

# **Ancestral Narrative as a Contribution to Community Memory and Identity**

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**Introduction**

Genealogists attempt to trace their ancestry by researching names, birth and death dates, and places. They use the statistics gleaned from hours spent sorting through census records, parish registers, ship manifests, and land grants to chart family lines. What does a genealogist do after she has taken her lines back as far as they can go? How can she begin to fill in the spaces between the lines? Archivist Hugh Taylor, in his article “The Collective Memory: Archives and Libraries as Heritage,” describes the pursuit of knowing one’s ancestors beyond vital statistics in this way: “Family history is not simply genealogy, although this would normally provide the structure. Family history should involve a knowledge and understanding of social history and material culture.”<sup>1</sup> Once a genealogist begins to link her ancestors to historical events, conditions, and culture, she begins to explore family history in a way that brings meaning to the lives of her forebears and a connection between her own identity and the past.<sup>2</sup> The process of connecting ancestors to a historical setting, filling in the gaps of knowledge, and recording these connections to vital statistics in a descriptive way is called ancestral narrative.<sup>3</sup>

I began pursuing genealogical research in about 1996. I have yet to reach that level where I might go beyond vital statistics and combine cultural and historical research to create family narratives, yet I have always been fascinated with those who have reached that level. As a student of archival studies, I realize the role that archives play in maintaining memory. This realization led to my question of what place ancestral narrative might have in creating, or even

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Taylor, “The Collective Memory: Archives and Libraries as Heritage,” *Archivaria* 15 (Winter 1982-83): 123.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Yakel, “Seeking Information, Seeking Connections, Seeking Meaning: Genealogists and Family Historians,” *Information Research* 10, no. 1 (October 2004), under “Information Research: An Electronic Journal,” <http://informationr.net/ir/10-1/paper205.html> (accessed January 31, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> While genealogists commonly use the term “family history” to describe this kind of written volume, using the term “family history” in literature searches often produces results in the family studies of the social sciences. For the purposes of this examination, the term “ancestral narrative” has been adopted. “Narrative” refers to the writing format and indicates that the text goes beyond a family tree structure. “Ancestral” signifies that the account is not just about the immediate family but reaches back further than the autobiographical. For an example of this distinction see Patricia Law Hatcher, “Adding Detail to Your Narrative,” in *Ancestry Magazine* 21, no. 4 (July/August 2003), under “Learning Center,” <http://learn.ancestry.com/LearnMore/LearnMoreLnd.aspx> (accessed February 17, 2011).

extending, collective memory. Could the narrative records, or memories, of many genealogists help to strengthen the identity of a community?

Family historians usually exchange ancestral narratives at family reunions, sell them at regional genealogical society meetings, and donate them to the local history departments of public libraries. If libraries and historical repositories were to systematically collect these volumes, ancestral narratives could be accessed by many types of cultural, genealogical, and history researchers. This increased access advances the potential for ancestral narratives to contribute to a community's collective memory and historical identity. By closely examining how an ancestral narrative is formed, studying its scholarly validity and general relevance to members of a community, reviewing the sociological and psychological insights to memory formation, and examining a published ancestral narrative, the contribution of ancestral narratives can be determined. Specifically, their ability to make connections between people and historical facts, to maintain societal memory, and to include the underrepresented is notable.

In the narrative of her grandfather Ebenezer Hodsdon (1820-1907), Beatrice Morosco illuminates the circumstances that prompted her interest in family history. "My avid interest in Minnesota history began with Grandma Jane's tales of her frontier life. She made her home with us and believed in telling children true adventures instead of fairy tales."<sup>4</sup> In combination with the oral history of her grandmother and her own historical research, Morosco (1898-1997) based *The Restless Ones: A Family History* on the diaries and letters of her grandfather. The settling of early Minnesota by this immigrant family from Maine sheds light on such activities as community development, religious activity, social group formation, geographic history, and the interaction with popular culture. Even the tensions leading to and resulting from the Civil War

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<sup>4</sup> Beatrice Morosco. *The Restless Ones: A Family History*. (Minneapolis, MN: Ross & Haines, Inc.): i.

touched the lives of the people and communities surrounding Minneapolis.<sup>5</sup> While the text is not cited, its index to historic public figures and events provides a framework for establishing connections between the Hodsdon family and the cultural and historical foundations of Minnesota.<sup>6</sup>

