

John Philip Colletta, Ph.D.
Lecturer in Genealogy
www.genealogyjohn.com • (202) 544-9498 • johncolletta@verizon.net

BANQUET TALKS

Is Any *Body* There? – Tracking Ancestral Remains

This is a humorous and anecdotal account of some of my own experiences searching for the burial places of ancestors. In one case, I know there are no remains (or perhaps “only a few bones”) in the casket. In another, an ancestor was buried three times in three different states. In another, I discover an ancestor buried in a rent-free tomb for eternity. One seven-year journey ends at the tiny tombstone of a two-year-old. The tales are all true and a lot of fun. They also teach useful lessons about finding ancestral graves and conducting genealogical research in general. This is one of my most hilarious, popular and requested banquet talks.

Searching for Ancestors, a Yankee Boy Stumbles into the Deep, Deep South

In 1971, eager to trace my mother’s ancestry, I ventured from my native city of Buffalo, New York, to the rural town of Rolling Fork, Mississippi. I had never been south of the Mason-Dixon Line. I knew nothing of life in the country. I knew nothing of the cotton culture. I was in for culture shock—and a riotous good time! This talk is an account of my misadventures, entirely true to fact and related in the guise of 19th-century episodes. My experiences are not only funny, they teach many valuable lessons for genealogists, too.

An Italian-German-French-Swiss American Boy’s Story: Genealogy in Buffalo in the 1960s

When I was growing up in a suburb of Buffalo, New York, I did not think of myself as ethnic. Until 1963. I turned 13 that summer and began investigating my ancestry. I had no idea that my quest for my heritage would lead not only to a knowledge of who I am, but also who I am not. This talk relates my personal story—the humor, surprises, disappointments, drama and enlightenment. My experience mirrors how genealogy in the United States has changed dramatically between the 1960s and today.

Catholic, Lutheran and Jew: German-Speaking Merchants in Mississippi, 1850s-1880s

Exploring the lives of our ancestors leads us into obscure nooks and crannies of history. Often our discoveries contradict the larger, general history and popular consensus. This talk relates the surprising truths I learned while researching my mother’s Ring ancestors in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, 1850s-1880s. The Ring brothers were businessmen, German-speaking immigrants from France, and Roman Catholic. However, they were also members of a small, esoteric coterie of German-speaking immigrant merchants who were not only Catholic, but Lutheran and Jewish, too, and who helped one another, socialized together, and even intermarried. Genealogical investigation often uncovers corners of America one would not expect to find.

The Keepers of the Records and I: Tales of Accessing Historical Sources

Without written records, there would be little genealogy. Family lore and artifacts can tell us only so much. We rely heavily on evidence found in the written record of the past. Four decades of hunting for evidence of my ancestors have brought me face-to-face with a diverse assortment of keepers of records: archivists, librarians, priests, curators, court clerks, secretaries, and cousins who got all the good stuff. To access the treasures these custodians control, I have had to develop skills of diplomacy, negotiation, good humor, melodrama, stealth, groveling and bribery. This humorous banquet talk relates three episodes that teach valuable lessons for genealogists eager to access historical sources about their ancestors.

Hacks and Hookers and Putting Up Pickles: Snares of Yesteryear’s English

Our ancestors used a vocabulary based on where they lived, when they lived there, and what they did. Their words reflect a world of skills, tools, apparel and customs that no longer exists. So the written records

of any particular place and time and family contain a lot of words that are unfamiliar to 21st-century researchers. Deciphering the informational content of old records poses a challenge. Misinterpreting small words can lead to big mistakes. This entertaining (and participatory) banquet speech explores ways to arrive at an accurate understanding of what the old records really say.

Love and Marriage in the Family Tree: Writing and Speaking about Ancestors

This talk is addressed to people who publish and lecture about genealogy. Family trees are constructed on marriages. So love and marriage are rich topics for people who write and speak about ancestors. But our objective is always the same: to teach. The lives of real people furnish case studies that show how to implement a research methodology or interpret a historical source. True stories—happy, tragic, funny, shocking, thought-provoking, astounding stories—engage readers and listeners. So they comprehend the lessons we are teaching. This banquet speech explores skills of selection and technique for people who write and speak about ancestors. It is full of fascinating true stories of love and marriage in my own family tree.

