

Oral Family History Fades in Just Three Generations

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Ever frighten yourself when you couldn't recall a family story or experiences you know had to have been recounted to you many times by your grandparents? Ever wonder why you know very little about the personal lives of your grandparents or great-grandparents?

Aaron Holt of the National Archives and Records Administration says that "it only takes three generations to lose a piece of oral family history." If you want to avoid losing those precious family stories passed down through the generations, Holt continued, the story "must be purposely and accurately repeated over and over again through the generations to be preserved."

Jim Ison, an area manager for [FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org) and a recent luncheon speaker at the National Genealogical Society's 2014 conference in Richmond, Virginia, said the notion that his family's narratives could be lost in three generations gave him the resolve to ensure that didn't happen on his watch.

Ison, an accredited genealogist, shared a similar epiphany he had last year at a RootsTech 2013 talk by FamilySearch CEO, Dennis Brimhall. He said Brimhall asked a stop-you-in-your-tracks question, “What will your great-grandchildren wish you had done?”

Ison has spent a lifetime researching his family’s genealogy, meticulously extending and documenting generation after generation of his family tree. Now he found himself faced with a very intriguing question indeed, “What WOULD his great-grandchildren, most of whom he’d probably never meet in this life, wish he had done?”

Ison thought, “No one knows (my ancestors) like me or their stories that I know. I’m the connecting link between my grandchildren and my grandparents.” He decided at that moment in 2013 to put aside his passion for genealogical research and a long-term goal to trace his genealogy to the great Charlemagne, and instead he began focusing on the rich personal accounts of his parents and grandparents—things he thought his great-grandchildren would want to know and wish he had taken the time to do.

He started with a box of old family photos in his closet that had been passed down to him from his father, who had them passed down to him from his mother. “Like my father,” Ison noted, “I put the box in my closet for (another generation of) safekeeping! The problem is a box doesn’t make them shareable, accessible, or enjoyable across generations.”

To start out on his new quest, Ison picked a particular set of grandparents to start with, Lorilla Spencer and Frank (Reight) Ison. He scanned their photos and uploaded them to his free [FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org) account and added other source documents he had amassed over the years from his research. He then edited and added stories his father had written about his grandparents years before, and he preserved and shared them online through FamilySearch’s Family Tree.

“They moved from my shoebox to the ‘cloud’ online at FamilySearch” for future safekeeping,” said Ison triumphantly. “Now a great-grandchild 1,000 miles away can see the same pictures and read the same stories.”

Ison quoted research from a 2013 New York Times article by author Bruce Feiler, who observed, “The single most important thing you can do for your family may be the simplest of all: develop a strong family narrative.” The research noted that children who knew the most about their forbearers—who they were, where they grew up, illnesses they struggled with, and tough trials they went through, had the greatest self-confidence and dealt with personal stress better.

For posterity’s sake, Ison focused on pointing out such highlights of the personal lives of the ancestors he knew and discovered through research.

For example, his Bavarian grandpa’s mother died when he was a young child. His great-grandfather remarried a “wicked stepmother,” who spanked them every morning

and told them the spanking was for anything during the day she wouldn't catch them doing! This grandfather and his older brother eventually ran away and changed their last name to avoid capture. They immigrated to the United States, worked hard, and were very successful.

His grandmother became a school teacher at a very young age. She was traumatized when her fiancé was killed in a tragic accident. To escape the constant reminder in the local community of her heartache, she applied to teach in Alaska and was rejected ironically because she wasn't married. She applied in Georgia and was refused because she was a "Yankee" from South Dakota. She applied in Kentucky and was accepted, which explained why she was willing to relocate 1,300 miles on horseback on her own, without the comforts of home and family.

As a newly married couple, the home of these same grandparents' burnt down.

Ison created questions from the stories and photos for these two grandparents, Frank and Lorilla, that would entice his grandchildren to know more about their fascinating great-grandparents.

- At age 9, why did Frank leave home with his brother?
- What did he do in the United States while in the German Navy?
- Who was responsible for him changing his last name from "Rieght" to "Ison"?
- How old was Lorilla when she started teaching?
- What was she given as part of her standard teaching supplies? (Answer: a gun)
- Why did she move 1,300 miles from South Dakota to Kentucky?

Ison said he marveled at how enthralled his grandkids have been in looking for the answers in the photos and stories he published online at [FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org) and how easily they navigated the online tools to do so.

For the younger grandchildren, he published 75 pages of the stories and photos. And he creates other fun activities such as crossword puzzles, bingo boards, and memory games with ancestral information, which he enjoys doing with grandchildren when visiting. "It will amaze you how many questions your grandchildren will ask just from a single ancestral story."

Ison is now moving on to repeat the process for other grandparents and ancestors in his tree, very content in his new role as the intergenerational connection for his posterity.