Elizabeth Yakel provides excellent definitions to the terms “genealogist” and “family historian” in her work “Seeking Information, Seeking Connections, Seeking Meaning: Genealogists and Family Historians” and this paper borrows some of her distinctions.<sup>7</sup> While some only consider the term “genealogist” to refer to a professional researcher, the terms ‘family historian’ and ‘genealogist’ are interchangeable, here. A “genealogy,” however, is a list of dates and names, while a “family history” combines statistics, historical and cultural facts, and narrative linking the family to community. Lisa Alzo, who prepared for the writing of her narrative *Three Slovak Women* while a graduate student in nonfiction creative writing at the University of Pittsburg, describes the elements that make up an ancestral narrative.<sup>8</sup> What Alzo calls “factual research” consists of the use of vital records, official government and church documents, cemetery records, newspapers, and historical references to determine birth, death, and marriage dates.<sup>9</sup> “Personal information” found in letters, diaries, or perhaps a family bible would also be included in a narrative. And, other than photographs, a genealogist lastly strives to include “oral history” to fill in the details of a relative’s life. Oral history can be the details of family life handed down from generation to generation, as it was in Morosco’s case. It is also the primary way that history is remembered in non-literate societies. Alzo finds that “Recording a

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<sup>5</sup> Morosco, *The Restless Ones*, 73-4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 287-98.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Yakel, “Seeking Information, Seeking Connections, Seeking Meaning: Genealogists and Family Historians.”

<sup>8</sup> Lisa A. Alzo, *Three Slovak Women* (Baltimore: Gateway Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Lisa A. Alzo, “Telling Stories: Bring your Family Tree to Life Using Oral and Social History,” *Western Pennsylvania History* 87, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 24.

story in the person's own words or obtaining accounts from those who knew him/her by asking the important questions of when, where and how they lived is a great way to find out what the records may not reveal."<sup>10</sup>

Background for the terms collective memory and community identity are also pertinent to this paper. Sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) and his student Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945) first used the term collective memory to describe memory as being tied to group dynamics. In societal groups, resources are maintained that encourage members to retain certain memories, forget others, and even create memories where experience is lacking.<sup>11</sup> Community identity refers to what a society thinks of itself. Archives educator Jeanette Bastian's book *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History*, chronicles her experience as an archivist in the post-colonial Virgin Islands. There, the majority of reference requests were for records that had been relocated to the Danish National Archives or the U.S. National Archives. Her experience offers parallels for a researcher or community member attempting to establish identity and memory based only on the papers and official records of those in power.<sup>12</sup> Without the contribution of ancestral narratives the identity of a community and its collective memory are incomplete.

## **Narrative Writers**

Why do genealogists do what they do? Understanding what motivates a person to go on field trips, visit libraries, and scroll through reels of microfilm in the pursuit of genealogical research can assist in determining the scholarly contributions of ancestral narrative. Ronald

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<sup>10</sup> Alzo, "Telling Stories", 25.

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Olick, "Collective Memory," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. <http://www.virginia.edu/sociology/publications/faculty%20articles/OlickArticles/galecm.pdf> (accessed March 28, 2011). For more on the development of the social memory field, see Jeffrey Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy, editors. *The Collective Memory Reader*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Pages 136-149 specifically address the contributions of Durkheim and Halbwachs.

<sup>12</sup> Jeanette A. Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History* (Westport, CT.: Libraries Unlimited, 2003), ix.

Bishop asked similar questions of sixty family history researchers to inform his goal of understanding “why individuals embark on genealogical research.”<sup>13</sup> Eleven respondents to Bishop’s survey also kept research diaries. Through the narrative analysis he performed on completed surveys, Bishop discovered that learning from an ancestor’s past mistakes or accomplishments was a common theme.<sup>14</sup> Some of the participants were motivated by a promise made to family members or a desire to honor those who came before by learning about them.<sup>15</sup> Many commented about the pains taken to be accurate, to make corrections to earlier narratives, and to fact check oral histories.<sup>16</sup>

What personal benefits does the genealogist derive from this research and narrative formation? Bishop found that “The desire to carve out, through narrative, a place for one’s family in the larger picture is a key motivation for these researchers.”<sup>17</sup> In an earlier treatment of the subject, Bishop compiled statements by genealogists that spoke to “a quest for identity, pure and simple.”<sup>18</sup> Yakel’s analysis of twenty-nine surveys completed by genealogists gleaned that “Self-identification and self-discovery through the role of family historian were an important dimension of the genealogical process.”<sup>19</sup> For Morosco, who loved listening to, reading, and writing stories about Minnesota history and, after the passing of her grandmother and inheriting Ebenezer’s “diaries, correspondence and notes,” she felt it was “inevitable that I should write the

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<sup>13</sup> Ronald Bishop, “In the Grand Scheme of Things: An Exploration of the Meaning of Genealogical Research,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 41, no. 3 (2008): 393, 396.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 402-4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 398, 404.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 402, 405.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Bishop, “Developing a Collecting-Inspired Ideology of Genealogy,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 38, no. 6 (2005): 997. A professor in the Department of Culture and Communication at Drexel University, Bishop was inspired for both of his articles on genealogy by the writings of philosopher Martin Saar. See “Genealogy and Subjectivity,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2002): 231-145 for more on Saar’s critique.

