

SLEUTHS

genealogists piece together puzzling past



Walker County Genealogy Society members Eleanor Wood, left, and Johnnie Jo Dickenson display several additions to the society's collection at the Huntsville Public Library almost every day.

By CHERI BALLEW
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These sleuths don't wear deerstalker caps like Sherlock Holmes, but their powers of deductive reasoning match the master detective's. And like Holmes's obsession with Moriarty, their quest is never quite over.

They are genealogists and their quarry is the past. Starting with a name and a place, they methodically unravel ancestral lines to identify forefathers from centuries ago.

Local genealogists say what begins as a hobby can become an obsession.

"You never find out all that you want to," said Johnnie Jo Dickenson, an officer in the Walker County Genealogical Society said.

"It's like a puzzle," society president-elect Eleanor Wood said.

Members of the genealogical society work in the Huntsville Public Library almost everyday on a number of projects. A corner of the library houses the society's growing collection of books and microfilms of records from around the country.

The society was founded here in 1965 by a dozen charter members. Since then the society has tripled its members, and its genealogical collection has grown from three shelves in the library to hundreds of volumes and microfilms.

In visually numbing columns of lists and tables

in those books and microfilms, genealogists see lives behind the figures. Every chart conveys an event that happened to someone: the joyful christening of a tot, the much-awaited purchase of a home, the embarrassment of excommunication from church or the tragic death of a loved one.

"People who may have lived 100 years ago become alive," Dickenson said. "You feel like you knew them."

Painstaking research can paint a vivid picture of an ancestor who hasn't been thought of for generations. Records revealed not only the eye color and height of an ancestor several generations removed from Wood, but also told the story of his service in the Confederate Army and incarceration in a Yankee prison camp, she said.

Digging through countless records, genealogists often turn up clues to intriguing stories about people who weren't the subject of a particular search — but become the target of another.

"Mary Wood has been thrown out of the bed of her husband ...," began a newspaper notice reproduced in one genealogical magazine Wood found. The notice didn't explain what had caused the marital split but the genealogist is sure to be on the lookout for why.

Wood has traced her family back to 1760, to John Phinazee in Ireland. Dickenson has documented ancestors dating back to the Magna Carta in 1215.

A family tree with such deep roots is impressive,

but with persistence and imagination anyone can reconstruct their family's history to the same degree, the genealogists said.

"The first thing is to talk to everyone alive in your family," Wood said. Get as many names, places and times as possible. Dickenson said births, marriages and deaths must be documented for each name added to the generation chart.

Wills, deeds, Bible records and census records are where ancestors leave behind footprints. But often records are not enough. That's where a little of Holmesian deduction is needed.

Once a genealogist runs into a dead end, he or she must then form a logical hypothesis and try to prove or disprove it, Wood and Dickenson said.

"I'm lost in Arkansas," Dickenson said of her research of a man who was on Arkansas' 1860 census but had disappeared by 1860. "I assume he died in the Civil War, but I can't prove it."

Wood likewise is stuck with the name of an ancestor in Mississippi. What's the next step?

"Just keep digging and digging and digging," they answered together. And the research often leads to a variety of lessons.

"One thing about genealogy, when you're searching (for your ancestors) you get interested in events," Dickenson said.

"You learn history and geography — or recall geography," she said. "It's an excellent hobby or pastime to broaden your knowledge."

Wood began her research to prove a point to her children, she said. Wood's family moved often because her husband was in the military and then worked in the oil patch, she said. As a result, her children were all born in different places.

"They felt isolated, like they had no kin," she said.

Not only has she proven they have plenty of ancestors, but Wood is now updating her generational charts — with the names of her grandchildren.

"I did it to give my children and grandchildren a sense of roots," Woods said.

Dickenson's introduction to genealogy was a request from her cousin to sign an application to the Daughters of the American Revolution. Her cousin had already researched the necessary documentation, but Dickenson wanted to try her hand at, too, she said.

"I started with my husband's family," she said. It wasn't long before she began doing research for others.

Dickenson is one of three instructors who will lead a HEAP class in genealogy. "Research in the Huntsville Public Library" will be offered through the Huntsville Enrichment Activities Program from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. June 10 at the library.

The class is designed so that beginners and experienced genealogists alike will learn something, Dickenson said. Society members Clara Malak, Juanita Lynch and Dickenson will show students how to get started by using materials available in See SLEUTHS, page 2C



Pieter Van Court photos

Genealogists Eleanor Wood, Johnnie Jo Dickenson and Melaney Mims, in background, work in the Huntsville Public Library.

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