A genealogy swap meet scheduled this Saturday in Mount Airy offers a rare opportunity to explore one's family tree and also to fuel interest in genealogy itself, according to one local expert involved.

When people are bitten by the genealogy bug, they can grow obsessed with wanting to learn all they can about ancestors who have long passed.

"You become like a detective and go out and do all this research," Surry County Genealogy Association President Esther Johnson said Wednesday, describing the process as similar to assembling the pieces of a puzzle.

The free family history and genealogy swap meet set for Saturday at Mount Airy Museum of Regional History at 301 N. Main St. could supply some of those pieces. It will be held from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on the third floor of the museum, which is sponsoring the gathering along with the genealogy group.

Such a swap meet has not been held locally for several years. "Everyone is invited," Johnson said.

“If they’re into genealogy, fine, if they’re not into genealogy, that’s OK, too.”

A variety of resources will be available, including personnel to help information seekers look up names on the Ancestry.com website. Someone also will be there to explain FamilySearch.com, another Internet resource.

Family histories that have been assembled by area residents additionally will be displayed, and those attending are asked to bring and share any information they have with others in order to establish valuable connections.

Representatives of other historical or genealogy organizations also are expected to be part of the event along with authors.

Services provided Saturday will be free, except for copying costs. Participants with laptop computers are encouraged to bring them.

“I think we’ll have a good-size crowd,” Johnson added Wednesday. The local genealogy group holds its regular meetings at night, when some older folks can’t drive, so Saturday’s daytime event will benefit them, she said.

Journey Involved

Johnson, a longtime genealogist, did offer an observation about how the swap meet fits in with the big picture of family history research, which she has heard is now the world’s most-popular pastime.

It has been bolstered by the emergence of television shows such as “Genealogy Roadshow,” along with various Internet resources.

But sitting at a computer is a small facet of genealogy, Johnson said, which should go beyond collecting cut-and-dried facts.

“One of the reasons I wanted to have a swap meet is to teach people that there is more to genealogy or family history than names and dates,” Johnson explained. “I want them to know

that you have to do research that you cannot always find on the Internet.”

This can involve seeking out old homeplaces, traipsing through family cemeteries and picking up a variety of information from facilities boasting resources not found elsewhere. These include the Carlos Surratt research room at Surry Community College, register of deeds offices, public libraries and others.

The Surry Genealogy Association, which meets at the college on the second Monday of each month at 7 p.m., also hosts special speakers who supply research tips.

Collectively, a person might learn the kind of life an ancestor led, such as his or her occupation, military service and interesting tidbits.

The ultimate objective for people tracing their roots, Johnson said, should be “putting the meat to the bones.”