

Mercer County Historical Society Newsletter

"Preserving Mercer County History"

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Mercer County Historical Society

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Essley-Noble Museum

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Aledo, IL 61231

Phone: 309/582-2280

Hours

April – Oct: Wed, Sat, Sun 1-5:00pm

Nov - March: Saturdays 12:00-4:00pm

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Essley-Noble Museum

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Aledo, IL 61231

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Website: www.mchsil.org

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The Importance of Family Stories

by Stephanie Braucht

In the mid-1990s, Dr. Marshall Duke, a psychologist at Emory University, was asked to help explore myth and ritual in American families. At about the same time, Dr. Duke's wife Sara, a psychologist working with children with learning disabilities, mentioned something she had noticed about her students. She observed that the ones who knew a lot about their families tended to do better when faced with challenges. Dr. Duke was intrigued, and decided to actually test that hypothesis through the Emory University Family Narratives Project, funded by the Sloan Foundation. He and a colleague, Robyn Fivush, developed something they called the "Do You Know" (DYK) scale, which asked children to answer yes or no to 20 questions. Examples of the questions were: Do you know how your parents met? Do you know where some of your grandparents grew up? Do you know some of the things that happened to your mom or dad when they were in school? In 2001 they asked the set of 20 questions to 48 children and taped their family conversations at the dinner table. Then they compared the children's results on the DYK scale with their results on a battery of psychological tests. Duke and Fivush were overwhelmed to learn that the more children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem, and the more successfully they believed their families functioned. The DYK scale turned out to be the best single predictor of a child's emotional health and happiness!

A few words of caution, though, come from Dr. Duke. He warns against interpreting this to mean we can increase the well-being of our children (or grandchildren) by simply teaching them the information about our families that is asked about on the DYK. Just because two events correlate with each other, that doesn't necessarily mean that one of them directly causes the other. Dr. Duke and his team believe that "knowledge of family history reflects certain processes that exist in families whose members know their histories." Such processes include the stories that are told about families during family dinners, family vacations, family holidays, etc. Some of these stories might be: "When we came to this country, we had nothing. Our family worked. We opened a store. Your grandfather went to high school. Your father went to college." Or "Sweetheart, we used to have it all. Then we lost everything." Or "Dear, let me tell you we've had ups and downs in our family. We built a family business. Your grandfather was a pillar of the community. Your mother was on the board of the hospital. But we also had setbacks. You had an uncle who was once arrested. We had a house burn down. Your father lost a job. But no matter what

happened, we always stuck together as a family." Dr. Duke says that children who have the most self-confidence have what he and Dr. Fivush call a strong "intergenerational self," meaning that they know they belong to something bigger than themselves.

Dr. Duke reminds us that the critical factor is not so much the *content* of what is known by the child, but it is the *process* by which these things come to be known. In order to hear family stories, people have to sit down together. Some people have to talk and some have to listen. The stories need to be told over and over again on multiple occasions and over the course of many years. "No quick fix. No simply learning the answers to the questions. Just coming from a family in which the opportunities to learn family history and to create a narrative are regular, multiple, predictable..."

Pearl Heald Snell, avid Mercer County genealogist and researcher (1894-1987), was an example of this. She grew up in the midst of family members who passed their family stories on to her. In one of the photos accompanying this article, she is shown with three preceding generations of her family. They were, (behind her) her mother Bertha Braucht Heald, (on the left) her grandmother Clara Gilmore Braucht, and (on the right) her great grandmother Permelia Wood Gilmore. In the other photo, Pearl is surrounded by her parents and uncles and aunts, all of whom shared stories with her, as well.



Even though knowing the answers to all the questions on the DYK scale is not THE solution to raising a resilient and self-confident child, it is interesting to know what those questions were. They are listed here. They simply ask for an answer of "yes" or "no." No stories are asked to be shared.

1. Do you know how your parents met?
2. Do you know where your mother grew up?
3. Do you know where your father grew up?
4. Do you know where some of your grandparents grew up?
5. Do you know where some of your grandparents met?
6. Do you know where your parents were married?
7. Do you know what went on when you were being born?
8. Do you know the source of your name?
9. Do you know some things about what happened when your brothers or sisters were being born?
10. Do you know which person in your family you look most like?
11. Do you know which person in your family you act most like?
12. Do you know some of the illnesses and injuries that your parents experienced when they were younger?



13. Do you know some of the lessons that your parents learned from good or bad experiences?
14. Do you know some things that happened to your mom or dad when they were in school?
15. Do you know the national background of your family (such as English, German, Russian, etc.)?
16. Do you know some of the jobs that your parents had when they were young?
17. Do you know some awards that your parents received when they were young?
18. Do you know the names of the schools that your mom went to?
19. Do you know the names of the schools that your dad went to?
20. Do you know about a relative whose face froze in a grumpy position because he or she did not smile enough?

