ROOTS RUN DEEP

In 1791, Revolutionary War veteran Jacob Minerd Sr. and his wife Maria Nein settled just a few miles from where Fallingwater is today. Their 12 children produced 87 grandchildren, 469-plus great-grandchildren and 1,344-plus great-great grandchildren. The Minerd.com Web site has connected thousands of their relatives to historic family information via its online archive.

Family *is* everything

And for **Mark Miner**, cousins are everywhere

As part of our city's 250 celebration, organizers encouraged Pittsburghers to hold family reunions and bring people to Pittsburgh to showcase "America's Most Livable City." And so, I followed suit, inviting my family to come to the Heinz History Center in June for a family reunion.

Admittedly, there's nothing as boring as someone else's family. Yet mine may be a little different. You see, I have 50,000 cousins, and a majority of their ancestors left Western Pennsylvania in the 1800s and have never returned.

It may be that most Americans have just as many clan members. The difference is probably that I've made a hobby of finding my relatives. It all came about from years of research and the genealogy Web site I created. Since 2000, that site—Minerd.com—has received 1.2 million visits, earning an award from *Family Tree Magazine* as one of the Top 10 family sites in the nation. Believing that others might want to do something similar, I agreed to outline thoughts on how the project came together.

In the beginning

My story begins simply. My mother read to me when I was a boy, and I absorbed the stories about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and cowboys and places and people far away. As soon as she finished one book, I'd ask her to start another.

Another early value was that family meant everything. When I was 10, my dad took us to see his elderly grandmother at Christmas. He hid a tape recorder beside her rocking chair—she didn't know what the newfangled thing was—and he started asking questions. During that hour or so, she talked about growing up on a West Virginia farm and how her grandfather had been killed in the Civil War. That day, my aunt showed me tintypes and sepia-toned photographs of great-great grandparents and long-dead aunts and uncles.

My mind raced with the knowledge that I actually had relatives alive during the Revolutionary War and when cowboys and Indians were sparring out West. And that visit changed the course of my life.

A few years later, after Great-Grandma died, my parents took us to a reunion in Washington, PA. I was 14 and became bored playing jarts. Apparently I spent a lot of time looking at my aunt's photograph album and asking lots of questions. As we prepared to leave at dusk—my aunt came to our car and handed me the album to keep. "You're the only one who asks me about these people," she said. "You're the eldest son of the eldest son of my eldest brother. And you carry on the Miner name. Now, go find out about these people someday."

I can't estimate the hours I spent with that album, looking at faces of long ago. (It also was a technique to delay doing homework.) The craving to learn about these relatives grew, but it wasn't until reading Alex Haley's *Roots* that I discovered how to start in such places as libraries with old census records, books and

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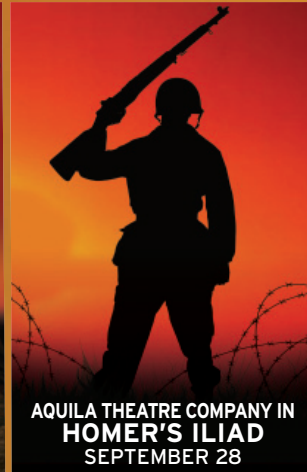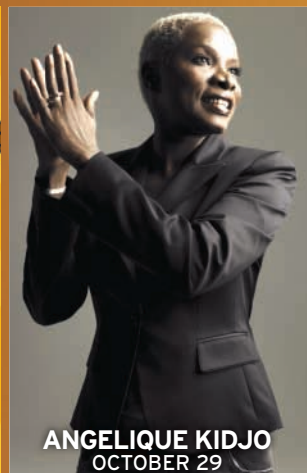
newspapers and in courthouses with deeds and other legal records.

At the next reunion, I asked more detailed questions. Armed with names and dates, my mother took me to the Washington Observer-Reporter office. We found the obituary of my great-grand-father, who died at age 42 in 1919 after collapsing at a Sunday school picnic. Mom copied the news story by hand, with details about the tragedy and other nuggets about his life.

When my grandmother died in 1977 and we cleaned out her root cellar, I found a dusty, oak box containing papers of a distant uncle. These yellowed relics showed that my great-great granddad had been born near Kingwood, Somerset County, in about 1846. Now I had a geographic location and time frame as a reference point. That winter, on a day so snowy that school was cancelled, my mother somehow drove me (and my unfortunate brothers) to the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. While reading censuses on microfilm, Mom found a record from 1850 showing great-great granddad as a boy in his parents' house-hold. It listed the names of his parents, brothers and sisters. We made a photo-copy and took the document home as a prize.

