

# *The daunting role of family archivist*

"Who will put together the Stageman history?" worried my mother in her final days.

"I can do that," I replied. "You're almost finished, aren't you?"

"Well, yes . . ." she answered.

And, so, the torch was passed, and I became the fifth-generation caretaker of the green wooden writing box brought with the Christopher and Mary (Dring) Stageman family from England in 1840. The responsibility transferred from Christopher to James to Mark to Ruth had now been given to me.

Opening the roughhewn box for the first time after my mother's passing, I felt as if I were lifting the lid of a treasure chest. An air of anticipation surrounded me as summer sunlight exposed the contents. First I carefully removed the English ledger filled with entries written in Christopher Stageman's own hand. Then I gently lifted out the stack of family letters from the 19th century. I leafed past the familiar gold rush letters and then gasped with excitement at discovering Sarah's Salt Lake City letters, written in a fine hand, the ink now faded. I had forgotten these letters existed. As I shuffled through the thin, blue stationery, out fell Christopher's pocket-sized list of personal possessions, the value of each assigned in English pounds. Was this a list of items brought with the family from England, where Christopher had been employed by Sir Wastel Brisco on his Crofton Hall estate? Or were they items brought from Fairhill, Maryland, to Kanesville, Iowa, as the family followed the Mormon movement?

Recognition sank in. The history of the Stageman family was nowhere near finished. There were too many pieces of the puzzle yet to be solved. My mother knew that, I suddenly realized. Now, almost nine years later, I can more fully appreciate being entrusted with the daunting role of family archivist.

Pursuing the pieces to the family puzzle through clues provided by this treasured collection of letters has led me on a personal journey of discovery and opened up a world of people, places, and opportunities I could never have imagined. Transcribing the letters from the handwritten copies into a word-for-word typed text filled a summer and pulled me into the lives of the authors. I became entranced by the universality of emotions expressed by the letter writers.

By the following summer, I knew that I wanted a deeper sense of the landscapes of their lives, and, so, the family history jaunts began. Traveling to the sites of origin of the letters has led me on delightful trips to the rolling pastures of Fair Hill, Maryland; to the loess hills of western Iowa, where the houses of James and John Stageman still stand; to the wagon ruts visible at "parting of the ways" near South Pass, Wyoming; to the "rose of the desert," Salt Lake City; across the Great Basin on the California Trail to rugged Carson City and Virginia City; and finally, on into California gold rush country in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. "Family vacations" have taken on new meaning.

Looking beyond the names and the dates on my family tree and actually retracing the steps of my ancestors have given me a greater understanding of my heritage and led me to an appreciation of their struggles and joys. I hope that you, too, will find the puzzling out of family history to be a wondrous journey, with bounteous rewards.

— Kathryn Webb Wikert