

Genealogist personalizes Christmas with 'family tree'

By SANDY STUART
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BERNARDS TWP. — Sherlene Bartholomew won't have several generations of family members gathered around her tree on Christmas morning but she will have the next best thing: Several generations of kin decorating her tree.

Bartholomew, an enthusiastic genealogist who lives on North Maple Avenue, has festooned an evergreen with old photographs of her ancestors to create what she has dubbed her "family tree."

The personalized Christmas tree, which also uses lace doilies and ribbons to create an old-fashioned look, traces Bartholomew's maternal ancestors back to the early days of the camera.

Hanging atop the highest branches is a photo of Fielding Langford, her great-great-great grandfather, born in Kentucky in 1804. Successively lower on the tree are following generations of Langfords. On the back of each photo is a brief biography.

"There are interesting stories behind each photograph," noted Bartholomew, who is a part-time volunteer in the Family History Center of the Morris County Library. "It really brings the photos to life when you know something about the people in them."

For example, there's Fielding Langford. "He had a distillery and I guess he had to taste every batch," said Bartholomew. "He became an alcoholic and his wife eventually left him." Langford's alcoholism, she said, might have been a factor influencing other family members to convert to Mormonism, which forbids its adherents to drink liquor or other addicting substances.

Another colorful addition to the tree is James Harvey Langford, born in 1861 to the Mormon faith, who is shown in one photo wearing prison stripes. "He was jailed for polygamy," Bartholomew explained. "He had married two sisters, and refused to give one of his families up when the law changed (prohibiting polygamy)."

After being released from jail, she said, James Harvey Langford moved to Mexico with his wives and eventually expanded his family to 22 children.

According to Bartholomew, her "family tree" illustrates one of the pitfalls of genealogy — finding out that your forebears were flawed.

"Look at it this way. If you go back just six generations, you have 510 direct ancestors," she said. "When you get 510 relatives, you may find alcoholics, you may find thieves, you may even find a murderer or two."

Although the majority of family genealogies won't trace back to Mayflower bluebloods, Bartholomew said



(Photo by Ray Jones)

Special Ornaments

Sherlene Bartholomew of Basking Ridge shows off some of the photo ornaments adorning her family Christmas tree this year.

she doesn't believe there is any reason for anyone to be ashamed of their heritage.

"Most of the people who came to this country were destitute people. That's why they came here," Bartholomew pointed out. "They may have been very poor, or they may have been persecuted. But I feel we owe what we are today to them, and they deserve to be on our tree."

Of course, the genealogical game works both ways. "You also might find you're related to famous people — maybe people who fought in the Revolutionary War or maybe even a president," she said.

While residing in White Plains, N.Y., several years ago, Bartholomew discovered she was related to Solomon Tracy, a Revolutionary War soldier who fought at the Battle of White Plains. She said she "got chills" when she realized she was living only a short distance from the battleground where

Tracy risked his life to create a new country.

"I figured he was probably hiding somewhere in the woods 200 years ago and here I am nonchalantly going to the grocery store and taking all my wealth and freedom for granted," she said.

She also learned recently that she is directly related to Jonathan Fairbank, born in England in 1595, who settled in Dedham, Mass. "He must have been among the wealthier ancestors, because he brought bricks and window glass with him from England," Bartholomew said.

After one of his sons and a grandson were massacred by Indians, Jonathan Fairbank found a secret passage-way but he died. Bartholomew said she is the oldest still standing in the family history

"Once I found that date, I was hooked," said Bartholomew, a Utah native who moved to Basking Ridge with her family two years ago. "My husband had to try to keep me out of the library."

Bartholomew now has volumes of genealogy books and charts, plus computerized files of her family history. Every bit of new information is carefully logged into the computer, using a special genealogy software program developed by the Mormon church.

Although her ancestry has been more extensively researched than most, Bartholomew said there's practically no such thing as completing a family tree — unless you can trace your lineage back to Adam. Because the number of ancestors doubles each time a researcher goes back another generation, she said, there are always new mysteries to be solved.

"It's like a puzzle — you have to have a little bit of detective in you," she said.

As gung ho as she is about researching her own family history, Bartholomew is almost as enthusiastic about helping other people find their roots. Twice a month at the Morris County library branch on James Street in Morristown, she helps novice genealogists get a start on their family trees.

"It's really not as hard as it sounds," she emphasized. Thanks to the computer and the Mormon church, which houses the world's largest collection of genealogical information at its Family History Library in Salt Lake City, there is plenty of easily accessible information for almost anyone who can supply a few names, dates and locations.

Much of that information is available in Morristown, Bartholomew said. The local Family History Center has a file drawer full of microfiche International Genealogical Index (IGI) cards supplied by the church.

The IGI cards provide an alphabetized listing of surnames, according to state and county of birth. Included in the listings are the date of birth or christening, names of parents (if available), date of marriage if applicable, and name of spouse.

"A lot of people think that since the information is collected by the Mormons, you have to have Mormons in your family to find anything in the library," Bartholomew said.

But that's not the case, she said. Because the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is relatively new, having been founded in 1830, the ties between Mormons and non-Mormons of European ancestry is very strong.

To the surprise of many people, Bartholomew added, the Mormon church also keeps extensive genealogi-

cal records of cans and other

"Alex Hailey gone to that I saved him two 'Roots,' she s

The library includes the alpha federal census r card catalog of cility. Microfilm mation contain brary can be Morristown.