family is the well of self. It makes childhoods, imprints memories, and offers models for a lifetime. Doing family history is a way to investigate its powers, to take control of personal history. This research provides a distinct type of self-knowledge, which is timely and even indispensable in this age of abstractions, ideological battles, and mass culture. As we set off on this quest for truth, variety, and individuality, family history shows us the specific historical creatures who shaped our parents and their parents, making us see ourselves, too, as actors in an immediate, lived history—and this is worthy of reflection.

*Jacob’s Well* seeks to expand the historical imagination of those who wish to write their family history. Family historians must take care that their ideals don’t distort their histories. The family we live by today, placed at the heart of our values and sentiment, increasingly becomes synonymous with the nuclear family. We forget that families were not always composed of two parents and their children, they did not always exist in the same household, and they were dedicated to reproduction and economic survival rather than fostering individual emotions and happiness. Until roughly a century ago, the household was a work unit, necessary for survival in both countryside and town. And even with this in mind, it is easy to forget, when contending with sentiment and nostalgia, that variations in circumstances, environment, and institutions determined the stability and form of the family.

Only over the courses of centuries, starting with the wealthy, has the family been transformed into a social institution that fostered the individual and the intimate person. We once identified ourselves locally in terms of a specific place on earth and collectively “in the Great Chain of Being,” which vertically linked beings from God, creator, to the smallest mite. But in the last hundred and fifty years or so, we have come to define ourselves not in place but in time, in what historian John Gillis calls “the Great Line of Progress.” As a consequence of this revolution in worldview, the family has its meaning not in a defining origin but in its democratic and progressive advance across time.

So as we discard the regressive search for noble origins and pure lineages, we come to know ourselves literally as the makers of our family and the definers of family tradition. We recognize that history is an active craft. The historian learns and makes as he or she proceeds. Moving back and forth between memory and research, fashioning and refashioning connections and contexts,
ties borne, and validates individual acts of wrong and evil and the price of risk, loyalty, and sacrifice. Likewise, this same history joins us to other histories, as we discover that we are not of pure heart or certain lineage, of single class or race or ethnicity, or of definite origins or fixed causes. Chances weigh heavy, they are in fact preponderant, that we are of mixed breed, an incalculable and perhaps unfathomable result of diverse combinations and unexplained but indisputable mutations. Woven of fad and fancy, commerce and technology, war and revolution, freedom and necessity, our individual histories testify to the singular but crooked paths along which we traveled to the present. We are the fleshy, spirited, contradictory stuff of which democratic poet Whitman sang.

I put on the tattered and worn but many-colored coat of my mongrel family past. Formed on North American shores over more than 250 years, my family was woven out of strands of Sicilian mountaineers, French Acadian swamp dwellers, English Midlanders, West Prussian farmers, and pre-famine Irish Protestants and Catholics. My family’s past was composed on the largest looms of North American history, with its laws, economic transformations, industrialization, migrations, and wars, yet it can only be re-created in the spirit of the long and patient handcraft of quilting, by joining bits and pieces from church, work, and cemetery records; ship manifests, censuses, and property titles; excerpts of newspaper articles, personal letters and notes; and one extensive journal. In the process of reconstructing the family past, I found myself juxtaposing distinct paths of migration, studying numerous localities, examining individual marriages, and pondering the meaning of many stories and singular fates.

Like the family histories of many, if not most, Americans, mine is a history of mixed ancestry, which has proved, contrary to common prejudice, to be rich in information and filled with surprise. Formed of rural and pre-national peoples, of no single literate or national culture, my family surely was more a creation of nature, environment, and local conditions than any pure ethnicity. Although some of its members served, even died, in almost all the nation’s wars, including in the ranks of colonial Massachusetts during the Revolution, the family

An object of nostalgia, a source of inner discord and bitter feelings, the family fills hearts to brims.
never made a soldier’s claims to the national tradition of military glory. More than anything, our story coincides with the history of the American poor. In their first century in this nation, my forebears, perpetual migrants, simply tried to eke out a living on barren lands and in small mill towns. At the turn of the twentieth century, they joined the emerging urban industrial working class and, over time, became wage earners, consumers, and members of national, popular, and mass culture.

Having once found some comfort and, thus, a kind of therapy in the idea that I was a combination, perhaps an alloy, of my stoic father, Joe, and my vivacious mother, Ethel, I extended this embrace of opposites to my Sicilian grandmother, Rosalia, and my American grandmother, Frances. With the most ancient Mediterranean sense of fate, and with a modern sense of discontent and restlessness, Rosalia and Frances joined in me contrasting worlds and ages of ethnic and Yankee ways. The very differences between them led me to understand their contradictory lives and times—and how one life is many lives, one time, multiple times.

