

"Take Time to Pass Down Family Stories"

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By Mary Ann Ashcraft

Time marches on and pretty soon all of us are faced with condensing our belongings – perhaps because we are moving into a smaller house, an apartment or a retirement community. Maybe your belongings carry very little history with them because you bought them new forty or fifty years ago, but maybe they came down in your family from an ancestor – a great grandfather's watch, a bonnet worn by a great great grandmother, or something a bit less exotic like a your grandfather's shoes.

A very few Carroll families are lucky enough to own a tall-case clock made by the famous Eli Bentley of Taneytown or a John Slagenhaupt chair from the same location. These are pieces of furniture which you hope will stay in the family for generations to come, not ones which will end up on the auction block.

Do people in your family know the stories behind your belongings, or will they mean nothing to the person who inherits them when you downsize? Knowing the stories and making sure others know them as well is so important if you want to keep family history alive. In this county where some families have lived for generations, an abundance of relatives can help by sharing stories and keeping them accurate. "That couldn't be Great Aunt Sally's wedding dress because her fiancé ran off with her best friend and she never married." "Don't you remember how Oma and Opa Metzler said grace in German at supper every night?"

Nowadays we seem to have so little time to absorb or share stories until it is too late. As a volunteer in the library at the Historical Society of Carroll County, I love hearing visitors reminisce about hog-butcher in the winter, planting and harvesting tobacco on a relative's farm in Southern Maryland, the businesses which have come and gone along Main Street in Westminster. I know I haven't told my own children half the stories they should have heard about "the way it was." When they return home, things are hectic and the opportunity to think back and retrieve family stories isn't there.

Someone runs downstairs to throw a load of laundry in the washer. Should I stop them on the way back up to describe how we washed clothes in 1945? There's the sketch my grandmother made in 1898 when her father took her to Gettysburg and showed her where his company fought at Little Round Top. She drew an arrow pointing to the rock behind which her father crouched. I'm not sure my children have seen that sketch and I know they couldn't find their great great grandfather's name on the Pennsylvania Monument. What useless thing was I doing when I might have shared this story that seems so important now?

After my mother died at the age of 97, I found a little pair of high button leather shoes tucked away in the back of her bureau drawer. Luckily, I knew the story behind them. My grandfather was born in 1874, one of a set of triplets – all born alive to my tiny great grandmother, Annie French Paret. One triplet died just two days after birth; another lived seven months. "Dampy" survived but was very slow to walk. He wore this pair of shoes when he was about a year old. One shoe is in good condition, but the entire side of the other is worn through where he dragged that foot as he crawled. Thank goodness this story won't be lost. Someone in the family will inherit the shoes, carefully labeled, in an archival box/frame.



This charcoal drawing of Ruth Bennett Crawford plus a sampler she made as a young woman are two of more than a dozen artifacts at the Historical Society which help to tell some Crawford and Bennett family stories. They are currently on display in the Shriver-Weybright Exhibition Gallery. Collection of the Historical Society of Carroll County.

Mary Ann Ashcraft is a library volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.