



The Widow Won, The Barkeep Lost: Using Historical Context and the “FAN Club” to Enrich Your Family Stories

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“Rarely is a written account of past events complete or definitive. Rather, discovering history is an on-going process... The zeitgeist in which a historian lives also influences how he or she interprets source material and describes past events. History is re-written in every generation.”

– John Philip Colletta, *Only A Few Bones: A True Account of the Rolling Fork Tragedy and Its Aftermath* (pg. 340)

The Plaintiffs: The widow Sarah Wilcox Bell, and her five young children

The Defendants: Jacob and Albertina Helmuth, owners of the City Hotel in Yorkville

Where: Yorkville, Kendall County, Illinois- the Fox River dam

When: 16 May 1890

Historical Context: Why is it such an important tool for your writing?

- **Helps make sense of the time and place in which your ancestors lived**
 - What was going on in the world at that time- in their city, in their neighborhood?
 - How did your ancestor communicate with the outside world, friends and family?
 - What was the day-to-day life of your ancestor like? Technology, food options, even clothing and hairstyles? Small details can add color to a story.
 - Climate and topography of the place where they lived- farmland, desert, mountains? How did these factors affect their way of life?
- **Helps explain why your ancestors did what they did**
 - What were the laws of the time, and how were they interpreted/understood then vs. now?
 - Social/Cultural context- social norms for different ethnic or religious groups? Factors affecting immigration (chain migration, ethnic neighborhoods, other push/pull factors)?
 - How did your ancestors celebrate special occasions or honor religious customs? Were they part of a social or ethnic society or club?
- **Helps strengthen your research conclusions as evidence support**
 - Genealogists need to gather evidence to support their research conclusions
 - Family history writers can use historical/social/cultural context as evidence to support their ancestors’ actions within their stories

As John Colletta states in the quote above, our present-day mindset can affect how we interpret past events. We should not judge or interpret our ancestor's actions based on our own modern-day point of view- we should use historical context to fully and correctly tell their stories.

Historical Context examples from our case study:

- Why did German immigrant Jake Helmuth decide to settle in Kendall County, Illinois?
- Why did Jake and Albertina's first-born son have three first names?
- What was the Illinois Dram Shop Law, and how was it interpreted in 1890?
- What was the Temperance Movement, and how much did it (and the movement's supporters) influence events during the Bell vs. Helmuth trials?
- How did the local newspaper shape public opinion during the trials?

The FAN Club: Friends, Associates, Neighbors (a term coined by Elizabeth Shown Mills)

Investigating the people connected to your ancestor's story can provide a big payoff!

- Searching for the FAN club in genealogy records can reveal further information about your ancestor's story that you may have not found otherwise, and can provide clues to additional records.
- Don't fall victim to "tunnel vision" by focusing exclusively on one ancestor- what about brothers, sisters, spouses, children, aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbors, fellow church-goers, co-workers, witnesses on deeds and licenses, godparents listed in baptismal records...the list goes on!
- A good tip: build out separate family trees (or create charts or timelines) for FAN club members, to save and gather data. Ensures you won't miss any important clues

FAN Club examples from our case study

- Benjamin F. Herrington, the "white knight" attorney for the Bell family.
 - Why was he so well-respected in the community?
 - Did the local admiration for Herrington impact the trial, and perhaps increase the plaintiffs' chances at winning?
- M.E. Plain, the "lone juror" in the second trial
 - Why was he chosen as a juror if he was "prejudiced" against the Dram Shop Law?
 - Was he or his family connected to the Helmuths in some way?
 - How was he "forced into line" by the other jurors- what happened on 12 December 1891?

Concluding the “villain’s” story: What happened to the Helmuths after the Bell family’s “happily ever after?”