Pruning the Family Tree: What to Do with Unwanted Ancestors

Nothing is better for the health and appearance of a tree than occasional, judicious pruning. This humorous banquet speech uses lots of real life stories to explore the idea of applying the same practice to family trees. To achieve “an ideal family tree,” which ancestors should be snipped? Criminals, profligates, trouble makers? But one generation’s sinner sometimes turns out to be the next generation’s saint. Which ancestors should not be snipped? Hearty pioneers, successful achievers? But one society’s hero may be another society’s rogue. The troublemaker for some relatives is the staunch ally of others. While some people may hold that “my family is better than

your family,” a larger historical perspective reveals that we are all members of the same family tree of mankind. Maybe it is best to leave Nature alone!

Exploring Ancestral Places: Tales of Research in Europe

Following our ancestors back to their native lands in Europe and continuing to research their roots there is thrilling and rewarding. But preparation in the United States is necessary for a successful research trip overseas. This humorous banquet speech teaches valuable lessons as it describes my own first trips to Germany, France and Italy. Europe ain’t America! Research experiences there are different than they are here. This talk offers prospective travelers one dozen useful recommendations. Anyone who has ever done genealogy in Europe will identify with the tales recounted in this talk.

Visiting Ancestral Towns in Europe: How to Avoid the Mistakes I Made!

When you have climbed your family tree back to immigrants from Europe, you may decide to visit the towns they left behind. That will be a joyous experience of self-discovery, a personal journey never to be forgotten, or repeated. I know. I have been back to the towns of forebears from Germany, France and Italy. But I was young the first time I made that journey, an enthusiastic but unprepared genealogist. I made many mistakes and learned many valuable lessons. This banquet talk recounts my funny, embarrassing, lucky, unlucky, hysterical and shocking experiences. They provide sound advice for family historians.

Only a Few BONES: How to Turn a Juicy Family Story into a Book... and a Career!

When I was thirteen years old, my grandmother told me about the horrendous murder of my great great grandfather. It was an outlandish saga of rebellious slaves, arson, slaughter, a sinking riverboat and a

John Philip Colletta, Ph.D.
Lecturer in Genealogy

www.genealogyjohn.com • (202) 544-9498 • johncolletta@verizon.net

miraculous survival. Even as a child, I was skeptical. So I spent the next thirty years investigating and writing *Only a Few Bones: A True Account of the Rolling Fork Tragedy and Its Aftermath*. The real past turned out to be more hair-raising than the distorted family lore. What grandmother told me was inaccurate—wrong time, wrong place, wrong lots of things. But the tale did contain kernels of truth. Indeed, if there had not been something unusual about the demise of my great great grandfather, no family story would ever have gotten started. In this banquet talk full of humor and surprise and enlightenment, I relate how and why my curiosity as a child grew into a full-fledged career as a professional genealogist, author and lecturer. My personal experience provides insights for anyone endeavoring to research his or her own family's stories... and publish a book.

Speaking of Genealogy, Now and Then: A Brief and Personal History

This talk is for people who teach genealogy. I gave my first presentation on how to research family history in a college English class in 1968. I've been doing genealogy and speaking about genealogy ever since. But a few things have changed over those four decades, rapidly advancing technology not the least of them. In fact, so much has changed in the field of genealogy, I sometimes feel like I'm in a boxing ring with technology, fighting for survival. And it's a losing battle. This amusing banquet talk illustrates how techniques for presenting genealogical instruction have changed. Venues have changed, too, and so has the genealogical audience we address. Modern technology has altered the dynamic between teacher and student. Nevertheless, it's still genealogy. And genealogists are still highly motivated and eager to learn. Today, rather than battling against technology, I embrace it as my colleague and assistant.

Why Great Grandpa Shaved Off His Mustache: Tales of Our Ancestors and the Weather

Our ancestors experienced the weather more intensely than we do today. The cycle of seasons played powerfully in their lives, determining their diet, wardrobe, daily routines, the rhythm of their labors and occupations. Some of the most exciting and significant episodes you may discover in the history of your family were occasioned by severe weather events. Ten stories of winter demonstrate that sometimes weather changed ancestors' lives! The stories are true, amazing, funny, shocking, sad, and thought-provoking, and they illustrate ten sources for information about historical weather.

John Philip Colletta, Ph.D.
Lecturer in Genealogy

www.genealogyjohn.com • (202) 544-9498 • johncolletta@verizon.net