

The Cycle of Life

“What is past is prologue.”—William Shakespeare

BY REBECCA J. RAZO

September 8, 1944

You won't receive this until our operation is completed and then some. We know the only outcome can be victory, but what will be the cost? I hope you are not worrying too much about me sweetheart...I know I'll return to you when the war is over. We'll take up the wonderful life that we had together again when I come home...

September 13, 1944

Lately, I've been doing an awful lot of thinking about you and how much you mean to me. It's funny how the approaching battle causes me to think so much of you...I've been reading a lot and briefing my platoon on the coming operation...I've crossed the Equator twice but, search as I did, I couldn't see that line, so I now agree that it's an imaginary one!

September 14, 1944

This morning, as I looked out upon the lavender Pacific, I noted the rise and fall of its breast like sheets of glass. In its mirrored surface, I could see the folly of my longings. For in its terror, beauty has no place. Its only mission is to put space between me and the one I love. Pain surges in my heart like the striving billows of ten-thousand oceans Pacific...contempt and the oils of wild passion and wilder fear surge within my heart. A new day will dawn on the violet sea...

I feel confident that I'm coming home to you. My greatest prayer now is that I'll be a good leader for my men, as well as a good example...I'll be with you in sincerest love in the coming weeks.

United States Army Lieutenant Robert Garland Holsinger—Bob to his family and friends—penned these letters to his young pregnant bride while en route to the Palau Islands, 300 miles east of the Philippines. Even now, six decades later, the ache in this young soldier's heart is palpable; the love for his wife, painfully tender; the anticipation of his impending mission, unnerving. Sadly, Bob was killed in action on September 28, 1944. Exactly one week later, his wife Jane gave birth to a healthy baby girl.

The story has all the makings of a feature film, but like thousands of other heartbreaking stories during World War II, it is entirely true. In fact, the baby born to Jane Holsinger on October 5, 1944, was my mother. And despite the tragedy of Bob's death, Jane eventually married again and had two

more children, adding more branches to the ever-growing family tree.

Such is the cycle of life.

Researching our family's history is about the closest we can come to time travel. Like modern-day Agatha Christies, we live for the thrill of uncovering the mystery of our ancestors. There is a magical—almost mystical—quality associated with discovering the links to our past, though I can't imagine that a hundred years from now my descendants would have a remote interest my life. And yet, I'm fascinated by the lives of those family members before me, not because they were wealthy or famous or notorious, but because they were ordinary people with hopes, dreams and aspirations—and it is most often in the ordinary that one finds the extraordinary.

This fully intact scrapbook holds dozens of photos of newlyweds Bob and Jane Holsinger. The album, discovered among other family heirlooms more than ten years after Jane's passing, remained unseen for decades.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JAIMIE ITAGAKI



PHOTOGRAPH BY HILLARY BLACK

Above: Bob Holsinger's letters to his wife during World War II will be cherished by his descendants for generations to come.

Begin at the End

To begin filling in the branches of your family tree, experts suggest starting with yourself and working backward, concentrating on one family line at a time. Many novice genealogists research their paternal lines first, since tracing a single surname poses less of a challenge; however, you may choose to research the line in which you have the

most background information. If, for example, you've been bequeathed historical family documents and photographs, you may opt to begin your search with that particular line. This is how Tris Mast, who has been researching his family for over a decade, got started.

"My grandparents and great-aunt gave me boxes of old photos, family Bibles, yellowed newspaper clippings, and the written minutes of family reunion meetings," Mast says. "The more I delved into these heirlooms, the more questions I had. Some of my ancestors were thoroughly represented in photos and paperwork, but others were sadly underrepresented. Once I started to sort it out, it was clear which family members needed to be researched. Whole branches of my tree were missing, but tantalizing clues were in those boxes of old paper."

Like a jigsaw puzzle, a family tree contains myriad pieces, and completing the picture takes time and patience. Talking to relatives is a good starting point, according to Mast. "I can't stress enough that you should interview your living relatives and record what you learn," he says. Most experts suggest interviewing elderly relatives first. Grandparents, great-aunts, great-uncles and cousins are excellent resources and are likely to be enthusiastic participants.

While you'll certainly want your interviewees to regale stories of their youth, there are several key pieces of information you'll need if you are to

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further your research. As much as possible, attempt to obtain the following details about your relatives and their spouses, children, parents and grandparents:

- Full names
- Dates of birth and birthplaces
- Dates of death and places of burial
- Schools and colleges attended
- Professions or trades
- Religious backgrounds
- Military service
- Hobbies

Ask about family vacations, traditions and holidays; cities and towns where the family lived; and major historical events that took place in the person's lifetime. Ask to see letters, postcards, diaries and photographs, and seek permission to photocopy as many of the items as possible. In short, gather as much information as you can—and take thorough notes. Mast even suggests videotaping or tape recording each interview.