<sup>19</sup> Yakel, “Seeking Information, Seeking Connections, Seeking Meaning,” 9.

book my grandfather had planned a hundred years ago.”<sup>20</sup> For one of Yakel’s participants, the journey launched by family history research is what brings the reward. “I just find that genealogy is a really interesting way to find your way almost by chance into worlds and places and times that you never knew existed and never would have picked to think about.”<sup>21</sup> Making sense of an ancestor’s life, situating one’s self into the course of history, and passing on information to the next generation are all guiding motivations for the family historian.

Some critics of family history research contest that genealogists are not serious historians and, therefore, their work should not be collected by libraries and archives. According to Richard Marius and Melvin E. Page, historians are interested in discovering what past events mean, how they led up to what happened next, and how the answers to these questions influence today’s discussions.<sup>22</sup> Marius and Page designate the elements of history as the names of people and places, the details of when and where things happened, and other similar information gathered. Writing about history combines these facts, as well as insights and interpretation of evidence to tell a story; which are all common aims of ancestral narrative writing.<sup>23</sup> “Human beings,” they explain, “want to know how things got this way.” Just as genealogists do, “They yearn to understand origins and purposes,” and how “essential parts of their own lives in the present are influenced by their understanding of the past.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Ancestral Narrative as a Contribution to History**

In the introduction to *Historians at Work: Investigating and Recreating the Past*, editor David Duffy explains the nature of history as characterized by what historians do. He

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<sup>20</sup> Morosco, *The Restless Ones*, i.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah A. Torres, “Genealogists as a ‘Community’ of Records,” *American Archivist* 70, no.1 (Spring/Summer 2007): 108.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Marius and Melvin E. Page, *A Short Guide to Writing about History*, 7th ed. (New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 2010), 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-1.

differentiates three groups of scholars as “definers of history,” “users of history,” and “doers of history.”<sup>25</sup> Specifically, these groups are those who write about history, those who use historical research, and those who do historical research. Since his definition allows that “history, as a discipline, should be seen as how historians make the past to appear and not regarded as objective description of what actually happened,” family historians could be considered members of all three groups.<sup>26</sup> Family historians write about their research for the benefit of others, they use the research of others to build upon their lines and flesh out the details of an ancestor’s life, and they perform their own research in archives, libraries, cemeteries, and online databases.

The very presence of a chapter on genealogists in *Historians at Work* indicates that the editors recommend family history research as a viable contribution to historical literature.<sup>27</sup> While history writings help the genealogist to prepare ancestral narratives, their narratives can provide information for other researchers. Nancy Gray, the author of the above mentioned chapter, “Tracing Family History,” came to genealogical work through the local history research process. Gray had to rely on the library of the Society of Australian Genealogists in Sydney to prepare a volume on the Hunter Valley of New South Wales.<sup>28</sup> The society’s volunteers assisted her navigation through pedigrees, cemetery memorial transcriptions, church registers, and an index card reference system. Once the book was completed, she began to explore genealogical research and processes in a systematic way which led to her being able to assist numerous patrons.

For some scholars, the oral history element of ancestral narrative brings into question the contribution that family history research brings to collective memory and identity. However,

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<sup>25</sup> David Duffy, “Reconstructing the Past: An Introduction,” in *Historians at Work: Investigating and Recreating the Past*, ed. David Duffy, Grant Harman, and Keith Swan (Sydney, Australia: Hicks Smith & Sons, 1973), 3-11.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Nancy Gray, “Tracing Family History,” in *Historians at Work*, 111- 122.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-5.

traditions surrounding religion, craftsmanship, family, and community life and culture that are normally passed down orally can be lost when modern technologies are introduced or colonizing forces intervene.<sup>29</sup> Setareki Tale and Opetia Alefaio explain the loss to collective memory when oral tradition is not preserved in some form. Their essay, “We are our Memories: Community and Records in Fiji,” recalls the account of a *meke* song, an important part of island identity, being lost with the passing of the community’s elders until a recording of the song was discovered at the former government’s radio station.<sup>30</sup> One of Bishop’s respondents reported that an aunt, who resided with her, repeatedly told family stories until she became frustrated. One day, the respondent realized that unless she wrote them down, she would be unable to remember the stories after the aunt was gone.<sup>31</sup> An example of preserving knowledge of primitive farming methods is found in *The Restless Ones* as Morosco describes Con Hodsdon’s technique of tilling the soil. She writes, “Con had no harrowing disc so he harrowed and dragged the land with the tops of trees loaded with rocks to smooth out the clumps and clods. Some less scrupulous farmers solved the problem by stealing railroad spikes and driving them through a two inch plank weighted with rocks, on top of which all the children were piled for a free ride and further ballast.”<sup>32</sup> Tale and Alefaio, Bishop, and Morosco all point to the importance of preserving tradition, family life, and every day practices as a part of collective memory. If oral history is not recorded in some way, it will eventually be lost or forgotten, along with the component of identity it illuminates. Ancestral narrative is a way of combining the recorded with the unrecorded in an effort to expand a community’s history and identity.

