

# COMPUTER

## ORNER

### **Surprise, Surprise! I Love to blog!**

*Guest Column by Lark M. Robart*



*In this article I address the two questions I had to answer for myself before I began blogging: (1) "Should I share, or am I ready to share, my family history?" And if so, (2) "Is blogging a good option for me?" This article also touches briefly on different blogging platforms, and the pros and cons of blogging. And finally, in the event you're intrigued but not quite ready to make the leap, you will find a few alternatives to blogging.*

#### A simple glass of wine

One lovely evening on my back porch, while enjoying a glass of wine with a dear friend, I found myself sharing the story of how I came to discover that my paternal great-grandmother had amassed a huge collection of journals, letters, and photos (both personal and historic). I told my friend of my idea to share the collection but explained I was bit stuck on how to move forward.

"Maybe you should try a blog," my friend said.

"What's a blog?" I asked.

She basically described it as an online website, usually written by one individual. And the blog can cover any topic - including family history! The advantage of a blog, she explained, is that the author can share her ideas or stories in bite-size pieces. Thus, every time you write a blog post, you achieve success. And *that's* the idea that really appealed to me.

Since I had not yet completely reviewed and scanned my great-grandmother's collection, I also liked the idea of not having to wait to get started. Said another way, I could begin sharing at the same time I was discovering!

#### So why the hesitation?

Nonetheless, I found myself hesitating to take the leap into the blogging world. These were my major concerns:

1. Am I entitled to share my great-grandmother's collection with the world?
2. What are my privacy concerns about putting myself out there as a blogger?
3. I can't write!!

With regard to sharing my great-grandmother's photos and letters, and especially the personal thoughts expressed in her journals, I spoke with several cousins and they all encouraged me to go forward. In fact several of them are my biggest blog fans. And of course I never blog about any living family members without first obtaining their permission.

As to my own privacy concerns, I felt more and more comfortable after visiting numerous family history blogs. And to date (*knock on wood!*), there have been no negative repercussions along those lines.

Finally, I have to qualify the "I can't write!" statement by disclosing that I am a retired paralegal. And as such, have quite a bit of experience writing technical documents. But writing a family history blog seemed entirely different to me, and it is.

But in the case of this blog, it occurred to me that each post would pretty much write itself. My plan was to share my great-grandmother's journal entries and relevant photos, with some context added by me. And the more I thought about it, this seemed doable - and a great way to start.

After spending some time working through these issues, I finally decided to give blogging a try. And so I set off to learn more about family history blogging.

Let the research begin!

The first question I wanted to address was, "How do I want my blog to look?"

I would recommend visiting the GeneaBloggersTribe blog located at <http://geneabloggertribe.com/>. Click on the "Our Members" tab at the top of the page and a list of blogs will pop up. You can start by searching for a specific category or blog, or just click on a few links that might interest you.

*Tip:* The time you spend here will certainly pay off so plan to spend several hours on this step.

The biggest thing I noticed is that some blogs are confusing to look at and navigate, while others are clean and easy to read.

*Tip:* If you see a blog format that you particularly like, you can sometimes determine which platform the blogger is using by scrolling to the bottom of the home page.

And speaking of blogging platforms . . .

Lots and lots of blogging platforms

Next, I needed to decide which platform to use. Options include Blogger, WordPress, Wix, GoDaddy, and Weebly, to name some of the most popular.

Google is your friend here. I searched and located numerous articles on the ins and outs of the different platforms. During my review of different blogs, I noticed that many family history

bloggers use Blogger, a free blog-publishing service owned by Google. I tried it out and found the options to be somewhat limiting, and even confusing in some instances.

I decided to check out WordPress because most of the blogs that I liked were WordPress blogs. But I quickly ran into the confusing part: What’s the difference between **WordPress.org** and **WordPress.com**?

After searching the internet and reading numerous articles on the differences between the two, I finally made my decision based on the considerations in the chart shown below:

Feature	WordPress.org	WordPress.com
Cost	Free blogging software but you need a third party hosting service*, which is <i>not</i> free. For example, a typical web hosting service such as Hostgator costs \$10/month, for unlimited websites.	Blogging software <i>and</i> hosting service all wrapped into one. There are several plans, including the “free for life” version, or a “personal” version for \$4 a month (billed annually).
Themes	Lots of professionally designed themes, with ability to customize.	Limited themes with limited customization. You can upgrade for access to more themes, but the customization restrictions still exist.
Plugins	27,000+ plugins** that give your blog added functionality such as backup, speed customization, and creating customized forms, just to name a few.	Banned from customized plugins, unless you upgrade.
Third-party ads	Choose whether or not you want to run ads.	Reserves the right to display ads. Must purchase the “no-ads” option if you want your blog to be ad-free.
Blog address	Your blog address will be <i>www.yourwebsite.com</i> .	Your blog address will be <i>www.yourwebsite.WordPress.com</i> .

\* *Wikipedia defines “web hosting service” as a “service that allows individuals and organizations to make their website accessible via the World Wide Web. Web hosts are companies that provide space on a server owned or leased for use by clients, as well as providing Internet connectivity, typically in a data center.”*

\*\* *A “plugin” is a piece of software that allows you to add features to your website without knowing how to code.*

After considering all these options, I decided to go with **WordPress.org**.

*Tip:* It is entirely possible to begin a blog at with the free version of **WordPress.com** and later move it to **WordPress.org**.