"When I was a kid, I remember discussing my genealogy with my paternal grandmother. She died in 1994, and now I wish that I had been taking notes or taping those discussions," he says, adding, "In a videotaped interview, I asked my 90-year-old great-aunt what she remembered about grammar school and found out that she rode a horse to school every morning."

Don't dismiss the significance of even seemingly irrelevant information—sometimes it's the little nuggets that are most precious. During my research, I learned that Bob and Jane enjoyed a popular song titled "Yours is My Heart Alone," and that Jane had the name of the song engraved in Bob's wedding band. On my first wedding anniversary, I had the same inscription engraved in my husband's wedding band—a small, but meaningful way to honor both my marriage and that of my grandparents.

Search, Find, Organize

Use the information gathered in your interviews to delve deeper into the lives of your ancestors. Thanks to the Internet, finding the resources to sketch out your family tree is easier than it has been in previous years. "Often, there are family trees already mapped out on the Internet that you can use to see many generations at once," says Mast. "I live near a National Archives and Records Administration office where one can scan the national censuses

from the 1700s to 1930. These records are becoming increasingly available on the Internet, although some sites require a paid membership." Among the vital records you may wish to access are birth, marriage and death certificates; immigration, adoption, baptismal and military records; wills, deeds, real estate and probate records; divorce decrees; naturalization documents; and cemetery records.

While the Internet is both convenient and accessible, don't underestimate the value of your local library—especially if you live in the same area as family members from previous generations. Many local libraries have substantial genealogy and local-history collections, as well as old maps, magazines, phone books, encyclopedias, and computerized databases and catalogs. Old newspapers are also invaluable resources for birth, engagement and marriage announcements, and obituaries.



Genealogy on the Web

When it comes to researching your roots, cyberspace has never been more helpful.

Membership-based Sites:

- www.Ancestry.com
- www.Genealogy.com
- www.FamilyHistory.com
- www.FamilySearch.org

The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration:

- www.Archives.gov

Genealogy Sites on the Internet:

- www.Cyndislist.com

Free Genealogy Articles and Reference Information:

- <http://Genealogy.about.com>



Left: Sadly, thousands of American families during WWII received Western Union telegrams informing them of a loved one's death. Here, the original telegram sent to Jane Holsinger is flanked by Bob Holsinger's Purple Heart and Silver Star, awarded posthumously.

PHOTOGRAPH BY REBECCA J. RAZO

As the phrase suggests, a family “tree” has branches that go off in many different directions. Each new piece of information you uncover will have countless additional leads; therefore, it’s crucial to develop an organized system for managing your research. Index cards, file folders, notebooks and plastic storage containers are useful tools. To preserve heirlooms, original documents, photographs and other priceless memorabilia, experts suggest making digital or photo copies of the items for everyday use and storing the originals in acid-free archival boxes or scrapbooks. To further ensure the safety of the items, consider investing in a fireproof safe or safe deposit box for storage. For the technologically savvy, computer genealogy software programs and membership-based Web sites offer an assortment of e-tools designed to help organize your research, while building your family tree.

Just as we are drawn to our ancestors, so will our descendants be drawn to us. No matter how “ordinary” we think we are, our lives—like handprints in cement—will leave indelible imprints on future generations. Certainly, Bob Holsinger could not have predicted the impact his letters would have, any more than he could have predicted his fate in the days after he wrote them. And while the idea of tracing your family’s roots can seem daunting, most agree that the experience is profoundly rewarding.

“The fact that I was genuinely interested in the lives of the people I was looking into made it an enjoyable journey,” says Mast. “I wish I could have met every one of them. In some ways, I feel that now I have.”

Undoubtedly, our descendants will feel the same.

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ILLUSTRATION BY NANCY MINK

Discovering the Missing Link

Tracing your family’s genealogy can mean much more than finding a long-lost relative or unveiling an interesting family tradition. Ellen Galford authored *The Genealogy Handbook* as a guide for beginning the journey to self-discovery.

Designed for genealogists at every level, topics include how to execute a family tree, interview a loved one, search for a surname and gather clues from old family photographs. Because documentation is an important part of a person’s genealogical history, the text describes how to access public records like wedding, birth and death certificates, which can act as stepping stones during this voyage. The text also includes a comprehensive listing of international directories, religious archives, Internet sites and much more.

The Genealogy Handbook provides all the information you need to put your family’s history into perspective and is instrumental for those who want to find that missing piece of the puzzle.

The Genealogy Handbook: The Complete Guide to Tracing Your Family Tree by Ellen Galford. The Reader’s Digest Association, Inc., © 2001. Visit www.readersdigest.com.

—Eric Gomez