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<sup>29</sup> Setareki Tale and Opetia Alefaio, “We are our Memories: Community and Records in Fiji,” in *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*, ed. Jeanette Bastian and Ben Alexander (London: Facet Publishing, 2009), 89.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90.

<sup>31</sup> Bishop, “In the Grand Scheme of Things,” 401.

<sup>32</sup> Morosco, *The Restless Ones*, 146.

Patricia Galloway, in her essay “Oral Tradition in Living Cultures: The Role of Archives in the Preservation of Memory,” argues that few societies are purely oral and that even those considered to be completely literate have some oral elements.<sup>33</sup> The idea, then, that a society can have mixed means of recording memory, written and oral, prohibits the ranking of one mode over another in favor of a less positivist view of history.<sup>34</sup> Written historical accounts, whether narrative or documentary, all include errors. They can contain inaccuracies or leave out participants’ perspectives, altogether. Oral histories can be one-sided, re-interpreted through collective memory, and fade in accurate detail over time, but their ability to link events with human interaction cannot be overlooked.

One example of factual, personal, and oral information coming together to link human interaction with historical events is found in the stories of immigration. Alzo suggests that the circumstances that motivated or complicated an ancestor’s leaving or going can tie them to a particular movement as well as distinguish their story from that of others.<sup>35</sup> *The Restless Ones* opens with Ebenezer, a retired sailor, Jane, and the three Hodsdon children standing on a train platform holding their luggage. “All winter clothing and heavy garments had been left behind because the advertisement in the Maine newspaper had claimed Minnesota Territory was an ideal winter resort with such mild weather cattle could live in the open and graze all year long.”<sup>36</sup> It was not until the final leg of their journey, an ox cart ride from Hastings to St. Paul conducted by a fur-clad driver, that Jane realized the newspaper advertisement had misled them. She

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<sup>33</sup> Patricia Galloway, “Oral Tradition in Living Cultures: The Role of Archives in the Preservation of Memory,” in *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*, ed. Jeanette Bastian and Ben Alexander (London: Facet Publishing, 2009), 65.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>35</sup> Alzo, “Patricia Galloway, “Oral Tradition in Living Cultures: The Role of Archives in the Preservation of Memory,” in *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*, ed. Jeanette Bastian and Ben Alexander (London: Facet Publishing, 2009), 65.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 66. “Telling Stories,” 25.

<sup>36</sup> Morosco, *The Restless Ones*, 2.

exclaimed to Ebenezer, “They lied to us, this is the first day of May and it’s cold as Maine in February.”<sup>37</sup> History writers referencing family narratives are able to include details and motivations to their documentation of the westward movement in the early United States.

As a professor of history at Louisiana State University, David H. Culbert sees the gathering of oral histories by college students as compatible with Jesse Lemisch’s pursuit of history from the bottom up; “Frequently, family history projects become an important way of learning about the past experienced by the poor or little-noticed person.”<sup>38</sup> Consider Morosco’s representation of her grandfather’s struggle to maintain ownership over a parcel of his land. Shortly after settling in the Minneapolis area, the Hodsdons purchased a farm not far from Ft. Snelling and adjacent to the shoreline of Lake Amelia. In November of 1885, a representative of Hennepin County served Ebenezer with a notice that fifteen acres of his land had been seized under a tax judgment and sold to a Mr. Miller. *The Restless Ones* recalls Hodsdon’s eighteen-month fight to regain his land by providing tax receipts going back to 1852, appearing in district court four times and, after the death of his attorney and incurring \$300.00 in legal costs, representing himself in a final appeal to the supreme court. It is true that court records exist for the case, including Hodsdon’s testimony that he was ““taught early in life that citizens pay taxes for the sake of protection against fraud, violence and injustice. Yet, I’ve been robbed by officials of Hennepin County.””<sup>39</sup> However, the story of one man’s defense of his property, the practice of loan sharking at the time, and the details of a farmer-to-farmer, interest-free, no-collateral loan system might have gone untold if not for the narrative tying all of the strands together. As

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>38</sup> David H. Culbert. “Family History Projects: The Scholarly Value of the Informal Sample,” *American Archivist* 38, no. 4 (October 1975): 534-5.

<sup>39</sup> Morosco, *The Restless Ones*, 182-4.

Richard Cox discovered through the writings of China Galland, records sometimes reveal the story of those in power and not whether they gained that power (or land) legally.<sup>40</sup>

Professor Rina Benmayor engaged her students in an oral history project similar to Culbert's. In an effort to revitalize Salinas, California's old Chinatown, former residents and tourists were interviewed about their memories and experiences. The oral histories will serve a dual purpose. They will be used as a guide to determine which structures and functions should be restored, and they will constitute a permanent collection of interviews maintained in a new cultural center and museum.<sup>41</sup> Benmayor discovered that the memories differed according to the age of the resident at the time they lived in or visited Salinas. Also, the resident's gender, ethnicity, and emotional identification with the community were among the mediating factors in the types of memories recalled.<sup>42</sup> In her review of Sean Field's article about post-Apartheid South Africa, Benmayor found that she agreed with Field's observation that "people shape memories to contain emotions."<sup>43</sup> Lisa Alzo, who had to interview her mother three times to get the complete story of a beating that her then twelve-year old mother received at the hand of her father, found that memories that are painful or prohibited from discussion can be very difficult to record in their entirety.<sup>44</sup> If researchers do not take the time to collect and incorporate these oral histories into narratives, the consequence is a whole in the fabric of community identity and a gap in the collective memory.

