

Discovery of Self

It has been said that: *“Genealogy is where you confuse the dead and irritate the living!”* Some believe that: *“family reunions can become an effective form of birth control.”*

It is a privilege to address this conference on the quite personal field of genealogy. It is a noble work... searching ancestral families. In my view, it is a search for identity, a discovery of self.

I assume the phrase *“Who Do You Think You Are?”* is well known. As seen on television, the show takes celebrities on a quest of discovery. Nearly all who embarked on an ancestral search manifest a greater appreciation of self. They better understood who they are by discovering who their ancestors were.

Lionel Ritchie’s quest, seen in March of this year, led him to his second great grandfather, John Lewis Brown. Mr. Ritchie discovered that J.L. Brown left a legacy. A legacy more fully appreciated as we ponder his words, the words of a man born into slavery.

“It is only by our good qualities, rightly set forth, that we are to succeed in the future. First by educating every boy and girl, and teaching them, from cradle to grave, honesty, industry, economy of time and means, and the fullest employment of all rights of citizens; and, the destruction and burial of the accursed idea that the negro is inferior simply because in time he has been deprived of life, liberty and property. Let us all be wise men and women.” Commenting on his great, great grandfather’s remarks Lionel Ritchie, with deep emotion, said; *“This discovery was a most spiritual experience!”* By any objective measure, John Lewis Brown was a great man.

Well... who DO we think we are? Are we "*confusing the dead and irritating the living!*" or have we discovered ancestral truths, bringing joy to loved ones who have passed beyond mortality? Have we brought understanding to the living? Have we, through research and verification, discovered who *we* are....have you found your identity?

When laboring in genealogy, I occasionally felt irritating stings. It seemed like searching a hay stack and finding needles when all I wanted was thread. In that vein, allow me to share a bit of my own quest. It was a quest where hidden threads slowly, and in some instances, painfully revealed themselves; a quest that ultimately linked myself to an ancestry that helped build the republic we know as America. It began when I was a young boy.

I had turned six. Americans, and the world, were tender from suffering the ravages of depression and a world war. Rebuilding families and prosperity was on the minds of adults. I, on the other hand, was a school boy struggling to spell the word *garage* in Miss Schumm's first grade class.

Occasionally, during those early years, a sense that something was wrong stirred inside. Something was not right in the relationship with the man I knew as father. Well, I misspelled *garage* and was doomed to write the word 250 times on the blackboard. After completing the task, I walked the 2 miles home on hot sandy roads in the California desert, near the Mexican border. It was then that I experienced something that has remained vivid throughout my life. Not realizing it at the time, I was enlisted in a quest to discover family... and myself.

It was early October. The afternoon sun hung low in the western sky. As I walked down the drive that led to our small farmhouse, I saw two vultures perched on the fence to my left. They were huge, grotesque creatures. I felt somewhat frightened. They didn't move. They just sat there staring at me.

With my eyes riveted on theirs, I lowered my books bound together with a leather strap. The thought was to use them as a weapon if they attacked me.

As I came even with them, I stopped, impressed by their size, so close, not more than ten feet away. My throat was dry, my heart pounding. I thought for sure they sensed my fear and were about to pounce and devour me as they did with dead rabbits or coyotes. It was at that moment that I heard a soft voice, seemingly beside me. An immediate sense of calm embraced me. The gripping fear left. I stood motionless.

The comforting voice said: "*Norman...Look, look at their shadows*" and I did, then came a question, "*can you see what they are by their shadow?*" Beyond the low fence was an embankment that caught the image of their shadows. "Yes", I said, quietly, "I can see they are vultures by their shadows." Then softly came, "*Now look at your own shadow. Do you know who you are by your shadow?*" I turned one way then the other but could not perceive who or what I was by my shadow. I responded, "I cannot!" Then in what seemed a whisper, penetrating my soul, the words, "***You must know who you are!***"

For a moment I stared, not at the vultures, but at my shapeless shadow, trying desperately to find a relationship between its form and myself...to discover my identity, but I could not. I looked up to see the vultures fly away. They circled high...silently, in the desert sky.

Since that profound experience in 1946, the quest would eventually mature. Some 42 years later, in 1988, after encountering deceptions, red herrings, hidden records, bureaucratic barriers, and lot's of needles, I found the trailing ends of ancestral threads.

I discovered I was born in a place called Fairhaven, a home for unwed mothers operated by the Penial organization near Sacramento, California.

At birth, I was to be given up for adoption, but was taken home by my grandmother, to be raised within my maternal family, the Robertson's. That changed as my mother married a Landerman. I was never adopted. My birth certificate carries no surname, only "Norman Jay". The father is not identified.

