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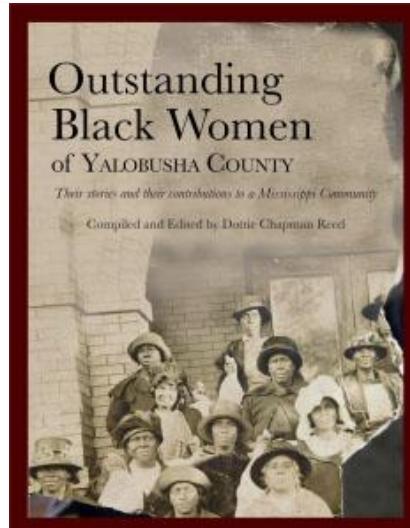
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Researchers offer tips for finding family history

 April 28, 2021  Kathy Mitchell  0 Comments

Commenting on the importance and the complexities of researching family history, Bernita Stanley Waller recalled that Alex Haley's 1976 book Roots: The Saga of an American Family spurred nationwide interest in researching ancestry. Up to that point, she said, many Black families assumed that

tracing their lineage would be impossible because so much information was lost during slavery and its aftermath.

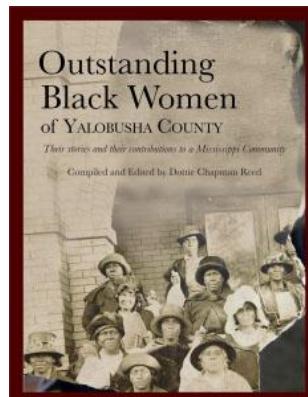
A life member of Association for the Study of African American Life and History, Waller was one of three primary speakers at DeKalb History Center's April 20 Lunch and Learn session, the Importance of Documenting Our History.

"Oral histories are often the key to family histories," Waller said, suggesting that the researcher ask older family members about others in the family, including their parents and grandparents. "Ask who, what, when—it doesn't matter in what order you ask the questions," she said, explaining that the memories can be the basis for more formal research through official documents. Waller added that pulling together a complete family history requires a major commitment in terms of time and effort. "Just keep the fire burning," she urged.

Waller warned that the task can be a wearing and sometimes frustrating one. "There may be things that family members don't want to share," she said. "You may find out find things that are disturbing for you. This is not just true in African-American families. This can be true in any family."

Putting together a family history is rarely a smooth process, Waller said. She noted that there may be misinformation both in family stories and in even in official records. "Sometimes people guess at spellings so the spelling may be different from the one you know. Also, the person may be listed by a middle name when what you have is a first name."

Another presenter, Bettie White Milledge, talked about family reunions as a vehicle for gathering and disseminating family information. She recalled a family wedding reception at which an aunt pondered aloud why the family never held reunions. Her half-joking answer was "because we can't stand being around each other for that long." Nevertheless, Milledge's family started a decades-long tradition of reunions under her direction.



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County was a focal point of the discussion with author Quaye Chapman Reed, one of the three panelists discussing researching family and community history at a recent DeKalb History Center program.

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Milledge compiled what she learned into a self-published book: *Engaging the Family: Reunion Planning Made Simple*. "We learned a lot from mistakes we made," she explained. "I hope this book can help other families avoid making those same mistakes. I always tell my grandchildren, 'When you make mistakes, make new ones; don't repeat the same mistakes that have already been made.'"

Quaye Chapman Reed, advisor to the Mississippi Hill Country Oral History Collective and author of *Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County*, told the story of writing her book based on interviews with families in her hometown. A native of Water Valley, Mississippi, and a graduate of the University of Mississippi, Reed now resides in Stone Mountain.

"Face-to-face interviews are so important. It's best to just let people tell their stories. Don't interrupt with your own comments," she advised, explaining that once her oral history project became official under the auspices of the University of Mississippi, she got help from graduate students.

Reed said sometimes an obituary is the only written information available about a person, but sometimes births, marriages and deaths are recorded in family bibles. A surprising source, she said, is recipes. "Sometimes family recipes have notes about the person who created them."

She advised writing identifications on old photos when they are available. Reed explained that one of the women in the photo on the cover of her book is her mother, "but I don't know who all the others are." She emphasized the importance of telling not just family stories, but stories from the communities one grew up in. "If we don't tell our own stories, they will be lost," Reed said.

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