

Discover your roots



By Randy Ray

While vacationing in Newfoundland and Labrador this summer, my wife and I were introduced to the music of the fabulous Newfie band Buddy Wasiname and The Other Fellers.

While listening to one of their CDs after returning to Ottawa, I was inspired to write this column by one of their songs, *He's A Part of Me*.

Like most music from The Rock, it spins a tale that grabs at the heartstrings and doesn't let go. It's a story about a grandfather with a weather-beaten face, sawdust-covered overalls and an old engineer's hat, who sang *Home On the Range*, carved whistle pipes and tied funny knots.

Although he's long gone, old granddad "left behind a trail that's hard to follow and his memories will guide me," the band sings.

Every time I play the song it gets me thinking how little I know about my late mother and father and their parents. They're a part of me, for sure, but as in the song, they're gone, and I'm sad that I don't know more about how they lived their lives, the good times they encountered, and the bumps in the road they overcame.

It's left a void in my life that won't soon be filled.

I'm pretty sure many folks in my mid-50s age bracket are likely in the same boat. They know mom worked for The Bell for three decades and dad slogged it out at the government for 40 years; they know they were married in a church somewhere and bought their first house in the 'burbs where they raised kids and saw family pets come and go.

But they're missing many of the facts that fill out the rest of the story.

Where did their parents live as kids? Where did they grow up later in life? Which schools did they attend? Did they go to war? Were they awarded medals? Did they

play sports? How did dad land a job with the government and what did he do at work every day? Did he or mom distinguish themselves in any way during their careers?

The purpose of this column has always been to explain how moms, dads and kids can get started at various endeavours – everything from playing sports and working in the garden, to landing part-time jobs, saving money and caring for the environment.

After listening again and again to *He's A Part of Me*, I'm convinced families need to know more about their roots and I'm compelled to explain how they can get to know their own kin and how the exercise will enrich their lives. If you think it's a waste of time, I urge you to buy the Buddy Wasisname CD and play the song.

For advice on the matter, I turned to Glenn Wright, an Alta Vista retiree and author who worked at the National Archives for many years. Wright was assistant historian for the RCMP for eight years and these days is a well-respected genealogy researcher who helps people trace their roots. I also had input from Michael More, chairman of the Ottawa Branch of the Ontario Genealogy Society.

Wright thinks it's sad that many of us don't know the full story about our parents, and even less about our grandparents. Like me, he feels it's a situation that needs fixing and sees many benefits in fitting the pieces together, benefits that go far beyond gaining an appreciation for your family's history.

"Today, most kids know dad works for the government or the military but I have to wonder if most know much beyond that, such as where their parents went to university, where they grew up and got married and what grandpa did for a living ... so there is a gulf created there."

My dad worked for the Canadian Pacific Railway in downtown Toronto and my mom sold fine china and sterling silverware. They met while dad was a roller skating instructor. I couldn't tell you where his office was, when he started working for the railroad or how he got into the rail business; Lord only knows how my mom got into china and silver and I have no idea where they tied the knot, or if they honeymooned.

In my wife Janis's family, it's known that her father Syd served in Italy during World War II and helped liberate Holland from Hitler's clutches. But family members know little more than that, mostly because their dad was a soft spoken man who rarely spoke about his years in the military, a fairly common occurrence,

I'm told. After doing a little probing over beers during visits to Legions, I learned that he never got close to the front and never fired at the enemy but that he played a key role maintaining key pieces of equipment.

His wife Flo worked for years in the ladies' wear department at The Bay in Scarborough, a fairly uneventful job you'd think, until you learn that one of her managers was shot dead during an armed holdup not far from where she worked as a sales clerk. I can't remember how this family factoid surfaced.

Imagine all of the other amazing stories we haven't heard.

So, how exactly do we learn more about our families? What role can moms and dads play? And what's to be gained?

Before you start, it's worth noting that your kids may not give a hoot about their parents' lives or those of their grandparents, not surprising, I suppose, in a world ruled by cell phones, video games and laptops. If this is the case in your household, don't give up; push them a bit. Like a kid coaxed into piano lessons in grade school, they'll appreciate it later in life.

A good way to launch the process, says Wright, is to haul out old photo albums where the kids will see mom, dad, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and grandparents (and maybe the great-grandparents) at various stages of life. They'll see the homes they lived in, the people they hung out with, their cars, vacation spots they visited, the family cottage in various stages of construction, the sporting fields they played on and the awards they won.

While leafing through these photos, parents should add a running commentary and encourage questions. An hour later, the kids will have a pretty good idea of where their family members came from and what they're all about.

Another great source of information is school yearbooks. The kids will yuck it up at your hairstyle and the funny looking clothing you wore way back when, but hopefully they'll be interested to learn mom was on the school debating team, dad played football and hockey and both of you met at a school dance where a live band blew out your eardrums.

Wright also suggests you hop in the car and take the kids for a tour of the neighbourhoods you grew up in: show them your houses, the schools you attended, the baseball diamonds you frequented and the corner store where you hung out. If

your kids play hockey, they should be shown the rink where dad scored his first hat-trick and if his name's on a trophy inside, get out of the car and show them.

In my own experience, tours like this have drawn mostly yawns, but don't be discouraged, says Wright. A better way to get kids interested in your past is to unearth some artifacts: if your kids are hooked on the latest Guitar Hero game, Beatles version, show them the stub from the Beatles concert you attended in the '60s; if they are hockey fans, dust off your collection of hockey cards; moms might want to show their daughters their wedding dress.

These should hit a nerve and enable you to tell some colourful stories that are bound to lead to more questions.

“Artifacts help younger generations relate to your past and help them experience in some way the life you have lived,” says Wright.

Another way to get kids involved in family history, says More, is by touring cemeteries. When his daughter and son were in elementary school, the three would often visit graveyards and examine gravestones as part of their family research. His daughter, now about 30, still shows interest in family history as a result of their earlier exploits.

If the kids show an interest in family history, introduce them to senior members of your family who have a wealth of stories to share and probably more photo albums to leaf through. Also consider linking them with the Ottawa Branch of the OGS (www.ogsottawa.on.ca), which can help offer tips on researching families. Or have them surf the Library and Archives Canada Web site where there's a link to the Canadian Genealogy Centre, which has tools to help them do some searching.

The site is: www.collectionscanada.ca where they should click on the “Youth Corner” button.

Why go to all of this trouble?

Over and above providing insight into their family's past, digging into their family vault will bring moms, dads and kids closer, get them chatting and foster bonding. Isn't that what families are all about?

“It's one way of bridging generations and giving people a better appreciation of life; it's great fun to sit around the Sunday supper table and share experiences, and

seeing similarities in your life and your kids' lives is great. Communicating with your family will create a more positive spin in your home.”

The process will also teach the kids research skills and the persistence and drive that go hand in hand with chasing down information that can be hard to find. And, says More, it will show your children the relevance of history, right in their own backyard.

As noted on the Canadian Genealogy Centre Youth Corner Web page: “Students should have an awareness of their past in order to understand their present and their future.”

I couldn't have said it better myself.

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