

A massive search was waged this past weekend in which members of multiple families were sought. It didn't involve rescue crews scouring the countryside for missing children or senior citizens, but an effort staged quietly Saturday within the confines of Mount Airy Museum of Regional History — though almost as intense in terms of motivation.

The Surry County Genealogical Association Ancestor Fair, held at the museum for the fourth year, attracted people searching for something reflecting a unique brand of elusiveness: information about folks from whom they are descended. Researching one's family tree can be a tedious, challenging — and sometimes-frustrating — process filled with dead ends, wild goose chases and other pitfalls in the seemingly never-ending quest for names, dates and other facts. But Saturday's Ancestor Fair provided a fertile ground for those wanting to connect to their roots.

The third floor of the downtown museum was abuzz with activity, including computer stations offering free and unencumbered access to online genealogy services including Ancestry.com and FamilySearch, which normally require paying fees or establishing accounts. Non-digital resources also were well-represented with tables displaying genealogy charts, tax and other public records, books on area history and information assembled to aid others interested in surnames common to this region. "People have brought their family histories to show people ... scrapbooks — everything," said President Esther Johnson of the Surry County Genealogical Association. Aside from the records aspect, members of the association were out in force to provide assistance, along with representatives of historical organizations in Patrick and Carroll counties in Virginia.

The Ancestor Fair drew folks from near and far. "I think it's well done," said Joyce Lee Kanter of Winston-Salem, who was attending the local genealogy event for the first time. "And the folks I've talked to have been very knowledgeable and very approachable," added Kanter. "If they have any information, they're willing to share." The Winston-Salem resident specifically came looking for her ancestral details about Johnsons who lived in Stokes and Patrick counties, and also the Thore surname. Betty Rogers of Pilot Mountain, meanwhile, was making good use of the Ancestry.com and FamilySearch station, where she sought information about a great-grandmother named Hayes who long ago migrated from Statesville to Surry County by wagon. As is often the case with genealogy, some family lines are easier to track than others, which Rogers exemplified Saturday while holding up a copy of the Surry County Heritage Book, Volume II. It is a thick tome containing a wealth of information — but not everything. "I've got my story in here," Rogers said of her basic family history, "but I don't know much about the Hayeses."

While ferreting out such history can be painstaking and often tests researchers' patience, Johnson, the Genealogical Association president, said computer technology has been a tremendous boost in streamlining information collection. To a large extent, the digital indexing of birth, marriage, death and other records has eliminated the need to pore through dusty materials — which was once the only method available. “It was a slow process,” Johnson said of the time when hitting the “print” button wasn't an option for persons retrieving vital information. “They had to write it down.”