

The Archaeology of Eight Families: Uncovering Family History

-Merlyn Bell



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McMinimy family reunion - 1915

My project interweaves the lives of the eight families of my great-grandparents, their descendants and their ancestors with the history of the times and places in which they lived. I am not fictionalizing their stories but make some, hopefully logical, leaps when the facts are scant. I do not have the benefit of many archival letters or diaries. I have a collection of family stories and the results of hard work by family genealogists who were on the hunt before the days of computers and internet sources.

The people in my story are mostly ordinary folk. Only one was appointed to high office. The majority spent their lives on the farm. Although some were recognized for their achievement during their lifetime, most were soon forgotten by all but their family members. Being modest people, they would likely be embarrassed by the attention they are getting by having their lives described here. They were mostly of English, Scottish, and Irish descent and came from Great Britain between 1635 and 1850. Some were New England Puritans who sympathized with Cromwell and the Parliamentarians. Others were Anglicans, royalists who supported King Charles I. Some families split over the Revolutionary War, others over the Civil War. Their religious differences were enough to have the Methodist Bishop on one side declare the minister on another side a heretic. Somehow they found their way to the Osage Reserve in the last part of the 19th Century and the first few years of the 20th. Their children and grandchildren married across these divides.

The members of these families cared for each other, choosing to live nearby. They gathered for family reunions, one in 1915 is shown in the picture behind me, at weddings and funerals, and on Memorial Day around the graves. They remembered the places from which they had come and the people who had gone before them. They told their stories.

And they made sure that we who were nearly the last generation to live nearby also remembered. The names from generations past became as familiar as the names of the cousins closest to our age. Richard Lovelace, the wealthy English poet and royalist who wrote "Stone walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage" when he was imprisoned by the Parliamentarians. He died a pauper, abandoned by his friends, in 1658. Joshua Randall, the heretic cast out of the Methodist Church in 1822. Andrew Johnson, the Scottish millwright who came to America in 1822 and specifically to Illinois to build

water powered mills and own land. Plato Bean, the illusive Yorkshire man who disappeared from view in the 1850s, leaving five children and a wife. Will Burgess, the tough Irishman who tossed his Catholic and Protestant friends in the lake near Enniskillen when they began to fight and found his way to Kansas in time to be threatened by Quantrill's Raiders. Willis and Hannah McMinimy, the parents who turned their backs on their sons when they joined the Union Army. Sarah Allen Randall, Maine textile mill worker who in 1860 left her infant with her husband and mother, so she could earn enough money for them to buy land in Iowa. Mary Burgess McMinimy, mother of seven who sold the farm and their surplus possessions and took the children from Arkansas to the Reserve to join her husband and oldest daughter. Nan Cooper Bean, who had a fourth child, a fourth boy on the trail in 1884, lived in a dugout and fed her native visitors while her husband freighted lumber to build the nearest town. Annie Lovelace Johnson, who in the early 1900s found a way to leave her husband when divorce was unacceptable; she simply visited her six children.

The members of these families began as farmers, a necessity in the unsettled areas of America, including the Reserve, and their children's children became preachers, school teachers, shoe makers, blacksmiths, nurses and operators of pool halls. Their descendants became doctors, lawyers, professors, actors, clinical psychologists, entomologists, environmental toxicologists. They made and lost money as the economy waxed and waned. They lost children, wives and husbands to disease, accidents and wars. As people in a rough and tumble new world they experienced upsets over which they had little or no control. Their voices call out for their stories to be heard, for an accounting of their losses and their triumphs, for their lives to be placed in context, in their times and places.

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