

Facts writer's genealogy journey leads to some fascinating revelations

DIGGING UP ROOT: GENEALOGY JOURNEY LEADS TO FASCINATING REVELATIONS

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From left, Brazoria Historical Militia members Michael Bailey, far left, and Les Pettigrew talk with Tim Pettigrew, Judy Tomlin and Tissie Schwebel after a ceremony in April 2015 honoring Confederate soldiers from Brazoria County buried in the Old Columbia Cemetery in West Columbia. Bailey, curator of Brazoria County Historical Museum in Angleton, can and often does help area residents pursue their genealogy. Bailey has been helping Facts staff writer Mary Newport trace her family tree. They have come up with some surprising results.

On the second floor of the Brazoria County Historical Museum, there's an office overflowing with the family history of dozens of Brazoria County lines. Some of the more entrenched and prolific have entire filing cabinets, while others simply sport bulging manila folders. Through this mountain of paper putters curator Michael Bailey, who could tell the secrets of generations of locals — but wouldn't.

“You and your family's history are yours so it only goes as far as me, unless you give me permission to talk about it,” he said. “During my research I may find contacts of relatives of yours who are also doing research on part of your family. I won't contact them unless I have

your permission. All information is yours and at any time you can stop the process and have me delete the materials.”

That’s the promise he makes to everybody who comes to him for help with their family history, as every Brazoria County resident has a right to do. Free genealogy assistance is assured to local taxpayers, who can call up the museum and make an appointment to learn about their history. Some want to check their eligibility for organizations like the Daughters of the American Revolution or the Society of the War of 1812, while others are curious about their roots. I just wanted to write a story about it, once I caught Bailey’s enthusiasm for the idea.

“A lot of people don’t know they can do this,” he explained, flipping through websites and online scans of historical documents. “I show people what they can do and get them started on the research.”

That research can start with very little. All he needed was my name and place of birth, and in short order he had my grandparent’s marriage certificate and my fraternal grandmother’s obituary, along with a photo of her grave. He also had a possible membership for me in the Society of the War of 1812 through the Underwood line, complete with a grave photo and the last will and testament of Baldwin Underwood.

“To my daughter Leana all my interest in the stock, horses, mules, cows, sheep and hogs and all household property,” he wrote on Dec. 13, 1872. “At the death of my daughter Leana, the land and personal property to belong to Albert Rice Newport and Sarah F. Newport, heirs of my daughter Leana.”

All this was pretty impressive, but Bailey was just warming up. A few days later, he had my first semi-famous family member. He traced my grandmother’s maiden name, Lucille Martin, through census records and found a sprawling family of Martins. Great-grandfather John Frank Martin came to Oklahoma City from Missouri as a child and settled in for a rocky ride as an adult.

During his four-year tenure as mayor of the city, he saw eight different city managers hired and fired as the City Council fought among itself. Nevertheless, he passed \$1.28 million in bond issues for a new city jail, police department headquarters and municipal auditorium. He also went on to become assistant county attorney, municipal counselor and member of the Oklahoma Legislature and the Civil Service Commission.

After that, we were on a roll. Bailey and I exchanged emails and calls as he cruised back in time, chasing marriage and death certificates. Some of his findings were surprising; for example, my staunchly Catholic family must not have always been that way, for one of my not-too-distant ancestors was named Martin Luther. Another point of surprise was our heritage, which I had vaguely thought to be English-Irish. But close investigation pursued the family back to the German region of Baden-Baden.

Delighted at the treasure trove of information, I called my father to tell him all about it. He was happy for me, but a little perplexed.

“My mother always said we were Irish,” he said doubtfully when I expounded on our German roots.

I didn’t want to doubt Grandma Lucy, but I had a very persuasive line of census scans, grave photos and marriage certificates. I read out some of my evidence, and offered to email him the rest.

“Wait, this is about the Martins,” he interjected.

“Well yeah,” I said. “Grandma Lucy’s parents. We started with them.”

“Didn’t you know your grandmother was adopted?”

I didn’t. My grandmother, it emerged, was not born to the wealthy lawyer who brought a squabbling OKC City Council to heel. She was born to a family too poor to keep her, so desperate they had to give two of their children away.

The Martins couldn’t have children of their own; their three sons and three daughters were adopted from families who couldn’t support them. Two of them were my blood, Lucy and her biological brother Jerry. But my grandmother didn’t make much of that distinction as she got older — she considered the Martins her parents, and referred to them as such.

In many ways, it’s heartwarming to know that my history is touched by such love and selflessness. But I also was ashamed that I had wasted so much work by not knowing my family history. When I went to Bailey, he swept my worries away at once.

“Look at all the good they did and your adopted heritage. For that is also as much a part of you as you want to make it,” he told me. “(The adoption) did not show up in the records, only your willingness to look at it and start that conversation with your family saved that story.”

The conversation eased my feelings, but opened a new question: If all those people we traced back to Germany weren’t my ancestors, who were?

EDITOR’S NOTE: This essay will be continued in next Sunday’s edition.

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