Genealogist loves suspense of tracing family

By DONNA REED
LSN Staff Writer

Genealogy: a record or account of one’s ancestry, the study of family ancestry.

What makes a person want to dig and search, go through old dusty books at the courthouse and wallow through old cemeteries looking for dates of births and deaths? Genealogists — that’s who.

Ville Platte resident Margaret Milner Fontenot, a native of Eunice, is one of those people who love the suspense of following leads to find one more name to add to her family tree. The mother of four, Mrs. Fontenot is a 1969 graduate of Eunice High School and is married to Paul Roy Fontenot, principal of the Evangeline Parish Career School in Vidrine.

She began the study of her family pedigree out of curiosity. Her paternal roots, Milner-Bruno, have been traced back to the first generation of Tobeyes in Salem in 1701. She also has found records that date back to 1583.

“When people know that you are looking into this, they offer you whatever they can,” Mrs. Fontenot said.

Old Bibles are a good source of information, she added. Sometimes the names are spelled differently that the way they are spelled now. That sometimes makes her search seem never-ending.

“Back then,” she said, “I guess they would spell names like it sounded and whoever documented the names on birth and death certificates would do the same.”

As she hunts through the old records made available to her from the church or the court house, it is never-ending. “You get hooked on it and you can’t get away,” she said adding, “there’s hours whiz by when you are at the courthouse looking through the records.”

Marriage bonds are also a good source to find information. These bonds, in the amount of $300, were signed by the groom-to-be and the father of the prospective bride, promising that the marriage would take place. Many of these bonds she found were hand written in French, but had informative dates on it. The document states the age of the couple, color, mother and father of the couple and their residences, former husband or wife and relationship of contracting parties, sometimes third or fourth cousin. All signed, with three witnesses and the Clerk of Court, the end of the document was a Process of Verbal Marriage.

Marriage bonds were deceiving, however. The dates of the marriage bond and the marriage date at the courthouse and the marriage date recorded at the church were all different.

The bond was signed before the wedding took place producing one date, the wedding was usually performed by a judge, for there was a lack of priests — second date; and then, when the priest made his round to their part of the parish, he blessed the marriage, therefore producing a third date on the church records.

Other sources that Margaret researched through were birth and death certificates, land records, state records, land mortgages, and legal documents such as succeions after a death.

The adventure of finding roots is overwhelming for her. She has discovered that she and her husband have relatives that were Confederate soldiers, constables, teachers, carpenters, timbermen and naturally, farmers.

When Mrs. Fontenot was asked, “Why do you do this?” she simply answered curiosity.

“I always wanted to learn the family history for myself and the my kids to know where our families was from,” she said. “I would love to know that my kids would pick up where I left off,” she added, “to keep passing it down to generations.”

She was destined to have a love for her genealogy. Her love of antiques and the sentimental values of old furniture, dishes, tins and photos has been in her system since a child. Her mother, Mrs. Audrey C. Milner of Eunice, has been a big influence on her, she said, helping her with her study and research. In an old antique hutch, she stores her collection of tins, including a small can of baby powder and an empty tin of Similac which her mother had saved for her. Among her other treasures — a Brownie box camera, an After Dinner Coffee tin, a Luzianne Coffee tin, a Steen’s syrup, Handdy Bulb kit, Mennen’s talcum powder with powder still in it, an old pair of spectacles belonging to her husband’s great-grandmother and an assortment of bowls, including a wooden bowl used to knead bread dough. A couple of small hand churns are placed on the upper shelf of her hutch.

In her dining room, a large antique armoire holds the treasures from her great-grandmother — two beveled mirrors, the only thing saved from the great flood of the 1920’s in Crowley.

The first organ Sears sold, an old sewing machine, three large crocks and an antique milk can are all part of her nostalgic visit through time.

Mrs. Fontenot confesses that fate has played a big part in her hobby. At the time of her marriage to Roy, she said, “I had no idea that he was a Civil War buff, and he had no idea of my love of antiques and the past.” The two, and their four children, spend many hours visiting antebellum homes, flea markets and antique stores.

Antiques and family history are part of the Fontenot home.

In the den, a piece of great-grandmother Millie Jane Tobey Milner’s red and white quilt is handsewnly framed.

Large and small wooden pegs and square nails in a framed shadow box hangs on the wall. An antique box telephone hangs above the television as Roy’s great-grandmother’s father’s clock graces it.

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A genealogy wall, as Margaret calls it, features old photographs of the family.

Margaret, with her sense of wit and her faith in fate, insists that her love of her genealogy is passed on through her children. “I just love it — every day brings something new!” she commented.

Editor’s note: Mrs. Fontenot wishes to inform persons interested in genealogy that the Latter Day Saints Family History Library, located on Blue Bird Lane in Lafayette is a good place to begin. The Library offers history dating back to the 1500’s. Also a good place to purchase generation pedigree charts and genealogical help is Bookcraft Inc., 1648 West 2300 South, Salt Lake City, Utah 84119.