

Uncovering the Past**Literature**

Who Cares About Great-Uncle Edgar?

by Lila Perl



ABOUT THE READING This excerpt is from the book *The Great Ancestor Hunt: The Fun of Finding Out Who You Are*. Lila Pearl's genealogy guide discusses the importance of learning not just about history, but about family history.



As you read the passage below, think about the importance of all types of history.

We come across an old family photograph. The photo is in black and white, and it's faded and cracked. The person in the picture stands stiffly against a real or painted background of draperies, **foliage**, and elaborate furnishings . . . But who is this person in the picture? Is it your great-grandfather's brother, the first member of the family to become a famous brain surgeon, fondly and respectfully known to all as Great-Uncle Edgar? . . .

Possibly you don't see any connection at all, and you're wondering why we should even care about our ancestors . . . Yet, whether we know our **ancestors** or not, we are each a link in a human chain . . .

Who were the very first people to keep records of their family lines and why? People have been searching for their "roots," constructing their "family trees" ever since earliest times. They have done so out of curiosity, a sense of family pride, and often, too, to establish inheritance claims. For, by tradition, rights of rulership, land holdings, and

VOCABULARY

foliage a cluster of leaves

ancestors people from whom one is descended

oral history historical information preserved by word of mouth

Underline the words that indicate to you that the photograph is very old.

Why have people searched for their "roots"?

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other possessions have been handed down from parent to child.

Even before they kept written records, many peoples relied on **oral history** to recall their ancestors. This was true among the ancient Scandinavians, Irish, Scots, and Welsh. Storytellers and poet-singers known as bards passed on the names and heroic deeds of dozens of earlier generations to younger members of the clan or tribe, to be memorized for safekeeping . . .

What is a *bard*?

Among certain Africans, Indonesians, and Pacific islanders, oral history is still very much alive. In recent times, a chieftain of the Maori, the Polynesian people native to New Zealand, recited a thirty-four-generation history of his people as a claim to the inheritance of a certain piece of territory in that country. His recital was said to have taken three days!

Underline the details that support the statement that oral history is still alive.

The lengthiest oral history ever delivered is reported to have covered *seventy* generations. It was offered by an old man on a small Indonesian island off the coast of Sumatra, in the Indian Ocean . . .

Oral history endures, of course, only as long as it is both remembered and retold.

ANALYZING LITERATURE

- 1. Main Idea** According to the reading, why is keeping records of family lines important?

- 2. Critical Thinking: Analyzing Information** Do you think all of the information in an oral history can be accurate? Explain your answer.