Perhaps the most significant moment in the early years was on a hot Sunday afternoon in 1978. While driving to Ligonier to pick up my brothers at church camp, I persuaded my father to drive us into Somerset County to find the village of Kingwood. There, we knocked at the first house we came to. An older man came to the door. When I told him why we were there, his eyes lit up. He knew one of my long-lost cousins still living nearby and offered to take us to meet her.

The route took us down a narrow, dirt road into a deep, forested valley. We stopped at a small farm house, and I tapped on the door. Minnie Miner Gary, elderly and frail, answered. I told her who I was, who my people had been and how they were related to her. With a big smile, she ushered us into her kitchen, where she was making jelly on an old wood stove. It turned out that she was a first cousin of

And our economy is more balanced than ever before. We can no longer be called a company town. Numerous opportunities in venture-backed start-ups and growing small businesses often are more appealing than a slow rise up the escalator of corporate hierarchy.

Three strong bell cows are leading us toward a knowledge-based future: Carnegie Mellon University—the leading computer science university in the world; the University of Pittsburgh—with broad-based strength capped by the health sciences and a school of medicine ranking sixth in NIH funding; and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, now the largest academic medical center in the nation with $7 billion in revenues and over 50,000 employees.

Like two-headed Janus, we may look forward to a promising future and, with great pride and a little nostalgia, look back to a time long ago when Pittsburgh forged the industrial might that made America the greatest nation in the world. P Q

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Family Tree

my great-granddad. She told stories of joking with my great-great-grandparents and her own father's suffering in the Civil War.

I realized that there must be hundreds of older cousins still alive who could tell me about my family's past, and I've continued researching over the past three decades, balancing career demands with my quest. As one early family history manuscript noted: "Any attempt to write a clear and accurate genealogy of early pioneer families is futile; from two causes—illiteracy, and burning of cabins, destroying records, if any were made." My own branch of the family, for instance, spelled our surname in a variety of ways, finally settling on M-i-n-e-r in the late 1800s. Yet despite the fact that family branches had dispersed all over the country, I suspected that many had at least one like-minded person who was thirsty for

family information and willing to share.

The stories I've found are both varied and fascinating, tying our family to many of the nation's greatest events, events perhaps all families are connected to if they just had a means of knowing. For instance, my cousins experienced the Oklahoma Land Rush, the building of the Panama Canal, NASA's Apollo missions, construction and care of Fallingwater, the Lincoln-Douglas debates and even the Little Big Horn battle (Custer's brother, who also died there, fathered a child out of wedlock with one of my cousins).

It became clear that Pittsburgh's reputation as a "Gateway to the West" was well earned, as wave upon wave of adventurous cousins headed west and south seeking better health and prosperity. Few looked back or returned.

Shooting the moon

At some point in the 1990s, there were so many offshoots that I decided to "shoot the moon" and find all cousins everywhere. The paradigm changed from tracing backward in time to exploring forward from long ago to now.

One cousin, Eugene Podraza in New Jersey, suggested we meet. This resulted in a new tradition—a joint research trip out of state. Since then, Eugene and I have gone on 17 annual summer journeys to Ohio, Maryland, West Virginia, Illinois and Indiana. My archive of books, papers and photographs filled shelves and filing cabinets. Cousins asked if I would "write a book." My answer was no, but I needed a way to unite all of the data and share it with others.

And then the Internet was invented.

At the time, I was head of corporate communications for the Buchanan Ingersoll law firm and built the firm's first two generations of Web sites. Perhaps with the right type of creativity, a Web site could leverage the family research, reach unknown cousins, capture the

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imagination of students and expand our family knowledge.

In May 2000, I launched the site. I wanted to create interesting biographical and feature pages loaded with names, key-words and photographs. Each bio is linked to bios of parents and children, so that all paths ultimately lead back to the Western Pennsylvania pioneers, my fourth great grandparents, Jacob and Maria (Nein) Minerd Sr. I hoped to attract cousins whom I suspected would find the site after Googling their own family names.

The strategy worked. Minerd.com has drawn some 1.2 million visitors over eight-plus years. Some 730 distant cousins and others around the world have made first-time e-mail contact. Grandparents use the site to educate grandchildren. Students rely on it for school and 4-H projects. Writers mine the content for articles, Web sites and books. And cousins cleft from the clan through adoption or divorce use it to learn the truth about their shrouded pasts.

Today, the site features more than 1,200 biographies and 6,000 photographs, news clippings and postcards. It also protects and preserves a fragmented family history and culture against the ravages of time and erosion of memory, public disinterest,

destruction of interpersonal relationships and dispersion of families. When I hear of families breaking apart so often, I realize this Web site has an unprecedented way of re-connecting them (us).

