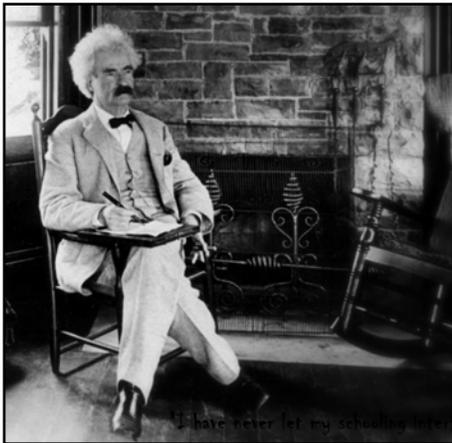


Okay, Now What?



**“Why waste your money looking up your family tree?
Just go into politics and your opponents will do it for you.”**

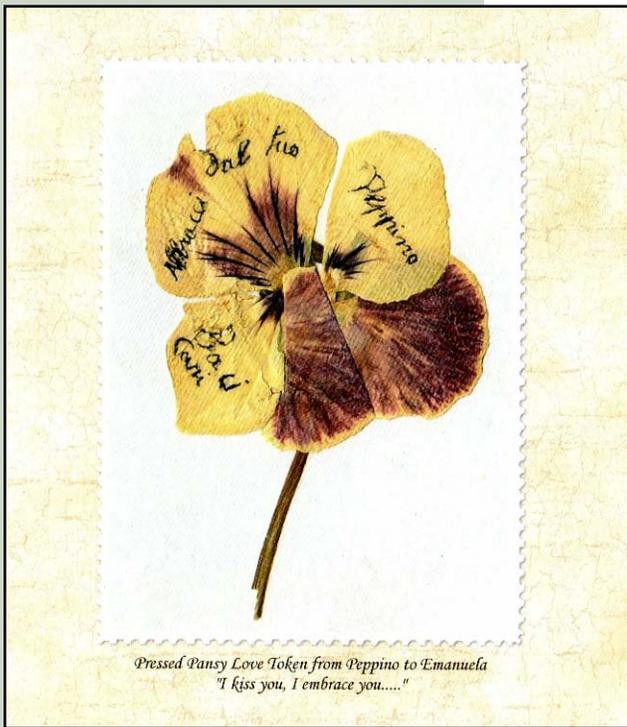
—Mark Twain

If Samuel Langhorne Clemens was still with us, he would be amused (and not much surprised) to discover that his sardonic assessment of American politics rings as true today as it did over a century ago. Despite Twain's clever observation and the fact that the ongoing shenanigans of the 2016 presidential race are tempting fodder for a writer, I'm opting out of a political run as a genealogy research tool. I know only too well that the mining of family history yields nuggets of all varieties including ancestral gems, glittering iron pyrite impostors, and the inevitable feet of clay—all of those supported by layer upon layer of plebeian pebbles. Once the genealogical digging is completed, next comes the inevitably subjective and sometimes selective process of taking that raw material and refining it into a documented genealogical legacy—a project never to be ceded to anyone with an axe to grind or a score to settle.

Despite the potential effects of subjectivity and selectivity and the risk of further distortion under the lens of modern examination, it is essential that family history research discoveries be documented, shared, and passed down to succeeding generations. We must continue the age-old cultural tradition of family storytelling, imperfections notwithstanding. Having given you sufficient warning and admonishment on the subject, let me also give you some ideas and tools for doing so.

I am often asked about the best way to memorialize the story that results from genealogical discoveries. The answer is not the same for everyone. The key thing is that these multigenerational family stories be put down on paper (physical or electronic) and preserved for sharing now and passing down in the future. How simply or elaborately that is done is less important and depends on the objectives of the person (or persons) who invested the time and dogged effort to resurrect the family lineage. Committing the discovered family history to a simple Word document can suffice. For those who wish to go further, there are other options.

When the puzzle pieces of my own Irish ancestral roots finally began to come together after three decades of



Modern technology allowed this fragile, precious momento to be preserved and shared.

daunting searching, there was no way I was not going to memorialize that family history. The periodic genealogical exhaustion I had felt during years of failing to surmount brick walls, being bamboozled by misspelling of names, and generally coming up empty time and time again was almost instantly replaced by a zealous second wind born of a desire (and a need) to tell the tale. In my case, there was a bittersweet aspect of my motivation: the one person in the world I had wanted to tell that story to, my grandmother Catherine, had died before I succeeded in discovering it.

