

WRITING YOUR FAMILY/BUSINESS HISTORY

(Taken from the *Multi-Generational Family Farm*,
published by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.)

A good place to gain an understanding of the many influences that form a business' and family culture and how these interact is to look at the family from a historical, multi-generational perspective. Expressions such as "blood runs thicker than water" and "he's kin, after all" allude to the power and influence of families. Often family values and traditions are not articulated and people remain unaware of how influences have been passed down from generation to generation. The values and traditions we first encounter as children stay with us throughout our lives.

Members of a family who are working in a business can benefit greatly from exploring together the history that they share. One way to do this is to write their family history.

HOW FAMILY PATTERNS SHAPE YOUR FUTURE

Family patterns have a strong influence on who we become and how we behave. Our family culture is often invisible to us. We may be totally unaware of the power family patterns have in controlling us and determining our future. This not to say we must remain captive to our family history. Awareness is an important first step in understanding the influence family has and deciding to change.

Consider this family history:

My great grandfather left England to come to Nova Scotia to farm. One of my great grandfather's two sons.(my grandfather) left the family farm in Nova Scotia to homestead on the Canadian prairies. My father and uncle tried farming together in Southern Alberta, but one left and went to Africa, Looking back, I can see my family has a strong pattern of farming with repeated incidents of family members striking out on their own. It makes sense that I chose not to farm with my brother on the family farm but to seek out an independent career instead.

Writing a family history can help people see the patterns that exist in their family. It can also reconnect people in the family. If members in your family are not used to talking about themselves with one another, writing a family history can be a non-threatening way to begin communicating. The discussions might develop an understanding, for the first time, of why Mom and Dad did things the way they did. A family history will shed light on both the family and the business.

TECHNIQUES FOR GENERATING A FAMILY HISTORY

A wonderful starting point for writing a family/business history is to spend an evening telling family stories. As the events are retold and the feelings that went along with those events are recounted, someone should take notes. Old family photographs can trigger memories and foster curiosity, especially in the younger generation.

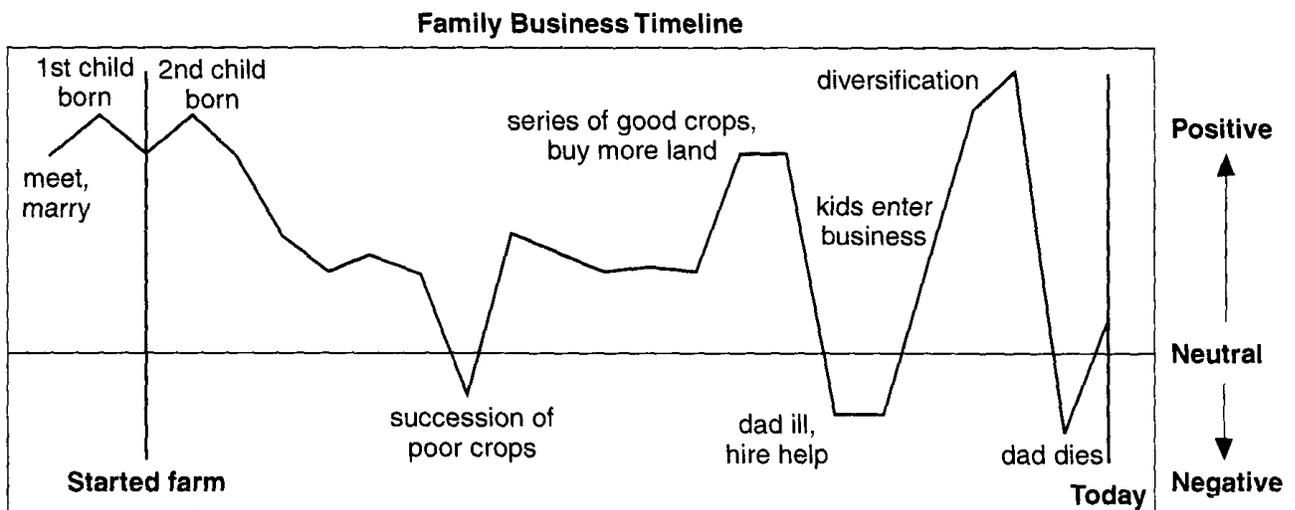
Doing a complete family history, sometimes called a genealogy or family tree, may require considerable research and time to complete. If one family member has a particular interest, he or she may be keen to take on the task. Or the project can be undertaken as a family effort. Try

contacting members of the older generations or talking to long-time friends of the family to gather as much information as possible.

Knowing who beget whom and when is important, but so are other pivotal life experiences such as weddings, divorces, accidents, prolonged illnesses and the like.

