

Francis Fallenstein was born, it is said, to a noble family in Dusseldorf, Prussia in 1822 but his loving, gentle mother died when he was young. Chafing under his father's strict rules, he and his brother Hugo, ran away about 1837, stowed away on or joined the crew of a ship bound for America, and started a new life. He didn't want to be found so he gave his mother's maiden name, Mueller. The official recorded it as Miller and Francis and his family have been Millers ever since. We know these details and many others because members of the family told the stories and wrote them down, some were eventually videotaped and archived by professors at Appalachian State University. Official records such as the census, death, and land records are among the best tools for genealogists and historians but informal records such as diaries, letters, and memoirs are also invaluable. They are often the only place a name change at the border will be explained or personality traits will be remembered long after the person is gone.

For generations we have learned these stories at dining room tables, on grandma's porch, at church, or family reunions. Details are sometimes lost or grow hazy with retellings but the gist of the stories remain. Too often, however, we move through life, too busy to sit and listen. There are bills to be paid, meetings to attend, things to do that draw us away from the elder members of our family until age, disease, and death steal them away and, too late, we realize we didn't have another Sunday to ask those questions or to write names on the back of photos.

For years I've encouraged folks to write their stories down or record them on tape, the ones they've been told or the ones they've lived. The answer is often, "I'm nothing special. No one cares about these old stories." Respectfully, I beg to differ. Stories about military service or going to meeting across the 'holler,' doing laundry in a wringer washer, or grandma courting that Edwards boy even though her brothers tried to warn him off are part of the fabric of Surry's history and those of us who didn't live it will want to know even if we don't realize it yet.

I wonder how many local Millers, a name that is, according to the US Census Bureau, the sixth most common surname in the United States, know at least some of them are descended from Fallenstein? Or that Miller Road is named for their family? Or that there is a monument in the front yard of the home Francis built? We have a rich collection of family lore about the early Miller generations for a few reasons, not the least of which is Francis' half-sister's son, Max Weber, internationally credited as one of three founders of sociology. Max and his wife visited his cousins here in October 1904 during his trip to speak at the Worlds Fair in St. Louis.

Such stories are gathered in the Surry County Genealogical Society's Surry County Heritage books published in 1983, in the indomitable Ruth Minnick's columns, and, to some degree, in

papers in the museum's collection. There are so many more stories in this region, though. Treasure troves of history are stored in the memories of our elders and every time we lose one, every funeral we attend, is the loss of an encyclopedia of knowledge we will never get back.

The museum is planning some oral history workshops in the coming year, watch for information about them. But you don't need to wait for us. I encourage you all to make the time to sit and talk, to write down, or digitally record your family's stories. And, I hope, share them with us at the museum. Future generations will thank you.

*for the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History with 22 years in journalism before joining the museum staff. She and her family moved to Mount Airy in 2005 from Pennsylvania where she was also involved with museums and history tours. She can be reached at [KRSmith@NorthCarolinaMuseum.org](mailto:KRSmith@NorthCarolinaMuseum.org) or by calling 336-786-4478 x229.*