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Your Creative Family Tree

Alice Volkert loves family history research. She loves to share her findings with friends and family. But Alice has a problem. "I find that guests tend to run out the door when I drag out my six-inch-thick binder of pedigree sheets," Alice says.

Sound familiar? Many family history researchers find themselves in Alice's position, wishing they could interest relatives in the family tree. Perhaps, like Alice, you've watched eyes glaze over when you pull out your family records. Perhaps you know you need a better method of presentation, but you fear your creative abilities won't measure up to your research success. Don't despair.

You need not be an artistic genius to create a beautiful and elegant presentation of your family names. The projects described here, many created by researchers like you, will get you well on your way to planning a work of art you can take pride in.

Investigating the Options

Alice Volkert found her inspiration at a family history conference near her hometown of Costa Mesa, California. As Alice and her husband, Roger, wandered through displays, they happened across something interesting. Someone had drawn a large circle on plastic sheeting and entered family names on lines radiating from the center. "It was an impressive way to display a large amount of information that could be easily understood," Alice says. "I had been looking for a way to 'do something' with the information I had gathered that would present it in an organized way."

That plastic chart sparked an idea. Using Roger's large-format architectural printer and software, the Volkerts created a sunburst-style chart of family names. The names are uniformly printed on radiating lines, making an appealing and legible display.

Soon Alice was creating charts for friends and relatives and friends of relatives. "Someone said, 'You should get a website,'" Alice says. "So we did." Sunburst Charts was born. Alice now takes custom orders through her website at www.volkertservices.com. Customized charts cost \$50 and are rolled for shipment.

Art History

Some family historians create displays that are as much about art as they are about research. The Martha Stewart Living website (www.marthastewart.com search term: family tree) includes illustrated instructions for creating a hand-lettered family tree. Names form the tree's trunk; marriages branch off the trunk with wedding date twigs. Also available through the website is a six-generation family tree. The kit includes six sheets of die-cut leaves and a sycamore tree print. The tree can display six generations and up to 240 ancestors. The kit is priced at \$36; the frame costs an additional \$99.

C.J. Woodruff, reference consultant for Public Affairs at the Family History Library of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, has seen some wonderful examples of art merging with family history. One artist created a fourteen-foot tree out of copper wire covered with rice paper, with each ancestor's name and birth date written on the rice paper. Another artist watercolored a tree and then inked in family names over the tree.

Linda Keene of Plainfield, Illinois, brought her family history passion to the dinner table. "This summer I painted a map on my dining room wall," she says. The map covers the area of her ancestry, from Ireland to Germany/Prussia. "As I find an immigrant and the location of his or her village, I add that information to the map," Linda says. "If I have a photo of that person, I hang it close to the hometown."

Linda's family loves her artwork. "The map is a work in progress and inspires me to continue in my research," she says. "Whenever we entertain, the map and pictures spark interesting conversation." Linda's map also helps her to see the relative locations between ancestors. "Recently I located two villages of two different family lines," she says. "They were just five miles from one another."

Perhaps artwork appeals to you but you find yourself among the artistically challenged. If you can color inside the lines,

the Museum Store of the Museum of Church History and Art has a creative and inexpensive solution. Picture an 11 x 14-inch line drawing of a Victorian house, with couples peeking out of windows and standing on balconies. All you need are family names, black ink, and colored pencils. Matted and framed, the result is one-of-a-kind.

The Victorian House is also great for getting children interested in their ancestry; the first generation can be pictured as a boy, a girl, or a couple. The picture is available through the museum manager at dahls@ldschurch.org, or (801) 240-3592. Cost is \$1.50, plus \$5 shipping for up to ten pictures. Pictures are rolled for shipping.

If you'd like a beautiful painting of your family tree but would rather spend your time on research than artwork, artist Sandra Diehl can help. Sandra transforms genealogical research into personalized watercolor paintings. Custom paintings generally cost \$400 to \$500. Her website at www.fmlytree.com shows examples, such as wedding trees to celebrate a marriage. Sandra tries to include family, geographical, and cultural heritage as well as names in each painting, such as a phrase in an ancestral language.

