



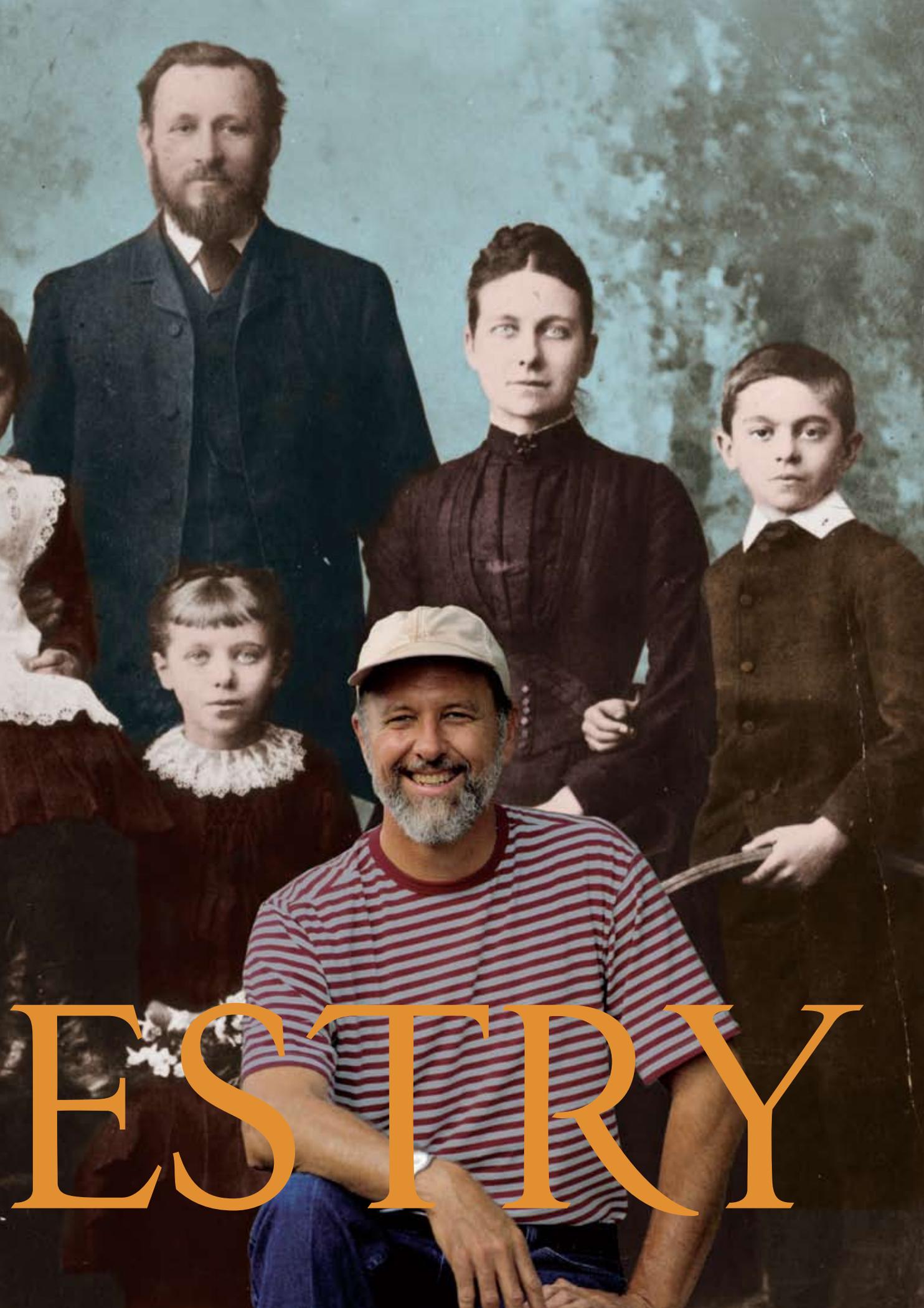
RESEARCHING YOUR ROOTS CAN RECONNECT YOU TO YOUR FAMILY—AND YOURSELF

FINDING LONG-LOST FAMILY. Tracking the origin of traditions. Or simply wanting to feel a sense of belonging and purpose. These are a few of the motives behind the rising interest in ancestry. You need only click on the television for evidence of a growing fascination with those who came before us. Earlier this year, Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. hosted PBS' *Faces of America*, a four-part series that looked at the genealogy of 12 prominent Americans. Actress Lisa Kudrow brought ancestry to the small screen in 2010 as well with *Who Do You Think You Are?*, a show that examined the backgrounds of several celebrities—and has been picked up for a second season.