## Setting up a blog

Next, I set off to learn how to create a **WordPress.org** blog. A somewhat time-consuming process - but again, well worth the time spent.

I found that YouTube was a very effective resource. Just search “how to create a WordPress blog” and you’ll get lots of hits.

*Tip:* Make sure to look for the most recent videos that relate to the web hosting service you select.

I watched several YouTube videos before landing on one that made the most sense to me. **WARNING!** Some are quite long. The one I chose was a little over an hour. I watched it twice all the way through and then kept it open in a separate window as I created my new blog.

Before I knew it, I was up and running!

Of course there have been other “how-to” challenges along the way, but I have found there is a great deal of support for bloggers out there, and even specific support for family history bloggers.

## Support for family history bloggers

1. The website GeneaBloggersTribe, mentioned earlier in this article, has a “Resources” page that is particularly helpful. It contains a section on blogging platforms and a “how to create a blog” section. You will also find a “Genealogy Prompts” page that many bloggers use to create daily blog posts.
2. The GeneaBloggersTribe also has a Facebook group that’s a great place to go for specific help on many blogging topics. You can start by searching to see if your question or topic has already been discussed. And if not, just ask away! This group also helps to promote family history blogs.
3. And again, YouTube and Google are great resources. I have used both on several occasions to troubleshoot WordPress or blog issues in general. And sometimes I just search YouTube for the best free plugins for any given year - a great way to make sure your blog is up to date.

## Other social media options

If blogging still seems too overwhelming, but you still feel yourself a bit intrigued by the idea of telling your family stories, or sharing your hard-earned research tips, you might give one of these venues a try:

1. **Facebook family group.** This is a great way to share pictures and stories with your family. And if you prefer, you can make the group private. I have two Facebook family groups - one for my maternal side and one for my paternal side.
2. **Instagram.** Instagram is a free social networking app used for sharing photos and videos from a smartphone or device. And a growing number of family historians and genealogists use it to share research tips, family stories, and photos. You can follow others on Instagram and they can follow you. I have an account that I use almost exclusively to share my family history and my general rule is to only follow other family historians. I've met some great folks from all over the world on Instagram - and have learned new stuff along the way! *Tip:* Should you decide to create a blog in the future, you can provide a link to that blog in your Instagram profile.

### The upside of blogging

1. I am definitely one of those people who has an itch to create. And much to my surprise, creating and maintaining a blog has scratched that itch!
2. Although it does take time to create each blog post, it doesn't take as much time as it would to create an entire family history book. And each time a blog post is finished and published, I have a small sense of satisfaction.
3. I use blog posts to track the status of particular research projects.
4. I've met some interesting family history bloggers along the way - some in person and others through social media.
5. Quite a few people have reached out to me through my blogs. A few surprises have been:
  - the daughter of the doctor who delivered me in Great Falls, Montana;
  - a distant cousin who remembers seeing many of the photos I've shared, although he hasn't seen the photos since he was a child because the person who has possession of the photos in his immediate family won't share them; and
  - a woman from Illinois who reached out to request the use of several photos collected by my great-grandmother that relate to a little girl who grew up to be a "living legend" in nursing. The photos were used in a performance art piece celebrating her life.
6. I *finally* feel like I'm sharing family history, stories and photos - something I've wanted to do for a very long time.
7. It's just downright fun!!

### The downside of blogging

1. Although I would like to blog on a regular basis, sometimes life gets in the way of that goal. And no matter how hard I try not to let it bother me, it does.

2. Writing a blog post does involve a time commitment. And some require *much* more time than others.
3. The style of writing involved in sharing family history and stories does not come easy for me. I keep promising myself to take a class in creative writing . . . but that hasn't happened yet. In any event, I have found that the writing gets easier as I go along.

## Conclusion

The upside of blogging far outweighs the downside. But as much as I enjoy the process of blogging, I have to be honest and disclose I don't have many subscribers. And that used to bother me a lot in the first year or so. But it doesn't bother me anymore. I think there are several reasons.

First, I've come to realize that I blog more for myself than for anyone else - because it's so much fun. Second, I have a few faithful subscribers who tell me on a regular basis how much they enjoy reading my blogs. And that is a great motivator! Third, I know that somewhere in the future there will be a descendant of mine that will be forever grateful for the stories and memories I've shared, just like I am forever grateful to my ancestors. Fourth, if I ever decide to publish my family history, the content has already been written. All I'll need to do is add a cover, a Table of Contents, an index - and *voilà!*

And finally, I always like to give a great big shout-out to my Mom who started me on this journey of discovery when I was a young girl. Thanks Mom, for keeping and sharing the stories!

## SOURCES

1. Spera, Mark. "WordPress.com vs. WordPress.org – Which Is Better?" *Growth Marketing Pro*, 12 Feb. 2018, <http://www.growthmarketingpro.com/wordpress-com-vs-wordpress-org-better/>.
2. Brinker, Mark. "7 Little-Known Reasons WordPress.com Sucks for Serious Bloggers" *Smart Blogger*, 23 May 2018, <https://smartblogger.com/wordpress-hosting/>.

You can follow Lark on Twitter @ldrobert and on Instagram @8roads2montana. And you'll find her blogs at <http://www.anupbuildinglife.com/> and <http://www.eightroadstomontana.com/>.