

Ah yes, 'if only.' The bane of all family historians, or genealogists as they are commonly referred to. It seems that everyone starts too late to record the events of the past. The older generations are already dead, or at best have long since forgotten many of the details so desired by the avid historian. Or they have become victims of the malady Maria liked to refer to as 'Selective Memory Syndrome,' characterized by responses like "Sometimes I think I know and other times I don't know if I know or not."

If only they had known the right questions to ask of Uncle Thomas. Uncle Thomas knew a lot of people and was interested in family history long before Maria fell under its spell. But Uncle Thomas was now in a nursing home, being kept as comfortable as possible since a stroke had robbed him of his large muscle control and his ability to speak or to write. Doctors said it was possible that he was able to think, but his brain didn't allow him to communicate in any meaningful way. So sad about Uncle Thomas. He had been in that horrible condition for over three years now.

If only they had realized that old abandoned rural cemetery was an important resource when they visited Monroe County Ohio a few years earlier. Ohio was a long distance to travel, and Glen and Maria would likely never have that opportunity again. Fortunately, as it turned out, Monroe County had published the records of the cemetery, but no one had photographed the stones, or copied the transcriptions. Now they were too weathered to be of any value in that regard. The cemetery, covered with weeds, animal burrows, scattered broken stones and debris, had long since been forgotten by most of the local inhabitants except for the owner, who was forced to farm around the outside of the rotting fence heap, wondering to himself if anyone would even notice if he were to take it down and run his machinery over the entire small area. It would make his life a lot easier.

If only the census taker—who went around to every household in 1860—had been more careful with his handwriting and with his spelling. If only those who had microfilmed the census pages had been more careful to focus the lens. If only...If only... Maria's daydreaming returned her to the present task at hand.

Seated across the card table from one another in the living room of the Kingston's modest two-story older home in Cosworth, Iowa, were the family historian Maria and her husband Glen, who was always ready and eager to help out in whatever way he was needed at the moment. Rounding out the little group were Jidgie and Darrell, Glen's parents. It was the elder couple's home and they supplied the boxes of pictures to label. Maria had a rubber-banded cluster of soft lead pencils for everyone to use for the weekend cataloging project. The four enjoyed their leisurely day tramping around two local rural cemeteries, cleaning and photographing family markers and sharing stories about the ancestors they found there.

Maria carefully transcribed the markers, pleased to add some small details to her history, a middle initial, a month or day of death, or perhaps a more important one, a maiden name. She was always irritated to think that women lost their identity when they

Comment [JI1]: Bane is somewhat stilted. It seems funny to say family historians are commonly referred to as genealogists. I know what you mean but family historian is less technical. Can you rework that.

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Comment [JI2]: Explain why that's a long distance. Maria doesn't travel as well as she used to or Glen isn't a traveler or something else?

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Comment [WS3]: This sounds stilted too.

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Comment [JI4]: I like the description in this paragraph a lot.

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Comment [JI5]: I'm not sure daydreaming would return you to the task at hand. Maybe a sound or the site of something. "At hand" and "present" are redundant.

Comment [JI6]: Too many clique phrases, turn them into something unexpected, almost like poetry.

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Comment [JI7]: You vacillate between first person and third person and between ...

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married. Discovering a maiden name was often a very difficult and lengthy process, a process that, when successful was cause for celebration. Maria smiled inwardly, vowing to herself "The next time I get married I'm going to retain my maiden name," knowing full well that she would never marry again. She and Glen had married very young, just a year out of high school, and had four sons born during the first six years of their marriage. Their second son had died the day after his birth and Maria would never quite get over the fact that he never had a chance to be a child or a man. Each May she shed a few tears for what could have been. No, she would never marry again; there was way too much invested in this relationship to ever consider another one. She moved on to the next transcription.

Comment [WS8] : You've used "never" three times here. Consider revising this.

Comment [JI9] : This section is fantastic. You have to write like this; its so good.

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Comment [JI10] : I'd like you to find a more poetic turn of phrase here.

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Comment [JI11] : Here's more of the formal.

