

“The MacGuffin of Family History”
A lecture by Gary T. Johnson to the Annual Members’ Meeting
of the Chicago Historical Society,
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When our Chief Historian, Russell Lewis, told me about our annual meeting, I asked him if there are any traditions I should be aware of. “There used to be a lecture.” I decided to revive that tradition myself, but don’t worry, the lecture will be brief!

You may have heard the rumor that I am an enthusiastic family historian. The rumor is true. I hope that, for the historians among you, this doesn’t take your new President down a notch. I can remember two conversations when that already has happened to me. One of my tutors from Oxford had the wonderful Dickensian name of Harry Pitt, and he loved visiting Chicago. During one of his visits, I proudly told him about all the progress I had made, and he scolded me. “What do I care if some deed turns up showing that one of my 15th century ancestors inherited a bedstead and a table?

Shame on you! Give me Lincoln!” There’s no arguing with that, of course. I suppressed my rebuttal that family history, properly done, was history. In my own family, it certainly was an example of “history from the bottom up,” the kind of history everyone was trying to learn how to do. The second conversation involved Ellsworth Brown, the fifth President of the Chicago Historical Society. When I told him once that I was something of a genealogist, he groaned. “Oh. Gary! ‘Genies’ -- as he called them -- are the bane of every serious research library. Not you!”

If you share these views, I probably won’t change your mind, but with a captive audience of friends, I would like to take this opportunity to offer a brief explanation.

My title is “The MacGuffin of Family History.” You remember Alfred Hitchcock’s term “MacGuffin,” don’t you? Hitchcock would build an entire story around what he called the “MacGuffin,” which was something of intense interest to the characters, but otherwise is of little wider importance.¹ In [The Lady Vanishes](#), it’s a little tune. In [Notorious](#), it has something to do with uranium. In [North by Northwest](#), there is the vaguest of references to secrets.

I propose that the concept of Hitchcock’s MacGuffin is a key to understanding family historians. Viewed from the lofty heights of academic scholarship, the driving force for a family history researcher is of no world significance, but viewed from the vantage of the particular researcher, it means everything and creates fevered activity.

Take a common example. Much family history activity over the years has been focused on proving something, such as “Can I make a connection to some noble line?” It is such activity that gives family history a reputation of elitism, but there are many surprises. I know one family that made its case for DAR membership, but learned that their first immigrant to America came here to serve a sentence for being a thief. Family research truly requires an open mind.

¹ “Well, it’s the device, the gimmick, if you will, the papers the spies are after.... So the ‘MacGuffin’ is the term we use to cover all that sort of thing: to steal plans or documents, or discover a secret, it doesn’t matter what it is. And the logicians are wrong in trying to figure out the truth of a MacGuffin, since it’s beside the point. The only thing that really matters is that in the picture, the plans, documents or secrets must seem to be of vital importance to the characters. To me, the narrator, they’re of no importance whatever.”

“Hitchcock,” Helen G. Scott, Francois Truffaut. Simon & Schuster, Inc. New York, 1985. P. 138.

I know someone who works tirelessly to prove that he has a collateral family connection with George Washington. It's what spurs him on, but is of no particular wider significance: we all know that some people are related to Washington's family, so why does it matter who such people are in the great scheme of things? It's a MacGuffin.

But not so fast. Sometimes there is an interesting story. Consider the efforts of some Afro-Americans to prove a link with Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemming. Maybe that's not a MacGuffin, because of the wider significance. Viewed from the point of the individual researcher, however, isn't there at least some general resemblance between these two quests – Jefferson and Washington?

In any event, it isn't always connections with the famous that the researcher is trying to prove. During years of working in one research library, the fellow in the carrel at my side was a doctor who was an African-American. He was driving himself to distraction contacting everyone in the country who shared his surname, as long as he could tie them into the family lines. Some were black, and some were white, he told me. So there it is: a fact so well known to American history that nobody needs to prove it any more – that many Americans on both sides of the "color line" are not only bound by historical ties but also by family ties – yet exploring that question in the context of one extended family occupied every minute of a researcher's spare time and drove him to the very limits of research.

What are we to make of these people who research family history? Can you simply write us off as obsessive personalities, and let it go at that? To do so would be circular. As anyone can see who knows a star athlete, or a prolific scholar, or an ambitious person of any kind, there generally is a degree of obsession that helps to drive them on. No, the question is: Why do these people channel their obsession in that particular direction? And in each case, when you get to know them, you will find there is something that drives them along that is not of world significance, but is important to them. A MacGuffin.

