

Editorial: Connected to our roots: The power of our past

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Our past is a powerful thing. Sometimes, it's a negative power. Sometimes, our past is a positive power.

For some, the past is a time of shame, regret or hurt. Some would rather not talk about their past.

For others, the past is a time of fond memories, love and joy. These people can't stop talking about the past.

I'm at the age where my past is just as important as my future. I'm equally interested in both. So, when my parents start talking about our family history, I listen more closely.

Family history

My dad has spent the last several years amassing his genealogy. He has traveled coast to coast and visited courthouses and hidden cemeteries. He has driven well off the beaten path to retrace parts of the Oregon-California Trail his ancestors—and mine—traveled more than 100 years ago on their way to California.

The stories are fascinating ... and for another day. The reason I mention my dad's efforts to gather his family history is that in watching him, I've learned how powerful and important it is to be connected to our past.

I've known more about my mom's family simply because we have attended her family reunion in Brownwood for much of its history. At the reunion this year, something different happened that taught me again the power

and importance of being connected to our past. I ended up with a piece of my past.

It all started ...

The Lee Family Reunion started in 1931 in honor of Hiram Jasper Lee's birthday. He's my great-great-grandfather. Hiram Lee was a Baptist circuit preacher who spent most of his ministry in Brown and Eastland counties. Several of his descendants became ministers and missionaries serving in Texas and elsewhere.

When I was ordained to the ministry and commissioned as a missionary, my mom framed my ordination certificate along with a brief history tracing a line of ministers in her family from Hiram Lee to me. I was young then and didn't appreciate fully her gift. Pastoring a small country church—probably about the same size as one of my great-great-grandfather's churches—and being able to see time stretch out behind me has changed the way I regard her gift.

A trip down memory lane

I don't always get to make the reunion because of scheduling conflicts, but I did get to take my son this year. Rather than traveling the usual route from the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex through Stephenville to Brownwood, I decided to drop down from Cisco so I could show my son where his great-grandfather was born and raised.

At least 20 years ago, my grandfather took us to the small house on the side of 183 south of Cisco where he was raised. It was in rough shape then. Twenty years later, I hoped I could find it again.

I think I found it. The walls essentially are gone, eaten away by time,

weather and termites, the roof resting on the ground. I imagined my grandfather's parents living in that house trying to raise a handful of children. It was hard, hard enough that my grandfather didn't finish high school because he needed to help care for his family.

My grandfather fought in North Africa, Sicily and Italy in World War II. After returning home, he became a carpenter and a builder. He built the school at Grady north of Stanton in West Texas, just minutes from where my wife's mom grew up. And from what I remember of the stories, he built one of the buildings at Colonial Hills Baptist Church in Snyder, where my father-in-law attended during Jimmie Nelson's pastorate.

After moving to New Mexico, my grandfather was involved in many more church building projects. He also was very involved in Gideons and promoting the New Mexico Baptist Children's Home, among other ministries.

A piece of my past

The Lee Family Reunion concludes with an auction to help raise money to cover reunion expenses. The best auction items are made by family members ... or the family heirlooms.

A few years ago, the family heirloom was one of Mary Emily Lee's dresses. She was my great-great-grandmother. As you can imagine, it was a hot auction item. The buyer kept it for a few years before reintroducing it to the auction so another family member could enjoy it.

This year, the hot auction item was less interesting than a dress in some ways but certainly interesting enough to keep raising the bid. It was a cardboard pillbox belonging to Hiram Lee. The prescription was filled in Rising Star.

The fact that a little cardboard box has lasted all these years is astounding. But that wasn't what grabbed my attention. What grabbed my attention was that it is the only tangible thing I could have from my great-great-grandfather, a Texas Baptist preacher like me. I wanted that box, not because of what it is—a cardboard pill box—but because of what it is—a powerful connection to my past.

Marveling over the past

Maybe someday, I'll return Hiram Lee's pillbox to the auction. Maybe. But not before I finish marveling over a line of ministers that runs at least a century up to me. There's a certain *gravitas* in that thought.

What about you? What connection, what roots, ground you?

Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist Standard. He can be reached at eric.black@baptiststandard.com or on Twitter at [@EricBlackBSP](https://twitter.com/EricBlackBSP). The views expressed are solely those of the author.