

Sailing in Their Wake

**Mary Roddy recommends
'living the history' of your ancestors
through sailing, railroads, planes
and more**

Like many genealogists, I started as a name collector — she who dies with the most ancestors wins! I moved on to collecting dates — births, marriage, and death — scouring internet databases, graveyards, libraries and courthouses to plot on a timeline the milestones of my ancestors' lives. Time passed and I began to focus on fewer ancestors, but in a more detailed way. After the initial WHO? and WHEN? I began to look at WHERE? and WHY? I dug deeper for the deeds, court cases, coroner's inquests and newspaper articles describing the sensational and mundane events in my ancestors' lives. Gathering a detail here and a thread there, I wove them into a tapestry picturing my ancestral world.

As I continued my search, I couldn't stop the questions from coming. WHAT? and HOW? What did the waves feel like to my great-great-grandfather on the sailing ship rounding the Horn? How did nightfall smell as my great-great-grandmother drifted off to sleep in a wagon encampment on the vast western prairie? How did the train shake to life as her son threw the throttle on a locomotive?

I began to investigate ways to "do what they did." It's easier than you might think to find opportunities to live the history. Some are once-in-a-lifetime experiences, some a little closer to home. But each of these experiences brought history to life.



All I Ask is For a Tall Ship



The author aboard the HMS Bounty in 2009 while traveling from Delfzijl, Netherlands to Edinburgh, Scotland. (Courtesy of author)

A fleet of tall ships sails around the world, rendezvousing at maritime festivals held along both coasts of North America and the Great Lakes. If you hear of a nearby festival, take the opportunity to go aboard. Some ships are exact replicas, others built as passenger or training vessels or floating movie sets. Sometimes at the tall ship festivals, there is an opportunity to go for a day-sail. When the festival shuts down, ships sail to the next port, and passengers are often welcome.

Check websites for various ships including *The Lady Washington* (www.historicalseaport.org) for details. The highlight of the experience is the chance to crew the ship. Sailors of all levels are welcome, and

landlubbers will soon be feeling like old salts, as they stand watch with the regular crew. My husband and I sailed with *HMS Bounty* (since lost at sea off the North Carolina coast in a hurricane in October 2012) from Delfzijl, Netherlands to Edinburgh, Scotland for a week

in 2009. We joined "A" watch, on duty 4 to 8am and 4 to 8pm. There is nothing like seeing the dawn color the clouds as you view the sunrise through the rigging and 12 hours later, watching it go down again. Our able crewmates taught us how to steer the vessel, keep watch on the bow for traffic and hazards ahead, and patrol the ship, checking all compartments to make sure no seawater was filling the hold and no fire had started in the bo'sun's locker. In the middle of the day, we worked alongside the crew, mending sails, splicing lines, cleaning and repairing block and tackle and caulking the decks. The maintenance of a wooden vessel is never ending, but climbing into my bunk at night, a full day of work behind me, I listened to the timbers creak as *Bounty* made her way across the North Sea, imagining my great-great-grandparents, John and Mary Fields might have heard the same noises as their ship sailed from Boston to San Francisco.

TALL SHIPS AND MARITIME FESTIVALS IN CANADA

Barque Picton Castle, a three-masted tall ship based in Lunenburg, NS
www.picton-castle.com

See also the historic port of Lunenburg
www.explorelunenburg.ca/lunenburg-harbour-port-information-a-tall-ships.html

Toronto Brigantine – Tall ship adventures for youth
www.torontobrigantine.org/about-us

Tall Ships Challenge Great Lakes 2013
www.sailtraining.org/tallships/2013greatlakes

Victoria Tall Ships Society
<http://tallshipsvictoria.ca/>

The Iron Horse

In addition to their connections with the sea, many of my ancestors were employed by various railroads across the United States, in the days of steam locomotives. There are numerous opportunities across the country to ride in a carriage pulled by one of these magnificent machines.

In 2008, I was given the ultimate birthday gift — Engineer For A Day on the Sumpter Valley Railway in eastern Oregon (www.sumpter-valleyrailroad.org).

