

Making it easier to track your coloured ancestry

COLOURED ancestry has been an issue at the Cape for many decades. With selected oral history, family secrets and limited access to records, tracing ancestry can prove difficult.

But Merle Martin, through her personal journey in discovering her own ancestry, has worked toward changing that.

“You need to be committed. Doing family research is a long-term project,” she says.

As a result of her own experiences, Martin founded the SA St Helenian Heritage Association. While the main focus is on St Helena, other ancestries are acknowledged and explored.

Today marks the start of the third annual Heritage Day exhibition organised by the association. The two-day exhibition, at Meadowridge Library, will have census lists, family trees and St Helena records on display. Representatives from the National Archives and a genealogy

association will be there. For those who are starting out, Martin has this advice: Start with yourself, and work your way back.”

She was told around 2006 that her great grandmother was from St Helena.

“I couldn’t find anything about it. I felt driven to do an awareness project,” says Martin.

She was born in Bokmakierie, Athlone, but learned of her maternal and paternal St Helenian heritage. At the time, all she could find was a few lines written on the immigrants from the island.

In the 1840s, thousands of slaves were freed on the island and sent to the West Indies and Cape Town. Since starting her research, Martin has received hundreds of responses so far of families with links to St Helena immigrants.

“The problem we have is that coloured people especially don’t know who we are and where we come from. We’ve been

ridiculed for it in the past,” she says.

Martin explains there is not enough awareness about ancestry, and it’s only when we become older that this becomes important. “With our history of oppression, keeping secrets and families being split, it’s very difficult.”

What she has found is that many a trail runs cold at great grandparent level. She says many families were split along lines of skin tone.

It wasn’t uncommon for there to be a division between lighter and darker-skinned siblings, and children were disowned for marrying the wrong race or even skin tone, she says.

“People are still hurt and won’t speak about where they come from. Hurt is the cause of a lot of grandparents closing up,” says Martin.

For those who may not have the luxury of oral history, there are resources including the state archives, marriage, birth,

baptism and death records from churches or home affairs.

Martin says that knowing where you come from is of the utmost importance, because it’s part of one’s sense of belonging and self esteem. “Our ancestors built Cape Town and made contributions. We have nothing to be ashamed of,” she says.

The people on the Cape Flats didn’t always live there, says Martin. They are descended not only from the slaves who worked on the farms, but also the farm owners, as genealogists have uncovered, she adds.

“Our problem is that we don’t know enough. Hopefully we can gather enough information to pass on to the next generation. I hope they will ask more questions.”

The exhibition takes place at the Meadowridge library and is free to the public. It opens at 9am and closes at 4.30pm on Friday and 12pm on Saturday. – **Esther Lewis**



ANCESTRY: Merle Martin is the founder of the SA St Helenian Heritage Association.