Collaborating on a Family History

Finding a cousin who has research that fits nicely with your own is a perfect situation for collaborating on a book. Collaboration, however, is easier if you can set up a few ground rules and systems before you begin.

1. Collaborating Means Giving up "Ownership" of Some Information

While finding the one elusive clue to prove a relationships is elating (in some cases worthy of a whoop out loud in a quiet library followed by a vigorous Snoopy-dance), an extraordinary find can also set you up for difficulty while collaborating. One of the great joys of genealogy is finding elusive information. Sharing those finds is a gracious and generous gift to other researchers and to future generations. If you are working on a book with someone else, agree that all of your research combined will make the best book.

2. Split Up the Work Using Realistic Goals

It is not always possible to split the duties 50-50. If one partner is retired and the other is working or caring for a family with young children, then set your goals accordingly. Be realistic about how much time (energy or money) each partner has, and acknowledge the differences in what each partner can contribute. Beginning the project with an understanding about different work loads can prevent resentment that can damage a working relationship.

3. Set Up a System for Sharing Using Easy-to-Use Tools

Differences in computer equipment and levels of experience using different tools can create a challenge during collaboration. Chances are good that you will want to share written information and images while you work. There are several ways to accomplish this.

File-Sharing Tools

If you are using the same type of computer (Mac or PC) and have the same software (Word for example), you can always send files back and forth using email. There are also a number of online file-sharing tools that can make it easy for each of you to work on the same document.

Dropbox is one example of a file-sharing application. Once you set up a Dropbox folder on your computer, you can invite others to share whatever is in the folder. This is an easy way to store files allowing each partner to read or change the files in the folder.

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Google Docs is one way to avoid problems due to different software or computer operating systems. If you set up a Google account, it includes online tools for word processing, for example, and a place in the cloud to store the files so that you and your collaborator can read or change files in the account.

Mobile Apps with Sharing Tools

There are a number of different applications that make gathering and sharing information from a mobile device easy. This is helpful if you need to return to the library for more information and want to update a working document. Evernote, for example, is an application that you can install on your computer as well as your mobile devices that will sync your files. No matter which device you use to update a "note," the other devices will show the same information once synced. Evernote also gives you the tools to share your notes with a collaborator by using the chat feature, sharing a public URL, or sending a note via email.

These are only a few of the many file-sharing and collaboration tools available. Spending a little time in the beginning of a collaborative project to find the easiest way to work together will save time and frustration in the long run.
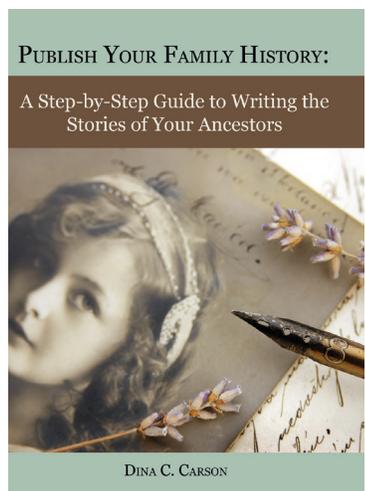
4. Keep Things Simple

While you are writing, do not worry about the formatting. All of the formatting can take place when you have the manuscript completed and edited. Write using simple paragraphs, headlines and subheads so that the material is easy for you to keep track of and scan through quickly.

Create a mutually agreed-upon style guide so that you and your partner are presenting information the same way which will save having to reconcile different styles in a long manuscript later. When a new situation arises, you can present it to the other partner and agree upon how it should be handled. Then add the situation to your style guide so that each partner is following the established rules by typing dates the same way, for example.

Agree upon a method for showing changes to files. Most word processing software includes a feature for tracking changes so that you can see what has been changed. Using this feature will avoid having to explain every change that is made and often will prevent duplicating work.

Collaborating on a family history brings more experience, more research, and more opportunities to catch and correct errors which quite often makes for a better book.

Dina C. Carson is the author of *Publish Your Family History: A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing the Stories of Your Ancestors*, available from www.irongate.com, Amazon.com (in print or for Kindle) or other fine bookstores.

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