

THE ROTTEN LIMB OF MY FAMILY TREE

‘Writer’s Corner’

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I knew Ma Haney had a low opinion of school education. She always said all a child needed was the three R’s. Anything beyond that could be found in the Bible. She was always complaining that if Ms. Draper was going to find kids something to read at our little two-room school, it should be just the Bible and stories she had found in what she called “the other good book” which was a collection of Bible stories.

Then came the assignment to do a family tree. Since I made A’s and wanted get all my assignments done, I was determined to get my heritage recorded as far back as I could. I was in the 5th grand and my Aunt Zasu was in the 8th. We knew that we could work together to get the Haney and Medley sides.

Mrs. Draper had said the assignment might be easy when we found the common limbs that so many of us had. She also said this was something we would treasure some day when our grandkids came to us to do their own.

Our first stop was to get the family heritage from Ma Haney after school that day. She was very helpful with the Medley side. She knew it all the way back to her great-grandpas on both sides. We learned about Flatt and West blood ties.

I knew this had me a fourth of the way there and Zasu was half way. Then I asked, “Who was my great-grandpa on Momma’s side?”

She looked funny before saying, “I don’t know.”

I looked at Zasu. “Do you know who your grandpa is?”

She said, “Pa Medley.

“No, on the other side. Pa Haney’s father. Who was he?”

We both looked at her as she got that mad look on her face. “I don’t remember.”

I knew that Pa Haney’s mother was alive. I had seen her once when my mother’s Aunt Dorcas brought her up to visit. “Ain’t her name Possum?” I asked.

“No, she bellowed. “That was some old fool nickname that they gave her! Don’t you dare write that down!”

Feeling that I was getting some kind of run-around, I said, “I bet Pa Haney knows.

“Don’t you ask him no foolish questions?” she bellowed. “He’s studying the Bible now and can’t be bothered with your old stupid school stuff.” She shook her finger and said, “I don’t see why that old Draper woman thinks meddling in family stuff is school business. I think it is about time you kids quit school and learned how to work.” As she stomped off, she screamed, “If you all bring that back up, I will get a limb to your butts. School is for learning the Bible, not to draw family trees!”

Aunt Zasu quit school soon after. Ma Haney said it was to help around the house. Zasu confided Ma Haney was still made about the family tree stuff. That was also around the time that she started trying to marry her off to a guy almost a decade older. In Ma Haney’s words, “It’s best to get girls married before they learn about boys.”

My mother was just as hopeless with my projects as her crazy mother. She claimed she didn’t know any of her Haney bloodline beyond Pa Hewey Haney. Though I suspected she was lying to me because, for some reason, I felt Ma Haney had told her what to say.

I went to Pa Flint to ask about the Flint part. He knew names all the way back to his great-greats, even on his wife’s side. That was when I learned that her mother had mental problems and that her doctor was secretly my great-grandpa.

My biggest fear was that since Ma Brown had already passed away earlier that year, no one might know the names on that side. My heart still cringes as I remember that time and Ma Haney’s comment about her mirror half’s passing when she saw me crying. “You still got your grandma.” I never told anyone on my thoughts that the wrong one died.

I told Pa Flint about how Ma and Pa Haney didn’t remember who his parents and grandparents were. He thought that was odd but enlightened me. “Everyone knows that Preacher Haney’s Ma and Pa were Albert and Mable Haney.” He laughed before going on.

“Everyone called them Polecat and Possum.”

He went on to name their parents.

I turned my family tree in and got an A for the effort. Mrs. Draper said, “You kids may not place much importance on this now, but some day you will look back on it as a treasure. Put it someplace safe, like the family Bible.”

Pa Flint had the old Brown family Bible that had been passed down for generations. He said I could put it in the back pouch where other family records were kept. I wrote on the back of it **VERY IMPORTANT. DON’T THROW AWAY.**

Years passed as I went away to college, got married and moved out of state. Members of my wife’s family started doing family histories, carrying it back 14 generations. He dad’s family was from Germany and came to the colonies to start the metal forging

business. On her mother's side, she was descended from an Indian Princess and French immigrant fishermen to Canada.

After reading this, I had the fever to find the family history on my side for a book. I remembered the family tree in the old Bible and knew I could find it in the old dresser in the room that Pa Flint slept in. I went to my parents and the Bible was still there.

When I opened the Bible, I realized the pouch was empty. All the papers were gone. Marriage certificates for both my grand and great-grandparents, birth certificates and most important of all, that family tree I researched.

I asked my mother if she knew what happened to those papers, to which she responded, "I threw them away."

I said, "They were important family records."

She just turned and walked away like she always did when she didn't want to talk about something. "Those old papers were just about a bunch of old, dead people. They weren't my family."

She may have felt they weren't her family, but they were mine. And, as far as I was concerned, they were the best part. Old thoughts of wishing I didn't have any Haney blood resurfaced and a wish to not be part of that rotten family limb resurfaced.

When I retired from being a nuclear engineer, I moved back home. I occupied myself by working for the U.S. Census Bureau. During that period, I learned the census records were a great resource of family history. I decided that Pa Haney had been old enough to leave a census trail. Once I found his parents, I could probably take it on back a few generations. Then, during my mid-fifties, I received a shock. My mother called to advise me that my grandfather was buried the week before.

Ironically, he was also a Haney and one of the people I interviewed for the census. He claimed in passing that he had never heard of Ma or Pa Haney, though he was living in the same community as them. However, he left records to be made public upon his death. He claimed to have fathered Ma Haney's twins before running off to Michigan, leaving her an unwed mother.

I decided to retrace the family history back through the census records. I discovered that when my mother was three, they still lived at Pa Medley's and were listed as grandchildren. Ma Haney was listed as a child, though her name was still medley. Ten years later, they were discovered as Haney in Pa Hewey Haney's home. Ironically, I now have correct names and can fill in that shaky limb of the family tree.

*Read more of G. W. Brown's stories and 'Writers Corner' at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>