Making use of timelines

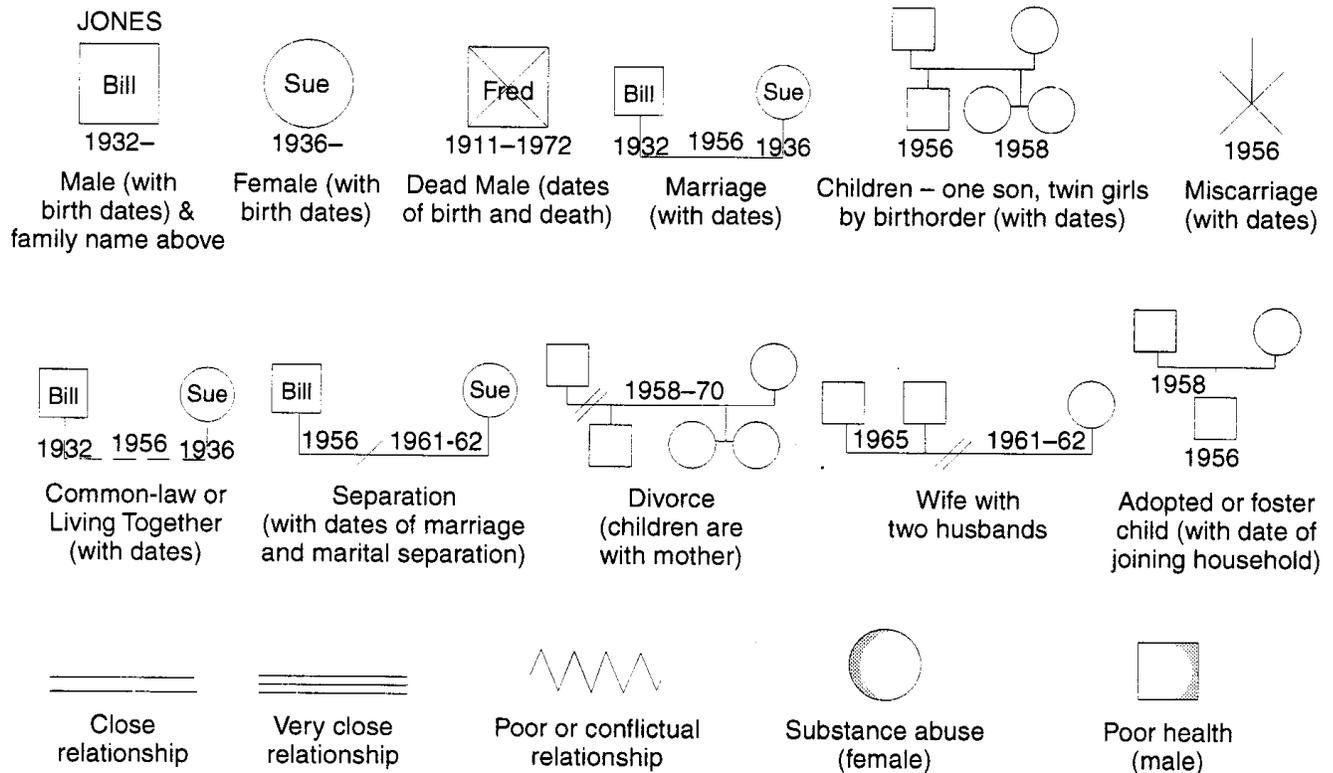
A family history can be depicted in a number of ways. It can be shown as a timeline with events spaced out along a horizontal line. Positive happenings can be illustrated as lines going above the horizontal line (the more positive the event, the higher the peak of the line). Negative or unhappy events can be drawn as lines going below the neutral line. Start your family's timeline with a significant event as in the example which follows.



Making use of genograms

Another method of diagramming your family's history is to construct a genogram. A genogram makes use of symbols and words to depict a family's history and significant events. A genogram shows the names and ages of family members; date of birth, marriage, separation, divorce, death, etc.; residences, illnesses, changes in life plans and other major events in the family's history. It also shows the nature of relationships - whether they were close, distant or tumultuous. Ideally, a genogram will depict a minimum of three generations. You can use the symbols as outlined below or devise your own. Use symbols that are applicable to your family. If, for example, your family has a history of cancer or alcoholism, you may wish to note this.

