

Finding Family – November 2018

Searching for Cousin Margaret

By Sue Ziemski

When my mother moved to a smaller residence, she gave me three LARGE boxes of family photographs, documents and letters. It took more than 3 years to identify all the people and their connections.

Among the documents was a letter from 1954. The envelope was addressed to my great-grandfather John Stephenson. The salutation was to "Cousin John" and the signature was "Cousin Margaret". It was mailed from Kansas; I had no Stephenson connections in Kansas that I knew about and I had no idea who this "cousin" was. There was a return address in Kansas but no name.

I have many wonderful memories of my Grandfather John. As children my brother and I spent every spare minute at the farm and when he retired we shared many afternoons with him. He moved his rocking chair out to the front yard, under the maple trees, and he would sit there smoking his pipe. The smell of Prince Albert Cherry-blend tobacco still takes me back to my childhood.

He was one of the few adults who had time to sit and talk to us little kids. I remember so many of his stories. One that I will never forget is about the time he bought his first Model A Ford. It was only the second automobile in the county. And since most of the roads were simply farm trails through the countryside, it could be a challenge to get anywhere. One day he came to a stand-off with the other Ford when they met bumper to bumper and neither driver could get into reverse. He would always chuckle when he told that tale.

Grandfather John's current dog, Shep, followed him everywhere and would lay beside his chair. He always had a dog and even though it was not the same dog, it was always named "Shep" short for "Shepard". He said it was easier to remember one name. He said that Shep had one job: to bring the cows in from the pasture in the evening. And when Grandfather retired so did Shep.

Of the stories he told, they were sometimes about family members but seldom about family connections. So after I found that letter I was intrigued and began to search for "Cousin Margaret" in earnest. There were some clues in the letter. She wrote about her niece visiting the family home in England (although the pictures she referred to were not there) she did mention the family home was still standing in the community of Skidbrook near Saltfleet in Louth County. I wonder if it is still there today because my Grandfather John's father, David Stephenson, immigrated to America in 1856 just days after marrying; so in 1954 the house was at least 100 years old.

Through further research I have discovered the connection between Margaret and John. John's mother was Helen Dawson who married David Stephenson in 1856. Margaret's father was Mark Dawson, the brother of Helen. They all emigrated from the same town in England but

Finding Family – November 2018

Searching for Cousin Margaret

By Sue Ziemski

David Stephenson ended up in Michigan and Mark Dawson ended up in Kansas even though he spent some time in Michigan.

A portion of her letter reads: "Wouldn't your parents and mine and Aunt Rebecca and Uncle Frank have gotten a thrill out of the sight of the old home. Which I imagine is very little changed from their time . . . There were many Dawson relatives left behind in England when our grandfather had nerve enough to start out for himself in a new country."

And with that paragraph I had two other names to add to the growing family tree. There are other letters and documents which indicate that the Kansas families often visited in Michigan. There are photographs of picnics and other gatherings. Even today I continue to find new information and the family story gets more detailed. Margaret married Ephraim Haines in 1900. They had no children but there were many nieces and nephews through the years.

Margaret was the only child of Mark Dawson and his wife Teresa Dean. She died in 1955, and although we never met in person, I feel as though I knew her. And I have learned even more about Grandfather John.

(Since this research, I have located David Stephenson's house near the cemetery bearing his name. This house was built only a few years after he arrived in the United States about 1859 and is still standing although it needs restoration.)

If you are interested in genealogical research, stop by the Napa Valley Genealogical Society's library, 1701 Menlo Ave. Friendly library volunteers are available to help you begin your search for your roots. Check www.napavalleygenealogy.org or call 252-2252 for library hours.