

Harvest Your Family Tree for Character Names

By Sharon Buchbinder

When I first started working on my short romance, "Catastrophe," I knew I wanted the heroine to be a resilient, down-to-earth woman and the hero to be exotic, maybe someone who spoke another language. I struggled with the character names, almost leaving them as HEROINE and HERO, and the story stalled. I turned to my other obsession: spending hours researching my family genealogy.

In the midst of tracking down my grandmother's side of the family, going back to my great-great-great-grandparents, I found them: my characters. Polly Griggs meet Simon Engleman.

Born in Berlin, Germany in 1765, Simon Engleman immigrated to Kentucky. At the age of twenty-five, Simon married Polly Griggs, age twenty, on March 25, 1790 in Lincoln County Kentucky. When I first "met" Simon and Polly, I envisioned them in frontier country, Simon in an old-fashioned European suit and top hat, Polly in a buckskin dress, bonnet on her head, a baby at her breast and a small child clinging to her skirt: the Daughters of the American Revolution *Madonna of the Trail*.

When I updated that image for my story, Polly became a compassionate woman who took in cats (twenty-three!), taught high school civics, and became inspired by memories of her

mother to fight for those she loved. Simon became her stuttering knight in blue jeans, a student at the university failing his speech class, and madly in love with Polly—but too tongue-tied to tell her. Add an evil landlord evicting Polly for breaking the rules about pets, and the story came to life, racing along faster than my fingers could keep up. The story was published by the Wild Rose Press <http://www.thewildrosepress.com/> in November—six days before my birthday. Coincidence? Or my ancestors giving me a little nudge? All I know is that I am now hooked on using my family's names in my stories—and you might find it useful too. Here are some ways to root out those family monikers, and see if they fit your characters. Conversely, perhaps your ancestors will inspire some new characters to populate your romances.

1. **Oral History:** Talk to your parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. You'd be surprised what someone recalls about the family tree. My cousin recalled that my grandmother and grandfather married over their parents' violent objections. Why? Because she was expected to return to Kentucky and marry a cousin—to keep the money in the family. Instead, she defied her wealthy family and married a handsome gardener for the US Botanical Gardens and the White House. Sound like a romance? Take good notes. These are great stories!

2. **Family Bibles:** Many families keep a record of every birth and death in a family bible that is handed down through the generations. Names and relationships that don't appear on "official" records are often noted in longhand in these precious archives. Depending on who has kept the records, spellings often vary—giving an entirely different connotation to a name: Levisa or Levica? The first one evokes the image of a soft, feminine woman. The second, with the sound of a hard "c" evokes a tougher woman. I discovered my grandmother had a sister, Eliza, making me want to sing "I Could Have Danced All Night?" What images do your family names inspire?

3. **Birth and Death Certificates:** If you know where your ancestor was born and when, you can write to the Vital Records division for that state and the District of Columbia. The National Center for Health Statistics has an online listing of where to write for vital records by state <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/howto/w2w/w2welcom.htm>. When I wrote to the District of Columbia for my grandfather's birth certificate from the 1880's, I thought it was a long shot. I was surprised to receive it shortly thereafter—and even more surprised to find out he was born deaf and delivered at home, the sixth child of my great-grandmother Elizabeth and her husband, James. Don't they sound like a

British couple? He's a grocer, she's the daughter of a minister, and I feel a family saga coming on...

4. **Military Records:** If you are the child of a member of the military, you are entitled to obtain copies of that individual's records. My parents divorced when I was in elementary school, and my father died when I was in high school. I never really knew him, and my mother wouldn't speak of him. When I began to write my first novel, I became obsessed with World War II and my father, James Wright Bell. I wanted to know his story, and what role he played in the last "good" war. Among other things, I found out that his nickname was "JW." Now there's a great character handle, something different from "JR," evocative of cowboys or soldiers. The College Park, Maryland based National Archives <http://www.archives.gov> has extensive resources on military records, as well as other genealogical resources—with more names and stories.
5. **Books, Software, DVDs, and CDs:** [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) lists over sixty books and related items on genealogy, including the ever popular *Complete Idiot's Guide to Genealogy*. These books range from the superficial to the nanomanager's resource manual, so if you choose to go this route, read the reviews to see if the book fits your needs. One Baltimore based company, the Genealogical Publishing

Company, Inc, has over 2,000 books and CDs to browse and is located online at <http://www.genealogical.com/>.

6. **Online Genealogical Resources:** If you are busy and don't have time to go to courthouses, write for census records, or aren't sure where to begin, there are a number of excellent online subscriptions for genealogical resources. I have a subscription to Ancestry.com, but there are many others. There are also forums for finding out more information about family ancestors, for instance, in one posting, I discovered someone had a letter describing my grandmother as "poor Bessie." The reason? She was deaf, secondary to spinal meningitis, and the person writing the letter despaired of her ever marrying. How could the letter-writer know that Bessie would meet the wild, motorcycle-riding gardener, Carl, on a blind date and marry less than a year later?

I have grown to know my family better in this research process and have found some great stories along the way. Now when I read my great-great-grandfather's name, George, I see a well-to-do stern man's face, devastated when his middle-child contracts spinal meningitis, and is left deaf by the disease. I also envision my grandmother's sisters, Liza and Annie, living at home on the family estate, while Bessie is sent away to live

at the Kentucky School for the Deaf and Dumb from the age of seven to the age of twenty-one. I envision my grandmother with great obstacles in her life—that she overcomes with her persistence, determination, and obstinate insistence on marrying the man she loves—not the one her family chooses for her. Now *that* is the essence of romance!

I began my genealogical research as a way to find out more about my family and the grandmother who raised me. Along the way, I discovered it was fun to have names for my characters that didn't sound made up. In addition, I have a personal connection with the names and take great pleasure in finding just the right one from my family tree for a particular story.

Romance is everywhere you look in your family history, otherwise how would all those generations have appeared? People are born, fall in love, marry, have affairs, have babies, divorce, and die. Interesting names and intriguing stories are in the branches of your family tree, waiting to be discovered by you. Is it time you began to harvest *your* family tree for character names?

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