

Genealogical Research, Dementia and Caregiver Support

Marianne Perry explores the benefits of genealogical research and how it can help when caring for an elderly parent

All images courtesy of author

Are you a caregiver for aging parents?

Relative to a growing cohort of adult children, I've served as a caregiver for aging parents. My late mother, Dorothy Anne Perry, suffered from dementia. A daunting responsibility irrespective of infirmity or disease, caregiving is a multifaceted role.

Understanding the affliction, navigating difficult choices, determining support strategies for various stages, liaising with others integral to a parent's well being, managing fiscal matters, balancing personal demands, maintaining one's health plus reconciling myriad emotions produces a complex state of affairs.

In response to mom's dementia, I sought advice from medical practitioners and those confronting comparable circumstances to better grasp the realities of her condition and tend to her needs.

Why do you conduct genealogical research?

My late parents, Dorothy Anne Lima and Arnold Joseph Perry were first-generation Italian-Canadians. My maternal grandparents had emigrated



My late parents, Dorothy Anne Lima, 22, and Arnold Joseph Perry, 25, with my maternal grandmother, Rose Lima, 48, August 1947, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

from Sicily, Italy, and my paternal side from Calabria, southern Italy during the period 1898 to 1914.

Mom was born 16 February 1925 in Toronto, Ontario, and

dad on 22 October 1921 in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. Mom was raised in Toronto. They met there after World War Two, married 23 July 1947 and relocated to the Sault in 1952.

My parents had scant knowledge about their family history. I wanted to examine our roots and they encouraged me to do so. I'd begun genealogical research in the mid-1990s and after having consulted diverse sources, confirmed considerable information. My discoveries had elated them and sparked countless discussions. We'd established goals, and I journeyed to Italy in 2004 on the first of my two research trips.

Life resonates with the unexpected, however, and we had not foreseen mom's descent into dementia, anticipated my father predeceasing her, or imagined her being admitted into a long-term care facility. I also had no idea that I would craft anecdotes spun from genealogical insights obtained in my early endeavours that would enrich mom's final years.

In answering this question, therefore, I mention mom's dementia and how chronicling the past in a manner conducive her

ability had comforted her. I caution that I am neither a professional genealogist, nor expert in the field of dementia. I am merely a daughter enthused about solving family mysteries through genealogical research who tried to solace her mom by recounting stories she once treasured that had faded into oblivion.

What is Dementia?

For clarification purposes, this is the definition from www.alz.org:

“Dementia is a general term for a decline in mental ability severe enough to interfere with daily life. Memory loss is an example. Alzheimer’s is the most common type of dementia. Dementia is not a specific disease. It’s an overall term that describes a wide range of symptoms associated with a decline in memory or other thinking skills severe enough to reduce a person’s ability to perform everyday activities.”

Background Notes

Arnold Joseph Perry, my father, served as mom’s primary caregiver. Except for a span in the 1970s when I’d taught in Toronto, I lived in Sault Ste., Ontario Marie and provided support. Dad was diagnosed with cancer June 2006. I’d retired to assist in his care plus assume responsibility for mom. Dad passed January 14, 2008, at age eighty-six. Mom moved into a long-term care facility January 29, 2008 and she’d succumbed to complications from dementia October 4, 2016, at the age of ninety-one.

The Joy of Reminiscing

Mom’s dementia had continued to advance at the care facility

and, over time, she only remembered fragments of what I had authenticated about her ancestry that had joyed her earlier. I’d wanted to give her the pleasure reminiscing again and I have illustrated some of my efforts to achieve this end.



Mom’s father, Pietro Lima (right), about 24 years old at Lima’s Market in Toronto, Ontario, circa 1922.

This photograph is from an album I reviewed with mom during my initial research. Mom’s father, Pietro Lima, had operated a market in Toronto where she had worked prior to marriage and she favoured this picture.

The following is a sampling of facts I verified about mom’s father:

Pietro Lima was born in Trabia, Palermo Province, Sicily, Italy on June 29, 1898. His parents were Antonio Lima and Annunziata Cancilla. He’d sailed from Naples, Italy on the San Guglielmo and landed at Ellis Island, New York on October 15, 1914. He’d settled in Ottawa, Ontario, resided at 79 Clarence Street and worked as a barber prior to marrying Rose (Rosine) Mandia on October 1, 1918 after which they’d relocated to Toronto, Ontario.