Key to Symbols used in Genograms

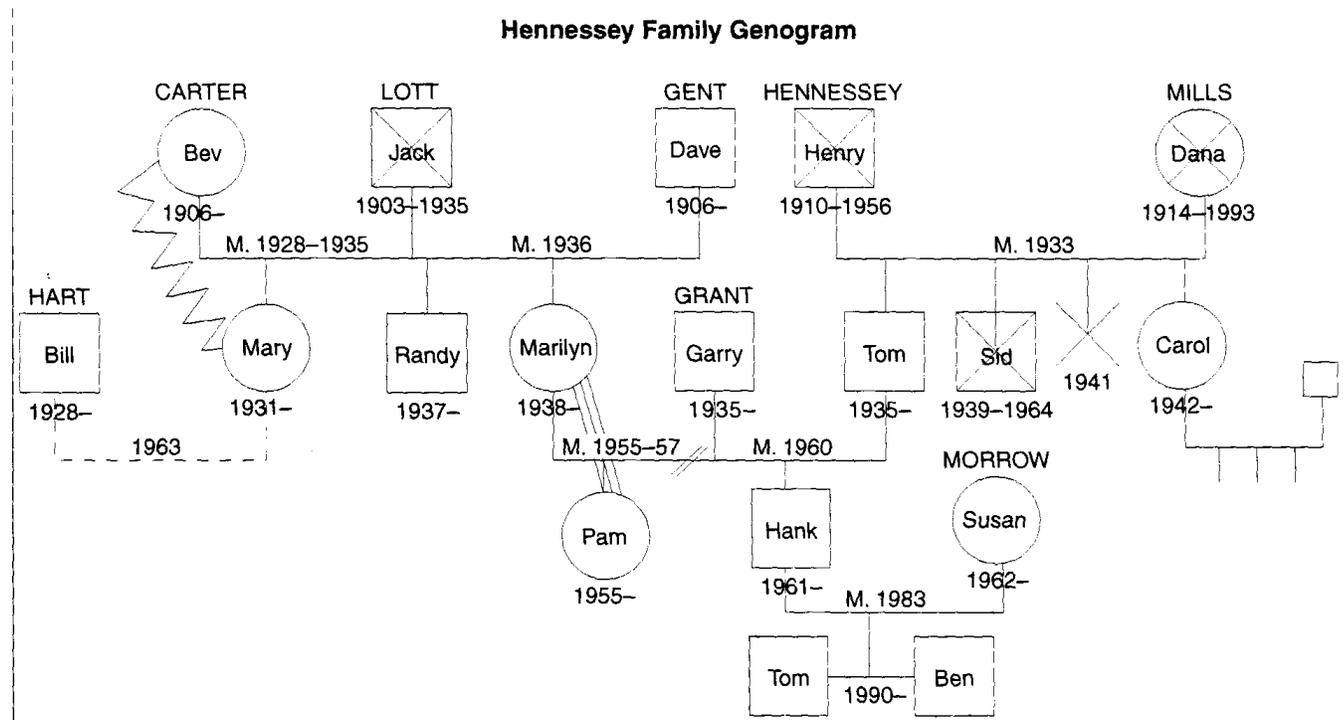


What can a genogram tell you?

1. **It can show patterns of household structure.** Does the family have a history of strong nuclear families? Of divorce and remarriage? Of multi-generational households?
2. **It can show life cycle patterns.** How did family members move through the stages of leaving home, marrying, having children, etc?
3. **It can show patterns repeated across generations.** Is there any indication of family strife between siblings? Alcoholism or other substance abuse? Strong expectations of success? Great emphasis on education or a particular line of work? Of individual members cutting themselves off from the family?
4. **It can show critical life events that have a profound effect on the family.** Have there been prolonged illnesses? Suicide? Untimely deaths? Lottery winnings?
5. **It can show relational patterns.** Has there been a history of close mother-daughter relationships? Of fractured father-son relationships? Of sibling rivalry? Close relationships with non-family members?

One of the great values of a genogram. is that it can bring to light patterns that have repeated themselves through several generations. Your family's genogram. may reveal an inclination to strike out on one's own. Or it may reveal a pattern of family disruptions due to divorce, siblings cutting themselves off from family members, or health problems. Genograms can also reveal positive patterns. Many family histories show a pattern of strong, close nuclear families, siblings working well together, and forebears living long and satisfying retirements.

Let's look at the Hennessey family's genogram.



The genogram tells a lot about the Hennessey family. Marilyn was married very young, has divorced and remarried. She has a daughter from her first marriage and a son from the second. She and her daughter Pam, for whom she had custody, have a very close relationship. In contrast, her half-sister, Mary, has a conflictual relationship with their mother. The genogram tells us the conflict is due to Mary's decision to live out-of-wedlock with Bill Hart. On Tom's side of the family, we can see that his father died when Tom was only 21, at which time he took over the farm. There has been considerable sorrow in the family. One brother died when a young man and another sibling was miscarried. Further examination of the genogram. would reveal many more details about this family

A genogram. can be a valuable tool for reviewing your past and trying to gain understanding of your family as it exists now. Both family strengths and weaknesses can be identified. Genograms may or may not predict what will happen in the future. Even if a strong familial pattern exists, these patterns do not have to play out in the current generation unless family members desire it to happen.