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# Technology, Word of Mouth Help Genealogy Hit the Mainstream

by Mike Richman



Jack Goins poses with a photo dated to have been taken in 1898 of his great-great grandparents found through genealogical research, May 23, 2012.

Two major providers of family history resources recently made a groundbreaking deal that will streamline global access to genealogical records.

Ancestry.com, a commercial entity, and FamilySearch.org, a non-profit group, announced plans to put about 1 billion historical records online. The records will include birth, marriage, death and immigration certificates that used to be unobtainable on the Internet.

The deal between these two organizations, both heavyweights in the genealogy business, exemplifies the growing efforts to meet the hunger of people longing to

research their family trees.

Genealogy, in fact, has become a global phenomenon.

A market research firm, Global Industry Analysts, says there are more than 80 million professional and amateur genealogists around the world. The firm projects that the market for genealogy products and services will reach \$4.3 billion by 2018, nearly double what it was last year.

Sounds like there's a fascination behind tracing one's ancestry.

## Information on the Internet

"Because of technology and everyone's connectedness through technology, one, it is easier and less expensive than ever to make the world's historic records available for people online," FamilySearch.org executive Paul Nauta said. "But two, there's a larger base of our world population than ever that is now connected through this worldwide technology, and they're using it to socialize and communicate with each other."

Dick Eastman, the editor of an online genealogical newsletter, agrees that the capabilities to meet genealogical interests have increased, which attracts more people to the practice. There are about 10,000 online genealogical sites, he says, including many blogs.

"I think people have always been interested in genealogy and their ancestry," Eastman said. "I think that's been true for 100 years or more. The difference now is we've got tools to satisfy that interest, whether you're seated in your home or whether you have to go to a library someplace."

Genealogy was once considered a pastime pursued primarily by older adults and the Mormon Church, a U.S.-based sect of Christianity that is renowned for maintaining genealogical records. FamilySearch.org

is aligned with the Mormon Church.

Today, however, tracing one's family roots is of interest to people from different socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds. Eastman said many people in their 20s, 30s and 40s are now getting into it.

In addition to technology, Eastman credited exposure in the mass media with fueling an interest in unearthing one's ancestry. He said "Roots," a wildly popular 1970s TV mini-series about African-Americans and slavery, served as an impetus. Today, several TV shows focus on genealogy.

"So I can't point my finger and say it's any one thing, but when you look at the combination of these things, there's a certain, I guess, synergy is the word between them," Eastman said. "Each one kind of fuels the other, and people now who perhaps in the past had a very casual interest, now are suddenly thinking, 'Hey, I can do that.' And they do."

According to Eastman, most people dive into genealogy curious about their ancestors and their country of origin. He said a desire to learn about inherited medical diseases also attracts people.

"Who am I? Where did I come from? I am the product of these people. Who were these people?" he asked rhetorically. "I believe that most of the people start researching the family tree, when they start out they would be delighted to get back two, three, maybe four generations."

### **Amazing Genealogical Stories**

Nauta and Eastman have both uncovered fascinating personal stories.

Using birth, marriage and death documents now accessible online, Nauta discovered that his family tree traces back to Italy in the late 1700s.

He also learned that he has first cousins, a woman and a man, still living in the Italian town of Cagnano Varano. He has met both of them. They are living connections to his Italian ancestors that go back more than 400 years.

"She's been able to fill in the blanks for me and reconnect me with 400 years of my family history from this little town in Italy, all thanks to these records being more publicly accessible to people doing genealogical research," Nauta said.

Eastman learned that one of his ancestors was a French-Canadian man who lived in Quebec. This man was killed by a jealous husband who found him in a "rather indelicate position" with the husband's wife, Eastman said.

Eastman cautioned against believing ancestral stories without researching them. For example, he once was told his great grandmother was an American Indian, but later learned that story was false.

"Your family's going to have different stories, but some of them can be fascinating," he said. "Just keep in mind the ones you heard when you were growing up, 50 percent of the time will turn out not to be true or only have just a little nugget of truth in them."

Most of the people attracted to genealogy are in countries that have accepted waves of immigrants over the years, such as the United States, Canada, Argentina and Brazil. Western Europe also is a big user of genealogy products and services.

With more and more family details finding their way to the Internet, that interest is not about to wane.

<http://www.voanews.com/content/technology-and-word-of-mouth-help-genealogy-hit-mainstream/1757389.html>

