

Through My Voice: Telling Family History

by Beth Horner

I grew up in a house filled with family pictures and portraits my mother put on our walls. I grew up with a father who told stories of various ancestors, of both good and questionable repute. Bits and pieces of these stories seeped into my memory, fusing with the faces in the pictures and portraits.

Now some of these portraits have found their way to the walls of *my* home and sometimes the people in them speak to me, “Beth, I survived the Civil War, but lost my husband, mother, sister, brother and three young sons during the war. Please tell my story.”

“Beth, my husband was captured by the British during the American Revolutionary War and was going to be hanged as an American spy, but I saved his life. I lived to raise 11 children. Please tell my story.”

“Hey Beth! Stop doing that paperwork, stop watching that video, stop taking that nap. My story needs to be told!!”

Because their blood runs through my veins, because their stories are the stories of my childhood, because I would not be who I am without these people, their stories are a vital part of my own life story. I am compelled to honor them, their experiences, and the times in which they lived. I am compelled to see current experiences through their eyes, bringing the past into the present to learn from it, to understand better what we face today and how to deal with it.

Discovering and researching their stories is an adventure. Telling their stories is an absolute joy. However, the crafting of their stories is concentrated, arduous, sometimes frustrating and often emotionally difficult work. It is worth it.

In looking back over the developmental process of these stories, I find the same pattern: the spark, research/percolation period, crafting the story, and telling the story.

The Spark

The spark can be an intriguing bit of conversation such as, my mother saying, “They found my grandfather’s dead body in a Chicago hotel room. No one knows how or why he died... but we have our theories....”

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Or from my father, “After the battle in Tennessee, he was buried in a mass grave, but curiously, the engraved spurs he’d worn into that battle, and were assumed to be buried with him, were later discovered in Iowa.”

My mother again, “She lost every one of her sons during that war.”

The spark can also be an artifact: a portrait of a beautiful lady that hung over the fireplace in the home in which I grew up; a large gravestone in the local cemetery; a diary written by my great-great grandfather during the American Civil War.

What’s in a Name? is the story of my childhood search for a middle name via years of research into my ancestry. *The Silver Spurs* is the story of my great grandmother as she remembers her father going off to fight in the Civil War.

Both of these stories were initially sparked by the portrait, the diary, the gravestone, a story my father told me as a child, and a notebook from my cousin, which contained information he had gathered about the family, including the birth and death dates of the woman in the portrait. These sparks ignited a flame.

Research/Percolation

Research is exhilarating, filled with the thrill of discovery. Interviewing people is fascinating. Sifting through family papers is overwhelming, but exciting. The Internet is amazing. Of course, there are frustrations. In one interview my father began nearly every amazing story with, “You can never tell this to anyone...”

Next, the story percolates for a blissful period, sometimes months or even years during which time I am thinking, sharing anecdotes with family and colleagues, conducting further research, and letting the story roll around in my heart and brain.

During this percolation, I look at all of my information and memories through the filter of several questions:

1. What is it about this story that makes me want to tell it?
2. How do the events in my family’s history fit into the overall events of the times?
3. What impact does this story from the past have on me today?
4. What impact does this story from the past have on listeners today?

These questions all add up to the most important one:

5. What is the story really about?

At first, I wanted to tell a story about my great-great grandfather, the soldier who wrote the diary. Every time I read the diary however, I was overwhelmed by the waste of his life and the lives of others in the war. It took about two years before I could read it without weeping.

It was years before I had the emotional distance to craft his story. However, I kept coming back to one diary entry, “Today I received a letter from my wife Jane. Ah, those three words that sum up all bliss: my wife Jane.”

Jane! She was the woman in the portrait. The woman buried under the large gravestone. The woman whose last name, Harper, I took as my middle name at the age of 16. I might not be ready yet to tell the soldier’s story, but I *could* craft a story about his wife, the woman who survived the war and became my namesake.

Crafting the Story

Now comes the hard part, taking the facts and molding them into an interesting story. During the crafting process these questions are essential:

1. What exactly is the story I want to tell?
2. How do I transform facts, dates, and histories into living, breathing characters?
3. How do I connect this story to my listeners, making it universal?
4. How do I fill in holes in the available research?
5. What is the best structure for this story?
6. What do I leave in? What do I take out?
7. What is this story really about?



Jane Bishop Harper Winans Riggins (1830-1899)
Montrose, Louisiana. Photo 1850.

Widow of Wesley Winans, great-great grandmother of Beth Horner. As a child, Beth took her middle name Harper from Jane's maiden name.

I wish I could say I take these questions step-by-step until *voila!* I have a story. In truth, it is a very messy process involving lots of hand wringing, pacing back and forth, starts and stops, different versions, and eating too many cookies. I consider each question repeatedly. Changing the answer to one inevitably causes changes to all the others.

1. What exactly is the story I want to tell?

I struggle with this. However, as a transition to actually crafting the

story, there always occurs a brief, delightful moment when the percolation suddenly bubbles up and out pops an initial form of the story in front of an audience—and I discover the story I want to tell.

