The History Trail

There’s a historical trail that winds through mountains, crosses deserts, and wades through rivers. It forms the beginnings of village roads and future highways. It passes homes and businesses, schools, and buildings. It’s often a rough and unpredictable trail, full of dangers and unexpected joys. Yet it’s a trail that you will never find designated on any map.

It’s the trail that historians blaze through a flood of materials to shed light on the everyday lives of people. These historians are like detectives. They search for clues to the simple truths about the ordinary women and men of other times. When they organize all the pieces into an understandable whole, the story they tell may help readers of the present to better understand the past and perhaps even their own times.

Historians concerned with the everyday lives of people will often choose a subject who lived during a period of truly significant events. For example, in the United States, a historian might choose someone who lived during a major war, such as the American Revolution or the Civil War. Or they might choose someone who had been part of a great movement of people, such as the settlement of the West. The great waves of immigration to the United States from different parts of the world are another rich source of experiences.

How do historians choose subjects to write about? That varies from person to person, but let’s imagine that our historian is one Adam Henderson. Adam is an amateur historian with an interest in the history of Kansas and especially his own family’s role in it. Adam opens an old leather suitcase filled with papers that will help him write the Henderson family history. Another exciting voyage on the history trail begins!