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What's in a Name: Family Treasures

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What's in a Name: Family Treasures

By Lisa Roney
UCF Forum columnist
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My mother's cousin Virginia and her husband, Pat, visited us from time to time when I was a kid. Virginia was my grandmother's oldest sister's daughter, so—as we southerners were trained early to calculate—my first cousin once removed.

My grandparents had taken Virginia in after her mother died in the flu epidemic of 1918, a time that to me, even in the 1970s, seemed lost in the mists of the distant past. It stunned me that gray-haired Virginia had once been an 8-year-old girl whose mother died.

I may have been unusual, as not many children become fascinated by genealogy, but maybe you, too, had a favorite relative in your past. Maybe you, too, have joined in the recent boom in genealogy research going on. Maybe you've also thought about what all these family histories mean.

Virginia and Pat didn't have any children, but she was a big family history buff, and sometimes would arrive with notebooks of family trees and photos of gravestones and long-dead ancestors. She explained to me how it was that she was 26 years older than my mother, her first cousin—she was the eldest of an eldest, whereas my mother was the youngest of a youngest child. She also noted that childbearing happened over long years for women of previous generations.

I pored over the records with her. My Grandmother Roney had done enough research to become a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, but it was Virginia who brought the past to life for me.

By the early 1990s, however, I was busy with college, then work, then graduate school, then work. I moved from Tennessee to Minnesota, back to Tennessee, to Pennsylvania, then to Florida. Virginia died, and her husband soon followed her. I never knew what happened to her expansive notebooks that had opened the door to so many family stories, perhaps even to my own propensity to weave such stories, fictional and not, into my work as a writer.

A couple of years ago, however, one of my graduate students, Judith Roney, who had the name by marriage, became convinced that I must be a relative of her husband, and she suggested I join Ancestry.com to try to figure out how. We never could—that connection must be distant at best.

However, Judith reopened Virginia's world for me again. Right away, I got both of my parents (who are now divorced) to send me the records they had. These include a book written by yet another long-gone cousin about my maternal grandfather's family history, as well as my Grandmother Roney's family trees.

Madly, I began entering all this information into Ancestry and adding more via the little green leaf icons that indicate online records. Suddenly, I had more than 3,000 people in my family tree.

Perhaps you have done the same. It's certainly a widespread craze—I jokingly tell my husband that online genealogy is the equivalent of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) for old people. There are plenty of similarities—it happens on an internet-connected computer, you meet lots of other people *sort of*, there's always an interesting overlap between reality and fantasy, and it's addictive.

For most of us, there's always an imaginative element about these family histories. While there are strict genealogists—and I know a few of them—who painstakingly construct factual accounts of their ancestors, most of us take a few facts and wonder and guess and sympathize and suppose what life was like for those who came before.

Often what we find are indications of the same joys and sorrows we experience as mortal human beings today—births, marriages, graduations, travels and moves, fortunes gained and lost, illnesses, deaths. Sometimes we get a glimpse of poignant differences such as the once high rate of women's and infants' deaths at birth and childbirth.

One of my distant cousins—with the decidedly old-fashioned name of Finis Ewen Hogard (1880-1943)—lost his mother and baby sister at childbirth when he was 4, then lost his first wife and child in the same way, and the first child with his third wife at birth as well.

Evidently, there were some good years, as he went on to have six more children, and there's an extant charcoal portrait of him, looking prosperous in suit and tie. Ultimately, however, he died in the poorhouse, without his family, of syphilis.

Such facts beg for embroidery—a detailed story of this man overcoming travail only to return to it. Genealogy offers us a scaffolding with which to support our sense of ourselves, our families, and the past. For now, I imagine Finis driven by his many youthful losses, roving the South, desperate for affection and for children, taking up with numerous women until finally one is strong enough.

Perhaps one day I will reach out to his direct descendants and learn more of the real story. For that is one important difference between online genealogy and MMORPGs—there are real, live relatives out there.

In fact, when I first enrolled in Ancestry, I feared encountering relatives who were out to prove the WASP purity of their heritage or even a ridiculous relationship to royalty. As a white southerner whose ancestors have been in the region a long time, I expected I would find past slave-owners and current racists in my family tree.

Fortunately, the first relatives that I have met online and then in person are quite the contrary. It turned out that some of my unknown cousins live in Miami, and I met three of them last year. The Scotch-Irish Campbell line, shared through our great-great grandparents, however, isn't the main heritage of Geoff, Robbie, and Brett. Their grandfather married into an Ashkenazi Jewish family, and they and most of their relatives are Jewish.

We marveled over drinks how strange and marvelous that—for some unknown reason—the Tennesseans in our ancestral line seem to have been open-minded, egalitarian, and ahead of their times.

My newfound third cousins and I toasted to our good fortune in this regard. We talked about how, even part of the same generation, we are about 20 years apart in age.

And I reminisced about dear Virginia and about the fragility and strength of family, history, and story.

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