

Digging Into a Family Tragedy

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Few families live through the ages without some sort of family tragedy. It could be based on unanticipated death, misconduct, misfortune, or some other undesirable circumstance. Many times, the family legend, if told at all, is not the full story and can be a faulty representation of what happened. This presentation explores the means of finding more details for a more accurate account of what transpired. Additionally, ideas for writing the story of a family tragedy are shared.

Factors that can sabotage the true story of a family tragedy:

1. The desire not to explore the horror or sadness of the event.
2. The incapacity to comprehend or justify what occurred.
3. The desire to avoid the distasteful role of a family member.
4. The presence of bias/slant: loyalties, emotions, presumptions, etc.
5. The misattribution of motive. A preference for role as victim over role as villain.
6. The lack of facts to develop a full account.

Factors for development of a comprehensive account:

1. Perspective – exploring the tragedy objectively and from multiple angles
2. Historical context – how the times really were: resources, customs, opinions, etc.
3. Investigation questions: who, what, when, where, how
4. Research in credible sources
5. Testing of hypothesis – likely and feasible scenarios

Scenario used as an example for this exploration:

A recently freed young African-American woman, Rachel, and her infant child living on a farm owned by the Estes family were murdered on June 2, 1866 near “the Big Road” in Clay County west of Liberty by a “stranger” riding a lame grey horse. Each victim was shot in the forehead head at close range. There were several witnesses who saw the stranger as he came to the farm asking for directions to the big road and requested to talk to Rachel. Rachel’s sister was sure she knew the stranger and was bold in her testimony accusing him. The Clay County Grand Jury, however, refused to indict the accused.¹

A. The Investigator Mindset: a cousin of the Genealogical Proof Standard²

1. Be aware of “confirmation bias,” the tendency to search for, Interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms or supports one's existing beliefs or values. We have a natural propensity to attribute more importance to information that supports our existing views and to ignore or discount contrary information. When the evidence is ambiguous, we tend to interpret it in a way that supports these existing attitudes. Confirmation bias is more compelling when we are predisposed to find a desired outcome, when issues are emotionally charged, or to substantiate entrenched beliefs. Confirmation bias cannot be eliminated, but it can be managed by the use of critical thinking skills.³

2. Apply “critical thinking” techniques in forming a judgment about accuracy of the story. This involves the application (as far as possible) of unbiased, logical and even skeptical analysis and evaluation of the facts. A critical thinker employs intellectual skills and problem solving in an effort to overcome egocentric bias.⁴

3. Seek credible sources

- a. Close in time and observance – vital statistics documents, eyewitness accounts (perhaps), newspapers (perhaps), official reports, etc.
- b. Scholarly research – preferably peer reviewed or juried by committee
- c. Evaluate person/s sharing information: what is their self-interest and motivation?
- d. Visit the site of a tragedy if relevant: in-person, maps (www.archives.gov), aerial photographs (www.historicalaerials.com), etc.
- e. Derivative sources – when the original sources no longer exists (transcript, abstract/summary, indexes, etc.). Originals are preferred if available.

4. Cite your sources: what and where obtained. (It will save back-tracking).

5. Analyze the evidence with fresh eyes – What does it tell you? What does it change?

6. Does your hypothesis for the story hold water? What other explanations might be viable? What is most likely?

7. Write up your conclusions with evidentiary support.

B. Telling the story of a tragedy through the lens of truth, fairness, and compassion.
Make it an account worthy for posterity

1. Share the verified facts and identify “facts” from family lore not substantiated

2. Character development – we all have victim and villain qualities. Share as full-rounded a description of ancestors as possible.

3. Historic background – explain the context of the times and circumstances

4. Are there take-aways from the tragedy you want to share with others?

C. Writing the Story of a Family Tragedy

1. The Spinner Process: Six factors a writer considers for developing the story. (These factors can be addressed in any order, but all six are needed to complete the writing process).⁵

- a. Purpose – what do you hope to accomplish by writing the story?
- b. Readers – What are the needs and expectations of your readers?
- c. Brainstorm – What content is desirable and/or necessary (let your imagination flow/be open to ideas)
- d. Organize – What format? Chronology, description, discussion, or other
- e. Draft – Get it down on paper, in cycles is OK
- f. Revision – evaluate content, proofread, rewrite as necessary

2. Ten Qualities of a Quality Family Narrative⁶

- a. Base it on thorough and sound research from a variety of sources
- b. Make it creative or dramatic non-fiction, mindful of the truth
- c. Tell the non-fiction story about ancestors' lives
- d. Well organized in thought and presentation
- e. Documents all factual information
- f. Report information accurately, clearly stating when the author is speculating
- g. Include details about family artifacts, letters, diaries, papers and photographs
- h. Include illustrations, photos, maps, and appropriate charts
- i. Use standard accepted numbering systems and formats for genealogy summaries
- j. Include index of names, places, and subjects

Footnotes

1 – Original records of the coroner's inquest, hearing before a Justice of the Peace, and court filings are in possession of the Clay County Archives, Inc., a non-profit in Liberty, Missouri. An account of the crime and discussion of the tragedy appears in the book *Two Shots By A Stranger: An 1866 Double Homicide Re-examined* (New Notion Publications 2020).

2-A succinct description of the Genealogical Proof Standard appears in *Generation By Generation: A Modern Approach to the Basics of Genealogy*, Drew Smith (Genealogical Publishing Company 2023).

3-See a brief explanation of confirmation bias on Wikipedia at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confirmation-bias> (visited 07/12/2023)

4 See a brief explanation of critical thinking on Wikipedia at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical-thinking> (visited 07/12/2023)

5- *How to Write Anything, A Complete Guide*, Dr. Laura Brown (W.W. Norton & Co. 2014)

6- *You Can Write Your Family History*, Sharon DeBartolo Carmack (Genealogical Publishing Co. 2003)

Other Books on Writing Family History

The Art of Memoir, Mary Karr (Harper Collins 2015)

On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction, William Zinsser (Harper Collins 7th ed.2006)

Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide the Writing in the 21st Century, Steven Pinker, (Viking 2014)

You Can't Make this Stuff Up: Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction, Lee Gutkind (2012)

Kathleen Bird is a retired lawyer and a lifelong hobby genealogist who puts her experience as a prosecutor and municipal judge to work in exploring family stories for the most accurate account possible. She is Vice-President and coordinator of the Writers Special Interest Group for Northland Genealogy Society. She enjoys writing non-fiction books as proprietor of New Notion Publications.