I was like a "*Blossom in the Dust*" as depicted in the 1941 docudrama film of that title. It is a true account of Edna Browning Gladney, a child welfare advocate. In 1924 Edna joined the Texas Children's Home and Aid Society. Edna was a woman filled with compassion for children. She influenced legislation removing the stigma of illegitimacy commonly placed on birth records.

In testimony before the Texas State Senate she passionately stated: "*There are no illegitimate children... only illegitimate parents*".

Years progressed. My ancestral quest revealed names, places, histories and events. I became acquainted with the lives of people immigrating to America as early as 1620. Some were among the first Virginians, and first New Englanders. I discovered my natural father's family, his brother and four sisters, the Moore's, then the Freeman's, Baileys, Fosters, Mc Kissick's, and numerous other families, by marriages, occurring over the past 390 years. There are now over 9,300 documented individuals in my ancestral file, reaching back 13 generations on the Moore line, and the 12th Century on two other family lines. Many more await discovery.

They are of the wealthy, the poor, bonded servants, and the free spirited. They are those whose lives were filled with unspeakable tragedy and sacrifice. One set of parents lost seven children to childhood disease, snakebite or drowning, with only one surviving. There are members of King Henry IV's court of France. Each and every one is family from which generational blood flows in my mortal frame.

I was blessed to receive a genealogical record prepared by dedicated family members in the 1800's. The Moore family history was given to me while visiting a distant cousin living at one of the original family plantations located in Tennessee. This treasured volume set the foundation for applying modern technologies, taking advantage of the vast wealth of recordation available in this redeeming effort we call family search.

As author and historian Shirley Abbott ably puts it:

"We all grow up with the weight of history on us. Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge hidden in every cell of our bodies."

And, the poet Alice Walker, daughter of African American share croppers in rural Georgia, the youngest child of eight children, has said: *"How simple a thing it seems to me that to know ourselves as we are, we must know our mothers names."* Alice Walker adds an interesting reflection: *"Yes, Mother, I can see you are flawed. You have not hidden it. That is your greatest gift to me."*

As I realized, and am confident many of you have as well, this beginning was just that, a beginning. It was not long however, that I discovered something that had never entered my mind. I was introduced to African American relatives, descendents of slaves, the black Moore's of Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee, and the black Foster's and Mc Kissick's of South Carolina. These are they who are of my blood. They are of my family... as I am of theirs.

Allow me to share an abbreviated account of that discovery.

I had a phone conversation with a Moore family of eastern Tennessee. The amiable couple seemed anxious to assist my inquiry. To that point, I had sufficient genealogy to suggest that my Moore's were located in an eastern

part of Tennessee during the 1800's, having migrated there from North Carolina and earlier, in the 1700's, from Virginia. The Moore's migrated from one colony and state to the next in a southwest direction, settling in Wolf Valley on the Clinch River, a branch of the great Tennessee River.

"I think you may want to talk with Ruth and Herman Creasman" the woman said, "they live at the Old Moore Farm....they just may be your kin". I jotted down the phone number and was about to hang up when the man said "you know...them Moore's from over there in Meigs County have been around a long...long time!" I thanked them and prepared to make the call.

A woman's voice, decidedly pleasant, answered the phone. I described the nature of my call and after confirmation of some basic information, she thoughtfully said, "Well my dear, you are a descendant of the Tennessee Moore's and I am your cousin Ruth." We had talked for nearly an hour, rehearsing family history, when I inquired about slaves. Ruth quickly responded "Oh my yes!"..."There were slaves, most of their descendants live right near here." Without pause, Ruth began to tell the story of Harriet, the slave housekeeper, and the son born by her who was named Governor Gilbert Moore.

The child had been fathered by my great, great grandfather Caleb. Ruth continued for a short time then paused and said, "You know, you ought to talk with Ann Black, she is a granddaughter of Governor Gilbert...she lives in Oklahoma." As Ruth continued, she wanted me to know some of the Moore family history including, much to my surprise, that she lived in the original Moore home. The house was built in 1828 on a 3,000 acre plantation. The land was given to the family by President Andrew Jackson for service by the Moore's in the War of 1812, more particularly, the Battle for New Orleans against the British.

I made the promise that, as soon as I could arrange time, I would visit the Old Moore Farm. Ruth and I concluded the conversation with that promise. I sensed a true family solidarity with her, and a brooding, yet excited interest in Governor Gilbert, Harriet and descendents of the slaves. In an instant, and with little preparation, I found myself calling Ann Black in Shawnee, Oklahoma.