Family has many definitions. Recognizing family as either a matter of those who live together in the present or those who, independent of place and age, are related over generations, the law defines family as both a matter of household and a relation of consanguinity. Anthropology and sociology explore family as rooted in tribe, society, ethnicity, and class. The formal academic study of family history looks at family through the prism of environmental, social, economic, and cultural changes. Having harvested a veritable forest of distinctions and comparisons, insights and debates, and theoretical and quantitative findings, it requires skill to use cuttings from the history of a family in the building of a family history.

Yet, beyond macro-historical and social science approaches, it must be remembered that family is the terrain of elemental and abiding human experience. Family awakes primal feelings, core senses, primary metaphors, and first experiences surrounding biological events, daily circumstances, indissoluble attachments, and rites of passage. Family largely determines, at least for the great majority, how we experience, know, idealize, and remember life. Both nest and fortress, the bed of our sleep and the pillow of our dreams, family equally forms our necessary and intimate lives.

As memoirs and biographies attest, moving and compelling stories arise out of the family, which both nurtures and stifles. Family provides a first knowledge of and first steps into the world around us. It is where we are born, nurse, learn to love, grow up, marry, reproduce, work, and die. An object of nostalgia, a source of inner discord and bitter feelings, the family fills hearts to brims. We scour it for true stories and self-discovery. Source of love, gratitude, hate, remorse, and more, it is the subject of many of those first and elemental memories, which we cannot and should not forget. The living and the dead mingle around the family hearth in the classic world; in the special west room holding the heirlooms in old rural Ireland; in the “colorful” corner centered on an icon in a Russian peasant’s hut; or, as on the dresser top of Grandmother Rosalia, before the photograph of a husband, a statue of the Infant of Prague, and a few candles. There we catch a sense of James Joyce’s words: “The now, the here, through which all the future plunges into the past.”

A select set of premises, themes, and tools shaped the form of my work. First, I acknowledge that it is experimental insofar as it seeks to unify what is normally left apart. It joins a personal quest for a type of self-knowledge with a professional historian’s concern for an appropriate narrative and proper context. While stressing the importance of local and regional history for family history, I do not overlook the mounting and universal power of national and international history. Seeking to define a major revolution in everyday American and family life, I contrast the place of necessity in shaping the lives of earlier generations with the improved well-being and greater choice enjoyed by later generations.

On this count, Jacob’s Well traces the ascent of the American rural poor at the end of the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth century. In the context of the developing mill towns of Wisconsin’s Fox River Valley and emergent industrial and commercial society, I see the family, for the first time, structured around regular work, steady wages, and house ownership. This world—that of my great-grandfather, Prussian immigrant Jacob Linsdau, and my Wisconsin forebears—began to afford sufficient means and adequate public space for the development of individual careers, personal choice, and the hope of happiness.

Beyond this, the family here is made a microcosm of the social and cultural mutation of the modern world.
Rosalia Notaro and Joseph Amato on their wedding day, 1907

Stoic father, Joe, and vivacious mother, Ethel, early 1950s. They reappear in the background of this unintentional double exposure with their son, the author as a young man.

The last Linsdaus in Menasha, Wisconsin, 1930s (from left): Louisa, Bernard, and their daughter Gertie with three employees
The author with his parents, early 1950s

Christmas at Grandmother Rosalia’s house, 1939. The author sits in his grandmother’s lap, flanked by aunts.

Family dinner at “American” grandparents’ house, 1950s. Grandmother Frances stands in her apron; seated to her right are the author, his grandfather William, mother, and father.
Though embedded in locality and traditional culture at the start of their sojourns in North America, in the last two centuries my families have never been isolated from the effects of expanding markets, encroaching government policies, the opening of new lands, and the building of canals and railroads. Though moved by the perennial desire to find a place on the land, the family’s migration was energized and driven by the mounting and increasingly paramount modern need for money. The various branches of the family followed the Great Lakes and new canal system to frontiers of the Old Northwest. Starting from the impoverished countryside of mountainous Maine, the freshly settled regions of northern and western New York (known as the “burned-over district” because revivals of the 1820s and 1830s had so thoroughly evangelized the people), and the developing Canadian and American shores of Lake Ontario, as well as rural Ireland and West Prussia, the family joined in settling east-central Wisconsin in the 1850s and 1860s. By the end of the nineteenth century, their stories expressed the national shift from countryside to town, where both as families and newly born democratic individuals, they were transformed by mass, commercial, industrial, and national society into wage-earners, soldiers, citizens, entrepreneurs, entertainers, everyone else of whom an era’s Whitman may have sung.

Finally, I must mention in brief the tools I used to create this work. Utilizing what I call the trinity of family history—genealogy, history, and storytelling—I first turned to genealogy, the indispensable starting point and official scorecard of family history: You can’t tell the players without a program! Profoundly improved in resources, methodologies, and popularity in the last few decades, genealogy proved essential not just to establish names, dates, relations, and origins, but immigration, military service, the sale and purchase of property, and so much more that provides a family with coherence and detail. Aside from a patient and imaginative search for new evidence, it requires a detective’s concern for detail and connections.