THE APPEAL OF ANCESTRY

BY JULIE JACOBS





ESTRY

Genealogy's hot. Along with ancestry's presence on TV has come a spike in companies and individuals ready to help people dig up their family roots. The Association of Professional Genealogists (APG) numbers 2,000 members internationally. Online portal Ancestry.com, one of the largest genealogy resources, has more than 1 million subscribers and has helped generate some 14 million family trees over the past three years. The National Archives, which houses 10 billion records, including census, military, and naturalization papers, holds a free annual genealogy fair; more than 2,000 people attended the meeting this spring.

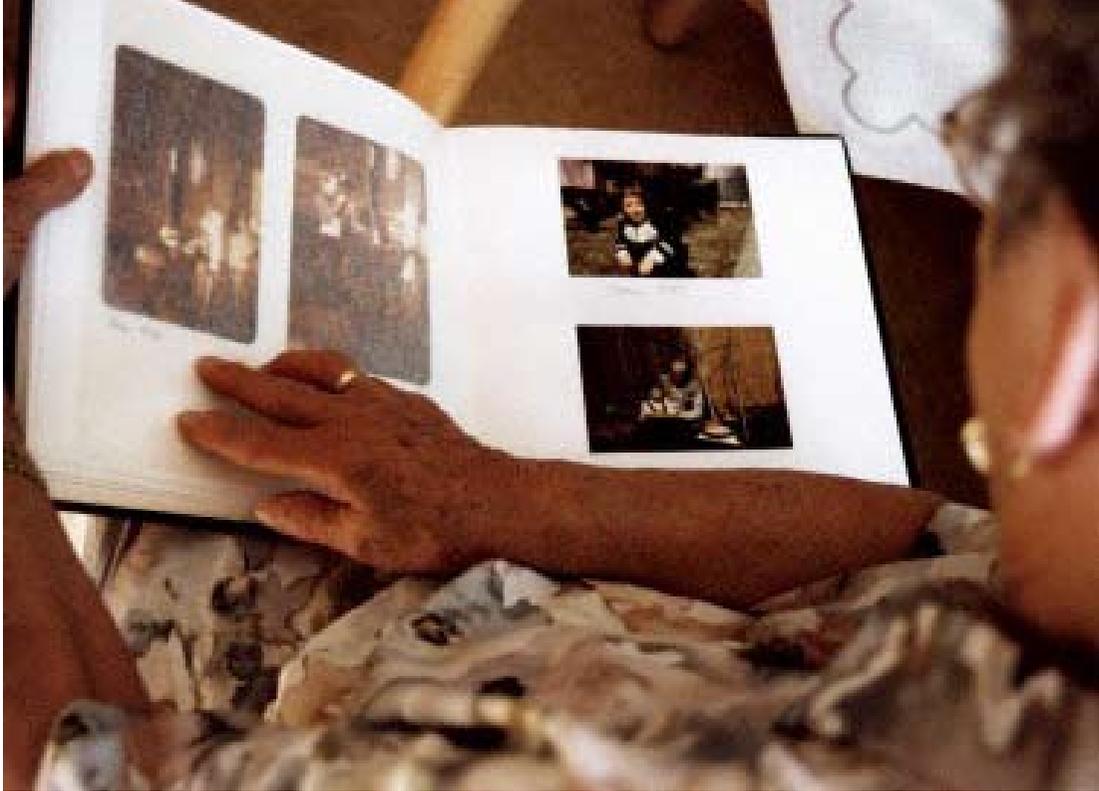
What is behind the ascending appeal of ancestry? "We've become a more mobile society, so many of us are growing up away from grandparents and older relatives and, as a result, we're not learning about our family history," says Lorraine L. Bourne of ProGenealogists. "I think there's now more of a draw to know about our roots, how family traditions got started, and who we're associated with."



