

SUNDAYPLUS



Finding connection

Letters and digital records reconnect people to their roots and others

Emily Leinfuss Special to the Herald-Tribune | USA TODAY NETWORK

Earlier this year, a Port Charlotte woman rediscovered a stack of old letters she bought at a flea market in St. Augustine for \$1. Instead of tossing them, she decided to try to return them to the original sender. • It wasn't easy. Reading through the letters for clues, Miranda Richard surmised they were written by a son to his mother in the early 1940s, and that their surname was Young. Mr. Young and his new wife (and eventually baby) lived in Louisiana, while his mother lived in Tennessee. The last two letters were written by the wife and indicated her husband had left to fight in World War II. **Continued on next page**

An old, scratched photo that Vicki Entreken found after her mother died led her to investigate the people in the image and the history of her mother and extended family. PROVIDED BY VICKI ENTREKEN

PASTTOPRESENT

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"It felt like I was uncovering a long-forgotten mystery," said Richard. The detective work entailed hours of online research, tons of phone calls, and the help of a coworker who found the couple's marriage certificate on Ancestry.com. But it was only after the coworker looked at the daughter's birth certificate, that Richard cracked the case.

"Once I had the daughter's full name and information, I was able to get in touch with one of her five children and send her the letters," said Richard.

A few weeks ago, those letters were placed into the hands of the letter-writer's daughter, now in her 80s and living in Oregon. There was a feeling of nostalgia and a sense of great happiness as the two – daughter and granddaughter – read them together.

Richard is only one example of a growing number of people who are invested in investigating a more personal kind of history. They are powered by the ever-increasing digitization of public and private records accessible through technology platforms that didn't exist until a few years ago.

A need to know

Are these seekers unearthing bad memories, or are they providing closure? Do they hope to inform their own lives by examining the past, or are they curious whether stories they've been told about their ancestors are true?

All the above, confirmed Tampa-based genealogist Rue Lynn Galbraith. His clients range from people who want to know which side their ancestors fought for in the Civil War or if they really were related to British royalty, to those who feel they can better know themselves by learning more about where (and who) they came from.

"It's an instinct to want to want to know the history of who we are," said Galbraith in a reference to an Alex Haley quote about why the author's 1976 book (and 1977 mini-series) "Roots" launched a nationwide political, racial, social and

