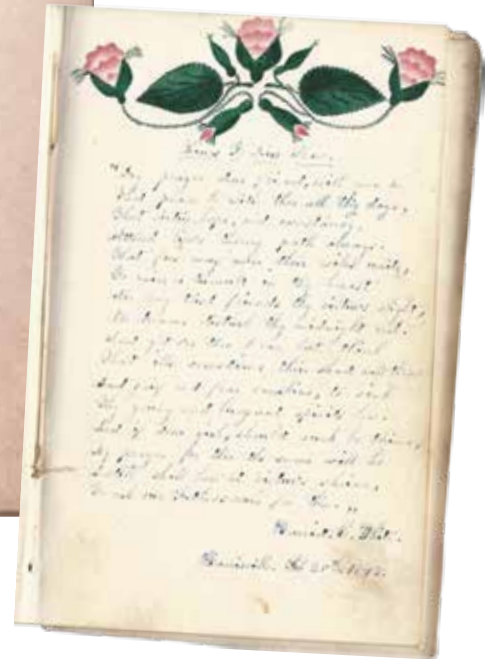




Pam Beveridge's orphan heirloom rescues include autograph books (left and bottom), as well as personal correspondence (below).



Home Again

Returning orphaned heirlooms to their families

By Anne Morrissy

In May 2013, Megan Smolenyak stood in front of a crowd of genealogists at the National Genealogical Society (NGS) Conference in Las Vegas, where she shared the role of keynote speaker with Mark Hall-Patton of the History Channel TV show “Pawn Stars.” She had been invited to speak not about her work as a contractor for the U.S. Army’s repatriation program, which tracks down families of World War II and Korean War soldiers, but about her Seton Shields Genealogical Grant program, for which she uses some of the funds she earns from her position as a professional genealogist to support genealogy and history projects

throughout the country. She decided to use the opportunity at the NGS Conference to announce a new kind of grant program—the Lucky 13 Project.

To tie her work to that of her fellow keynote speaker, Smolenyak brainstormed a way to connect her grants with the world of pawn shops. As a columnist for the now-defunct *Ancestry Magazine*, Smolenyak had helped readers research and reunite dozens of orphaned family heirlooms, many of which were discovered on eBay or in flea markets or antique shops.

“It occurred to me that pawn shops would be a logical place to find orphaned heirlooms as well,” Smolenyak says.

So she devised the Lucky 13 Project to “track down the descendants of the original owners of particular family history treasures that have gone astray,” she says. Smolenyak invited the public to hunt down orphaned heirlooms like family Bibles, military medals, journals or photo albums, and submit applications to be considered for one of the 13 “reunion” grants.

The Lucky 13 Project now is entering its second year. Smolenyak chooses grant recipients by selecting items that represent a variety of heirlooms and geographic locations: “A lot of times



PAM BEVERIDGE



people have tried to do the research themselves, but they run into a brick wall. That's where I can help."

In most cases, she is able to conduct the research without ever actually taking possession of the item. "I play the middleman, do the detective work and send the contact info back to the person who has the item," she says, leaving it up to that person to return the heirloom to the family that lost it.

Occasionally she facilitates the returns herself. "Every once in a while, I take possession of the item and hand it over," she says, adding that these tend to be her favorite investigations. "It makes it more personal when you get to meet the recipient."

Smolenyak is not the only genealogist working to reunite heirlooms with their original owners. Pam Beveridge estimates that she has spent the past 40 years collecting orphaned heirlooms in Maine. Now retired from her job at the U.S. Postal Service, she has turned her attention to documenting the collection on her blog, *Heirlooms Reunited* (<http://heirloomsreunited.blogspot.com>). Beveridge hopes that genealogists researching their family history might find a family treasure they didn't know existed.

Beveridge is especially drawn to autograph books, which she describes as the "Facebook of their day." She spends hours transcribing the names of everyone who signed the books, hoping that someone researching their family

history might stumble across the name via a search engine and ultimately be reunited with their ancestor's signature or artwork. Beveridge spends hours each day scanning, editing, captioning, researching and writing the blog posts with this goal in mind.

"A lot of people are attracted to the stories," she explains. "My favorite things to document have to do with hardscrabble people. I like to think that when I put an autograph book online, maybe that person never left any other record, but now they're getting a shot."

Sometimes her hard work pays off. One success story involved a family Bible with very little identifying information in it. She started researching the name printed in it and came across a man in Pennsylvania—Blake Stough—who was looking for information on that family. He ended up buying the Bible, and discovered it had originally come from a bookshop in his hometown. It provided him with information on the side of his family he knew the least about.

She also receives motivating notes via her blog. "A lot of people don't actually

want to own the item, but they're nice enough to write and tell me that there were tears in their eyes when they found their ancestor's signature or saw their picture [online]," she says. "This has been my goal. I just need to do something helpful with this stuff I've been collecting."

If you find an orphaned heirloom and want to return it to descendants of its original owner, both women caution the importance of conducting independent genealogy research rather than relying on family trees posted online. "Unfortunately, online family trees tend to be riddled with errors," Smolenyak says.

Despite the legwork that can be involved, Smolenyak emphasizes that returning orphaned heirlooms is a gesture that often is greatly appreciated: "These days genealogy is so popular, it's not hard to find someone who will be thrilled to get it back." 🐼

Freelance writer Anne Morrissy is a member of the Chicago DAR Chapter, Chicago.

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