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<sup>40</sup> Richard Cox, "Conclusion: The Archivist and Community," in *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*, ed. Jeanette Bastian and Ben Alexander (London: Facet Publishing, 2009), 258-9. For information about Galland's efforts to regain legal access to an African American cemetery in East Texas, see <http://www.chinagalland.com/>.

<sup>41</sup> Rina Benmayor, "Contested Memories of Place: Representations of Salinas' Chinatown," *Oral History Review* 37, no. 2 (2010): 227.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>44</sup> Alzo, "Telling Stories," 28-9.

## **Ancestral Narrative as a Contribution to Community Identity**

Community identity is forged over time, is modified by changing economies and technological advancements, and is strengthened by memory preservation. In *The Restless Ones*, Morosco traces the identity formation of the Minneapolis area. It is first identified as a frontier town due to its proximity to Fort Snelling.<sup>45</sup> With the growing popularity of river navigation, it is considered to be a port city known for the various trappings of a tourist destination.<sup>46</sup> Its identity is further enhanced by the construction of the rail system and bridges.<sup>47</sup> During the American Civil War, Minnesotans were galvanized by the mustering of the Minnesota First regiment and they identified with the abolitionist movement.<sup>48</sup> As a community grows and evolves, memory traces such as buildings, public spaces, and museums help to solidify this identity.

Jeanette Bastian explains that “The identity of a community is wrapped around the events they choose to commemorate.”<sup>49</sup> She quotes sociologist Barry Schwartz who explains that the celebration of a society’s landmark events is an affirmation of the shared values and identity of its members.<sup>50</sup> Morosco borrowed from local history, Ebenezer’s diaries, and her grandmother Jane’s stories to highlight the many commemorations of the Minneapolis area. Fairs, parades, and Independence Day picnics were among the annual festivities. Minnesota Territorial fairs, Minnesota State Fairs, and Hennepin County fairs, which paid tribute to the agricultural, industrial, and cultural accomplishments of the area, were all heavily attended.<sup>51</sup> They featured livestock shows, competitions such as a fire engine water-throwing contest, and public speakers. Jane recalled that as her children grew older, fair attendance served as a vehicle for courting, as

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<sup>45</sup> Morosco, *The Restless Ones*, 21, 29, 63.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 17, 35, 96.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 40, 51, 69.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 68, 88.

<sup>49</sup> Bastian, *Owning Memory*, 54.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>51</sup> Morosco, *The Restless Ones*, 64-65.

well.<sup>52</sup> In 1884, the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) chose Minneapolis for that year's encampment and celebration. As the Hodsdons gathered along the parade route to watch the infantry and military band process, it occurred to Jane just how much time had passed since the war's end. Morosco records, "Somehow, it came as a shock to Jane to see that the GAR were no longer young men, as she had visualized them, but men of middle age with paunches and balding pates."<sup>53</sup> The associations that individual Hodsdon family members have to these historic, community-building events, reflected in the narrative, give strength and dimension to the identity of early Minneapolis.

Elizabeth Yakel discovered in her interviews with twenty-nine genealogists and family historians that information seeking was often more about finding meaning for their ancestors' lives than about fact finding.<sup>54</sup> "As a result," she reports in a follow up article with Nancy Torres, "they are less concerned about every story being true and can seek identity through more subtle and perhaps metaphorical meaning in the stories."<sup>55</sup> She discovered that the genealogist advances from "his immediate knowledge and moves securely into the unknown and, by discovering his place in a continuing tradition, gains a deeper awareness of his own identity."<sup>56</sup> Can the writings of family historians, whose searches often contribute to individual and family identity building, contribute to the formation of community identity?

Ebenezer Hodsdon's membership in as many as twelve social organizations, as recorded in his diary and later in *The Restless Ones*, speaks to the "affinity" that historian Barry Schwartz

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<sup>52</sup> Morosco, *The Restless Ones*, 154-5.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 174-6. The Grand Army of the Republic was a Union Army veterans' organization that functioned from the years 1866-1949. For more on their history, see <http://www.suvcw.org/gar.htm>.

