

# Virtual Family Reunions

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Is your family too dispersed for everyone to gather in the same place at the same time for a family reunion? Even at the best of times, it's not always easy to get the family together. Even if you manage to gather everyone for a reunion, it may be hard for everyone to get into the same room to share family memories, and energetic kids may supply an abundance of distractions. A good solution is to hold a virtual family reunion. Many online tools are available to help you maintain and strengthen family ties. This presentation introduces some of these tools to help your family meet often and hold virtual family reunions. It also suggests five ways to get family members enthusiastically involved in organizing, implementing, and participating in virtual family reunions.

## What Is a Virtual Family Reunion?

Don't be afraid of the word *virtual* in the title of this presentation. Something is *virtual* that takes place on a computer or computer network. So when we talk about a "virtual family reunion," we are talking about a family reunion event that takes place online or an event that is facilitated by means of an online network. Online events can be *synchronous*, meaning that people participate all at the same time, or they can be *asynchronous*, meaning that they can participate in an event at different times.

Online computer networks enable us to create events that cross space and time quite easily. For example, I can hold an online classes from Missouri, where I live, with students participating from all over the world. Class participants can create experiences and engage with each other from their various locations and at various times. Similar online tools can be used to create a powerful family reunion experience.

A virtual experience can be patterned after corresponding physical experiences. But virtual tools also provide ways to explore and to create new and unique kinds of family reunions that provide benefits not available in a standard, on-the-ground family reunion.

RootsTech is an event that happens each year in Salt Lake City, Utah, but local family discovery days take place all over the globe that turn RootsTech into a sort of virtual family reunion that bridges both time and space.

## Benefits of a Virtual Family Reunion

1. The Internet enables family members to meet together and share experiences even when it isn't possible to be in the same place at the same time.
2. Online tools enable family members to meet and interact more frequently than would otherwise be possible.
3. Online tools enable family members to meet at different times.

4. A virtual family reunion features powerful tools for collaborating, interacting, motivating, discovering, and sharing.
5. The reunion experience can be easily preserved for others to experience in the future; people who are not born yet can even participate in your family reunion.

## Online Tools to Facilitate a Virtual Family Reunion

Tool 1. Video conferencing tools: Skype, Google hangouts, FaceTime; also CamFrog, Jitsi, ooVoo, Join.me, Facebook video chat

Tool 2. Multimedia screencast recording and broadcast tools: Screencast-o-Matic, Camtasia (\$), Jing, CamStudio, Free Screencast

Tool 3. Collaboration and sharing tools: Facebook, Google Drive, Picasa, Pinterest

Tool 4. Family heritage tools: Gimp, VLC, Audacity, RootsMapper

Tool 5. FamilySearch Family Tree (Memories)

## Five Ways to Get Family Members Enthusiastically Involved

1. Choose a theme and identify something specific to celebrate. The theme may be focused on a person in the family (such as Great-grandma and her 100th birth anniversary) or an event or a location of family interest, such as the anniversary of an immigrant ancestor's arrival in a new country or a visit to the old family home.
2. Don't try to do everything yourself. Identify people who would be willing to help, and delegate reunion tasks. The more other people get involved and feel ownership of the reunion, the better participation you will have.
  - Get email addresses and other contact information.
  - Choose a venue.
  - Notify participants.
  - Decide how you will record the reunion. Assign someone to record the reunion.
  - Plan the program.
  - Make an equipment list for participants (Internet access, computer, webcam, access to a platform). (Learn how to use the mute button.)
  - Plan and prerecord various events (cooking a favorite family recipe, having the kids act out a family story, and so on) for replay during the reunion.
  - Plan follow-up dates or recurring events.
  - Call and record the memories of family members about a particular event.
  - Plan break-out sessions and games.
3. Ask someone in the family to create a logo or design to celebrate a theme. Post the logo, design, or theme on social media or the reunion event site (or ask other family members to do it for you).
4. Invite family members to get an account on a shared platform that will be used in the reunion, such as Skype, Google, or Facebook, so you can share the event with each other.
5. Get the teenagers involved.