While my family rattled along in the antique coaches, I sat up front in the engineer's seat, my hand on the throttle of a 1915 steam locomotive. We stopped to take on water and I blew the whistle to signal at the crossings. As I backed the train to couple on a string of cars — gentle, not too fast! — I gained an insight into the hazards in some of those late 19th century rail yards where my great-grandfather and his colleagues worked.



The author at the controls enjoying a stint as "Engineer For A Day" on the Sumpter Valley Railway in eastern Oregon. (Courtesy of author)

CANADIAN RAILROAD EXPERIENCES

While numerous railroads offer rides in vintage coaches over scenic historical routes, a few offer opportunities to ride with or work alongside engineers and firemen in the locomotive.

Alberni Pacific Railway - www.alberniheritage.com/alberni-pacific-railway/cab-ride

Prairie Dog Central Railway - www.pdcrailway.com

South Simcoe Railway - www.steamtrain.ca

Other railroads welcome volunteers. Connect with your railroading ancestors by doing what they did.

Kettle Valley Steam Railway - www.kettlevalleyrail.org/about-us/kvsr-society

York-Durham Heritage Railway - www.ydhr.ca/volunteers.php

BC Forest Discovery Museum - www.bcforestdiscoverycentre.com



A re-enactment of Mormon pioneers in the 1912 Pioneer Day Parade at Liberty Park, Salt Lake City, Utah. Photo by Harry Shipler (Public domain)

Hit the Trail

Many of our pioneer ancestors traveled the western prairie in the middle of the 19th century. Today, adventurers of all ages can easily find a wagon train experience to suit their time and stamina.

Googling "Wagon train vacations" pointed me to a company in Wyoming. Guests spend two to six days, riding in the wagon or on horseback. Meals are served chuck-wagon style, and after a full-day on the trail, the modern-day pioneers can sleep

in the wagon, in a deluxe tent, or under the stars.

Another company runs a 14-day trip in Oregon and Washington. Although not mandatory, guests are encouraged to wear period clothing and bring a white canvas tent to sleep in. Imagine waking up in the morning and putting on a calico dress and poke bonnet,

and seeing your new friends similarly attired! This experience brings you face-to-face with two solid weeks of the trail conditions your forebears faced — sunburns, blisters, and hunger, sated by delicious trail cooking as evening falls. The operators include history enthusiasts who will bring back to life the pioneer spirit

passed down to you from generations back.

For those looking to dip their toes in the stream to test whether they got the pioneer gene, many companies offer day-trips in horse-drawn wagons. One of these might whet your appetite for more, (or have you headed to a cushy B&B).

Up, Up and Away!

History from the more recent past can be experienced as we investigate our 20th-century war heroes. Vintage aircraft, including B-17s, B-24s, P-51s and more modern F-4s and Hueys (Bell UH-1H Helicopters) tour the country, stopping at air shows and aviation museums. They may spend the day taking passengers up for 30-minute tours while bystanders watch fly-bys. At the end of the day, visitors can walk



Boeing B-17E in flight, circa 1942. (U.S. Air Force photo)

though aircraft and see where history was made. My research had led me to the story of a B-17 shot down over Germany in 1944. Walking through one brought the letters left by the copilot and navigator into startling perspective. Google Collings Foundation (www.collingsfoundation.org/cf_schedule-wof.htm), EAA/ Fly the Fortress (www.b17.org/tour), or “vintage war aircraft tours” to find a nearby location.

I can't find a way to capture the entirety of my ancestors' experiences. Any ocean voyage I take will be with the expectation that I will return and my family and friends will still be here when I do. Any wagon train journey is not likely to be interrupted by a herd of wild

buffalo or a typhus outbreak. But the pitching of a tall-ship in a stormy sea, and the smell of cow-dung and grass as crickets chirp in the distance are the same sensations my ancestors experienced a century or more ago, and in experiencing them firsthand, I will know just a little more about the lives of those who came before me. ■

MARY has a certificate in Genealogy and Family History from the University of Washington. She likens genealogy research to the logic of a Sudoku puzzle with a big, juicy payoff at the end.