

4H Western Heritage Project Genealogy Activities for Levels 1-3

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Introduction

Just like every one of you, I have a past. We are not defined or confined by it, but released to be our own person through it. Whether we speak of the past in terms of yesterday or a hundred years ago, it can elicit feels of anguish or excitement. For this activity, I hope discovering your past will not just excite, but inspire you to be different than you were before. I hope you will feel connected, on a deeper level, to the American soil we walk, drive, plow, and ride.

All of us have a story to tell, and this is my story of how I discovered my family history. As a young girl growing up in Southeast Texas, my Papa (grandfather) was always telling me stories of his past. Stories about how his friend, "crooked toe", got his nickname, how Booger Red (a dog) chased a local preacher up a tree, about showing his pig at the Houston Fat Stock Show with his Uncle - an Extension agent in Harrison County, and life on a cotton farm. When the stories ran out, the history books and John Wayne movies would begin. The characters on the silver screen were historical fiction, both those in the books and in Papa's stories were real-life fairy tales of gentlemen, ladies, and outlaws. My imagination of what the good 'ol days and old West was like had many years of development thanks to my Papa.

When I was 12 years old, a movie came out called American Outlaws. It was about the infamous outlaw from Missouri, Jesse James. After seeing the movie, I was captivated by this Jesse James guy. I just had to know more about him. He was charming, rugged, and a little nuts. This was a winning combination of characteristics that stuck in my head until I knew every little thing about the James Gang/the James-Younger Gang/the Jesse James Gang- whatever you wanted to call them. As I began searching for Jesse James on the Internet, I read about his family and the family of the men in his gang. The stories of hardships and victories piqued my interest.

With all the excitement wrapped up in the James brothers, I figured there had to be other men out there like them. I asked my Papa what our family history was. He knew a few names, but directed me to my great-grandmother, or Granny, as I called her, for the real story. She happily told me about my Nana's (my grandmother's) Dad, who died when my Mom was about 12, and all my Nana's cousins. However, Granny stopped there. She mentioned a "Momma Stanley" who came from some rough men and changed their last name so people wouldn't know they were related. After that, not another word, and said if I wanted to know more, I'd have to look for myself. All

this secrecy ignited the investigator in me. I had to know. Who were these ruffians that I am related to? Are they secretly outlaws who built my great home state of Texas? Or just no good trouble-makers who made the papers for gun fights?

This is when my genealogy research really started, 12 years ago. All I started with was the surname Parmer, which was changed to Palmer by Momma Stanley's mother. When my Granny died, she left me \$2,000 for a second horse and Momma Stanley's scrapbook. She never mentioned the scrapbook when she was alive. Inside were newspaper clippings of obituaries of her Parmer/Palmer family members, birthday cards with return mailing addresses, pictures, and prayer lists from her church. The few other names I got from the scrapbook, along with whatever my Nana remembered of them from when she was a little girl, set my genealogy research on the fast track.

It took a couple years for me to find all of the records, due to limited Internet resources and having to drive to different counties for records. By the time I turned 16, I had my family history all the way back to the 1500s on my Mom's side. I had found out that one of my ancestors, Martin Palmer born in 1778, in Virginia, moved to Missouri, and was elected state senator to the third General Assembly of Missouri at St. Charles before he moved to Texas with fellow Missouri legislator, James Kerr. While living in Missouri, Martin gained the nickname "Ring-Tailed Panther". Upon moving to Texas, Martin served in the Texas Revolution, was a signer of the Texas Declaration of Independence, served in the Mexican-American War, and was involved in the failed Fredonian Rebellion (for which Palmer's are still not allowed in Nacogdoches, Texas city limits under penalty of law). The real excitement came when I discovered one of his boys, Allen Parmer, not only fought for the South in the Civil War, but rode with Quantrill's Raiders, where he met Jesse and Frank James, and eventually married their sister, Susan James.

Knowing who my ancestors were, where they came from, and how they impacted my home state of Texas and our country by their service, gave me a sense of responsibility to live my life as passionately and meaningful as they did. Now, that does not mean I am out looking for trouble, wanting to be an outlaw. Nor does it mean that I excuse the horrifying things history tells us about the men in Quantrill's Raiders. Not all ancestors are good folks, but if you're lucky, you may find a gem or two who are. Knowing my past re-created my present and definitely my future. I would not be who and where I am today without the inspiring stories of my ancestors and everything they did to make American history.

So by the time you have completed Level 3 in this activity, I hope you are just as excited about your relatives as I am by mine. When you unlock the door of your family's past, you are allowing legends of the West to live on and the life lessons they learned will be

taught to a new generation. You never know what you will learn and who you will meet on the pages of your family history.

Level 1

Ultimately, before you begin your search, you must decide which side of your family you wish to research, your mother (maternal) or your father (paternal). The first step you will take in discovering your family's history is to ask your relatives. You can begin by asking your mother and/or father where their side of the family came from. If your parents do not know, interview older living relatives- your grandparents or great grandparents.

Gather all of the birth, marriage, and death records of your immediate family – your mother, father, maternal/paternal grandmother & grandfather, maternal/paternal great grandparents, maternal/paternal aunts, uncles, and cousins.

As you gather all of this information, record it onto a family tree maker. The two family tree generators I recommend are Ancestry.com (free or you can pay an annual fee to upgrade) or MyHeritage.com. If birth certificates, death certificates, and marriage licenses are available, make a copy of the document or write the date and location information down to ensure you have the correct facts to plug into your tree.

If paper and pen are more your style, you can print out either a family tree or a family group sheet tracker found on the above website. If you choose to use the print outs in this level, you must continue to use them through the duration of this activity for consistency.

At the end of this exercise, you should have a substantial beginning to discovering who your ancestors were. Level 2 will reveal exciting new discoveries about your past!