Perhaps the most heartfelt example of Minerd.com's impact is a memoir by cousin Melinda Brooksher—entitled "Come Back to Pennsylvania." Melinda's branch has resided in Kansas since 1886. She wrote of her visit here in 2002 to attend our Western Pennsylvania reunion:

"We have always known that our roots were in Uniontown. But the thought of ever going to Pennsylvania had never crossed my mind. And now I hold the honor of being the first of my branch of the family to return to Pennsylvania. It was such a spiritual experience for me that I cannot find the words to express just how much it meant. I walked where they walked, experienced the same sunlight at the same time of day when they might have been working, loving, struggling, and all the great day-to-day stuff that makes us all unique." P Q

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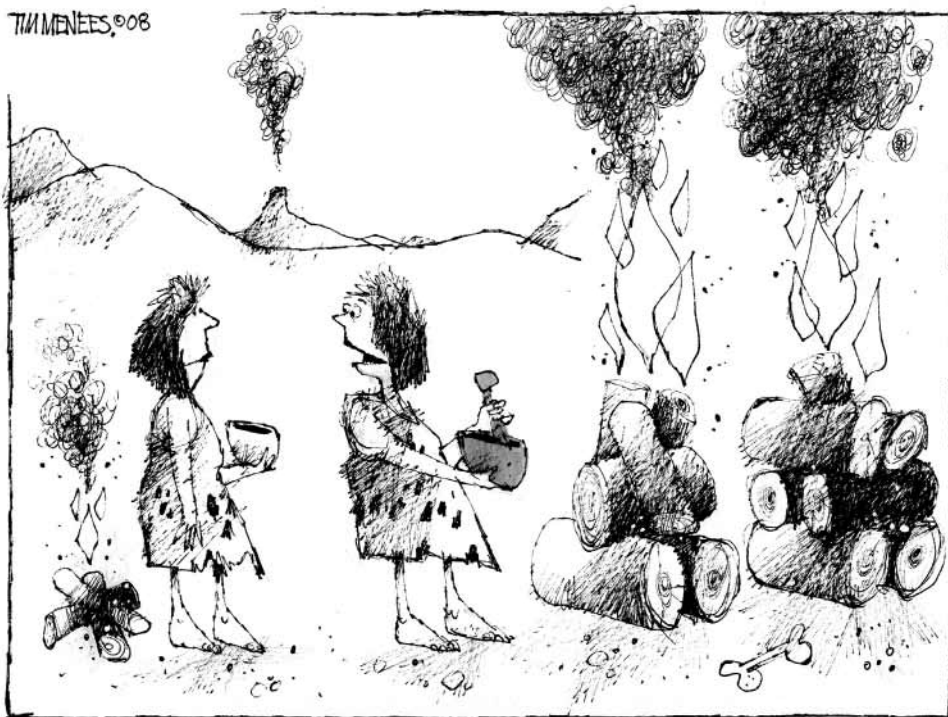## Song of Slippery Rock
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soon followed by an influx of pioneers who would radically change the landscape through lumbering, agriculture and manufacturing. In addition to the resources above ground, subsequent generations exploited those below the surface. Coal and gas reservoirs were abundant, and mining became a booming industry: The Mt. Etna furnace was established in 1822, the Hickory furnace in 1836, then the Isaac Pearson foundry—functioning into the 20th century. The Wolf Creek woolen factory northwest of town manufactured carpets (at 50 cents a yard) and Kentucky jeans (37 cents) from 1845 not far from the carding factories and sawmills on Slippery Rock Creek.

By the beginning of the Civil War, the population had increased to a sizeable 400 souls, serviced by two taverns, two blacksmith shops, a cast-iron stove and plow maker, a tannery, a saddler, wagon-maker, tailor, gunsmith, cabinetmaker and cooper. The community also boasted two shoemakers, two doctors and—that ultimate indication of stability—an undertaker.

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While grand old Pittsburgh took a population dive in the last seven years (from 57th to 59th largest American city), Slippery Rock took a big leap—from 3,068 in the 2000 census to 5,251 in 2007. That whopping two-thirds gain makes it the fastest-growing township in the state, though the figures may be skewed by a new 600-unit complex near (but not officially part of) Slippery Rock University. SRU may also be responsible for skewing the town's median age (23) and gender ratio. Guys, take note: For every 100 females, there are just 77 males.

SRU (a.k.a. "The Rock"), founded in 1889, is one of the largest and best campuses in western Pennsylvania, with 611 acres and a 7,500 enrollment. Its distinguished alumni include Chuck Aber (a.k.a. "Neighbor Aber" on Mister Rogers'

"We like to entertain."