As crucial as genealogy, local and micro-regional history provided an all-important understanding of the many small and defining worlds my family inhabited since their arrival in North America. As articulated in my study *Rethinking Home*, local history and regional history offer ways to reconstitute the substance of everyday family life as abstract and general theories never can. At the same time, I had to make use of national, macro-regional, and even international histories, which explain how outside forces and ideas penetrated and shaped farm and village lives at accelerating rates in the nineteenth-century North American countryside. American democracy, as French visitor Alexis de Tocqueville observed in his 1831 trip across the United States, was individualistic, mobile, and dynamic. As I observed in my family, one consequence of this was, in the words of twentieth-century French commentator Paul Valery, a mass society characterized by “interchangeability, interdependence, and uniformity in customs, manners, and even in dreams.”

Yet no matter how keen the use of genealogy and how ample and critical my application of local, regional, state, and national histories, this project required more, if I were to put an individual and human face on the family. I could not treat the family as mere molecules in the flow of a great river, nor portable mannequins for my reaching generalizations. While paying attention to all sorts of vital family matters, I also had to look inward and, in measure, reconstitute the emotions, sensibilities, motives, beliefs, and metaphors that moved and guided family members. In effect, I had to discover and invent them, remember and resurrect them, and beyond the cultivation of their meaning, give them control over their own lives. Anthropologist Greg Dening pertinently wrote, “History . . . is not an artificial curiosity at all. History, by common sense, is the past itself. It is independent of our knowing, as wild as reality, controlled and ordered like life, perhaps, but not by us.”

Moving between exterior and interior worlds and on alert at all times for the interplay between family and place, nature, environment, and society at large, family history scavenges the past for every scrap of evidence. In reconstructing a family, all counts. This includes school, church, company, and military records; photographs; productions of crafts, tools and their organization; gardens, foods, and recipes; and so on. We must strain our memories and those of our relatives and friends to recall the actions, gestures, and interactions, and the words, anecdotes, and stories of the family. My family comes to life today when we think
about the wine they made, the chickens they slaughtered, the gardens they staked out, the songs they sang, and the food they made. The telling fact, indeed, can be how they prayed or cursed, took notes, wrote letters, or even kept score at cards. My grandmother Rosalia revealed her understanding of life when she took the optimistic proverb, “Every dog has his day,” and twisted it to say, “Every day has its dog.” We adopt new methods, to quote cultural historian Carlo Ginzburg, “to bring to light those forms of knowledge or understanding of the world which have been suppressed or lost.”

Family stories, which can be considered the richest wells but often the most ambiguous gems of all evidence, are always to be sought and to be deciphered, sometimes anew by each generation. What does it mean, for instance, that my mother said that her grandfather worked as a veterinarian at the end of his life, when in fact he worked as a hostler? What significance is found in Prussian Catholic great-grandfather Jacob’s battle against the local temperance league? And what do I make of his son’s—my grandfather William’s—tales of instructions of how to take the curse off a white horse, or spit under a chip of wood to make a wish come true? In this tradition, his daughter Ethel—my mother—was a well of stories from which I continue to draw insights into Jacob’s tribe.

Stories, deciphered and retold, are the third and last member of the trinity of family history. They provide the richest clues and deepest enigmas in the family’s past. Enticing, baffling, revealing, and enlightening, stories constitute a family’s heirloom seeds. More than an inherited pocket watch that quit ticking a century ago, a barely worn family rosary, or a grandmother’s recipe for dill pickles, stories reanimate the spirit and set it dancing across time and space. They reveal original conditions, consuming situations, fixed attitudes, as well as mixed feeling and ambiguous motives. A tiny story can sum up a horrific life. It can synthesize the individual and the universal, while making the ironic, paradoxical, contradictory, and tragic stand forth. Stories prove the best bait for hooking the impressionable minds of grandchildren. Whether in the form of Shakespearean drama or simply a short bawdy tale, stories call the present into the past and invite—when records are lost, forgotten, and still—their retelling in the future.

The family historian must master the art of storytelling. What, after all, is truth without anecdote, history without events, explanation without narration—or yet life itself without a story? Stories are not just the wells from which we drink most deeply but, at the same time, the golden threads that hold and bind—Ariadne’s precious string that leads us through the labyrinth that connects the living present with the living past.

And then, once upon time, there is the story of my Italian grandmother Rosalia and that of my American grandmother Frances, who came together in the family of Joe, Ethel, and grandson Joey, from worlds away and worlds apart to give us their lives, tell us their stories, and in some way make us them.

Notes


2. Levine conceives the origin of the modern family not as a distinct result of the “Christian marriage ideology, a ‘homostatic demographic system, or a ‘feudal mode of production,’ but an interconnectedness of these elements within a quite distinctive ecological environment”, David Levine, At the Dawn of Modernity: Biology, Culture, and Material Life in Europe after the Year 1000 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), esp. 268–69.


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