"Hello", came a distinctive southern accent. I introduced myself and said, "I am a descendent of Caleb Moore...I am his great, great grandson researching my family history. I have talked with Ruth Creasman and understand you and I are cousins." After a slight pause Ann inquired "Are you Black or White?" I quickly responded, "Ann, I am white and discovered, only moments ago, that I have Black relations." She laughed a little saying, "Honey...you have lots of Black cousins!"

Thus began a most incredible, soul stretching relationship. Since that moment, my life changed in ways linked to a deeper meaning of identity, far, far beyond names and dates and places. The ancestral work became a spiritual quest. It has become an allegiance, working toward healing lingering adversities of a storied past. It is a solemn resolve toward building relationships founded on a reverence for who we are..., black or white, for we know that all things considered, we are children of God."

I determined to travel to Tennessee and met with Ruth. I walked on ancestral lands. It was Mothers Day weekend of 2006.

As we drove along a winding forested road that Sunday morning, Ruth did her best to prepare me for the experience ahead saying "There is a tradition here on Mother's Day. Black families gather at their Church to celebrate family relations." I thought that would be a perfect basis for anything I might say, if asked to say anything at all. I responded by telling her I had brought the genealogy Ann and I had worked on and asked, "Do you think it appropriate?" Ruth assured, "I think it would be very good."

I was immediately impressed with a small and humble yet impressive church building. It was set in a groomed patch of lawn, surrounded by trees. The structure appeared to have evolved from the late 1800's. It had. This was where descendents of slaves, those who had retained the Moore surname lived. This is where generations worshiped, held funerals, celebrated marriages, or mourned the death of a newborn, so many newborn. It was a special structure serving a small community called Hickory Flats. It stood to nourish its people. It symbolized solidarity, their devotion toward each other and to God. It was a place of hope, a place to seek solace, a place to socialize, to rest from worldly cares.

There were only a few people when we arrived. Ruth saw my wonderment and laughed a little saying "They do things a little different here." The services were scheduled for 10:00am. It was near that hour. I determined to try and shed myself of "promptness", adjusting my nature to respect the way of these people. It helped when Ruth patted me on the arm saying: "They just have their own clock." I relaxed and walked around the church taking a few photographs. The feeling was profound.

Ruth and I entered the church taking a seat on one of the straight backed wooden benches. There was a stage of sorts in front with a large pulpit made of beautiful hardwood. It was obviously hand crafted and quite handsome. The windows were painted stained glass with a colorful pallet of greens, blues, purple and pale yellows. Puffy spring clouds floated by, casting a kaleidoscope of colors throughout the chapel. A slight chill transformed into an abundance of warmth as more and more people arrived, dressed in Sunday-best.

Musicians set up drums, instruments, music stands and chairs. An old upright piano held its permanent place. Before long a mature and rather large woman played church music on the piano, joined, spontaneously, by

worshippers, humming while taking their seats. The thought struck me that I may be in someone's favorite seat. I leaned over to Ruth and whispered "Are we ok sitting here?" She smiled saying "we're just fine." I realized my nervousness and needed to simply absorb the scene.

The preacher arrived, dressed in a fine suit with a black cape over his shoulders. He carried a large, old Bible under his right arm. As he passed, he smiled and bowed his head slightly. I returned the nod, with a smile. He greeted Ruth by saying, in a sincere manner, "So good to see you Miss Ruth!" The piano music continued, joined by increased humming. Soon the band joined presenting a medley of voice and instrumental sounds that was truly cultural...rich in spirit.

Voices and instruments gave way to the words of a Deacon who delivered an energetic sermon recounting past Mother's Days and the gifts of God. He continued for some time with increasing excitement over the blessings of Jesus and unspoken hopes of the congregation. There was an abundance of Amen's!

Two young boys walked up and down aisles passing out programs that arrived late. I was shocked to see my name with the designation "Guest Preacher". I turned to Ruth who saw it for the first time as well. She shrugged her shoulders slightly and just smiled. My heart pounded a little, thinking surely they had made a mistake. Certainly they couldn't mean that I would preach to them? "Good grief", what would I say? In a moment, a thought came to mind, "Tell them of their family history....share with them their heritage."

Wooden slat holders fastened on the back of the benches held song books, and small paper fans. The room temperature had become such that more and more fans were used. I felt I needed one myself as the preacher stood at the pulpit and formally introduced me and acknowledged Ruth who

they all knew quite well. I stood, bowing slightly to the congregation. The women wore grand apparel of the brightest colors. "What a beautiful and humbling sight" I thought. I also noticed every eye was riveted on this tall white man.

