

Opinion

To understand America, take a look up your own family tree

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH



Grubaugh

Family history is a complex thing. Imagine three Marys from one clan marrying three Harrys from another. That happened in my tree, just another example of confusing genealogy for this generation's confused researchers.

Finding one's roots is a burgeoning business, helped along by the modern miracle of DNA technology. Ancestry.com, the biggest of the search networks, claims more than \$1 billion in revenue after a 40-year history that began with the founding of Ancestry Publishing. The money is generated by subscribers who pay fees that start with an inexpensive testing kit. The hook is, the more you want to know about your tree, the more you go out on a limb to pay for it.

That's not a bad business model, really, enough to attract other genealogy companies to the mix, including "23andMe," "Findmypast," MyHeritage," and a host of others.

Ancestry.com is the best known and the one I have relied on for a few years. Since I retired last year, I expanded a longtime hobby into several hours of research a week. Ancestry provides a network through which you can connect with like-minded factfinders. The platform is easy to search and use and is certainly an improvement on leaving your lineage in a family Bible, although thank God for the people wise enough to do that in the past.

My ascendants came from around the world, largely Europe. They arrived at different times, to find a life better than they had — Irish, German, Scottish, and a Frenchman or two, among them.

More than once I've been struck by how the people who populated our country 200 years ago flocked to American shores. They became the backbone of who we are today, a nation rich in heritage and personal freedoms. More than 86 million people legally immigrated to the United States between 1783 and 2019.

Fast forward to 2023 where we have fallen into some kind of political parody, with many people unable to see the value immigrants have to our way of life. Entire U.S. industries — agriculture, tourism, construction among them — rely on the foreign-born.

How often I hear, "I can't find workers." That's because federal officials are into their third decade of failing to

fix a system that allows outsiders in, partly because they can't agree on the outsiders who are already here by illegal means, and who have become vital to our society since they arrived.

I digress. Finding my immigrant family has brought me great joy. Today, I have a trove of old photos, historical data and anecdotes of which I am quite proud.

I often share the story of my proudest genealogical find because it shows the lengths to which families go for the truth. I was in Richland County, Ohio, hunting for an ancestor's marker when, on a hunch, I turned over a downed gravestone and found the plot of my five-greats grandfather. He died in 1841. I nearly died on the spot.

I am descended from a line of large families. A century ago, households often had 10 to 15 children. Parents rarely had just one child, and back then, the portraits were of unsmiling faces, ramshackle houses, and hard lives. The men were farmers and the women were housekeepers — at least that's how the U.S. Census listed their occupations.

The families often lived in one area their entire lives. When they did move, scores of relatives uprooted and moved with them. That's how kinship groups arriving in New York or Philadelphia eventually made their way West.

Until the Census of 1850, men were the only listed members of the family.

Notably, given names were carried on through multiple generations (hence the Mary and Harry reference above, which drives researchers crazy.)

Ability to read and write was listed (many of my ancestors could do neither). Slave ownership was noted (there were a few in my tree). Ages were listed but some of them were noted incorrectly — as was the spelling of names.

The factuality of what researchers come up with is always a question. These trees are more like clothes trees, with moths flitting about and contrary facts doing likewise.

You can't even trust obituaries, and newspapers aren't to blame. Families themselves get the facts bollixed up. Uncle George's first wife given as Helga instead of Hilda, that sort of thing.

But obits are better than memory. Stories passed down are subject to embellishment, depending on the tale teller. Some military veterans become war heroes. Some merchants become magnates. Research requires a strained measure of skepticism. My advice is to document sources where you can because today's internet-hungry generation is always willing to share details, regardless of the facts.

•Dennis Grubaugh is the retired editor of the Illinois Business Journal.

It started with the vision of one man

By ALAN J. ORTBALS



Ortbals

Last month, World Wide Technology Raceway held another successful event as race fans from 40 states and 10 countries filled the stands to watch the Enjo Illinois 300. Local St. Louis real estate developer and former Indy Lights driver Curtis Francois has done a terrific job of revitalizing the track.

Under his leadership, the oval track not only hosts the NASCAR Cup Series, but also the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series, and the NTT IndyCar Series. There's also a 2-mile infield road course used by SpeedTour TransAm, SCCA, and Porsche Club of America, a quarter-mile NHRA-sanctioned drag strip that hosts the annual NHRA Camping World Drag Racing Series Midwest Nationals event, and the Kartplex, a state-of-the-art karting facility.

Following the success of the June race, Francois ran multiple, full-page ads in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch thank-

ing all those who helped him make the track a success from the Steward family of World Wide Technologies to numerous corporations, the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and the Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois. Rightfully so.

But I think it's important not to forget how it began and all the work that was done more than a quarter of a century ago to make the current success possible.

Back in 1994, Chris Pook, founder of the Grand Prix of Long Beach, was flying cross country with a stop in St. Louis. As his plane approached Lambert, he looked out the window at an abandoned auto racetrack, the Gateway Arch and the world headquarters of Anheuser Busch, the largest sponsor of sports in America. What he saw was opportunity. But the road would not be easy.

The name of that track, St. Louis International Raceway, was hyperbole personified. It started out as a local, amateur drag strip in the 60s nicknamed "The Swamp." A road race circuit was added in 1985. By 1988, it was abandoned. The track itself was useless and would have to be demolished to make way for entirely new construction. Land assembly posed a huge problem as the site was divided into numerous ownerships. There was a bar on the

property that specialized in serving minors. The site was surrounded by deleterious land uses: an auto salvage operation, a junk yard, a pig farm, and a landfill, just to name a few. And financing a startup racing operation would be extremely difficult.

But Pook was a visionary. Where everyone else saw blight, he saw an oval track to host open wheel and stock car races, a drag strip to attract NHRA events, stands to hold 58,000 people and corporate suites for local companies to entertain their guests. It would have been easy for local officials to discard such an idea as a pie-in-the-sky dream but that's not what happened.

The Southwestern Illinois Development Authority was one of the first to get on board. I was SWIDA's executive director at that time and SWIDA's board supported Pook's vision wholeheartedly. We worked with the city of Madison to create a Tax Increment Finance District to assist with the development and financing of the track.

Financing a start-up development like this is extremely difficult but SWIDA had the ability to issue bonds backed by the state—but only with the governor's approval. Republican Gov. Jim Edgar was not a fan of economic development, believing that government's place was to provide the infrastructure to make development possible, not assist individual businesses.

To win him over, we enlisted the help of Sen. Frank Watson, a Republican from Greenville, and Rep. Ron Stephens, a Republican from Troy. With their support and encouragement, the governor came on board and SWIDA was able to complete the unusual financing package.

Even then, it was an uphill climb. Pook quickly corralled a CART race for the 24th of May 1997. That put Design/build manager Korte Company under the gun to deliver but deliver they did, and the inaugural event was a huge success. But there was still work to be done. Traffic was an issue. Parking was an issue. Everyone continued to work together to clear the hurdles.

After a good run of 14 years and with the track bracketed by larger NASCAR tracks in Chicago and Kansas City, new owner Dover Entertainment decided to pull the plug in 2010, setting the stage for Francois' remarkable success. WWT Raceway has become an economic engine and a source of pride for Southwestern Illinois and metro St. Louis. Let's don't forget that it started with the vision of one man in 1994.

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