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Kathleen W. Hinckley, executive director of APG since 1995, agrees. “Our society is not like it was 100 years ago when even first cousins lived close by, so we lose contact. Studying our ancestry gives us a better understanding of the hardships our family went through and also explains the talents and abilities that we may possess. I have clients who come from generations of carpenters or musicians, for example. It’s amazing to ‘see’ the genetics.



“The interest in genealogy has been gaining steadily,” Hinckley adds. “The first surge was in 1976 with the American bicentennial, and shortly after that we had the miniseries *Roots*. Then the advent of the Internet made it easier to do research at home.”

For some people, learning about their heritage has provided crucial information about their circumstances, as well as much-needed connection and peace of mind. By looking backward, they have been able to move forward in their lives.

Cathryn Darling knows this firsthand. Darling, whose parents divorced early in her childhood, last saw her father when she was 8, before he suddenly stopped visiting her and her siblings. Her mother refused to speak of him, and Darling was left to wonder what happened, often feeling like a misfit as a young girl. “I acted differently than my brothers and sisters. I was always experimenting and making things, and as an adult, I went into research and was easily able to develop new techniques. That was totally unlike what I was raised to do,” she says.

In her 20s, she began searching for her father to unravel the mystery. “I had memories that didn’t match my mother’s story, so I had to find answers.”

She tried several avenues over the years, and then found a newspaper article through Ancestry.com reporting his accidental death at sea in 1970. Her father, a U.S. Marine and fisherman, was only 35. “To find out how young he was when he died is still very hard,” she offers, her voice choking up. “We were prepared to find a man who had remarried and started another family and didn’t want to talk to us.”

Despite the heartbreaking discovery, Darling was relieved to learn she had not been abandoned. She was

A TOOLBOX FOR DIGGING INTO YOUR PAST

- Find out what already is known by interviewing family members and gathering photos, clippings, and documents like birth certificates and marriage licenses.
- Review the Federal Census, available in most public libraries.
- Compile your information into an organized format. Genealogy software, such as Legacy Family Tree and The Master Genealogist, can help.
- Get assistance through online classes or from reputable organizations, including the APG, the National Genealogical Society, and the Board for Certification of Genealogists.
- When hiring a professional, ask for a work sample, find out if he or she is accredited or certified, and ask what is provided with the research. You should receive a written report and documentation with citations, plus a research calendar listing everything examined, whether or not it produced results.
- Avoid professionals who guarantee results. Success is not a given, and such researchers may give you fraudulent information.



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spurred on to track down his side of the family, which proved to be an emotional rollercoaster, with each new lead arriving at a dead end. Persistence prevailed, however, and a little over a year ago she located a cousin, who told her that the family had been looking for her for nearly four decades. Not only did she find closure about her father's disappearance, she also found relatives she had never known.

"It was like the whole world opened up for me. I now have this wonderful family that supports me and *is* like me," she says. "There's definitely been a healing process. My mother treated me as though I was odd, but in reality she didn't like the traits I had that were similar to my father's. This experience has enabled me to move forward and have complete faith in who I am and what I'm supposed to be."

Alton Woodman, too, lost his father as a child and had lingering questions about him. About seven years ago, while looking over old family photos, he was surprised to find the backgrounds didn't correspond with Manhattan's Lower East Side, where he had been told his dad grew up. "I didn't understand the pictures, and was missing who this man was and why he took his particular path," he recalls.

Through Ancestry.com, Woodman immediately found

his father listed in the 1910 Census as a child living with his parents. Then the trail came to an abrupt halt. "I knew he didn't leave New York State, but I couldn't find him," Woodman says.

Eventually he did, following some successful sleuthing. His search led him to the Hebrew Sheltering Guardian Society's Pleasantville Cottage School in Westchester, New York, an orphanage where his dad resided for a time after his father died in 1913 and his widowed mother could no longer care for him. Woodman wrote to the school, which responded by sending him a package containing reports on his father's time there. "The reports were wonderful. They really spoke about what kind of person he was, and the big picture began to fill in for me," says Woodman. "Dad never told me about this, but now I appreciate the journey he went on.

"I really am my father's son," he continues. "We both lost our fathers at a comparatively young age, and he was always trying to further himself, as I do. Now, as I look at all this documentation, I wish I knew him longer, because there was so much for me to learn directly from him." 🌸

Julie Jacobs, a freelance writer in New Jersey, knows all about where her family came from.