I began documenting the story for my family via a photobook that combined pages of narrative with images that included family photos, scans of vital records, historical images (immigrant ships, old views of places where the family had lived, etc.), maps, and even scans of family mementos like funeral cards. These types of photobooks are created on-line using one of a variety of available websites for that purpose. Some of the more highly-rated of those include: Shutterfly, Mixbook, Snapfish, MyCanvas, Adoramapix, and Picaboo. Creating a photobook that includes text and images for the purpose of telling a family story means first gathering and organizing the materials to be included, uploading images to the website, and then laying out each page using various templates and formats provided by the photobook website. That process will no doubt have you using a bit more of that dogged determination of yours—along with some basic tech skills related to photo editing—not to mention making big decisions about fonts, backgrounds, and colors. In the end, when the postman delivers a physical copy of the finished product and you tear open the package and see the completed book “in person,” all of that effort will be duly rewarded.

After making my “Irish” family history photobook, I went on to make one for the Italian (paternal) side of my family and, being more experienced at it and having more mementos to work with, I scanned and so preserved some very precious items including a pressed pansy blossom given to my Italian grandmother Emanuela by her then fiancé Giuseppe when they were courting in Italy in about 1920. On the petals are the words (in Italian): “Kisses and embraces my dear.” I found it in my grandmother’s things after her death in 1987. Carefully wrapped in an old folded piece of paper towel tied with thread, I never imagined that twenty years later something called “the internet” would give me the means of capturing it for posterity. Among the other things I scanned for the photobook were my grandfather Giuseppe’s 1923 NY Central Railroad pass (complete with his photo!) and a 1940s trade card for

*There is no one
“right” way to
self-publish your
family story nor
is there any need
to go that far in
memorializing
and sharing your
precious
genealogical
discoveries.
Whether the end
product is a
Word document
or a self-
published book, it
is the
preservation of
the family legacy
that matters.*

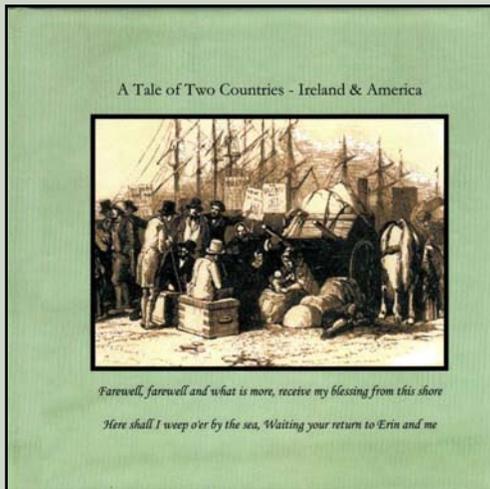
Giuseppe's shoe repair shop on Monmouth Street in Jersey City. Over the ensuing years I have created additional photobooks to tell more family stories and I never tire of leafing through their poignant pages.

Despite being more than satisfied with the results of my photobook efforts, my sadness at not having been able to tell my grandmother Catherine about her Irish heritage stayed with me. I had always pictured myself sitting with her over multiple cups of tea introducing her to her Irish kin, good and bad, saints and sinners alike. Still wanting to memorialize a more detailed, expansive Irish family story than could be done effectively via photobook, I began trying to write that epic without much success at first. Ultimately, after a few false starts, I came back to my original desire to tell my grandmother the story and wrote the saga just that way: as a very long letter to her. In doing that I not only gave names, dates and other facts, I told her what it was like to be poor and Catholic in Ireland in the 19th century and about the desperation born of centuries of religious and economic oppression by British occupiers that ultimately led to the Great Famine of the late 1840s. It was that catastrophic event that caused her own middle-aged great-grandparents, facing death by starvation or disease, to abandon their homeland in late 1846 in the hope of saving themselves and their six children. I continued the story by describing their perilous journey across the Atlantic in steerage and their subsequent life in Jersey City, all of that leading up to her own birth there in 1904.

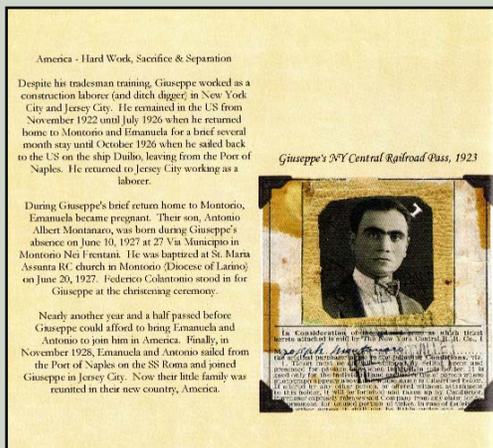
Having written our Irish family saga and intrigued by the new self-publishing arena, I began researching that as a possible venue for producing an actual book that would memorialize the story I had painstakingly authored. Not long after, I selected a self-publishing firm, purchased a publishing package and, several months after that, my first book was released. I have now self-published five books using three different approaches I can summarize for you:

1) Using a self-publishing firm that offers a menu of fee-based services to authors who want or need a partner for the process of bringing their work to publication. There are many companies offering this level of publishing support and services. The pricing can range from hundreds to thousands of dollars depending on the publishing package chosen. Using these companies' editing or proofreading services can involve additional fees. They can help you convert your finished book to a Kindle version, that assistance generally requiring the payment of an additional fee.