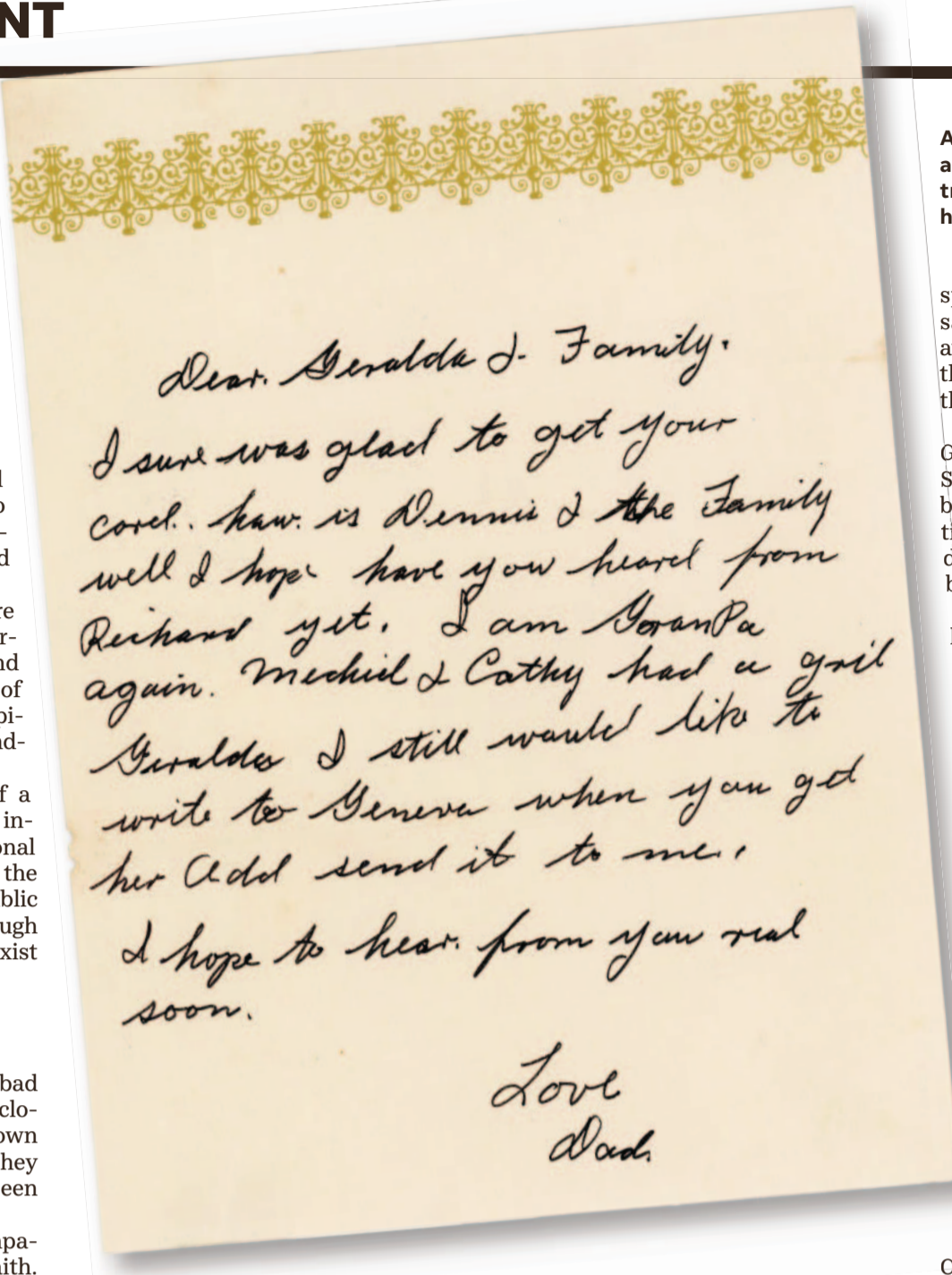
cultural dialogue. "In all of us there is a hunger, marrow-deep, to know our heritage – to know who we are and where we have come from. Without this enriching knowledge, there is a hollow yearning."

Galbraith points to examples of how learning one's family history can lead to a greater sense of self. A recent client had just moved to Florida after a divorce. When she heard that her great-grandfather was the recipient of a Span-

ish land grant in the late 1800s, she finally felt like she was home. "She was a true Floridian."

When Galbraith discovered that his great-grandfather had been a schoolteacher, he even had his own 'aha moment' – understanding more about why he had also become an educator.

Galbraith speculated that similarities that link us to our ancestors may be more than just coincidence – even more than physical genetics. "Our psychic, or



An old letter Vicki Entreken found among her mother's belongings that triggered a curiosity about her family history. PROVIDED BY VICKI ENTREKEN

spiritual DNA, gets passed down," he said, adding that when we are made aware of it, we can learn how to handle the negative attributes, and rejoice in the positive.

Perhaps that view stems from his Galbraith's upbringing in the Latter-Day Saints (LDS or Mormon) Church. LDS believes that if one's ancestors are baptized in a Mormon Temple, even after death, then families can (and should) be joined together eternally.

As a result, LDS has amassed the largest genealogy collection in the world, with information on more than three billion deceased people. It is available for free, after registering, at familysearch.org. Another privately-run resource is fold4.com. Owned by Ancestry.com, the site offers a seven-day free trial.

There are also national archives (archives.gov), state archives (for Florida it's floridamemory.com), and even city-by-city Florida archives that can be accessed at myflorida.com/library-archives/research/florida-information/government/local-resources/fl-cities/.

Civil War diaries

When it comes to the Civil War, Gari Carter has more than one story to tell. "Both my maternal ancestors fought for the Union, Franklin Dick in St. Louis, and Colonel William James Leonard from Maryland to Virginia," said the Sarasota author.