The preacher launched another sermon, full of power, which was magnified by spontaneous shouts of praise for God and love of Jesus. Never had I heard so many Halleluiahs and felt spiritual enthusiasm that nearly burst the walls of that small chapel.

A sustained period of time passed before the music and singing ceased. It was then that the preacher invited me to come up and "preach". I picked up the Black Moore genealogy folder and made my way toward the front of the chapel. I looked at the pulpit and thought it best that I stand in front of it, not behind it.

The room was silent. I took the opportunity to look into their eyes and see their faces. That moment imprinted in my mind an indelible image of men and women, boys and girls, descendants of slaves, many who carried, proudly, the surname Moore.

In that quiet serenity, I began by stating my name, saying "I have come from the Pacific Northwest to my ancestral home, the ancestral home of many of you. I am a great, great grandson of Caleb and Lavina Moore of the Old Moore farm. They were, in those trying days, slave holders." There was wonder and anticipation in their eyes. Some of the older men and women nodded their heads as a sign of understanding. Then I said, "I am most grateful to our God this Mothers Day to speak of one of His special daughters, a matriarch and ancestor of many of you here today. I speak of and wish to honor Harriet Moore." A murmur of approval, punctuated by a few soft amen's, rippled through the congregation. I began to relate the story of Harriet and Gilbert, her son, born as a result of

relations with my great, great grandfather Caleb Moore. I unfolded an abbreviated family history emphasizing, as I began to close; “you and I are cousins” and “if we are not cousins, then we are each a child of God which means, we truly are brother and sister.”

I bore my testimony that “Jesus is the Christ. He lives and He is the Only Begotten, the Beloved of the Father”. I confirmed that it was “He, Jesus, who atoned for the sins of the world, even the sins of our ancestors”. I closed with the affirmation “In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen”.

I looked into their faces and could not withhold my emotions. I realized I had no real understanding of what it meant to be a slave but sensed its horridness. I wept. Others were weeping as well and at that moment, a marvelous spirit of peace entered Hickory Flats Missionary Chapel. We all felt its presence. Suddenly there emerged, among the congregation, a refined, a most sublime, chorus of halleluiahs and amen’s!

Many of the elderly shared their stories and relationships. One woman told me of the days of slavery passed on by her grandmother. She repeated the story I had learned from Ann Moore Black. It was that at the end of the Civil War, all the freed slaves came to the kitchen door asking what would become of them. They wanted to stay and work. They were told they would have paying jobs. That land would be given them and the assistance needed for building homes, and that a school and church would be provided. I asked the woman if she would mind sharing her year of birth. With a broad smile she said, “My dear, I came to earth in January of 1916. She was 90 and as lively as could be.

I felt saturated with love and acceptance from the people of Hickory Flats. Ruth took my arm and we departed. As I got into the car, I looked back upon the remnant of folks enjoying themselves. “What a scene”, I thought, “What a marvelous experience”! That Mother’s Day, I crossed my Rubicon

never to question or wonder. Now the work would continue with renewed diligence. I would attempt to restore that which was taken, the missing link in their lives, as it had been in mine...identity.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are privileged to have access to marvelous tools. Computers, the internet, indexed source documents and inter-service libraries, archives, the services of organizations like Ancestry.com and LDS Familysearch.org, and the dedicated people and resources of the Northwest African American Museum, here in Seattle. We need only learn how best to access them and go to work.

Some may wish to take a path defined by Mark Twain who said: *“Why waste your money looking up your family tree? Just go into politics and your opponents will do it for you.”*

But, I think most would agree with Alex Haley who suggests that:

“In all of us there is a hunger, marrow deep, to know who we are and where we came from.”

It was the poet and playwright Carl Sandburg who warned:

“When a society or a civilization perishes, one condition can always be found. They forgot where they came from.”

And finally, the wisdom of Helen Keller who said:

“There is no King who has not had a slave among his ancestors, and no slave who has not had a King among his.”

Against all odds, I found my ancestry. In doing so... through their lives, the lives of maternal, and finally, my father's family, I discovered my identity.

As the July 27th 1988 announcement, prepared for family, friends and associates, states:

*“Having found my natural father Hope Eugene Moore,
With love and respect for my mother Ritta Jeanette Robertson Landerman,
And wishing to establish a legitimate surname, I am and shall henceforth
be known as Norman Jay Landerman-Moore.”*

Thank you for allowing me to share this with you. May God bless us, and guide us, in this great work that we may not “*confuse the dead and irritate the living*”, rather, that we may discover ourselves and do all we can to link families together.

Norman Jay Landerman-Moore

November 5th 2011