

Adventures in Research
or
So You Don't Want to Write About What You Know . . .

By Blair Bancroft

There's a saying among computer users: *You learn more from your mistakes than from your successes*. This, therefore, makes me an expert on research. Example: after reading nearly everything I could find on the Peninsular War, I wrote an historical with an utterly charming young heroine, a noble hero, set against the real-life background of the darkest days of Napoleon's conquest of Spain and Portugal. As if having an "exotic" background weren't enough, I compounded my sin by reading *Wellington - Years of the Sword* between draft and final edit. The result: a 120,000-word beginner's historical grew to 140,000 words. My only positive comment on this compilation of errors: I truly enjoyed writing it.

Over the years I've also gotten lost on the rocky slopes of Machu Picchu, and drowned myself in the mysteries of the former USSR. Only to be told that romance editors want American characters in American or English settings. Period. Sigh!

Note: I welcome with open arms the recent trend by some publishers to include a broader range of settings.

So research just gets in the way, right?

Wrong.

Now that I've given an early warning about not getting so lost in your research that you forget your goal - *a marketable product* - let's talk about why research is important.

For the purposes of this article I interviewed one of the *grande dames* of

historical fiction for children, Wilma Pitchford Hays, since deceased at age 98. Although she is known for writing a multitude of children's books, she "paid her dues" (and my college tuition) by years of writing first-person "confession" stories for Dell's "Modern Romances." Since Wilma is my mother, I grew up watching her spend weeks of meticulous research before sitting down to write. Her strongest advice for this article was the rule she applied to herself: *"If I get one fact wrong, how can children trust that anything else I have written is true?"*

Although Wilma Hays was interpreting history for children, this statement easily transfers to other genres. For example, in two romances I read this past year the authors referred to a waltz having four beats to the measure. Since a waltz cannot be a waltz without having only three beats per measure, not four, I was left with my mouth hanging open, wondering not only about the authors but about the editors and copy editors.

And, yes, this sort of thing happens all the time. If the author hasn't done her homework, the publisher is often too busy to catch it. Does it matter? You bet it does! Very, very few successful multi-published authors got where they are by strewing their books with errors.

Right up there with accuracy, Wilma Pitchford Hays advises: *"Visit the site you intend to use for background. Atmosphere is very important and can't be picked up simply by reading about it."* I can still remember the heat on the Plains of Abraham in Quebec when, as a teenager, I trailed after her as she researched a story about our ancestor who was a *Drummer Boy for Montcalm*. Yes, I know travel isn't always possible, but if you're writing historicals, try to visit something similar to the era you want: an old western town which has scarcely changed, the mystical atmosphere at Gettysburg, the amazing re-creations of Colonial Williamsburg, Sturbridge Village, or Plymouth Plantation. Regency authors need to save their pennies for a trip to England. Research books help, but there's nothing like soaking up the atmosphere of the real thing.

The same up-close-and-personal advice applies even more strongly to contemporary settings. If you can't visit the place you want to write about, then in-depth research is necessary, preferably including talking to people who know the site well, because you're far more likely to get caught out on twenty-first century details than a mistake about something that happened in 1813. So don't make readers cringe by putting basements or subways in Florida. I recall reading a book, *not* a fantasy, in which the tide was low at the same time every day! Minimal research would have shown that tides are controlled by the moon and the time and height varies day to day.

Have I made something up without ever having been near the site? Yes, certainly I have. But not without a lot of research. For a scene set in the wilds of Dartmoor, I finally stumbled onto a detailed description by an intrepid Englishman who took a walking tour of Dartmoor. It was invaluable in enabling me to set a dramatic scene on the moor without ever having been there. Added advice: when in doubt, don't make up a *specific* detail you can't back up. (Example: mention waltzing but avoid the specific beats per measure.) Be careful. Never assume. Don't be left with egg on your face. Your readers will appreciate it, and your reputation will be enhanced.

So how do you find out what you need to know without breaking the bank account or abandoning home and family? In addition to the Internet, which is insidiously easy to search but can disgorge doubtful information as well, don't forget those old reliables, library, newspapers, magazines, television documentaries, and personal interviews. Among other, the less well-known sources you might consider:

Old church records are frequently helpful. My former church in Connecticut has now passed its 350th anniversary. Every newsletter they put out has an item taken from the archives. They are almost inevitably revealing and sometimes amazing. And available to the serious researcher just for the asking. As are old courthouse records.

Medieval Times is your specialty? When you do your library research, be sure

you don't ignore the children's department. Courtesy of our local librarian, I discovered the best book on castles was a children's book. And, believe me, you need to know a crenelation from a barbican and a cyclas from a bliaut before you can adequately describe the world of Medieval Times. (Yes . . . sigh . . . I know a lot of authors don't, but I keep hoping.) Helpful Hint: Take a peek at your library's books on Costuming, including the reference section as well as "on shelf." If not available, try one of the online book stores.

