

HISTORIC ROOTS

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HISTORY HAPPENS

“History Happens!” says the bumper sticker on a friend’s car. How can that be? We know that history *happened* in the past. We can tell that from books and family photos, old buildings, monuments to those who died in our many wars. But how does history happen now?

In one sense history happens every day. What happens to us today is history tomorrow. What happens today affects what happens tomorrow. Many things influence our lives: our personality, our age, the weather, where we live, who we know, etc. History is another influence: what happened yesterday, last year, before we were born.

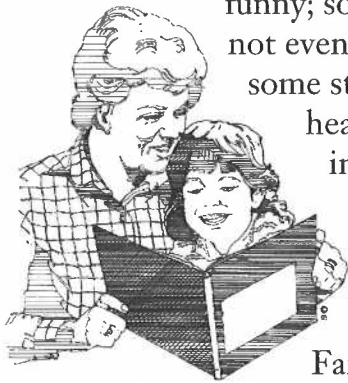
What if America had lost the Revolutionary War and we were still English? What if Germany and Japan had won World War II? What if our parents had never met, or if they had met a year earlier or six months later? The past lives on in an important way in the present, even though we may not always be aware of it.

Memories make us aware of some of the ways history affects our lives. Our grandparents’ memories become part of our history. Memories of what has happened to us influence the way we act and the choices we make. We pass both the memories and the choices on



to our children and grandchildren.

One way we do that is through stories. In our families we hear and tell stories about odd or interesting relatives and events. Some are funny; some are sad. Some may not even be true. There may be some stories you never want to hear again. But even thinking, "Oh, not that one again!" is a way of feeling its connection to your family's history and your own.

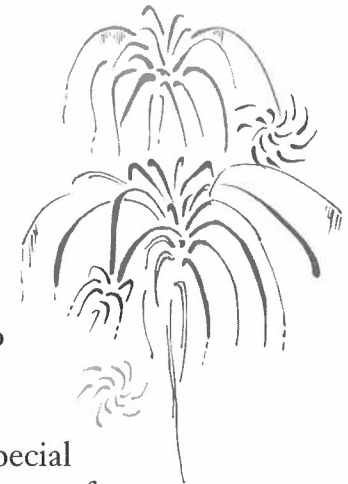


Family stories set us apart from other families and give us a clearer sense of who we are as individuals. Stories we hear about Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys, about George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and other Americans help give us a clearer sense of ourselves as Vermonters and US citizens. Stories help us know who we are and where we fit in the world we inhabit. By telling them we keep history alive and part of our lives.

Ghost stories are other examples of history that keeps happening. The events or the people in them are so powerful that we cannot let them die. They remain part of family or community and their stories connect us to what happened. We connect them to the future as well when we tell their stories to our children.

Most of all, history happens—to all of us—through traditions. Traditions are ways of doing things that are passed down from one generation to another. Eating turkey on Thanksgiving is a tradition for many Americans. So are fireworks displays on the Fourth of July and carving jack o' lanterns at Halloween.

Traditions remind us of our connection to older times and people. The Pilgrims ate turkey with their Native American neighbors to celebrate coming through a time of illness and hunger. We think of them at our Thanksgiving dinners. The bright explosions of fireworks celebrate our independence. They also remind us of the war that brought our freedom. Jack o' lanterns are meant to scare off the ghosts that are said to come out of their graves the night before All Saints Day, November 1. Sharing traditions gives many people a sense of belonging. Sharing traditions makes many Americans feel closer to each other.



Families also have traditions. They have special ways of decorating the house for holidays or birthdays, special games, special foods, even special habits. Sometimes we know

how these traditions started; sometimes we don't. Here's a story about one.

A woman was cooking a ham for her new husband. She cut a slice from each end before putting it into the pan.

"Why are you doing that?" the husband asked.

"I'm doing it because my mother always does it," the wife answered. It was not a good enough answer for him. So they went to ask her mother.

"Gee, I never thought about it," she said. "I do it because my mother has always done it."

Then they asked the grandmother, and her answer was the same. She did it because her mother had always done it.

Her mother was still alive, so they all went to ask her.

"Oh," she said, laughing, "I did it because my roasting pan was too small to hold the whole ham."

Her way of solving a problem had become a tradition, something special to her family. They probably still cook ham that way; it just wouldn't feel right not to.

Traditions are history happening over and over. They add richness to our lives. They help us define ourselves as members of a group—family, religion, race, or nation. They connect us to our past, to our future, and to each other. Without tradition, says Tevye, in the movie and

the play, "Our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on a roof."

ANN E. COOPER, *Editor*

Rooting Around

The articles in this issue help show you how history happens. How does it happen in your life? Try to find out about some of your interesting relatives, from other family members and from people who know or knew them. What are some of the important stories about your family? You might want to write the best ones down, to have for your children. You might want to send them to us.

Does your family have special traditions for holidays or birthdays or other times? Does your religious group or town or club? Can you think of some American traditions? You might want to pick out one or two and see if you can find out how they started. Your librarian may be able to help you.