Regarding that last question- fifteen percent of Duke and Fivush's sample answered "Yes." Dr. Duke points out that's because some of the stories families tell aren't

always "true." They might be told in order to teach a lesson or to help with physical or emotional pain, and they might be modified as needed. The accuracy of the stories isn't so very critical (but a genealogist would say that accuracy is pretty important), and there are often disagreements among family members about what really happened. Then these disagreements become part of the family narrative. The most important thing is that there IS a narrative, and that it is shared. Often.

Sources:
 Duke, Marshall P. "The Stories That Bind Us: What Are the Twenty Questions?" *Huffington Post*. May 23, 2013.
 Feiler, Bruce. "This Life: The Stories that Bind Us." *New York Times*. March 17, 2013.



Curator's Corner

Spring and summer hours at the museum start in April. As of April 1, we will be open Wednesdays, Saturdays, and Sundays, 1:00 to 5:00 pm. Our winter project is completed, and the bathrooms are now handicap accessible.

We are looking for volunteers for our 5th grade tours May 11, 12, and 13th. Those of you from last year will be notified. If any members would like to share local history with the students of Mercer County during these tours, or if you know someone who would like to, please let us know by contacting Linda Morrow at 1-309-737-0999. We are always looking for others to share the fun.

Veda Meriwether, Curator



Donations Needed

Pies, cobblers, and crisps of rhubarb or other flavors are needed for the Mercer County Historical Society to sell at the upcoming 25th Annual Rhubarb Festival. Items will be needed by June 4. If you would like to donate any of these baked goods, please call Linda Morrow to let her know, 309-737-0999 or 309-584-4357. If you would like to make a monetary donation for pies to be baked by someone else on your behalf, let Linda know about this, also. She will provide the bakers. All proceeds from this activity will go to the Mercer County Historical Society and the Essley-Noble Museum. Thanks for any and all donations!



Spring Open Program

Join us **Monday April 18** for our spring open program, 7:00 p.m. at the Essley-Noble Museum. This will be an interesting program, perhaps on the

unusual side, by "privy digger" David Hast. David and his partners use probes to locate long abandoned privies, or outhouses. Often these holes were used to discard items like bottles, broken china, stoneware, and a range of what was once considered "junk." Antique bottles are a common find. David explains that all bottles made before 1900 were hand made by skilled craftsmen. Those made around the 1900's had a mold seam that ended just below the lip and had a spun look to the top of the bottle. Those made before this time had crude looking lips and a wavy or bumpy texture to the glass. Bottles made before the early 1860's had a pontil mark on their bases. The pontil mark was formed by placing a rod on the bottom of the hot bottle to hold while finishing the top and lip of the bottle. When they removed the rod it left the pontil mark. David says, "Privies are really time capsules just waiting for us to explore. You can tell what the people were like and who lived in your house by going through their outhouse. The rule here is you never know what you will find."



The program is open to the public with no admission charge. Refreshments will be served afterwards and you will have an opportunity to socialize and explore the museum's exhibits.

Dues ... Due

Do not let this be your last newsletter! If you have not already done so, please renew your dues to the Mercer County Historical Society. We count on dues and donations for our projects and for the maintenance of the Essley-Noble Museum. You will find renewal information in the first column of this newsletter.



Check out our updated website!



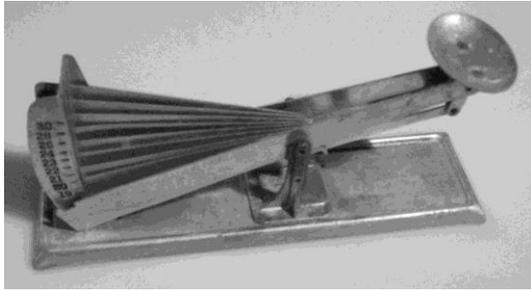
Same URL www.mchsil.org , but a fresh new look. It is still a work in progress and we would appreciate your feed back.

What is It?

The previous item was a clevis used with an oxen yoke.



This item is about 9" long and made out of light-weight metal.



Coming Events

April 2	Start of regular hours Wed/Sat/Sun. 1-5:00 p.m.
April 18	Spring program "Privy diggers" 7:00pm at the museum
May 11,12,13	5th grade tours
June 4	Dessert in the park at Rhubarb Fest, extended museum hours
July 12-16	Mercer County Fair booth Merchants building
Aug 27	Antique Days

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