What about your new president? My goal is to trace every immigrant ancestor back from Chicago to the village of origin in Europe. I have had some wonderful luck in Norway, Sweden and Germany. Once I find the right village, then working with records in northern Europe is usually easy. I've got the language skills, but I've seen plenty of researchers who have taught themselves enough how to make their way through old script in languages they have not formally studied. You could do it too. Trust me. But again, it's a MacGuffin: the historian knows the pedestrian truth that immigrants left places all over Europe to come to America, but to me, it's all important: which immigrants, which places and why them, not the others who stayed behind.

This might surprise you, but family historians are among the most computer-savvy people I know. We were early adapters because programs appeared early on for managing our chaotic details. There now are many ways to do family history research on-line, but it is not true, as so many of my friends ask me, that you can go on-line and simply download your family history. The real work is what it always has been: going through original sources. Microfilms are still a big part of our lives. Computers and on-line resources have been particularly valuable in certain areas, such as making connections between members of Jewish communities who have been broken because of the Holocaust.

But now a new kind of technology has entered our lives: genetic testing. You know a little about this from the story of Thomas Jefferson and his wider family. But there's more. If you give up a cheek swab sample, as I have done a number of times, you can get various reports back.

The National Geographic Society has a fascinating project that you can access online, which is based on genetic samples from all over the world.² I sent in my swab, and this is what they told me, all based on my Y chromosome, the one males get from their fathers.³ My people came out of Africa during the second great migration out of that continent, then my Y chromosome was carried to the Middle East and on through Iran to the steppes of Central Asia, where we hunted the woolly mammoth and other game. My Y-chromosome ricocheted off the mountains of the Hindu Kush and bounced northward into Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and southern Siberia. We sewed weather tight clothing, which was very handy, because this was the Ice Age. We headed west, our Y-chromosome in tow, and arrived in Europe some 35,000 years ago, where we elbowed out the Neanderthal in places like Spain and France. We begat the Cro-Magnons and painted caves. I will never forgive my ancestors for leaving Spain and France: couldn't they at least have kept a vacation house? Then my Y chromosome headed up to northern Europe. Thus saith the National Geographic Society. They even gave me a map. By the way, my map probably looks a lot like your map, if your people came from northern Europe.

If you send your sample to Bryan Sykes at the University of Oxford, you can learn the history of your mitochondrial DNA: in other words, your mother's mother's mother, and so forth.⁴ Professor Sykes posits one female, whom he calls "Eve," from whom we all are descended, who lived about 150,000 years ago. ⁵

The National Geographic Society posits the existence of one male, let's call him "Adam," who lived about 60,000 years ago from whom we all are descended.⁶ The odd thing, of course, is that Adam and Eve were not alive at the same time, as far as I can tell.⁷

Every week or so, I get an email from a group called Family Tree DNA telling me that someone new in their database has turned up with a Y-chromosome matching my own and encouraging me to email that person because there is over a 99% chance that we are related. Now, my father's line runs back to Sweden, but the names referred to me are always names like McSheehy and McKenzie. So I

² National Geographic Society, The Genographic Project. <https://www5.nationalgeographic.com/genographic/>

³ At the National Geographic Society, females get their mitochondrial DNA tested, the DNA we all get from our mothers.

⁴ Bryan Sykes, Oxford Ancestors Limited. <http://www.oxfordancestors.com/> His test is pricey: \$315 at current exchange rates. See also Bryan Sykes, *The Seven Daughters of Eve*. W W Norton and Company, New York, 2001.

⁵ "They join up with the clan mothers from other parts of the world and ultimately coalesce in one woman – mitochondrial Eve, who lived in Africa about 150 000 years ago. Wherever we live on the planet, we are all her descendants." Bryan Sykes is Professor of Human Genetics at the Weatherall Institute of Molecular Medicine, University of Oxford. "Mitochondrial DNA and human history" Bryan Sykes, posted 10/9/2003 by The Wellcome Trust, <http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/en/genome/genesandbody/hg07f004.html>

⁶ http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2005/04/0413_050413_genographic.html

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Actually, this is not so odd. The concept of the Mitochondrial Eve should not be confused with the mathematical hypothesis that all humans alive today had a more recent common female and male ancestor. [See Douglas L. T. Rohde et al., "Modelling the Recent Common Ancestry of All Living Humans," *Nature*, Vol. 431, 30 September 2004, pp. 562–566.] Such a common ancestor is known as the The "Most Recent Common Ancestor" of all living humans lived within historical times (3000 BCE - 1000 CE), according to a non-genetic model reported in a 2004 article by Douglas Rohde, Steve Olson, and Joseph Chang, "Modelling the recent common ancestry of all living humans". Other models reported in the same article suggest that the MRCA of Western Europeans lived as recently as 1000 CE. Physical isolation of certain peoples, such as on islands, may push the hypothetical Most Recent Common Ancestor farther into the past. At any rate, any family historian who can go back a dozen generations or more, will find the family tree narrows in certain places as the same individuals appear in different lines.