Glen and Darrell were occupied with cleaning the stones, clipping grass around the base, removing the remains of walnuts and acorns left by the ever-present squirrels, and washing away other types of remains left by birds that seemed to perch atop every available surface.

"Do you think some chalk would help with this one?" Darrell inquired. He knew that layering white chalk over the areas of interest would sometimes help with the photography.

"Yeah, just a minute, I'll bring you some more." Came Glen's reply. "Maria, do you have more chalk in your bag?" Maria traveled with a well stocked "cemetery bag," and you could be sure there was plenty of chalk, Styrofoam, wet rags and dry, paper and pencils, maps, anything that might be needed for a cemetery trip like this one.

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Many times lichen had grown so thick it had to be carefully scraped away with a heavy piece of stiff Styrofoam to read the inscriptions. Sometimes the elements of nature had literally scoured away old lettering and no amount of studying could bring out the details. When that happened the only thing to do was wait for the sun to reach a different point in the sky, hoping the shadows would coax some sense from the chicken tracks. Often Maria was pleasantly surprised to discover that the chalking and the carefully-focused photographs revealed more details than the human eye had been able to find and accurate transcriptions could be made just from the photos.

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It was Jidgie's job in the cemeteries to relate family stories. She was raised in the area and lived there for most of her life. Having a keen interest in family history herself, she remembered much about not only her own family but about Darrell's family as well. A small town provides that kind of closeness. If you got really lucky, Jidgie would ramble from one family to another, blending the details into a very interesting dissertation of both families, including friends and neighbors in her tales as well. Jidgie was, and still is, a people person. She recently celebrated her 90th birthday and her keen mind still allows her to be very interested in the past, present and future, particularly as it relates to people.

After a simple but heavy midwestern meal of meat, potatoes, cabbage salad and steamed vegetables, the four sat down to tackle the labeling. Seated across the card

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table from one another in the living room of the Kingston's modest two-story older home in Cosworth, Iowa, were the family historian Maria and her husband Glen, who was always ready and eager to help out in whatever way he was needed at the moment. Rounding out the little group were Jidgie and Darrell, Glen's parents. It was the elder couple's home and they supplied the boxes of pictures to label. Maria had a rubber-banded cluster of soft lead pencils for everyone to use for the weekend cataloging project. The four enjoyed their leisurely day tramping around two local rural cemeteries, cleaning and photographing family markers and sharing stories about the ancestors they found there.

The flat green box was sitting in front of Maria - the box holding the photo of Edythe along with a variety of pictures of John and Melisse, and some unknown people who might have been friends of the Balsdens or maybe members of John's family. Maria began to pick up the brittle, curling old black and whites one at a time, turning them over gently to see if any already had labels on the back. No such luck. As she began to sort them out, she found at least a half dozen more images of that same pretty little girl with the long blond curls cascading around her shoulders. She looked to be about twelve or thirteen years old. Maria continued quizzing Jidgie. "How do you suppose Edythe came to live with the Balsdens?"

"Well, I was always told she came off an orphan train."

"An orphan train? How quaint! An orphan train from where?"

"I don't know. Somewhere in the East I suppose. Isn't that where they always came from? New York? Or Chicago? I don't know. I guess I should have asked Aunt Bertha."

Maria made a mental note to check out what her favorite library had to say about orphan trains when she got home.

After we properly labeled the last of the photos and placed the unknowns into their own box, Jidgie asked, "would anyone like a piece of cake?"

"Funny, I was just thinking about that myself, but I thought you were probably saving it for something special." Glen was always pleased to be offered a piece of his mother's chocolate cake. "Maybe some ice cream on top?"

Comment [JI12]: Too many cliché phrases, turn them into something unexpected, almost like poetry.

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Comment [JI13]: You vacillate between first person and third person and between informal and formal verbiage. I think an informal first person style would be the most engaging and probably easy to read and write. You'll have to find your voice.

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Comment [JI14]: A different term?

Comment [JI15]: Are you going to tell us about orphan trains? That would great for the book.

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