DRAGON

DRAGON NATURALLYSPEAKING
SUCCESS STORY

Sandy Schlaudecker:

UNCOVERING FAMILY HISTORY WITH DRAGON

Thanks to the technology widely available to us today, future generations won't have much trouble learning who we were and what we did during our lives; all of us will leave behind many gigabytes worth of evidence of our existence. As we reach deeper and deeper into the past, though, artifacts from our ancestors' lives become fewer and further between.

For example, what were relatives of ours doing during the Civil War? There may be nothing left but a few photos and some memories passed along by a distant cousin. In the case of Sandy Schlaudecker, however, she has a treasure trove of letters written by her great-great-great-grandfather James C. Parrott, a postmaster and businessman in Iowa who organized a group of men into Company E of the 7th Iowa Infantry and later rose to the rank of Brigadier General in the Grand Army of the Republic. He took part in Sherman's March to the Sea in the spring of 1864 and left the army in the summer of 1865 to return to civilian life.

"We inherited over 200 of Parrott's letters through the generations, and I recently took it on myself to transcribe them," Schlaudecker explains. "With his vocabulary and unclear handwriting, though, it was taking forever. I thought, 'If I could just read these into the computer…'"

Enter the Assistive Technology Conference, where she discovered Dragon NaturallySpeaking. "I cannot tell you what a blessing Dragon has been," Schlaudecker enthuses. Now she simply places a letter in front of her and reads it into her PC. "I've saved a lot of time and frustration. A letter takes me about a fifth of the time to transcribe as it used to," she relates.

Occasionally she runs into a word that gives Dragon trouble, such as "sessesh" (secessionists), which was used during that time to describe Southerners, but once she trains it, the software has no problem picking it up after that.

Discovering the Past

Parrott wrote his letters between 1851 and 1875. Each is two to three pages long, and many of them were written to his wife and family in Iowa during his time in the Civil War. Schlaudecker donated the originals to the Iowa Historical Society and works from photocopies.

The project has not only taught her a lot about her great-great-great-grandfather but has also given her many family names that she has looked up on Ancestry.com. One relative of hers made an appearance on the PBS show Antiques Roadshow with a medal awarded to Parrott after the Civil War and a signal book carried by his son, leading to an information exchange that Schlaudecker has also conducted with other distant relatives. Many of them are eager to read Parrott's letters, and she's just as eager to see what treasures they have to show her.

Thanks to Dragon NaturallySpeaking, she'll be able to share Parrott's letters with those relatives much sooner than if she had to transcribe them by hand, helping them reach into the past and connect with someone who would probably be astonished to know that his legacy continued into the 21st century. "I think Dragon is a wonderful tool for adults and kids," Schlaudecker says. "I have recommended it to many friends."