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02

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# What is a Family Heirloom, and Where Can I Get One?

**Bill Leslie offers some insight into what constitutes a family "heirloom", and what to do if you don't have one**



*Heirlooms help to connect present and future generations to the past. Seemingly minute objects such as photos, pins, badges and certificates can add valuable context to your ancestor's life.*  
(Photo by Michael Kinnear)

**O**rdinary objects displayed in a home can offer an instant and intimate insight into a family's ancestors and heritage. Photos, souvenirs, and everyday objects that you sprinkle through your home can tell visitors a great deal about the generations that came before. And by learning about communicating about the generations that came before, the visitor will also learn about the current generation, for we are all products of those who came before us. Homes without heirlooms can be warm and welcoming, but without a historical context for the family, a little bit of warmth may be missing.

In the living room, there might be a photo of Grandpa wearing a white shirt and tie, tan knickers with white stockings, and leaning on a golf club. We immediately understand that Great-Grandpa was a golfer in the 1920s. In another room, we see Grandma in a WWII Women's Air Service Pilot (WASP) uniform, placing her as a member of the Greatest Generation, to whom we all owe so much. A framed shadow box next to her photo displays pins and badges to illustrate her service to her country.

Why are some families blessed with dozens of heirlooms, yet other families seem to have

little or nothing to tell their history? Can you create an heirloom, or can heirlooms only be created by your ancestors? What can you do if you have no heirlooms in your family? And just what is a family heirloom, anyway?

Family heirlooms are tangible objects that are linked to the lives, and memories, of your family. Although heirlooms often become more treasured with each generation, they don't necessarily have significant monetary value. In fact, many treasured objects wouldn't bring more than a few dollars at a garage sale. Yet they are priceless to the family because of the way they bring memories and a shared heritage to life.

Just because an object is old and belonged to an ancestor doesn't make it an heirloom. My own father owned two swords, one French, one German. He bought them hoping to sell them at a profit. These don't qualify as heirlooms, despite their age, because they involve no shared memories. It was

merely chance that they passed from him to the next generation.

Why are some families blessed with many heirlooms, while others have few or none? The single biggest reason that a family is blessed with heirlooms is because it chooses to remember and honor its heritage. It is not the times that your ancestors lived through, but rather your willingness to remember, appreciate, and communicate your history, that creates an heirloom. You can choose today to create a home that communicates your family's history in a warm and welcoming way, that honors the generations before you, and that provides a historical context for the generations that will follow. Here's an example. Suppose that your ancestors fled Poland just before the outbreak of World War II, with nothing but the clothes on their back. How can you preserve that heritage? Here are some ways that you could commemorate and display that heritage.

- Purchase photographs or maps of the small towns where your ancestors lived.
- Order copies of the immigration records of your ancestors.
- Purchase a print of the family crest, or a copy of the pre-war Polish flag.
- Learn to cook dishes that were common to your grandparents in Poland, and serve them in dishes that your ancestors might have used.
- Interview your grandparents, and write up their story in their own words.
- Contact cousins, and seek out photographs of common ancestors.

## There are three types of family heirlooms:

**1 Developed heirlooms** are tangible items that have gained their status as family treasures over time. The gravy boat that Grandma used for family dinners on Thanksgiving Day for years became an heirloom over time. Grandma served while everyone else at the table watched, and built special memories. How rich are the memories of the rocking chair that Grandpa painstakingly made for Grandma during the long winter that he turned 85. Grandpa didn't set out to make a family heirloom. He set out to make a chair, but that chair became a treasure because his children and grandchildren watched him carve it with trembling hands, piece by piece, from the old maple tree that had blown over in the backyard. Later, they watched Grandma sit and knit in that chair, long after Grandpa had passed away. It became an heirloom bit by bit, through time and by being used.

**2 Intentional heirlooms** are created to commemorate an event, a relationship, or an entire family. During one long rainy winter, three sisters, their mother, and a grandmother gather together every Sunday after church to create an heirloom quilt. Each person prepared several panels to illustrate a part of their family's history. The tornado that destroyed the family farm, but spared everyone in the root cellar is on one panel. On another panel is the ship that carried Grandpa to America, shown sailing past the Statue of Liberty. Dad in his World War II

Marine Corps uniform is on another panel. As this family stitches the panels into one quilt, they know that they are making an object that will be treasured for many years to come. They set out to make an heirloom, and generations to come will be grateful that they did. Other intentional heirlooms are created or purchased to illustrate a particular cultural heritage. A tartan or clan crest can be purchased to proclaim a proud Scottish heritage. A reproduction Civil War sword can be purchased to accompany the photo of an ancestor's service in the War Between the States.

**3 Instant heirlooms** are items that are the product of a specific event involving a family member. When brother Jim was hailed as a hero after he rescued a family from a burning house, the front page of the paper became an instant heirloom. When Grandpa received the Silver Star from the hands of General Eisenhower (NOTE: NOT PRESIDENT), the medal and photograph were destined to be treasured by successive generations. From the day that they were hung on the living room wall, they were recognized as instant family heirlooms.

Not all heirlooms fall into one category. My sister, Kathy, remembers regularly eating from Franciscan Ware in her grandmother's home. The dishes were inexpensive and common in the 1960s, but over time, they came to be symbolic of dinner with family. Sadly, none of the dishes remain in the family — but my sister is rapidly building her own collection, and her own grandchildren will grow up with their own memories of eating on those dishes. These simple

dishes are instant heirlooms to her, but will become developed heirlooms to her children and grandchildren.

Did you lose the medals that Grandpa was awarded during World War II? Order new ones from the military. Did you lose dad's pocket knife? Buy one just like it! Or buy two, and give one to your own brother. Your desire to preserve your family's heritage can take you in many directions.

Honoring the generations that came before will enrich your life, and the lives of generations to come. If your home has not been blessed with developed heirlooms or with instant heirlooms, consider creating or acquiring your own intentional heirlooms. ■

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**Fortunately, heirlooms don't necessarily involve a great deal of expense. Here are a few keys to presenting and preserving your family's tangible heritage:**

- **Look around.** Some family heirlooms may be worth little or nothing, and chances are that you have some heirlooms gathering dust in a cupboard or closet.
- **Ask.** Your parents and grandparents are a wealth of information about heirlooms owned by your extended family. They may be thrilled by your interest, and a whole new world may open up to you.
- **Document.** Today's heirloom is just another garage sale item if you don't write down the story behind the object. Take photos to accompany what you write, so that more than one family member can enjoy the object. If the family Bible has passed to another branch of the family, ask them if you can make scans of the pages, with notes in Grandma's spidery handwriting.
- **Display and Use.** It is better to use and display most family objects than to condemn them to a dark cupboard. A few items like paper and linens will require special caution, but with care, most tangible objects will survive from generation to generation. Chances are that your new sofa cost more than Great-great Grandpa's Civil War musket is worth. Pull the musket out, and put it on display, for all to admire.
- **Everyday objects,** such as a pocket knife, a bowl or serving dish, or an old pipe wrench may not display well, but most can and should be used for their intended purpose.

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Formerly Family Chronicle Magazine

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