email them and say, "I think there must be a Viking in your background," but maybe there's a McSheehy in mine.⁸

To me, this kind of genetic research is a parlor game, not what spurs me on. But that's not true for everyone. Another group, Sorenson Molecular Genealogy Foundation,⁹ tells me that there have been some very fruitful connections made between Afro-Americans and genetic lines in Africa. For the first time, certain families are finding a way to do what drives my research, which is to make the leap between America and find a specific place of origin across the ocean. To those African-American communities, where the written records are sparse, this is no parlor game: genetic research can be a powerful link to a past that seemed unknowable. It is very illuminating and very exciting.

What interests me the most when I have the time to research – which of course, now I don't – is something that doesn't even have a field to fill in on a genealogy program, the question of motivation. Motivation is the Holy Grail of family history. It's the "why" question.

For anyone researching in America, the key question always is, "Why did they come here in the first place?" For those descended from slaves, the "why," of course, had nothing to do with their own free will, but that "why" continues to have a powerful impact even today. For descendants of Europeans and Asians, the "why" is often quite murky. Religious freedom, economic opportunity, political reasons – all of these grand themes of history come into play, but that's not enough.¹⁰ Why did this individual come here, when siblings stayed home? Why did this family leave, when the family on the next farm is still there.

The drama of the decision to come to America is put in sharp relief for those of us who have had the good fortune to research our family members on both sides of the Atlantic. My first ancestor who came to Chicago arrived from Norway in 1853. I can trace where my antecedents and I were born as follows: Bjerkreim, Bjerkreim, Bjerkreim, Bjerkreim, Bjerkreim, Bjerkreim, Bjerkreim, Bjerkreim, Bjerkreim, Bjerkreim, Chicago, Chicago, Chicago, Chicago. Many of you would have the same story if you knew the details: ancestors who did not move an inch over the centuries, but suddenly, they set across an ocean and travel thousands of miles. (But you see that in my family, the tendency not to move an inch set in again after that one break!) Something so dramatic screams out: Why? This to me is the Holy Grail of family research.

I happen to have a letter written by that immigrant ancestor, Svale Staaleson, back to his brother Sigbjørn in Norway in 1859. It begins: "Chicago, 17th of August, 1859." In it, he writes to his

⁸ The message usually says: "You and the other person match in all loci. If you share the same surname or variant, this means that there is a 99.9% likelihood that you share a common ancestor in a genealogical time frame. If you match another person without the same surname or variant, you still probably share a common ancestor, but this ancestor most likely lived in the time before surnames were adopted." Family Tree DNA, <http://www.familytreedna.com>

⁹ Sorenson Molecular Genealogy Foundation: <http://smgf.org/> "The Sorenson Molecular Genealogy Foundation (SMGF) is a non-profit organization committed to developing the world's foremost database of correlated genetic and genealogical information, and making this information freely available to the public. DNA analysis is a powerful new tool for genealogical research. The SMGF database will allow genealogists to use their own genetic profile to identify possible genealogical links. This database is currently the largest of its kind in the world." The lab they use for testing is Lab with Sorenson: GeneTree DNA Testing \$195 <http://www.genetree.com/> A sub of Sorenson Genomics <http://www.genetree.com/sorensongenomics/index.asp> \$195 test. <http://www.genetree.com/product/y-chromosome-dna.asp>

¹⁰ It is marvelous, though, when a book appears that sheds light on the historical, social and economic conditions surrounding emigration. The best I know is Ann Urness Gesme, *Between Rocks and Hard Places*. Gesme Enterprises, Cedar Rapids, Iowa. 1993 ("traditions, customs, and conditions in Norway during the 1800s, emigration from Norway, the immigrant community in America")

brother back on the family farm: "I have been told by a newcomer from Hæsted in Helleland diocese that brother Iver is still thinking about settling in America but that he is having second thoughts about it. Ask him to write to me immediately so that I can write him back and tell him what would be best for him to take along if he comes here."

So there you are: one brother came to Chicago, another stayed on the farm, and a third flirted with the idea of coming, but had second thoughts and never came. Why? I stand here today because one brother answered "Yes, I'll go to America." I wish I knew more about that decision. Human motivation is the Holy Grail of family history research.

As long as I have the power to ask "why," I will keep asking it. And as long as I am here, the Chicago Historical Society will be the way I always found it when I did my own research here, a "family-history-friendly" zone.