INVESTIGATING FAMILY STORIES

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Recently I watched the penultimate investigation by Inspector Morse on the PBS series "Mystery." Morse was in hospital with a bleeding ulcer and became intrigued with a story about a Victorian criminal trial in his hometown of Oxford, England. A woman had been found dead in the Oxford Canal; several boatmen were found guilty and executed. It was an open-and-shut case. The men whose narrow barges transported coal and people up and down the Oxford canal were at the lowest level of society—rowdy, drinking men who worked seven days a week and hence did not go to church. But Morse questioned the details of the story.

The episode turned my thoughts to family stories. As genealogists, we often investigate family stories. I remember a lecture I heard a decade and a half ago by Lloyd Bockstruck. He pointed out that family stories often contain a grain of truth, but a well-disguised grain. The story about Grandpa's daddy is really about Grandma's daddy, the button from the Revolutionary War is really from the Civil War, and so on. We must take no story on faith (no matter how much we love the storyteller) and investigate every particle of information.

According to the stories in my father's family, my great-great-grandfather William Bricknell of Nebraska had been a successful contractor in London. He was surety on a note for another contractor who reneged on the deal; William was ruined and had to leave London. His wife, Louisa Miller, had been a lady-in-waiting to Queen Victoria. She hated the uncivilized life in eastern Nebraska and became a lady's maid to the wife of J. Sterling Morton, Secretary of Agriculture under Grover Cleveland and founder of Arbor Day (now Earth Day), at their home at Arbor Lodge.

I investigated William and Louisa, including trips to Nebraska, Salt Lake City, and London. The IGI pointed me to parish register entries in London; I read the parish register microfilm, obtained vital registration certificates, and used the street addresses therein in combination with maps to find census records (no British censuses were name-indexed at the time). Some of the story almost fit. William was identified as "builder" at the births of his children, "carpenter foreman" in 1851, and "carpenter employing 4 men, 2 boys" in 1861. But when he and Louisa married in 1849, William was a "carpenter," son of Thomas Bricknell "gentleman." It was Louisa's father who was a "builder."

I tried to be realistic about the legend. I didn't buy the lady-in-waiting part for the daughter of a builder, but assumed (ah! what a dangerous word) that she had perhaps been employed at one of the palaces as a maid. To be honest, what I was really doing was altering the story to fit my own perception of reality. My story made more sense, but it wasn't the original story.

Nothing I found indicated any employment for Louisa. A study of old London Postal maps showed that their homes during their two-decade residence in London were in the newest parts of town—further and further away from any royal residence and often in advance of convenient public transportation. Louisa simply couldn't have worked for the queen.

I began to suspect an explanation when my father's cousin mentioned the story that great uncles Harry and George (William's eldest sons, who never married and were great favorites of the young people) used to tell about climbing Big Ben and hanging from the clock arms. Stories—their purpose isn't always to preserve family information accurately. Sometimes it is to entertain. Perhaps Harry and George embroidered family history in the same way that they embroidered the wonderful Victorian punch-paper "God Bless our Home" embroidery that hangs on my wall.

A trip to Nebraska produced no record books for Arbor Lodge to confirm or disprove Louisa's employment, but tombstones told me that William was born in Oxford on 17 January 1813 and Louisa was born in Bath on 20 January 1825. It was back to old-fashioned record-digging. When she was born, Louisa's father was a carpenter. Their story was one of moving from town to town, presumably as he worked in the building trade.

I found William's baptism on 17 January 1813 at St. Thomas, Oxford, the son of Thomas and Mary Ann Bricknell. Thomas's trade is given as "Boatman." Their abode is "near High Bridge;" it looks as if the word "Barge" was written first and scratched out. The marriage of Thomas Bricknell and Mary Ann Bossom occurred in the same church in 1806. Thomas couldn't write; he signed with his mark. Clearly, he was not a "gentleman" in our modern understanding of the term. At the Family History Library I found a detailed study of the community, *Fisher Row: Fishermen, Bargemen & Canal Boatmen in Oxford 1500–1900* by Mary Prior. It documents the day-to-day existence of the boatmen and their families. It was a hard life, with some of the families living on the boats.

Which brings us full circle back to Inspector Morse and Victorian Oxford. My roots are not in a gentleman and a queen's lady-in-waiting. They are in what was considered the dregs of Oxford society and a carpenter's daughter. I'm proud of them; they are my family. But as genealogists, we need to remember that for most of our ancestors, the status from which one came determined how someone was valued. Raising one's self by one's bootstraps was not considered admirable until recently. William and Louisa may have tried to hide their origins as the offspring of a canal boatman and a carpenter.

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As we analyze family stories, we need to keep in mind the following:

- Some stories have grains of truth, but with the facts all mixed up.
- Some stories were meant primarily to entertain, not to inform.
- Some stories were inadvertently altered in the repetitive telling.
- Some stories were altered to make them "make sense."
- Some stories were created to hide or obscure humble origins.

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