2) Using a printing company to produce copies of a finished and formatted manuscript. With my second book, I used an



Examples of books created by the author to tell the stories of both her Irish (top) and Italian ancestors.



intermediary that assisted with the creation of the book cover (front, back and spine including ISBN and barcode). The intermediary then took the cover files and my completed manuscript (properly formatted for the production of a 6 by 9-inch softcover book) and identified several printing companies that could produce the books, providing me with the per book printing charge for each copy. If you are producing copies of your book just for family and friends, this can be a cost-effective way to go. If you mean for your book to be sold to a wide audience and be available on Amazon and other competing web bookseller sites, I don't recommend this approach.

3) Using Amazon's on-line self-publishing arm, CreateSpace, which provides tools for a "do-it-yourself" approach that allows you to upload your completed and formatted manuscript, create a cover on their site (if you don't have your own to upload), add an ISBN and barcode (provided by them), and convert your book to Kindle format—all without any fees. They do offer fee-based support services as well if needed. I have used CreateSpace multiple times and have been satisfied with the results and with their distribution support once a book is published through them.

The above is a high-level overview of some of the approaches to self-publishing a book. There are a lot of things to consider when selecting a publishing method and partner—the royalty split between you and the publisher, the discounted cost you will pay when purchasing copies of your own book, the quality of the finished product, to name just a few.

There is no one "right" way to self-publish your family story nor is there any need to go that far in memorializing and sharing your precious genealogical discoveries. Whether the end product is a Word document or a self-published book, it is the preservation of the family legacy that matters. Eons ago early civilizations, understanding the value of family history, kept their ancestors and historic events alive for generations through oral storytelling traditions including the recitation of epic historical poems. In some cultures, that oral tradition has continued to this day. The Irish have a word for those highly-respected generational storytellers: seanchaí. So, my advice to you is simply this: Be your family's seanchaí. Share the results of your investment in genealogical research by word of mouth and the written word (using any means or in any fashion that works for you). In giving your family members (young and old) the gift of the story that binds them to the ancestors who made their own lives possible, you will also be planting the seeds from which a next-generation family seanchaí may sprout. 

*"Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains
as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge
hidden in every cell of our bodies."*

— Shirley Abbott

Maureen Wlodarczyk

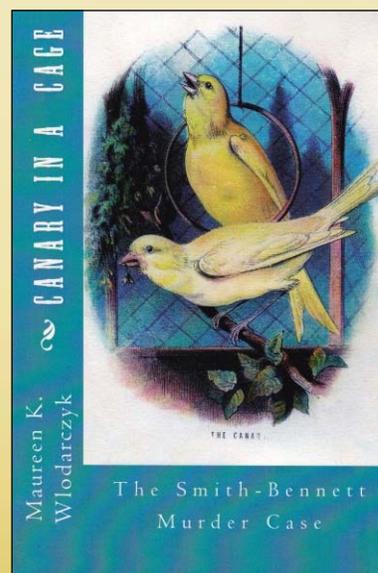
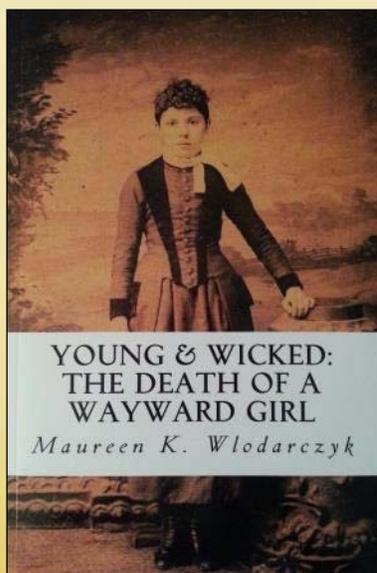
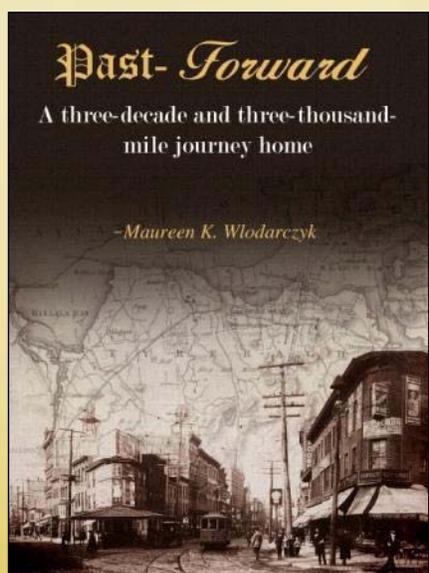
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