Visit a Medieval or Renaissance Fair or one of the specialty restaurants featuring dining in Medieval Times. Although these are commercial ventures which inevitably insert inaccuracies in search of a laugh, they give a feel of the color and excitement of ancient times, even if it's only the heraldic designs on the colorful silks decorating the Percheron horses, the shouts of the crowd, or the smell of manure!

If you're really serious about Medieval/Renaissance accuracy, find a local chapter of the Society for Creative Anachronisms, a group that features reenactments of medieval tournaments and serious study of the arts and sciences of the time. The research materials available through this group are awesome. Each SCA event features a Feast prepared as it might have been in ancient times. If no information is available locally, scads about the SCA can be found on the Internet (www.sca.org).

Speaking of the Internet, a good portion of the research for a recent book of mine was via the Internet. It took a little experimentation to find the right keyword but, after that, the articles I needed just kept rolling off the printer. I found myself with confirmation that the rather grim topic I was researching was very much an ongoing business, and I had articles from the UN and news items taken from international police reports to back me up. On a current more lightweight project, I needed information on a sand shark. In almost no time at all, there was a picture and description, including notes on the shark's most frequent habitat. So use the Net. That's what it's there for. And don't forget . . . the Internet is also full of maps.

Another quote from Wilma Hays: "*Maps are extremely important.*" And she

didn't just mean the ones you bring back from a trip, get from AAA, a local Chamber of Commerce, or off the Internet. She told me the story of carefully constructing a map of the main thoroughfare in ancient Rome (from info in a book), sketching in exactly whose statue was placed where along the road so she could refer to them accurately in her book. An example from my own experience: when I have a number of scenes in a certain house, I make a floor plan so that I will know how to maneuver my characters and what they will see. This, too, is a *map*.

When I had to set a number of scenes on a boat, I went to several local marinas with my camera, walked along the docks, and took photos. It was quite a while before I found the right "look" and layout, but one day, there it was. I also went to the library and scouted out books to give me the correct names for the various parts of the boat with which I was not already familiar. Details, details, details. Did I make a mistake somewhere? Probably, but hopefully it won't be as glaring as the waltz in four-four time.

For a book I wrote last year I relied on more prosaic research: the library, local newspapers and the evening television news. These three are still the best sources if you're writing about something in your own neighborhood. You should also have books on local trees, flowers, birds, etc.

Library research has changed a good deal in most places. Most of us are now blessed (if occasionally dubiously) by a computerized data file, covering not just one library but all the libraries in your city's or country's system. A big improvement over the so-called "good old days." And if you still don't find what you need, that's what Reference Librarians are for. It's astounding what they can get for you via Interlibrary loan.

Another surprisingly valid source of historical atmosphere and costuming are movies. Yes, they got a bad rap during the 'fifties and 'sixties, but "old" movies and many of the new historical dramas are amazingly well researched, and almost all costuming professionals take great pride in creating the proper styles of the times. Even the SCA, those very fussy Medieval buffs, pride themselves on their collection of

historical movies depicting that era. Another example: when I was writing about a Regency gaming house, I mentioned a “faro box” but didn’t actually know what one looked like. Recently, at the showing of a ‘30s movie at our local library, a gambling scene revealed a woman using one. The movie wasn’t thrilling, but the sight of that faro box made my day.

If you are in a position to afford it, there are travel tours which emphasize a certain historical period and college courses that do the same. That’s how I saw Peru with a Yale anthropologist at my side. (And . . . sigh . . . I also had stack privileges at Yale’s Sterling Library at the time. Ah, well . . .) Now I must make do with what I have: an inquiring mind and determination to get things right. Obviously inherited, as you will see in the story below:

My mother, Wilma Hays, always used my father as a “reader” for her work, but with *The Story of Valentine*, the one set in ancient Rome, he was busy and did not see it until the book was in the galley stage. As he read, he suddenly announced: “Pigeons don’t eat worms.” After a volley of “Of course they do” vs. “No, they don’t,” my father dug up some nice fat worms from our backyard and put them in a brown paper bag. He and my mother drove ten miles to the New Haven Green, known to be the habitat of numerous pigeons. (At this point I suspect my father stayed in the car.) My mother ventured out onto the grass, looked carefully around in hope that no one was watching, and tossed a worm onto the grass. The pigeons flocked around, turned up their beaks and stalked off. My mother offered a second worm. Repeat of the pigeons’ reaction. She then dashed to the nearest bookstore and, sure they would think she was crazy, announced: “I have to know what pigeons eat.” After some searching, it was determined that an acceptable pigeon food item back in ancient Rome could have been peas. She promptly called her editor and had the change made.

Why did my mother try to feed a worm to a pigeon on the New Haven Green? Why did I read three or four books on international banking just to justify the backstory in my 1998 Golden Heart final *Shadowed Paradise*? It’s not only the need for accuracy but a quest for rich details—call it embroidery, if you will—which make the difference

between mediocrity and a book that brings your story to life and makes your readers cry for more.

Or catches an editor's eye!

So, stop. Think. *Will a bout of research make me a better writer?* If nothing else, research will make you a better thinker. Expand your horizons. And who knows, maybe you'll save yourself from trying to waltz to four-four time or feed worms to reluctant pigeons.