

Finding Family –July 2017

Genealogical TMI

By Hilary Wardlaw

I sometimes ask acquaintances who share my genealogy hobby – “Did you fall for the free trial like I did?”

Truthfully, it was the combination of family lore and the complete lack of fact checking that got me hooked. Now, several years later, my family tree has nearly 4,000 individuals and perhaps some genealogical “TMI” (too much information and way too many cousins and in-laws.)

Genealogy is a bit of a crap shoot. Some days I find a ton of information, and on other days, I run into one brick wall after another. I can say that the Information Age is rapidly catching up with the past as a myriad of documents appear online.

Take, for example, some of the old newspaper stories in my collection: — an expectant great-aunt — who shot down her ex-fiancé — only to be exonerated due to insanity; — a man, accused of adultery — with my great-grandmother — who shot the sheriff coming to arrest him for the crime; — the gruesome death of my great-grandfather, a railroad conductor, who slipped while trying to catch a ride home at the end of his shift; — a great-great-aunt, who moved from Maine to a farm in north Napa in the 1860s with her husband, who later became a Napa County supervisor; — and a great-great-grandfather who founded a small resort town and railway station (now a ghost town) in the hills above Los Angeles.

There are too many more to mention here and, frankly, most are really only interesting to me and my kin. TMI — maybe?

My most recent and satisfying find was learning the circumstances surrounding my grandfather’s adoption. With only a common last name and grandpa’s date of birth, it took a good year to discover his biological parents. Through many months of searching, I finally found a legal notice, in the Salt Lake paper, about a guardianship hearing for my young grandfather by his adoptive family in Idaho.

That discovery led to stories about grandpa’s biological father, Ralph. Ralph was a railroad conductor, the son of a successful businessman from Maine and Mayflower descendant who died in a terrible accident. But, I found nothing about grandpa’s mother, Mary. What could have happened to Mary? Well, the problem was – so many things. The proverbial brick wall!