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Yakel and Nancy Torres, "Genealogists as a 'Community of Records,'" *American Archivist* 70, (Spring/Summer 2007): 108.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 122.

was referring.<sup>57</sup> In other words, Hodsdon's daily journal reflects the causes that Minneapolitans thought worthy. Morosco weaves into her narrative, which spans a time period from 1852 to 1907, Jane's reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the distribution of the "Abolitionist" among the towns people, and the formation of formal and informal abolitionist groups.<sup>58</sup> Ebenezer joined in on the discussions of one such informal gathering at the state fair of 1860.<sup>59</sup> Morosco writes, "The discussion turned to the Dred Scott case and its relationship to Fort Snelling. All knew the story of how Dr. John Emerson, who was stationed at the post, had brought his negro slave, Dred Scott, north with him in 1834."<sup>60</sup> The legal battle took place after Dr. Emerson passed away and his wife returned to St. Louis with Scott. The frequency of summertime tourists arriving in the area, once the river was navigable and other infrastructure were in place, saw the establishment of elite hotels that catered to wealthy Southerners. The Hotel Winslow in St. Anthony drew a significant amount of criticism for accommodating slave owners.<sup>61</sup> Public and private documentation of the following incident help to identify the Minneapolis area as an anti-slavery community. Morosco writes, "Col. Christmas, a guest at the Winslow, had brought along with his family, Eliza Winston, a negro housemaid. The group of abolitionists approached Eliza and informed her that she could not be forced to return to the south in servitude. They provided her with counsel and after winning her case she hastily departed for Canada."<sup>62</sup> Insight into pre-Civil War hostilities between slave owners and the settlers of the St. Anthony community adds to the formation of community identity.

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<sup>57</sup> Bastian, *Owning Memory*, 53.

<sup>58</sup> According to her son Charles Edward Stowe in *Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was first published as a serial in the *National Era* between June 5, 1851 and April 1, 1852. An edition of 5,000 copies in book form was issued March 20, 1852. A second run was printed one week later and the third was issued by April 1, 1852. Jane Hodsdon read the story in serial form just prior to leaving Maine. The *Abolitionist* was a monthly periodical published in Boston by the New England Anti-Slavery Society.

<sup>59</sup> Morosco, *The Restless Ones*, 14-15, 66-7.

<sup>60</sup> Morosco, *The Restless ones*, 66.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-7.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-8.

## **Ancestral Narrative as a Contribution to Collective Memory**

Analyzing the contribution of the ancestral narrative *The Restless Ones: A Family History* causes one to consider the psychological aspects of memory. “Do the details of the primary source demonstrate selective memory (due to positive or negative experience)? And, does the related narrative perpetuate selection or does it seek balance?” Though Morosco had access to her grandfather’s diaries and letters, she only rarely uses quotation marks to indicate Ebenezer Hodsdon’s direct words or thoughts. Instead, she weaves the oral history of the grandmother, historical facts, and Hodsdon’s own recollections into one, flowing account. Memory selection, therefore, could be on the part of the grandparents, in the grandfather’s own hand and in the grandmother Jane’s retelling of her pioneer life. Maurice Halbwachs looks at the ability to retain accurate individual memory as a continuum. In childhood memories are formed from the details of life that are important to a child. When one looks back, it is likely that certain details are left behind and others, important to an adult, are added.<sup>63</sup> The preoccupation with life’s necessities makes an adult less likely to visit the past with interest. “But this is not the case with old people,” writes Halbwachs. “These men and women are tired of action and hence turn away from the present so that they are in a more favorable position to evoke events of the past as they really appeared.”<sup>64</sup> It is possible, therefore, that Jane Hodsdon’s oral histories provide a balance to the daily journal entries of her husband in terms of accuracy or perspective.

Morosco’s memory of her grandmother’s accounts also could be selective. Morosco had to make decisions about how she represented her ancestors within the narrative. Morosco sets herself apart as a non-related narrator, not shying away from descriptions of Ebenezer’s

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<sup>63</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 46.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

absenteeism or Jane's docile behaviors. She does not hide the fact, for example, that Jane and Ebenezer lived separately from the time that their youngest daughter Julia married until Ebenezer's death.<sup>65</sup> The follow-up question, then, is "What is the motivation for writing the narrative?" In her "Author's Note", Morosco recounts the foundation of her "avid interest in Minnesota history."<sup>66</sup> The author of several articles on Minnesota history, and a participant in oral history collection projects, Morosco relates that when the diaries came into her possession, she was fascinated. "They told the humble story not only of struggles against the rough frontier but of struggles with their own emotions. Pioneers were not saints. Ebenezer was not a saint. But the Hodsdons formed an integral part of the threads of the tapestry that made Minneapolis."<sup>67</sup> Morosco recognized the imperfect lives of her relatives and that they also coincided with a pivotal time in early Minnesota history that warranted recording. Several of Bishop's respondents, also in favor of recording all the imperfections of an ancestor, objected to the idea of altering historical evidence about family members. "I don't believe that is right," wrote one researcher. "No matter *WHAT* our forebears did in the past, it is history and should be known."<sup>68</sup>

"Collective memory," according to Margaret Hedstrom, "is commonly defined as a group's representation of its past in terms of shared origins, values and experiences."<sup>69</sup> She points out that there is a relationship between isolated individual memory, individual memories influenced by social or cultural powers, and the formation of collective memory. Halbwachs contends that even "When people think they are alone, . . ." as with a diary writer, "other people

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<sup>65</sup> Morosco, *The Restless Ones*, 208, 282.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, i.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, ii.