Silk-screened wedding trees are available through WeddingShowerGifts.com at www.weddingshowergifts.com. Family names are inked on the silk-screened tree image. The 11 x 14-inch canvas is framed in your choice of woods. If you're uncertain of family names, WeddingShowerGifts.com also offers gift certificates.

Stitch in Time

Combine traditional quilting methods with family history and you just might end up with a work of art. When David Llewellyn Roberts and Mary Eliza Crittenden celebrated their sixtieth wedding anniversary in 1978, their daughter Maryloo Stephens decided to make her parents a family history quilt.

"My aunt sent out instructions to all my grandparents' descendants," says grandson Mike Provard of West Jordan, Utah. "She asked them to trace their hands and send the handprints back to her." Maryloo created a quilted family tree. "The trunk held the information about my grandparents," Mike says. Fabric appliqued handprints formed the tree's leaves.

"It's done in family groups, one branch per family," Mike says. "Each handprint had a person's name embroidered and then a number indicating the order in which they were born into the family. The handprints are done in shades of blue, varying by generation." Maryloo's anniversary gift became an instant heirloom. The queen-sized quilt has been displayed at museums and featured in quilting magazines.

If you don't have a quilter in your family, Sandy Thorpe of Sacramento, California, says her company Family Tree Quilts can design and stitch a quilt for you. "I started this company because of my mom," Sandy says. "I knew she absolutely loved to study our family's genealogy. Whenever she wanted to show someone all the progress she had made, she would have to get all of her notebooks and lay them out. She never seemed to have a nice way to display her hard work."

Sandy decided to combine her passion for quilting with her mother's passion for family history. "For many years, I had really loved the art of quilting," she says. "I loved to hand-stitch all the quilts I made. I decided that I wanted to make a quilt that honored all of my mother's hard work." The quilt turned out so well that Sandy took her idea to the marketplace—first on eBay, then to her own website at www.familytreequilts.com. Quilt prices range from \$430 for a wall hanging to \$670 for a king-sized quilt.

"Every quilt is made to order," Sandy says. "All of the names are hand-stitched as is the quilt itself." Sandy and her group of quilters normally complete a custom quilt in two to three months. "We have made a quilt with 300 names before," she says. "However, typically we include up to seven generations."

Other quilt techniques translate well to family history. Photographs printed on fabric make fun family quilts. Or avoid sewing altogether with a framed paper quilt using photos and patterned paper, like the one Jeanine Bell has hanging on the wall of her West Valley City, Utah, home.

"My daughter Bonnie went to a scrapbooking store and got some paper patterned like a quilt," Jeanine says. Bonnie scanned and sized the pictures to fit the quilt squares. She centered her parents' picture, surrounded that photo with pictures of their six children and their spouses, and finished with pictures of the thirty-seven grandchildren. Bonnie also decorated the picture with stickers, such as a fishing rod for the fishing enthusiast in the family. "I update it as we get new pictures," Jeanine says. "All the grandchildren like to look at it, so we placed it low on the wall."

Photo Finish

Family photos give a personal face to research. Displaying photos may be the easiest way to interest friends and family in those ancient names and dates. "I have hundreds of pictures dating back to the 1850s," says Mimi Malcolm of Toledo, Ohio. "I covered the walls of my den with the pictures. Everyone loves to look at the stern faces and old-fashioned clothing my ancestors wore, and my children want to know who these people are and how they fit into our family." Mimi makes sure the photos are never separated from the research. "The back of each picture is labeled with the identity of the person and a descendency record down to my children," she says.

A family tree display can be as simple as the generational photo arrangement created by Gail Garlinghouse Rysso of Daytona Beach, Florida. Gail has a wonderful collection of photos going back several generations. "The photos are all different sizes and shapes," she says. "The frames are different, too—some plain frames, some very fancy, nothing organized, just eclectic."

Her move to Florida required some adjustments to her photo display. "When we had lots of wall space in our big house up north, the family photos were displayed in the rogue's gallery in the upper hall," Gail says. "When we downsized, I had to get creative because wall space was limited."