Backstage at the Tell It Storytelling Festival in Asheville, North Carolina, I suddenly remembered I had once slept in the big bed in which Jane Harper was born. All of a sudden, it came into focus. Maybe I could use my connection to her through my middle name and through having slept in her bed as a structural device. I just *had* to tell it! As I furiously scribbled an outline in the wings, one fellow storyteller said to another, “Beth’s writing a new story as we speak. She’s going to tell it. She’s insane!”

The story was very well received. I now know to record these ‘pop out’ stories. They are the beginning of the hard work.

I never fail to think, “Wow! The story is done. Well...”

maybe it needs just a little work here and there.” So, I pull out my research and start adding details, anecdotes, bits of history, reworking the story. I become mired in the details, pulled further and further down until I desperately try to crawl out of a slimy pit of characters, images, facts, and settings, mashing a once clear structure underfoot as I scratch my way back to the light again.

The Jane Harper story was no exception. It became a mess. I could not let go of things I had added and I could not stop obsessing over it. I lost sight of what the story was really about. It officially fell apart.

Deadlines and Colleagues to the Rescue

Deadlines are the only way I *ever* accomplish *anything*! Without deadlines, I would never finish a story. I set the deadline as *What's in a Name?* for the 1997 Wild Onion Storytelling Celebration in Chicago. I then set a series of mini-deadlines, work dates with colleagues.

Colleagues and their objective ears are essential. Without them, the work takes much, much longer. Because they are not familiar with all the history and are not emotionally involved, they can look at the story with a fresh point of view. They can tell me what does and does not make sense, what is essential. They also can answer the most vital question, “Do you care about these characters?” Colleagues often see where I am going before I do.

2. How do I transform facts, dates and histories into living, breathing characters?

Storyteller David Holt once counseled me about a story, “It would be interesting if it weren't just a book report.” That was very helpful. I got all of the facts and dates and people into the story, however, I had not brought the characters and events to life.

What is truly engaging is not what a person does, but what that person thinks or feels. When I discover letters or diaries, I jump for joy. A bit here and there of a person's actual voice brings them to life and is much more effective than a lengthy description. I try to be concise, including only those excerpts that create small moments which let us into their

hearts, “Ah, those three words that sum up all bliss: my wife Jane.”

3. How do I fill in holes in the available research?

When there are holes in a family story, researching the social and political history and events of the time is essential. Also, if diaries, letters and other artifacts of one's own family are not available, finding similar sources of contemporaries can help. For instance, “because of the laws and customs of the day, Jane Harper knew that she could not survive or raise her children without remarrying after the death of her husband.”

Sometimes after researching a life as best I can, I include my own thoughts. “I wonder what it was like for Jane Harper lying in this bed. I wonder what it was like giving birth in this bed. I wonder what she thought as she lay dying in this bed. And as I lay there, I knew that if I'd been her, I would have thought, ‘I've lived a life of true love, true loss, and true survival.’”

4. How do I connect this story to my listeners, making it universal?

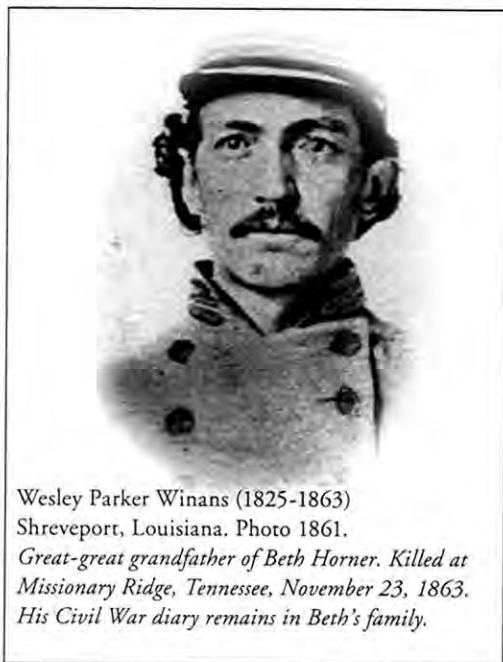
This is the most important question because, if answered correctly, it creates a story to which all listeners can relate. It is also important because finding these connections gives me a good idea of the story's structure and its primary through-line.

Writing the story of Jane Harper, I realized I had many connections to her: the portrait, the grave-stone, her bed, and my middle name. Of these, I decided that listeners could most easily connect to the story of a middle name because almost everyone has one. Since I had no middle name until I chose hers, listeners without a middle name would also be included. I could still use the other connections as reference points and moments of discovery but the middle name would be the primary through-line.

In looking at each of my family stories, I realize I am telling their stories through my perspective, through my voice. Therefore, even though each is a story of an ancestor, each is also an autobiographical story. The audience can connect to the ancestor through me.

5. What is the best way to structure this story?

Once I figure my connection, I can usually figure my structure. The story in *What's in a Name?* became a search through my family's history for an ancestor who could inspire me enough to select their name as my middle name. This structure dictated my point of view, that of a young girl, hearing each family story, discovering each family secret with a young girl's heart and experience.