<sup>68</sup> Bishop, "Grand Scheme," 404.

<sup>69</sup> Margaret Hedstrom, "Archives and Collective Memory: More than a Metaphor, Less than an Analogy," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2010), 165-6.

appear and with them the groups of which they are members.”<sup>70</sup> Kenneth Foote assigns dual meaning to the definition of collective memory. He references Halbwachs when he says, “Collective memory refers to beliefs and ideas held in common by many individuals that together produce a sense of social solidarity and community.”<sup>71</sup> He also suggests that individuals, organizations, and memory institutions can work collectively to preserve the details of history.<sup>72</sup>

It is the idea that ancestral narratives can function as an archive, and participate in this collective work of Foote’s, which recommends examination of the potential effect of *The Restless Ones* on community memory and identity. Bastian claims that “Records facilitate collective memory while they also hold it historically accountable.”<sup>73</sup> Following just one historical event in Morosco’s narrative, the Civil War, demonstrates how this can be true for family histories, as well. Although Minnesota’s governor offered 1,000 troops for Union defense after the fall of Fort Sumter, heavy losses in 1862 made a second recruitment campaign necessary. This is when the war had its first impact on the Hodsdon family. Morosco writes,

Hannibal had attended one of these recruit meetings at Bridge Square. The next morning Jane had just finished frying donuts when she noticed Hannibal [*her oldest son*] had changed his overalls for his going-to-town suit.  
“Why Hannie, where are you going?” she asked.  
“To Fort Snelling, Ma. I’m going to enlist.”  
Jane braced herself. “But you’re too young, Hannie. You’re only sixteen.”  
“I can enlist as a drummer boy. They take drummers at sixteen. . . I’d like to leave now before Pa gets back from town. Tell him goodbye for me.”<sup>74</sup>

Ebenezer cried when he found out. Hannibal never returned to the house before leaving with his unit.

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<sup>70</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 49.

<sup>71</sup> Kenneth E. Foote, “To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture,” *American Archivist* 53 (Summer 1990): 380.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Jeannette A. Bastian, “Flowers for Homestead: A Case Study in Archives and Collective Memory,” *American Archivist* 72, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2009): 129.

<sup>74</sup> Morosco, *The Restless Ones*, 73.

Hannibal's first letter home reported that "he had joined the Company D, 6<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the Minnesota Volunteers, 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, which was being sent to Virginia."<sup>75</sup> In his next letter he told the family, "I've learned to play a few notes on the bugle and the distant booming of the cannon indicates we're close to a battle front but you're not to worry."<sup>76</sup> The next letter included a tintype of Hannibal in his bugler's uniform. Morosco adds, "Jane never let the daguerreotype out of her possession and carried it around in her apron pocket."<sup>77</sup> Eventually, Hannibal took up arms, left the bugle behind, and combined with the 16<sup>th</sup> Army Corps in Louisiana.

Fort Snelling's close proximity to the town caused certain complications for its neighbors. One night, home alone, Jane heard tapping from outside. When she looked out the window, she saw a uniformed Union soldier. He whispered, "'Don't be afraid. I'll not harm you – but please give me something to eat and a safe place to rest for a few hours.'"<sup>78</sup> Morosco writes, "[Jane] knew the terrible conditions that a Union soldier endured and her heart swelled with pity. She knew equally well there was a stiff penalty for aiding a deserter to escape."<sup>79</sup> Jane sent him to the barn, brought him a meal, and inquired after her son's regiment. She never told her husband about the boy so when officers came to question Ebenezer the next day, he was able to answer truthfully and indignantly.<sup>80</sup>

Shortly after Lincoln's assassination, Hannibal wrote "'I'm waiting here in New Orleans, ready to be mustered out. Arrangements are being made to take all the Minnesota regiments to St. Paul by steamer. I'll surely be home for my birthday in May and I can hardly wait for the

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<sup>75</sup> Morosco, *The Restless Ones*, 74.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

strawberries to ripen so I can have some of your shortcake.”<sup>81</sup> The next letter Jane received was not from her son. The War Department had written to say that Hannibal had been “stricken with dysentery and fever, and was being shipped with a group of wounded soldiers to a Union Hospital at Willet’s Point, Long Island in New York.”<sup>82</sup> Some days later, Jane was coming in from tending the strawberry patch when she saw another letter from the War Department on the kitchen table. “Slipping the letter into her pocket,” Morosco writes, Jane “groped her way into the bedroom and closed the door. Minutes passed before she read the contents – and minutes more elapsed before she called to the children that she had something to tell them.” Jane wrote in the family bible, “Hannibal is dead. Hannie died in New York on his nineteenth birthday – May 22, 1865.”<sup>83</sup>