Mom had forgotten most of this, but whenever I had shown her the photograph, she usually stated, *“My father was a fruit peddler in Toronto.”*

I’d come to realize the image had stirred vague recall of her father, and this was a cue of sorts that she wanted to hear more about him. Recanting the above would have overwhelmed mom so I recounted this simple version, which had quite contented her:

Your father was born in Sicily, mom. He came to Canada as a young man and was a barber in Ottawa. He met and married your mother, Rose there. They moved to Toronto where you were born. At first, he’d sold bananas. Then, he had a fruit and vegetable store. You helped out before you married dad. Your father loved your family very much.

Little Rosie



Crocheted dresser scarf by mom’s mother, Rose (Rosine) Mandia, circa 1950. Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, Canada.

Charting the provenance of memorabilia such as jewellery and figurines inherited from previous generations was a vital component in my genealogical research. Mom had held dear certain heirlooms and I had recorded her particular attachment to dresser scarves her mother had crocheted. She

displayed this one on the bureau in her bedroom at home and we draped it on the night table by her bed in her room at the care facility.

Parallel the case regarding mom's father, I'd substantiated these facts about her mother:

Rose (Rosine) Mandia was born in Termini Imerese, Palermo Province, Sicily, Italy on September 14, 1898. Her parents were Antonino Mandia and Giuseppa Bova. She'd sailed from Palermo, Sicily with her mother on the Archimede and they'd landed at Ellis Island, New York on June 26, 1900. They'd joined her father who'd arrived on the Aller at Ellis Island, New York on April 20, 1899. They'd lived at 258 Dalhousie Street in Ottawa, Ontario and operated a fruit store. The oldest of fourteen children, Rose quit school after grade one to help raise her brothers and sisters. She'd met Pietro Lima in Ottawa; they'd married October 1, 1918 and settled in Toronto.

Though she had hazy memories of these details as well, the dresser scarf had roused warm reveries. Mom would glance at it then habitually remark, "Little Rosie was so smart and she only went to grade one."

I'd concluded this was a signal she'd wanted me to talk about her mother. Trying not to repeat the above, here is the gist of what I'd scripted that had cheered mom.

Your mother was born in Sicily like your father, mom. She came to Canada with Grandma Bova as a baby. They'd lived in Ottawa and she was the oldest of fourteen

children. She'd quit school after grade one to help raise them. They'd called her "Little Rosie" because she wasn't even five feet tall. Can you believe she'd crocheted this scarf without a pattern? Your mom was so smart and she loved you very much.

Spaghetti and Meatballs

Food is integral to Italian culture and I had documented our traditional recipes in my genealogical research. As a young girl and reflecting the custom, mom's mother had shown her how to prepare dishes such as eggplant parmigiana, ossobuco and marinara sauce. We travelled frequently to Toronto in the 1970s to visit mom's parents and she would cook spaghetti and meatballs – their most popular request.

We brought mom the same meal at the care facility. We reserved the table in the dining room and had set it to simulate family gatherings. During the course of eating dinner, she inevitably would say, "Do you remember I always made spaghetti and meatballs for my mom and dad?"

In tune with mom's patterns by then, I rationalized that the food had tweaked fuzzy vignettes and I chatted about that era of a life she had lived long ago. As per the other examples cited, she reacted positively regardless of how often I repeated the account.

An Old-Time Motto

Watching our beloved suffer is heart wrenching, and considering my experiences with mom, I've attributed a heightened benefit to genealogical research. I now deem it a resource for caregivers in devising solutions



Helpful Thoughts Postcard. Valentine & Sons, Ltd. Dundee and London.

to the challenges faced with respect aging parents. I hope this article has offered some assistance.

We stumbled upon this postcard after mom's passing. She'd recited the motto prior to the onset of dementia and thought it a lovely tribute to her with which to conclude. ☞☞



MARIANNE PERRY's writing is inspired by genealogical research to solve family mysteries.

The Inheritance is

based on her grandmother's early life. It tells the story of a woman rejecting social norms, a priest seeking redemption and a family disintegrating from conflicting loyalties in 1900 southern Italy. An ancestor's holograph is central to the suspense novel she is currently writing. Follow Marianne at www.marianneperry.ca, where she blogs about genealogy, family, books and travel.