Wesley Parker Winans (1825-1863)
Shreveport, Louisiana. Photo 1861.
*Great-great grandfather of Beth Horner. Killed at
Missionary Ridge, Tennessee, November 23, 1863.
His Civil War diary remains in Beth's family.*

I carefully went through and made sure that my age, location and mind set were made clear with each ancestral discovery so listeners could easily follow the progress of the young girl's search for her middle name.

In *The Silver Spurs*, the story I finally crafted about my great, great grandfather (Jane's soldier husband) I structured the story very differently. It became a story within a story, the tale of a little girl (Minnie) and her father who was killed in the war—within the story of another little girl (me) being told Minnie's story by my father. I decided not to reveal my relationship to Minnie (my great grandmother) until the end when I speak of meeting 96-year-old Minnie when I was four years old—thereby making the ending a poignant surprise and bringing out my connection to the story.

6. What do I leave in? What do I take out?

At first, this is a tough question. However, once the personal connection to the story is established and the structure decided, it becomes very simple, leave in only those things that clearly pertain to that connection or fit into the structure, take out everything else. This means cutting some real gems.

I resisted editing an anecdote about Minnie and her sister Nellie from *What's in a Name?* I loved it but finally cut it. However, that anecdote became part of the outer structure of *The Silver Spurs*. Remember, you are not discarding gems, merely saving them for the right story.

Once again, colleagues can be very helpful in deciding what to leave in and what to take out. They see with an objective eye and recognize what is unnecessary to the essential thread of the story.

Sometimes I have to take out wonderful bits in deference to my family or to what I believe my ancestors would prefer. I always run new family stories past my family. My sister asked that I remove something she had said from *What's in a Name?* I loved it, but since it made her uncomfortable, I honored her request. It is more important to respect my family's wishes than to "get a good story."

7. What is the story really about?

This question pervades the entire process. Story creation would be so simple if the answer to this question appeared early on, but it rarely does. Instead, it is a process of sorting

and experimenting, muddled by the many possible stories that could be told from the same source material. One must get in touch with one's heart when it comes to a family story.

Once I established my connection to Jane Harper and chose to craft the story about my name search, it became clear the story was *really* about my childhood search for identity; my realization that I was the sum of all who came before me. All that they had experienced and learned in life was mine to draw upon.

It was quite some time, however, before I realized that in *The Silver Spurs*, I was writing not only the story of Minnie and her Civil War soldier father, the story of my father and my childhood self, but also the story of my boyfriend, Ron, and his father.

Ron's father survived the Bataan Death March and four years as a prisoner of war during World War II. His struggles with his wartime memories and their effect on Ron's childhood must have been in my subconscious the entire time. When I realized this, I realized *The Silver Spurs* was a truly universal story—one of the sadness and losses inherent in war and their effect on those who survive.

Shortly after I first performed *The Silver Spurs*, Ron's father died. In his personal belongings, Ron discovered a hand-made diary (in minuscule handwriting, partially in English, partially in shorthand) his father had secretly written while a POW. I have the feeling that this diary, and that of my great, great grandfather, together will spark another story; I look forward to realizing what this story will be.



Minnie Dubose Winans Horner (1857-1955)
Montrose, Louisiana. Photo approximately 1865.
Daughter of Jane Harper and Wesley Winans.
Great grandmother of Beth Horner.

Telling The Story

Telling a finished family history story to an audience is an absolute delight. The journey is long and messy but the results are worth it.

People always tell me about their names and their ancestors when I tell *What's in a Name?* Although the story is geared to adults, children are always intrigued. "I have *two* middle names. I'm so lucky!" declared a nine-year-old girl. After she left, her 15-year-old brother who had been lurking in the background looking bored, snarled, "Well, aren't you going to ask me about my middle name?"

"Oh," I said, "of course, what's your middle name?"

Twenty minutes later my hostess was dragging me to my

next performance as I handed him my e-mail address so he could finish his story.

The Silver Spurs inspires more personal, quiet conversations about family members living and dead, about items and loved ones lost and found in war. A Bosnian woman, recently emigrated to the United States, wept throughout the latter half of the story. "Sometimes, it is good to weep," she said.

Often, after a performance or during one of my workshops, someone will express sadness that their family did not save letters and diaries, that there is no one left to answer their questions, or that they have only bad memories of their family.

My answer is always the same, "It can start with you. Document your life, tell your story to those who come after you, encourage them to tell theirs. The definition of family need not be blood relations. It's whomever you consider important to your life. The purpose of family history stories is to provide experience and wisdom for those who come next."

These days, when I look at the portrait of Jane Harper on

my wall I say, "Hey, I told your story today." Then I look at the young woman who saved her husband's life, "Don't worry," I tell her, "you're next...but let me get a nap in first."

Beth Horner

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dives into the breadth of human experience in her stories: a soldier's tender courage in *The Silver Spurs*, her mother's inspirational tenacity in *Winifred's Journey*, her community's political and environmental valor in *The Pipeline Blues*, and her raucously humorous *Encounter with a Romance*

Novel. She has been touring and teaching workshops for 21 years. Her stories are available through her website.