The Hodsdons’ suffered their last encounter with post-War fallout in October on a day when Lo, a younger son, was cleaning out the lake boats. Young neighbor boys were playing with a discarded Union firearm they’d found in the shoreline weeds. Not knowing that the gun was loaded, their game of “hold up” had disastrous results. Although Lo ran immediately for the wounded boy’s father, first, and the doctor, next, the young boy died five days later.<sup>84</sup> Tracing the Hodsdon family’s connection to the Civil War through *The Restless Ones* expands the collective memory of Minneapolis for this time period. Tying the family to official military actions, government correspondence, local tragedy, and human suffering fills in gaps of social memory. According to Bastian, tracking down the elements of a particular collective memory, in

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<sup>81</sup> Morosco, *The Restless Ones*, 86.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-23.

his case the war, not only contextualizes records, but is “a way to fill in some of the undocumented and underdocumented spaces.”<sup>85</sup>

## Conclusion

One aspect of ancestral narrative’s contribution can be described by Bastian, who writes, “Although the relationship between records and the formal written history of a community may be more measurable and more easily discernible than that of informal oral culture, community memory is a composite of all these expressions and, as historian John Bodnar suggests, forms part of a discussion between the people and their social and political systems.”<sup>86</sup> Family histories create a relationship between records and history. When they are accessed by researchers, the memories and societal connections they establish become part of a larger discussion, making room for the further building of community memory and the expansion of its identity. Bishop claims that the connections made by family historians are pivotal to illuminating historical facts. Once the details of past lives are uncovered, he proposes, they “achieve historical value only when they are incorporated into a broader genealogical account.”<sup>87</sup>

Halbwachs expresses memory as a living thing. The individual relies on collective memory to recall history, yet societal groups are incapable of reconstructing their past without distortions. “There are surely many facts, and many details of certain facts, that the individual would forget if others did not keep their memory alive for him.”<sup>88</sup> Ancestral narrative strives to keep memories alive while offering often previously unknown perspectives. The fact that society is permeable, according to Halbwachs, means that its collective memory makes room for today’s

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<sup>85</sup> Bastian, “Flowers for Homestead,” 119.

<sup>86</sup> Bastian, *Owning Memory*, 53.

<sup>87</sup> Bishop, “Grand Scheme,” 394.

<sup>88</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 182. According to Halbwachs, societal ideas *are* memory and are constantly fluctuating. Group contribution to collective memory can intersect via interest, or overlap in time.

ideas and the memory of intersecting or overlapping groups.<sup>89</sup> Yakel claims that the social connections, the intellectual insights, and material traces of family history passed down to future genealogists "make the continuity of collective memory tangible and meaningful across generations."<sup>90</sup> Hedstrom proposes that "Archives are sources for the potential discovery or recovery of memories that have been lost."<sup>91</sup> The narrative offerings of genealogists service the very same idea of memory discovery and recovery.

As previously discussed, rather than actively collecting family histories, libraries and repositories generally rely on donations. The Fort Wayne Public Library is one institution that broke with this tradition.<sup>92</sup> Rick Ashton researched the library's thirty-year history of actively collecting local histories, genealogical writings, and research materials. The staff next embarked upon a cooperative copying and sharing project that preserved aging family history volumes. Ashton explains that this resulted in expanding the reading room multiple times, accommodating users from all over the country, and "a commitment [to] the idea that genealogy was a field worthy of pursuit by the public library, and that excellent collections and services would attract users."<sup>93</sup>

Not every research institution has the funding or time for such an ambitious program, but a collecting ideology begins with the understanding of the contributions made by family history writers and their need for access to the work of other family historians. Richard Cox writes that archival holdings play a role in strengthening communities.<sup>94</sup> As Hedstrom puts it, another reason to enhance a collecting policy is to avoid, "a proclivity to document the . . . lives of those

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<sup>89</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 188.

<sup>90</sup> Yakel and Torres, "Community of Records," 111.

<sup>91</sup> Hedstrom, "More than a Metaphor," 176.

<sup>92</sup> Rick. J. Ashton, "A Commitment to Excellence in Genealogy: How the Public Library Became the Only Tourist Attraction in Fort Wayne, Indiana," *Library Trends* 32, no. 1 (Summer 1983): 89-96.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>94</sup> Cox, "Conclusion," 254.

in positions of authority.”<sup>95</sup> Bastian cautions that “who gets remembered” and “who gets erased” from history depends on the records that repositories preserve.<sup>96</sup> Ancestral narrative is one way of ensuring that more people are remembered and are worth remembering.

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<sup>95</sup> Hedstrom, “More than a Metaphor,” 168.

<sup>96</sup> Bastian, “Flowers for Homestead,” 131.

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