

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Whether you were born on Cape Cod or haven't yet been here long enough to call yourself a Cape Codder, if you've the remotest idea one of your forebears might have lived in the United States two hundred or more years ago, you might want to begin a study of your family's history.

Recently there've been two incentives to delve into the past and find out who and where you came from. One, of course, is Haley's book "Roots"; the other is the recent Bicentennial.

Most of us knew our fathers and mothers and many of us remember our grandparents, or some of them. A few of us may remember one or more of our great-grandparents. Beyond that, it's pretty hazy.

If, however, your parents--or better yet your grandparents--are still living, you'll find they remember people you never heard of; they will probably be delighted with the opportunity to pass along some of their memories about people who were family elders when they were young.

Sometimes these stories lead to a life-long search, following the chains of generations back to a time when the earth's population was smaller. The chase can be intriguing, frustrating, confusing, and in instances where the searcher is rewarded with the data he seeks, it can become an exciting treasure hunt.

There are, of course, dozens of organizations that exist primarily to glorify the memory of generations past. There are the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Sons of the American Revolution, the Colonial Dames, and there's the Mayflower Society. There are also family groups, limited to descendants of an early settler.

Whether or not you find your line goes back to one of the adventurous wanderers who landed at Plymouth in 1620, you may be astonished to discover just who your grandfather, five times removed, was and what he did.

On the other hand, it may come as a less than pleasant shock to find that there's a skeleton in the family closet. One poor lady discovered an ancestor had died in the electric chair, a murderer. The historian who unearthed this not-so-pardonable secret in the lady's family background was kind enough to disguise the incident, describing it more or less as follows:

"At the time he died he was connected with an institution conducting electronic work."

Becoming a member of a society such as the DAR or the SAR may be right up your alley or it may be the last thing you'd enjoy. People differ in their preferences, and if all those eligible were to join chapters of these organizations, membership would be remarkably commonplace.

In the opinion of some, such organizations primarily provide ego-trips for their members who somehow believe

because someone came over in the Mayflower or fought the British in the War of Independence he was, and by extension, they are superior to someone who more recently landed at Ellis Island.

Whichever camp you belong to, genealogy can be fun and can make the misty past come alive again in your imagination.

We all know, of course, the average life-span in those days was a good deal shorter than it is today. Women frequently died in child-birth; men were lost at sea. Young and old alike became victims of diseases and ills we seldom hear about anymore; and if we do, they're seldom fatal.

Diphtheria was a scourge; scarlet fever was a killer; few survived appendicitis, pneumonia or small pox; even measles and whooping cough took their toll. And there were some ailments that were lumped under general headings like "inflammation of the bowel".

These, added to fatal illnesses that still befall us, coupled with accidents and acts of God, served to slow the rate of population growth. It also served to produce many one-parent families and increased chances of second, third, or even fourth marriages.

Families were usually large ones, but in many no more than half the children born survived to adulthood. It wasn't particularly unusual for a man to have eight children by a first wife and, after her death, father another half-dozen by a second.

The intricacies of family relationships were further complicated by the practice of naming a second child for an older one who had previously died. Thus, in searching old vital statistics we frequently find a son Daniel. Born in '94, followed in '02 by a second son Daniel. Further research reveals Daniel of '94 died before his younger brother was born.

Such details may make ancestor-searching a confusing task, but for many who launch upon the sea of historical research, these particulars add interest to the voyage and zest to a successful arrival in port.

Digging out the facts can make our nation's early history a personal experience. It's one thing to know families were often divided at the time of the American Revolution with one brother taking the side of the Patriots while the other clung firmly to the Loyalists, a Tory, and perhaps being forced to remove to Nova Scotia along with wife, children, and household pets and effects.

It's another thing entirely to find that very thing happened to your very own ancestor. It gives a person pause, raises the questions "What would I have done? Which side would I have been on? Would I have dared to support those Kenneth Roberts called "Rabble in Arms?" Or would I have dared defy them and remain loyal to the Crown?"

We all have roots, whether here or in the "old country". And our roots are meaningful once we trace them back before World War I, the Spanish American War, the Civil War, the War of 1812, back beyond the Revolution to the first young men and women to raise families on these shores.

Living as we do upon the self-same land where some of the earliest Europeans to come to the New World, we've an advantage over our cousins whose forefathers were among the frontiersmen who pushed westward across the Appalachian Mountains, beyond to the Great Plains, and even over the deserts and mountains to the Pacific.

As you learn about your family, those who came before you, you may find strengths in them as well as weaknesses; you may find personalities that are, by a miracle of biology, repeated in yourself--or in your child who is, by virtue of accidental inheritance, showing those self-same characteristics--ones you've found hard to understand, perhaps.

There could be other surprises, too; since the number of appropriate mates was greatly limited in early years of this country's settlement, relationships often became complicated you could be related to the same person in more ways than one. Stranger things have happened.

To those who may be comparative newcomers to these parts, your roots may lie in Europe, in Africa, in the Middle East, in Asia--but wherever your search may lead should you undertake to make it, it cannot fail to be rewarding and may be amazingly revealing.