



By MICHAEL J. DECICCO

NEW BEDFORD, MA: *In 2005, I found a large sepia-tone photograph showing my parents' entire June 1946 wedding party, and I found the love letters my father sent my mother when he was an army private in the Philippines during World War II.*

Unfortunately, I found this six months after my mother had died and five years after my father had passed away, when I was cleaning out the New Bedford, MA home that I (and my mother) had grown up in and that I had recently sold to my oldest daughter (technically step-) and her husband.

It was far too late to use my skills as a full-time freelance writer and reporter to learn more about what could have been even richer family-history treasures had my parents been alive to tell more about them.

I've learned the hard way the over-looked, low-tech secret of compiling family history. Interview the living before you lose them and their valuable perspectives and information.

Here's what I did wrong and how you can do it right.

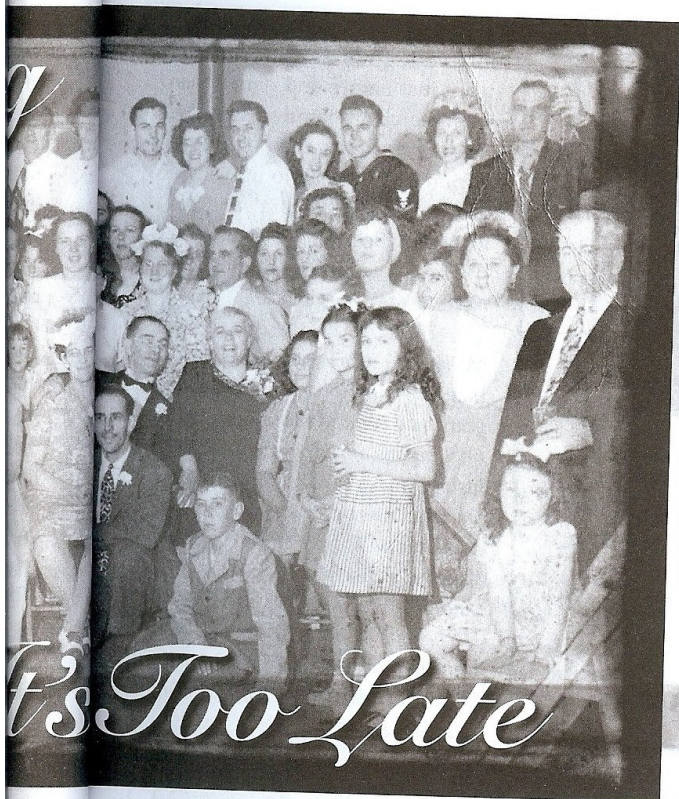
First Lesson:

Don't wait. Get what the older generation of your family knows down in writing and on tape now!

Sit down with the living. Tape them as you interview them. A small held-held micro cassette or digital recorder will do. Ask them not only about dates and places but also ask them what they remember about their own and their parents' life milestones.

Don't ignore tangents along the way. The most important thing I've learned through years as a freelance writer is let your interviewee talk. The tangents they go on when they are relaxed and not necessarily answering a specific question can be the most colorful and surprisingly informative.

Transcribe the raw tape word for word without deciding on a design for the tale being told. Rent a



The 1946 wedding party.

Seated in the center of the first row: Second man from the left is Vincenzo "James" DeCicco, my grandfather; Paul Landry, my mother's youngest brother; Marion Patterson, my father's youngest sister (and the only one still living); my father John DeCicco; my mother Yvonne Landry DeCicco; Euphemie Landry, my mother's mother; John Landry, my mother's father; and stooping directly below him, Edmond Landry, my mother's older brother. In that same row, the woman to the right of John Landry with the corsage is my father's mother, Roseangela DeCicco.

I knew for years that my paternal grandfather, Vincenzo "James" DeCicco, came to America from Italy because my great-grandfather had promised he would send back money after arriving in the U.S., but didn't.

Only a living relative, my 93-year-old uncle Henry, could have told more, and did tell me a lot when I interviewed him four years ago. My paternal grandfather and great-grandfather joined forces once they found each other in New Bedford, Massachusetts, working together as track maintenance men for the city's railway company. Together, they built the house I came to know as grandma and grandpa DeCicco's house with their own hands and foundation stones from the surrounding ground.

I knew for years that my maternal grandfather, whose home would be sold to my parents and where I grew up, made and sold beer out of that house during Prohibition. Only my mother, whom I did interview briefly before she died, could have told me more, that John Landry, my pepere, made and sold beer at the house to pay off its mortgage, that she had strong memories of the smoke-filled house and that the beer customers were all people that her family knew. Pepere quit the beer making business after being raided twice.

My interview of her was helpful in understanding the wedding photo. Mom told me pepere and memere Landry planned a much smaller wedding for my parents—until grandma and grandpa DeCicco heard about it. They said small wasn't good enough for "our Johnny." They found a larger hall, and family and friends cooked spaghetti, mashed potatoes, meatballs, chicken, and peas for a feast twice as big as planned, serving 200-300 people.

transcription machine to make the work go easier. Just format the transcription as follows:

Question:

Mom:

Then take the transcribed pages back to the family member for corrections and the chance to find out more.

Second Lesson—What I Did Wrong:

Don't be too easily satisfied; ask for details and then more details. Ask about memorable photos; even interview your family member with a box of them in front of you. Ask if the deceased left letters or other writings behind. Review the letters/photos with the family member and keep asking more and more questions.

Third Lesson—What I Did Right:

The details of the older generation's lives are just as important as, and perhaps even more important than, birth and marriage and death dates. And you can only get those details from the living.

It's Too Late

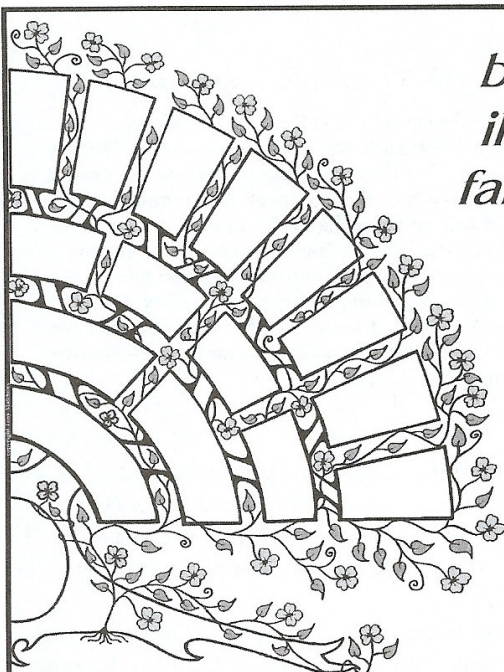
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The point is that the personal interview gives us more. We don't want just names and dates when we research our family history. We want the color, what the lives of our ancestors mean to the continuum of life in general and our lives specifically.

That's something live people, not statistics, can tell us.

Michael J. DeCicco has worked full-time as a freelance writer for over 20 years on a variety of New England publications, including ones on local history, and as a news correspondent for The Enterprise newspaper of Brockton, MA, since 1994. His novel, Kaurlin's Disciples, the story of a young, dynamic high school English teacher circa 1969 and the students he inspires, was published in January 2006. He lives with his wife Cynthia in New Bedford.

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