

WRITING A FAMILY HISTORY

by Douglas Dicken B.A.

There are several ways that a family history can be produced – from handwritten or word processed pages or by adding notes and pictures into a genealogy software program or a combination of these methods. It is possible to add video clips and sound to your computerised family history but this may be a bit much for most people. However, adding pedigree charts, family group records, church, civil and census information, photographs, newspaper cuttings and other items into a narrative in some way will help to produce a nicely finished document that can be treasured and become a family heirloom. Pictures should be labelled with names of the people in the picture, location and actual or approximate date taken.

If you have researched back a few generations you will probably have collected all sorts of information and you are now faced with a confusing amount of data and paper. To make things easier for yourself and especially for subsequent readers of your family history some thought should be given as to how this information can best be presented. The key to success is to break the history into sections so that one section can be understood before going on to the next section.

The example below is one way for an imaginary couple Derek Dixon and Ann Dixon (nee Hill) to write their history. After writing their personal histories and memories they decided to write the second and third parts of their history by following each of their male lines based on the tradition of naming using the male surname for family members. They will then address each of the generational wives and their ancestors. You may wish to take a different approach. Perhaps you want to write about the female lines before the male or you may want to write fully about yourself and your own parents in a first book section before tackling previous generations. You are the best judge of how you want to present your own family or families.

Ann and Derek have written down the following guidelines to act as a checklist for sorting and printing documents and writing a narrative for each section. This should keep them on track and avoid confusion.

GUIDELINES AND CHECKLIST

1) Title, who we are and introduction

In the introduction say something like “We wrote this family history in Qualicum Beach on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada in the year 2006. It is the story of.....”

Write overview of the family history book contents, how it is put together, and what it purports to do.

2) Personal histories and memories

We think our children will find this section most interesting. We will give the facts but we want to make this section as personal and warm as possible.

2a) Ann's story – write about where born, parents, siblings, childhood and teenage years, friends, happenings, schools, locations, houses lived in, family autos, family vacations, what it was like growing up, social changes, jobs, etc. Include scan of Ann's birth certificate and some scanned photographs, newspaper clippings etc. in the narrative. Ann wants to include paragraphs about what it was like growing up on a farm and recount her grandmother's stories including the one about getting up during the night to put logs in the one stove they had.

2b) Derek's story – similar to the above. Include 21st birthday card and a note about "coming of age" custom – that should raise a few smiles. Derek wants to say something about childhood experiences during the war and his migration to Canada.

2c) Courting days and getting married – how we met, walking, dancing, biking, funny happenings etc. Our wedding, where it took place, customs of the time, the reception, and our honeymoon. Include scan of marriage certificate and scanned photographs and anything else that will add to the narrative.

2d) After we were married, where we lived and worked, first home, children arriving etc. Family growing up, camping, sports, schools, homes, school buses, cars, bikes, roller boards, etc. What was happening in our own family world.. Our careers and/or occupations.

3) Derek's Dixon ancestors.

3a) Derek Dixon's direct line male ancestors. Family tree chart to show parents and all siblings in each generation as far back as researched. Write up broken into sections each dealing with a specific family group going back in time. Narrative will be about the family group's locations and occupations over the years. Copies of church, civil and census records, photographs will be scanned into the narrative. If anything significant happened that influenced the family group in any way this will be added here. Although there may be a lot of names on the pedigree charts it is not the intention here to write about everybody in detail, only the main persons – see note 1 below.

3b) Dixon line female ancestors with their family tree charts and write ups similar to above.

3c) The ancestral line of Derek's mother's male ancestry – the Southwick ancestors with their family tree charts and write ups similar to above.

3d) Southwick line female ancestors with their family tree charts and write ups similar to above.

4) Ann's direct ancestors.

4a) Ann's direct line male ancestors, the Hills, with their family tree charts and write ups. Similar to Derek's.

4b) Hill line female ancestors with their family tree charts and write ups similar to above.

4c) The ancestral line of Ann's mother's male ancestry, the Aldrins, with their family tree charts and write ups similar to above.

4d) Aldrin line female ancestors with their family tree charts and write ups similar to above.

5) Dixon/Southwick families.

It would be nice to get a family tree chart in here that gives all the parents and children of both families on one chart? We want to write a few words introducing the chart somewhere.

6) Places where the families have lived.

Introductory sentence.

Derek from Derby, England and Ann from Alberta, Canada so we will include some narrative about these places. A general overview of the geography, resources that were, events, agricultural and industrial changes, anything that had, or could have had, an impact on our ancestral families. We don't want to get too academic here.

Where Ann's family came from - the areas of Red Deer and Calgary and ancestrally from Kingston upon Hull in Yorkshire.

Where Derek's family came from - the areas of Matlock and Bakewell in Derbyshire.

Brief notes about the locations where we and our children lived in Canada and for a while in England – Calgary, Maidenhead, Chesterfield, Vancouver and Qualicum Beach.

Add any photographs, maps etc. to this section.

References –if quoting from books or words written by others we will add a list here with authors names.

Appendices - in the master book – clear plastic pockets containing collected documents.

Note 1 – we have decided also that if we want to do any write ups on family members who formed different branches of the family and/or spouses extended pedigrees that we will do completely separate family history books or book sections for each instance.

Note 2 – Although we will have included scans of documents in each section of the narrative to make it a good read and for distribution to other family members we will include originals and copies of original documents from official sources in separate family group appendices at the end of the master book with cross-references. Labelled and dated photographs with names of the people and location when the photograph was taken can be stored in the same place or in a separate album(s). The master book and album will be stored in our safe. We are going to distribute copies to our children and other members of our families. Reminder note to myself – check on how to put everything on archival acid free paper using archival quality inks.

The suggestion above, written by one of our members, is just one way of organizing your research and writing your family story. The Society has had featured speakers on this topic and likely will again. For other suggestions and more detailed information, visit the following web sites:

[Writing & Publishing Your Family History by Kimberly Powell](#) at About.com

[The Secret to Writing a Compelling Family History](#) by Sharon DeBartolo Carmack, C.G.

[Writing Your Family and Personal History](#)

[Cyndi's List – Writing Your Family's History](#) – there are links to many websites from here

[Ten Easy Steps to Writing Your Family History](#)

[Writing Your Family History, from idea to manuscript](#) by Annette Madden

[How to Write Your Family History](#)

[Genwriters, Writing for Future Generations](#)