

Mildred Leedy Armao

In 2008, Mildred was searching for a good Christmas gift for her parents, who, like most parents, “don’t need a thing.” That’s when she saw a commercial for Ancestry.com.

After spending many Sundays as a child listening to her great aunts and uncles tell stories about life in rural Missouri during the 19th and early 20th centuries, Mildred had developed a love for history, particularly her family’s. In fact, she even studied Oral History while getting her degree in Architectural History at the University of Virginia.

She decided to research her maternal grandmother’s family, the McBrides and create a book about her family’s history for her parents’ gift. However, at the time, the only information Grandma had shared with her (or anyone, for that matter) was that the family hailed from Kentucky and was originally Scotch-Irish. Taking those tiny granules of information, she used her passion for history, along with her willingness to read anything and everything, to unearth the whole, colorful story of her beginnings.

By Christmas the book for her parents was complete, but that gift was just the beginning of Mildred’s work. It was like a jigsaw puzzle, but so far, she only had the edges put together. She spent the next eight years reading and rereading hundreds of books, studying countless websites, reviewing hundreds of original documents, and consulting more than 50 experts in their fields to fill in the full picture of the McBrides beginning with their immigration from the Ulster Plantation circa 1741.

The hours upon hours of research on their own were their own reward, but it seemed a shame not to do something with all of the fascinating information that she had uncovered. Having worked in advertising for two decades, she hoped some of that creativity had rubbed off on her when she started putting those pieces of information—some head-scratchers and others downright startling—into a publishable form for others to enjoy. The prolific reader, turned writer, started with articles for genealogy magazines, self-published her McBride research, and then launched into a creative nonfiction book. Little did Mildred know that the research and investigation that started as a gift for her family could help many other Scotch-Irish pioneer families also learn their own stories.