Carter wrote about the former in her 2008 book "Troubled State: The Civil War Journals of Franklin Archibald Dick." Her book about Colonel Leonard, "The Bone Ring," will be published this year. It was named for a family heirloom: the ring that Col. Leonard's men carved him for his birthday from the leftover bones of their food, said Carter.

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Despite having diaries from both men, each book took years of investigation. “There is personal satisfaction in pulling together all the research about Franklin Dick and Colonel Leonard,” said Carter. A highlight along the way was a “visit to my 99-year-old cousin who had the bone ring and hearing his memories,” she said.

“It feels as if I am honoring my ancestors in ways that would have made them happy,” she added.

Carter admits that Internet resources are increasingly helpful when investigating family history. But there’s nothing like being able to see and touch original documents and photographs. That’s also the opinion of Phaedra Dolan, director of Historical Records for the Manatee Clerk. Her department operates two historical villages, two museums and extensive records archives that are housed in Bradenton’s historic Carnegie Library.

“There’s something special about being able to see those old cursive handwritten documents,” said Dolan. “It’s not the same as looking at a scanned image,” she added. You can see little errors or when someone couldn’t sign their name and only made a mark. Those things, together with knowing that the person from the past was also once in front of the document, “creates a real connection between then and now,” she said.

Dolan also said she noticed an uptick in interest in genealogical research during the restrictive time of the COVID-19 pandemic. “People were penned in. They couldn’t travel so they went back to the past.

It’s like time travel, instead of space travel,” she said.

The life-changing power of (knowing your) roots

It’s not an overstatement to say that Vicki Entreken’s life changed after she reached into a mystery box among her recently deceased mother’s things to



Finding old photos she didn’t recognize among her deceased mother’s belongings led Vicki Entreken on an exploration of her family history to identify people. PROVIDED BY VICKI ENTREKEN

find a completely unfamiliar photograph depicting a man, a young woman with a baby on her hip, and a small boy.

“It was deteriorating and stained with mold as if it had been in a shoebox in a Florida attic for years,” said Entreken. “Knowing my mother had been abandoned when she was eight years old and then adopted, I wondered if this was her biological family.”

Further investigation of the photographs and letters in the box unearthed a series of first names, but no last name. Already familiar with using Ancestry.com, Entreken plugged in the names as mother, father, son, and daughter (who

would have been Entreken’s mother) and hit search. A 1940 census came up for Geneva, Darrell, Richard, and Gerald Cravey from Galveston, TX.

Looking again at the old photo, Entreken realized, “This family is also my family. Then a question surfaced, one my mother probably never knew the answer to – why didn’t they want her?”

Entreken became obsessed with knowing the answer. “It kicked off years of research to learn more about, and to understand this woman, my grandmother,” she said.

After pinpointing Galveston as a

place of entry for research and talking to her own father who recalled that his then-wife’s mother (Geneva) had been an exotic dancer, Entreken was able to find and talk to Geneva’s youngest half-brother. He showed her a photograph of his sister in a stripper outfit.

Further research revealed that Geneva was married off when she was 15, and that there was an aunt that her mother never told her about. “Aunt Leah has been the last voice in helping me understand why Geneva abandoned her son, my mother and Leah,” she said.

She even located her grandmother’s former home in Texas which, amazingly, had just been renovated, and was now an Airbnb. It was truly a researcher’s dream to get to walk, write (she is finishing a memoir) and sleep in a subject’s childhood home, said Entreken. “Online research isn’t enough. You have to get on the phone or travel to interview people, visit libraries, genealogical societies, and government installations to check documents and facts,” she added.

By doing so Entreken got a visceral understanding of her mother’s life. “When my mother, as a child, played in her backyard with her brother, she could hear the waves of the gulf from a block away,” she said.

After all the clues (growing up in the Great Depression, eldest of 10 half-siblings, married when only 15) and conversations, Entreken finally feels like she has the answer to her mother’s lifelong struggle. “Geneva too was broken (to keep her),” she said.

“My mother would have understood that if given the chance. Perhaps then she wouldn’t have hated her as much,” said Entreken. Perhaps Entreken’s life would have been different too.

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