ALTERNATIVE FAMILY HISTORY RESEARCH

by Robert S. Davis, Jr., director Family
& Regional History Program Wallace
State College P.O. Box 2000 Hanceville,
AL 35077-2000

Everyone extensively researching the documents of the past, sooner or later, feels that some coincidences must be something more, the "odds" being too great that on a certain day and a certain place, you just happen to stumble into the key that opens everything. Henry Z. Jones, Jr. has now published two books on such experiences in "coincidence and serendipity." Explanations run to ghosts, telepathy, genetic memories, and reincarnation.

Luck can be a real research tool, however. While any event can be mathematically proven to be a coincidence of monumental improbability, the laws of probability, sometimes called the laws of chaos, dictate that some days you can seemingly find anything while other days you are doomed to failure in anything that you attempt. Such basic probability calls for the successful researcher to .use patience and persistence, while carefully preparing by study, organization, and planning, to make the absolute most of the "good" days, when they do inevitably happen. With more and more research tools every year from new books to the internet, no researcher should ever reach a true dead end. Some scholars believe that so-called coincidence may be manifastations of somethings greater than human minds can understand.

That blind luck can be a research tool implies that maybe some other ideas are also not so improbable. In my experience, I have known researchers to try to use séances, guided by modem witches, to try to contact long dead relatives. Spiritualism, officially considered a religion, has a long history and a number of works can "help" researchers using this alternative research technique. **A** good start might be Peter Haining, *A Dictionary of Ghosts* (1993). Scientists, historians, and professional magicians have exposed reincarnation, genetic memories, spiritualism, telepathy, and astrology as fraud over and over again. These beliefs continue, however, now joined by angels, as a way of believing in help from "beyond."

Other methods of research also spark controversy. One popular tool is to try to understand your ancestor's personality by examining the ancestor's handwriting. Among the works in this field is Hubert Desenclos, *How to Interpret Handwriting* (1995). Handwriting experts, including those who make comparisons for criminal trials, argue that handwriting, at best, only suggests how the writer feels, for whatever reasons, and something of background of the writer not about the person the writer maybe. Writing is taught the same way with each generation, making it hard to differentiate between people taught to write the same way at the same time.

Hardly less controversial is the idea that personalities are shaped by the order in which the person is born. First born children, for example, allegedly tend to be more aggressive, less likable, and harder working than the last born child of a family. Several books have been written on this subject including Kevin Leman, *Birth Order Book: Why You are the Wav You Are* (1985)**.** That order of birth should shape personality does not seem so strange when you remember that we take for granted that society frequently tries to shape personality based on roles assigned to people based on sex, religion, and race.

If we accept the premise of this book for today, however, do we have any way of knowing if the same conclusions can be drawn from people of the distant past?

This last question opens other areas of research for consideration. Today we study genealogy not only for learning of our familial past but also for medical studies relevant to us and our descendants. We know so much now on the generational effects of heredity, genetic disease, blood typing, and social disease not known to our ancestors. A first attempt at viewing our common family history in the broadest of these terms is Alex Shoumatoff, *The Mountain of Names: a History of the Human Family* (1985), although we can also learn a great deal from such works as Peter Radetsky, *The Invisible Invaders: The Story of the Emerging Age of Viruses* (1991) and Aubrey Milunsky, *Heredity and Your Family's Health* (1992)**.** Dr. Chris M. Reading has used 2000 family trees to document the effects of food allergies on family health and history in his work *Your Family Tree Connection* (1984)**,** which includes genetic charts of family descent that genealogists would do well to imitate.

When we look back into census and Bible records at families whose male children all died in infancy, where a couple had few children, or even where a couple had large numbers of children, we wonder at these other aspects of genealogy and family history. In such cases does the answer lie in coincidence, human actions, genetics, or even a social disease? Our problem comes that records seldom survive to allow us to use modem medical knowledge creditably beyond our own times."

Perhaps as genetic information becomes more available some answers will emerge**.** Genetic science used in genealogy is a long popular vehicle in Science Fiction that has become scientific reality. Hardly a month goes by without news stories of some important new conclusions being drawn on the history of human race based on genetic research.

Many geneticists, however, argue that environmental factors corrupt DNA so as to make such broad studies useless. We also must remember that in anytime, a significant percentage of biological fathers (and sometimes mothers) are different from the official parent given in records. Other researchers argue that genetics in genealogy is still in its infant stage so that in short order we will have better tools and larger databases to work from. DNA results are always statically problematic, making false positive results a possibility. Some researchers believe that the current database of Native American (Indian) DNA makes any attempt at proving that heritage useless.

These alternative tools of research seem crack pot to some people. However listen to an explanation of the internet or imagine explaining microfilming to someone before 1940. Whatever we use twenty years from now for research almost certainly would seem no more improbable to use today than handwriting analysis, genetic memories, or birth order. Who knows? It is curious to note that the books on all of the subjects described here sit on library shelves, very close to each other.