- Using historical context and FAN club connections to locate missing pieces
- Putting it all together to break open a brick wall and merge two identities

**Don’t underestimate the power of YOUR family stories to move and inspire readers-
SHARE and PUBLISH your stories!**

Further Reading & Reference

- **James M. Beidler**, *The Family Tree German Genealogy Guide: How To Trace Your Germanic Ancestry In Europe* (Family Tree Books, 2014).
- **Amanda Blosser** of the California State Parks, Office of Historic Preservation created an excellent slideshow about historic context. It is related to historic buildings, but has a lot of information relevant to family history too:
<https://ohp.parks.ca.gov/pages/1054/files/HistoricContext.pdf>
- **John Philip Colletta**, *Only A Few Bones: A True Account of the Rolling Fork Tragedy and its Aftermath* (Washington, DC: Direct Descent, 2015).
 - The 2015 version is the “New Edition” and includes a large addendum full of great tips and resources for family history writers.
- **Joseph R. Gusfield**, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963).
- **Kay Haviland Freilich & William B. Freilich**, *Genealogy and the Law: A Guide to Legal Sources for the Family Historian* (Arlington, VA: National Genealogical Society, 2014).
- **Judy Jacobson**, *History for Genealogists: Using Chronological Time Lines to Find and Understand Your Ancestors* (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2016).
- **Candace Marx**, “The Widow Wins: The Bell Family of Kendall County, Illinois,” *Illinois State Genealogical Society Quarterly* 50 no. 1, Spring 2018, 25-29.
- **Candace Marx**, “Telling the ‘Villain’s’ Tale: The Helmuth Family of Illinois and South Dakota,” *Illinois State Genealogical Society Quarterly* 54 no. 3, Fall 2022, 163-175.
- **Gena Philibert-Ortega** presented an excellent presentation for the APG Writers SIG in October 2023- “A Client’s Family Brought to Life: Incorporating Social History” (recording available for SIG members).
- **Elizabeth Shown Mills**, “QuickLesson 11: Identity Problems & the FAN Principle,” *Evidence Explained* (<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-11-identity-problems-fan-principle>).

Helpful and Interesting Research Links

- What was the weather like the day of the boating accident, 16 May 1890? **National Weather Service Almanac**- <https://www.weather.gov/>
 - Click the state/area of interest on the map, and select “Climate and Past Weather” to get to the NOWData search tool.
- How much was Sarah Bell’s \$5000 reward worth today? **Historical currency convertor**: <https://www.historicalstatistics.org/Currencyconverter.html>
 - HistoricalStatistics.org also has other helpful calculators for genealogists, such as a calendar convertor, weekday calculator, and age/birthday calculator.
- **WorldCat**- <https://search.worldcat.org/> - search for books on particular topics, see what’s available locally or through inter-library loan.
- **HathiTrust**- <https://www.hathitrust.org/> - Access is limited without an account, check out the options to login or join through a member university or library.
- **University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) Law Review** -free and open law review articles- <https://repository.law.uic.edu/lawreview/>
- **Excellent resources for Illinois research**
 - Fox Valley area (Kane, Kendall and a bit of DuPage and Will counties): **History on the fox**, historical blog by Roger Matile, archivist at the Little White School Museum in Oswego, IL: <https://historyonthefox.wordpress.com/>
 - Kendall County: **KendallKin**, a massive collection of Kendall County records compiled by the late Elmer Dickson: <https://kendallkin.org/>
 - Statewide: **Illinois State Archives** online databases (a must-see for any IL research)- <https://www.ilsos.gov/departments/archives/databases/home.html>
 - **Women’s Christian Temperance Union of Illinois**: Records from 1874-1965 are archived at the University of Illinois, view a finding aid here: <https://archon.library.illinois.edu/ihlc/?p=collections/controlcard&id=4032>
 - While you’re at the U of I website, check out the **Illinois Newspaper Project**, which includes over 8,000 Illinois newspaper titles dating back to 1814: <https://www.library.illinois.edu/illinoisnewspaperproject/#>
 - **Illinois State Genealogical Society** website (includes several online databases accessible to non-members): <https://ilgensoc.org/>
- **The South Dakota State Historical Society Digital Archives**: <https://sddigitalarchives.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/>
- **Black’s Law Dictionary online**- Second Edition (1910), by Henry Campbell Black, M.A.- <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=R2c8AAAAIAAJ&pg=GBS.PP12&hl=en>
- **Ancestry’s “U.S, City Directories, 1822-1995” collection**- <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2469/>