



Deborah Norville

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Chicken thieves. Growing up, I had been led to believe that I was descended from a bunch of chicken thieves. On my Southern-born daddy's side, that is.

On my Midwestern mother's side of the genealogical divide, it was different. There was the Swedish pastor who'd written a book and the great-uncle who'd been a cop. We still had the nightstick he once carried on his rounds.

My mom's family tree was a tidy, espaliered specimen whose branches were easy to read with relations that could be traced back centuries. My mother was second-generation Swedish American. Her grandparents came through Ellis Island during the great migration of the late 1880s. Back in the old country, thanks to Sweden's famed neutrality, there had been no wars to destroy birth and death records—so the Olsons and Axelsons and Dahlsens from which I come can be easily traced.

My dad's family tree seemed more like an overgrown bush. It appeared to have so many branches and tiny shoots, you figured pretty much everyone in the county where Daddy grew up was a cousin. So you greeted someone as a cousin even if you couldn't quite prove it.

I never knew how the chicken-thieves story got started, but I think it always irked Daddy to imagine there were unsavory folk among his kin. In his later years, it gnawed at him so much he just had to know the truth. That's when Daddy—and anybody he could drag along with him—started haunting graveyards and visiting county courthouses.

Ground zero on his search was all those cousins in Oconee County, Georgia. Armed with his lined yellow legal pads, he wrote down everything anybody could remember about their relatives, and what they couldn't remember was generally written inside the family Bible. Then Daddy visited innumerable probate offices, where he no doubt sweet-talked a clerk or two into helping him find birth and death certificates. That, of course, was just the beginning. It wasn't enough for Daddy to see the piece of paper confirming a forebear's departure from this mortal earth—he had to then find the cemetery where their bones moldered in the grave. My younger sisters were often along for this grim task—which always included making chalk rubbings of the headstones.

The weeks and months of Daddy's quest grew into years—and the picture of who he was in terms of where he came from grew clearer. And there were no chicken thieves anywhere to be found!

There was the relative who fought at Gettysburg in what was sometimes referred to where I grew up as the War of Northern Aggression. The apocryphal tale that Daddy told about him was that he was shot in the chest and left in the mud, which somehow stanching the bleeding and saved his life. There was the forebear who was enough of an elder statesman in Colonial Williamsburg that a church pew bears his name. Daddy found relatives who fought for our nation's independence during the Revolutionary War and in the French and Indian War before that. But the capstone in Daddy's quest had to be when he made the provable link to Peter Brown—one of the passengers on the Mayflower. Mayflower—not chicken thieves!

While Daddy was on his quest, I took a genealogical journey of my own, traveling to Sweden to see where my great-grandparents on my mom's side had come from. I felt guilty for laughing at Daddy's graveyard jaunts, because here I was doing the same thing.

On Sweden's west coast, I found the grave of Great-Aunt Bertha. She had immigrated to the United States but then returned home to Sweden, disappointed the streets of America were not paved in gold as she'd been led to believe. In a tiny church in central Sweden, I found

a baptismal stool with the name Axel Anderson—Grampa Axelson’s father had been christened here!

But the real magic of that trip to my Swedish roots came on Midsummer Eve. An old Swedish wives’ tale holds that if, on Midsummer’s Eve, a single girl picks seven different wildflowers and sleeps with them under her pillow, she will dream that night of her future husband. Wildflowers indeed were picked, and we danced around the Midsummer pole, as all Swedes do on that day of round-the-clock sun. Truth be told, there was no pillow and no one slept. We stayed up all night and delighted in the perpetual light.

There must be something to that wives’ tale.

The following day, a couple I had met at the party ran into an old friend back home in Sweden from New York. They mentioned me to him—and whatever they said must have sparked some interest. Karl Wellner called me for a date. Two years later, we were married—intertwining his modern immigrant story of a man who came to America and created businesses and opportunities for others—with mine, which extends centuries before.

When I was a child, the words *Remember where you come from* would often be the last thing I’d hear as the screen door slammed behind me. Back then, I took it as a threat: “Whatever trouble you get into, I’ll find out about.”

Today I see “Remember Where You Come From” as a bumper sticker for a richer life. Knowing more about the roads traveled by those from whom I am descended has made history come alive for my children and me. It is also a source of quiet comfort. What I might see as challenges are mere inconveniences compared to my ancestors’ struggles. Accomplishments shine less brightly, too. I am after all, only one patch in my family’s immigration story, which is in turn only one square in this giant quilt we call America.

A quilt square on its own is of little use. Joined together with others, it is part of something extraordinary. Like America.

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