

THE STORY TELLERS

Adapted in 2004 by William D. Kivett from a 1943 article by Della JoAnn McGinnis Johnson

In each generation there is always one who has been called upon to find the ancestors – one who is chosen to put flesh back on their bones and make them live again – one who somehow comes to feel deep inside that by telling the family story, those who have gone before know about and approve of this mission. These are the Story Tellers. All tribes have had one in each of their generations. They may have been destined to this role by something hidden deep in their genes. All those who have gone before cry out to them, “Tell our story!”. So, they have. Now it is our turn to heed the call.

Responsible genealogy is so much more than the impersonal gathering of names and dates. It is, instead, breathing life again into all who have gone before – a most noble calling of preserving the culture of the tribe. In the process of making our ancestors live again, we also come to know ourselves. The process helps us better understand who we are and why we do the things we do.

I visit an old country cemetery which I have recently learned contain bones of my bone, and flesh of my flesh. I find this hallowed site, out of years of indifference and neglect, now grow over with weeds and trees. I stand over these now barely discernible graves and want to tell those laying down there that I have come – come to tell them that they have left behind a caring family of which they can be immensely proud. I feel a warm love returned to me from those long cold below, and sense that they know about and approve of what I do. I am invigorated to press on with my mission to see that the location of their final resting place and what they were like are not forever lost. It helps sustain me and gives added meaning to my life.

In addition to their names, I tell my grandchildren to take pride in what their ancestors were able to accomplish, and how they contributed to what we all are today. I tell them what I have learned about the hardships and losses these real heroes overcame. I tell them how they never gave up or gave in - about their resoluteness to survive and make a better life for their family. I tell them about their particular ancestor who sold his farm and moved miles away to start all over again, just to be near a good school where his children could learn and prepare for a brighter future.

These personal stories are presented as illustrations of the broader story about why generations of families migrated – how fathers fought and sometimes died to make and keep this Nation strong - how mothers struggled to feed, clothe and raise children, and how they occasionally died giving birth to one of our grandparents. It needs to be impressed upon each new generation that without their ancestors’ willingness to take risks, their unwavering faith, and their many sacrifices we could never have become who we are.

So, as Story Tellers were are destined to remember them, and see to it that others do. With love and caring we now are embarked on a life long journey to find and tell their story with as much truth and detail as we can discover. We do so because we are, in reality, the still-alive sum of all of them..

As a scribe called to the role, I welcome this responsibility of telling the story of my family. This is why I do my own family genealogy. It will soon be up to someone in the next generation to again answer that call and take my place in this long line of family historians. To insure immortality, the Story Teller must also try to identify that chosen one for the next generation to continue memories of the past and add those about family members not yet known. That is why I try to teach all of this generation who will listen to hear and heed the vital Story Teller call.