Gail settled on a bookshelf display and realized her choice had a bonus benefit: "The layers lent themselves to chronological generations," she says. "Each shelf is a different generation. The top shelf has our daughter, my husband, and me. The second shelf is for the grandparents of our daughter. The third shelf is for the next generation."

Gail's photos have also provided her with consolation. "I lost my parents very recently, and it is comforting to see their faces all the time," she says.

The family photo display has also helped Gail's daughter Jennifer to feel a part of their family history. "Jennifer has been dragged to cemeteries, historical societies, and libraries since she was about two years old," Gail says. "One of my favorite pictures is of her squatting next to a tombstone of our Revolutionary War ancestor in Allen's Hill, New York. She was tucked up against the fence where his stone was resting with a cute little grin on her face. She is now in her late twenties and feels that she has always known these earlier generations. They aren't just names, they are real people to her."

Gail's photos have the added benefit of interesting friends in family history research. "The photos are a great conversation starter with friends," she says. "Most know our interest in genealogy, but the pictures make the names on the family group sheets more interesting. I have stories about almost all of the people, and our friends are often inspired to put their photos on display, too."

For an alternative photo display, Hallmark (online at www.hallmark.com search term: family tree) offers a family tree in the form of a twenty-two-inch metal tree with hanging photo frame ornaments. Frames come in glass, metal, fabric, rhinestones, and enamel. Some have engraved messages on the reverse side, such as "Memories hold a family close in heart" or "Blessings, Family, Memories, Home." Choose frames to suit the colors of your room or the personality of your family.

"The tree was hugely successful," says Deidre Parkes of Hallmark Public Relations. "It has since expanded and become part of our everyday line. There is now a fifteen-inch display tree in addition to the larger one. We've also added frames, shadow boxes, and photo/treasure keepers to the line." The twenty-two-inch tree retails for \$39.95; the fifteen-inch tree retails for \$24.95. A five-piece ornament starter set is available for \$16.95.

Also, many copy shops offer personalized calendars. Why not create a calendar using pictures of ancestors? Organize the photos by birth month or season. By the end of the month, your great-grandma's face will be a familiar sight.

Mementos and Memorabilia

Once upon a time, sentimental romantics kept a lock of hair from their loved one in a locket close to their hearts. In an elaborate variation on that theme, women had jewelry made using locks of hair from family members. The Paris Tabernacle in Paris, Idaho, has an impressive display of this intricate jewelry dating to the pioneer era. Strands of hair in shades of black, brown, and blonde have been elaborately twisted into tiny trees or flower bouquets, all encased in glass and gold and worn as brooches.

Sound interesting? This art form is still around. One website advertises Family Tree Jewelry by hair artist Sandra Johnson at www.heritagehairart.com. Each tiny work of art is mounted on mother of pearl and placed inside a silver or gold pendant or brooch. Finished jewelry pieces range from \$225 to \$300.

Shadow boxes also make beautiful family history displays. Shadow box frames are available at most large craft and framing stores. A display of your great-grandfather's stethoscope, spectacles, and medicine bottles would be a natural segue to family history conversations.

Judy Askew, from Brookport, Illinois, has framed family memorabilia and displayed it on the walls so everyone can enjoy it. "I have a letter from my husband's uncle dated 1859 in which he is inquiring about the state of his father's health and if he was left anything in the will," she says. "It is framed and hanging in the den." Judy offers a note of caution, however: do not display an original document. "Light and heat exposure will ruin it for future historians," she says.

Finding Your Bliss

If your friends check their watches when you tell them about your latest family history discovery, perhaps you need to rethink your presentation. With the right display, even your teenagers may take note of Great-aunt Edna.

Since she created her first Sunburst Chart, Alice Volkert finds that her friends don't run for the door when she talks about family history. In fact, when she adds a new name to the chart, she holds a celebratory dinner. "After dinner, the table is cleared, the chart comes down from the wall, the new name is attached, and the chart goes back up," she says. "Then we stand there and admire the new addition to our family."

Connie Myers is a freelance writer. Her feature writing has led to several guest spots on radio talk shows. Connie enjoys writing about her interests, which include family history, travel, cooking, and quilting.

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