or up until the time you were married. Put all of that together in chronological order. Line up the records—the certificates, the photographs, and so on—and put them in another box or envelope. Do the same with the records on the rest of your life.

Once you have done this, you have what is necessary to complete your life story. Simply take your birth certificate and begin writing: “I was born September 10, 1924, the son of Ira W. Packer and Emma Jensen Packer, at Brigham City, Utah. I was the tenth child and the fifth son in the family.”

It really won’t take you long to write, or dictate into a tape recorder, the account of your life, and it will have an accuracy because you have collected those records.

What then? After you’ve made the outline of your life history to date, what do you do with all of the materials you have collected?

That, of course, brings you to your book of remembrance. Simply paste them lightly on the pages so that they can be taken out if necessary from time to time, and you have your book of remembrance.

Once you begin this project, very interesting and inspiring things will happen. You cannot do this much without getting something of the spirit of it, and without talking about it, at least in your family circle. Some very interesting things will start to happen once you show some interest in your own family history work. It is a firm principle. There are many, many testimonies about it. It will happen to you.

Aunt Clara will tell you that she has a picture of you with your great-grandfather. You know that cannot be so, because he died the year before you were born. But Aunt Clara produces the picture. There is your great-grandfather holding you as a tiny baby. As you check through the records you find that he died the year after you were born, an important detail in your family history.

That accurate data means something. The middle name written on the back of the picture means something too. You may not know it at the moment, but it is a key; the beginning of ordinance work in the temple for some of your ancestors.

You believe in the [Resurrection](#). You must know that baptism for someone who is dead is quite as essential as baptism for someone who is living. There is no difference in the importance of it. One by one it must happen. They must do it here while living, or it must be done for them here after they die.

The whole New Testament centers on the Resurrection of the Lord. The message is that all are to be resurrected. Every scripture and every motivation that apply to [missionary work](#) have their application to ordinance work for the dead.

Now you have your own family history written, and you have your book of remembrance assembled. It sounds too easy—well it is, almost. But it does mean that you have to get started. Like Nephi, you will be “led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which [you] should do” (1 Ne. 4:6).

So find a cardboard box and put it in the way and begin to put things in it, and as the things unfold you will sense something spiritual happening and not be too surprised at that.

As the Heart Turns

Family history work has the power to do something for the dead. It has an equal power to do something to the living. Family history work of Church members has a refining, spiritualizing, tempering influence on those who are engaged in it. They understand that they are tying their family together, their living family here with those who have gone before.

Family history work in one sense would justify itself even if one were not successful in clearing names for temple work. The process of searching, the means of going after those names, would be worth all the effort you could invest. The reason: You cannot find names without knowing that they represent people. You begin to find out things about people. When we research our own lines we become interested in more than just names or the number of names going through the temple. Our interest turns our hearts to our fathers—we seek to find them and to know them and to serve them.

In doing so we store up treasures in heaven.[excerpts from Ensign Aug. 2003]