

Morris Area Genealogy Society is piecing together generations to understand who we are

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PHOTO BY MARCIE KINTISH

Lois Pelaia with her quilt made from photographs of her family.

Lois Pelaia unfurled a large quilt with photographs of her family, ranging from her great-grandparents to her grandchildren. Just as she has pieced together the generations in her handiwork, the Rockaway resident has been busy researching and putting together the details of her family's story with help from the Morris Area Genealogy Society (MAGS).

Founded in 1988, the purpose behind MAGS is "to promote the hobby of genealogy through monthly meetings, the publication of a quarterly newsletter and special programs." The group, which meets at The [Morris County](#) Library, also contributes to the North Jersey History and Genealogy Center at the Morristown-Morris Township Library.

Linnea Foster, a charter member of MAGS, noted that the group has changed as genealogy has changed.

"When the group started 25 years ago, there was no such thing as the internet," she said.

"Research was writing letters and visiting facilities — people still have to do that. They think they can get it all on the internet, you can get a lot there, but you still have to go to the courthouse and library."

The monthly meetings are standing room only, as it was earlier this month when MAGS celebrated its 25th anniversary. Foster attributes the club's success to the Special Interest Groups (SIG) that were started some six years ago. These small group meetings are attended by about 20 at a time and focus on such topics as Your Brick Wall, Italian and West Europe Genealogy, DNA, Beginners and Beyond, German and Eastern European Genealogy, Computer Genealogy, and Family History Writing.

"It gives the opportunity to work with people on specific questions. To me, this has made the major change," said Foster.

The SIG is what enabled [Parsippany](#) resident Susan Kehr to track down her family's history. The Computer and Beginner groups, Kehr said, "Imparted how to do genealogy effectively. The importance of finding documentation to support the data, and how to cite those documentation sources. They also taught me how to question and challenge the information I found, and guided me on how to make assumptions, prove or disprove information, draw conclusions from indirect documentation, and much more."

Kehr has become very involved with the group, taking on some of the organizational responsibilities including becoming webmaster and leading some of the SIG. She also contributes to the genealogy world as part of MAGS' Indexing Group, which indexed books from the North Jersey History and Genealogy Center and records for familysearch.org, a website connected with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

"I thought I'd pay back for obtaining my own free information," she said. "I eventually had sufficient indexing under my belt that they invited me to become an arbitrator, which I still volunteer to do today."

Kehr continued, "Everyone had been excited about the 1940 Census being made available, and a big push was on to get it indexed as quickly as possible. MAGS' own Martha Corson, an LDS member, was making a plea to the MAGS membership to participate in this volunteer effort, and I added my name to her list. I made my own personal commitment to volunteer one hour a day to arbitrating the 1940 Census records. It was grueling work.

"Some census pages were so very difficult to read, some handwriting was almost illegible, and some foreign names became guessing games to read them. We simply had to do the best we could; everyone who wanted to use a 1940 Census index in the future was counting on us to make the best interpretation we could of what we were reading. When the 1940 Census was finished being indexed, arbitrated, and made freely available, that was the time to take a sorely-needed break from indexing and get back to my own genealogy work for awhile."

Just as her research has broadened her knowledge about her family, Kehr said MAGS has "expanded my horizons to new friends and new experiences, exactly what I was hoping to get by joining a subject-oriented group."

Continuing, "Who else will listen to my genealogy issues, but another genealogist? Who else will understand my indexing frustrations but another indexer? And the friendships are with people of a variety of backgrounds, each person with a different perspective; I learn something new from every one of them and am grateful to hear their opinions."

Pelaia, too, has found the SIG of great help. Her membership in MAGS, however, goes back to the 1990s, predating the SIG. Pelaia took several years off from research to help care for her grandchildren, but returned her attentions to genealogy in 2008. Along the way there have been some surprises.

A message on one research website led to hearing from her mother's cousin, who had family information and photographs. Another time, she heard from a relative she never knew existed.

In addition to unexpected family reunions, there have been family revelations. Pelaia discovered that a family member who was originally from Germany, fought in the Revolutionary War. She had never heard that there was a family connection to this historic event. Pelaia came upon the

information while visiting the cemetery where her parents are buried. A family member's grave had a DAR marker. This led Pelaia on a fact-finding hunt, contacting the DAR and then the National Archives.

"It was a big surprise and made me want to keep going. One little success leads to a lot more work," she said.

The course of family research does not always run smoothly. Pelaia joined the Brick Walls SIG in hopes to learn the one thing that her research did not reveal, how the Revolutionary War soldier connects with her great-great grandfather.

Of genealogy, Pelaia said, "It is fun, but very frustrating at times."

Family history is not just tracing ancestors for placement on a family tree; it is also the stories of their lives. MAGS President Martha Corson noted that as a youngster, her father, who died in 2006 at the age of 102 3/4, played the trumpet at the funeral service of the last surviving Civil War veteran in the family's Pennsylvania hometown. She observed that information like this links people to the past and makes us aware of others' hardships, providing a different perspective on our own lives.

"I like studying genealogy," she said. "You learn your place in history. You realize you're part of something bigger, your family. It didn't start with you and it will go on."

Genealogy is much like Pelaia's quilt — it is the many generations of a family pieced together that then allow us to understand the fabric of who we are. For more information on MAGS, visit www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~njmags.

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