

INSPECTOR MAIGRET; HERCULE POIROT! STEP ASIDE! Alice Hoyle

I love a good mystery story – the twists and turns in the plot can keep me awake long into the night as I try to figure out what’s coming next and whodunit! I think this is one of the reasons why genealogy is so intriguing to me.

Picture this: I’m sitting at my computer, researching some important link in my family ancestry.....a link that has been eluding me for years. Suddenly: as I click my mouse one more time, I find the exact piece of information I have been looking for. Kazam! Yahoo! – let’s see, who can I phone to tell them this exciting news? I pick up the phone to call one of my sisters – I’m dying to share this news with someone who will care about it as much as I do. Luckily, I look at the time on my computer – oops.....I guess there isn’t one of my sisters who would appreciate being woken at 1:00 a.m., even to hear this new discovery. Once again, I have been sitting at my computer, researching my ancestors, and totally oblivious to the amount of time that has elapsed! THAT is the beauty of genealogical research – it just pulls you in, grabs your imagination, poses those “what if”, “why”, and “who” questions that keep running around in your brain, keeping you awake at night until, finally, you have to work at solving the mystery.

Our grandson is a very curious child: he is always asking questions. He wants to know how something works, why it works, and if it doesn’t work....why doesn’t it work? I love this trait of his! When I think back to my own childhood, I realize I was always curious as well – perhaps not in the same way he is (he is very mechanically minded so he wants to know all about machines, computers, anything electronic) but I always wondered about obscure things.....family dynamics, customs, habits, “family talk” – for instance, why did my mother and the other women of the family say someone was “P.G.” when they referred to someone who was pregnant? Perhaps I was an annoying child....asking questions. I’ll have to ask some of my older sisters, since my mother is no longer here on earth, so I can’t ask her.

So, where is this leading? My curiosity has helped me with my genealogical research! There are so many examples of this and I have decided to share some of them with you. Some of my methods and clues may help you with your research, and better yet....it may inspire you to become more curious, and let out the ‘detective’ hidden inside your normally calm exterior.

Mystery #1 - Why did a group of 191 Scottish people (89 of which were children under the age of 14), board a sailing vessel at Cromarty Bay, Scotland, on October 1, 1825, bound for what was then La Guayra, Colombia, South America – later to be La Guayra, Venezuela? My great-great-great grandparents, Alexander Butchart and Elizabeth (Webster) Butchart, along with their children, George, Caroline (my great-great grandmother) and Alexander, were 5 of the people on board. The journey to La Guayra would take 2 months, with a stop along the way at the island of Madeira. My research tells me that this stop was normal – British sailing ships going to the Caribbean and South America stopped in Madeira for repairs and to stock up on provisions, one of the provisions being a considerable amount of wine!

Today, in this modern world, I cannot imagine getting on a sailing ship, embarking from the N.W. coast of Scotland, with 3 small children (aged 10, 5, and less than one year), being on the ocean for 2 months, on a journey taking me to totally unknown parts, to a land where they spoke a different language, where the climate was completely different, and to a place so far away that contact with their family would probably be no longer possible.

So, why did they do it? Advertising! In June of 1825, a delegation from the Colombian Agricultural Association visited the United Kingdom. They were promoting a scheme that would see groups of people relocated to South America to settle and farm the lands there. The promotion must have been convincing, because newspapers at the time praised the scheme and gave glowing reports about that area of South America and its promise of great harvests from productive land.

The Scottish people who embarked on this journey were, according to documents, mainly tradesmen and military men – they were all classed as coming from “comfortable homes”, which apparently at the time meant they were not paupers! My ancestor, Alexander Butchart, came from Aberdeen and had spent 9 1/2 years with the Royal Artillery.

This “adventure” of my ancestors did not turn out well: the arable land that they were promised, land that would be suitable for growing grain and vegetables, turned out to be land that needed to be cleared, and would only be suitable for growing coffee, indigo and cotton. Discontent grew, and by the end of 1826, many of the settlers were anxious to leave. Eventually, my ancestors and many of the other Scottish settlers, would re-locate to the Guelph area of Ontario, arriving there in 1827, just as Guelph was becoming an established settlement.

How did I find out this information? When my genealogical journey began, I did not know any of this. I found out a few clues from a distant second cousin living in the USA. From the bits and pieces she told me, I began my research. One day, years ago, while doing one of my ‘random Google searches’, I saw a reference to the La Guayra settlers, and in searching further I noted that in 1979, the Guelph Historical Society had produced a booklet on the history of these specific Scottish settlers. I did what I always suggest to people when I am giving a genealogy presentation: I wrote a letter to them! ☐ Even though it was probably 20+ years after printing, they still had some of the publications for sale – I was in luck! I mailed off a cheque and when I received the booklet, I was thrilled to see that it was 112 pages of information about the colonization project, the failure, the journey the Scottish people made, eventually ending up in Canada, and so much more!

Mystery #2 = Why didn’t my uncle’s “War Bride” follow him to Canada? Three of my Dad’s brothers enlisted when WWII broke out, and they were sent overseas. One of my uncles was stationed in England, one in France, and one in Italy. My uncle who was stationed in England, met, dated, and married an English woman. When I was a child, it was common knowledge within the family, that my uncle’s first wife was an English “War Bride” and that she refused to come to Canada. My uncle, by the time I was old enough to remember him, was re-married to someone from the area where I grew up. No one talked about “why” his English bride didn’t come to Canada. Fast forward 50+ years: I decided to ask my uncle about his first wife. My curiosity had gotten the better of me by this time, and I didn’t even know what her name was!

So, I asked him if he would mind talking to me about it, and he was fine with that. He told me her full name, and he told me he didn’t know why she refused to come to Canada. After the end of WWII, he was shipped back to Canada and he was making arrangements for her to come to Canada, when suddenly he had a letter from her saying she was not going to make the trip. He was pretty devastated at the time and was especially confused because he didn’t know “why” she seemingly changed her mind so suddenly. As you can imagine, communication at that time was restricted to letter writing. In the end, the marriage ended in divorce, my uncle re-married here and that was the end of the story. Well, not for me, obviously!

Some of the clues I got from talking with my uncle: her family was ‘dead set against the marriage’ according to my uncle. They did not want their daughter marrying a Canadian serviceman. My uncle thought perhaps his absence from her life, and her family’s influence on her had combined to sway her decision to follow him to Canada.

After my uncle died in 2007, I was still bothered by this mystery. By this time, the increase in online data bases allowed me to search for my uncle’s first marriage in England. Sure enough, there it was! As I am filling out the online request at the General Records Office in London, England, asking for a copy of the marriage registration, a little voice at the back of my head is saying “why are you doing this.....it’s not your direct line of ancestry”. Naturally, I managed to keep that little voice quiet long enough for me to finish filling in the form, plunk in my credit card number and push the mouse button that sent my request zipping across the ocean.

When the document arrived in the mail, one of the mysteries in our family was solved, as far as I am concerned. If you have ordered or seen the Marriage Registration documents from England, you know that the bride and groom have to list their father’s name and his occupation.

My uncle’s father (my grandfather) was a farmer: her father was a retired policeman. BINGO.....a light bulb went off in my head! I have a brother-in-law who emigrated to Canada 30+ years ago. He has told us that the English class system was still alive and well when he was there; certainly in the 1940’s it would have been as well. My grandfather, being a farmer, would have been considered someone of a much lower status than my uncle’s new father-in-law, a retired policeman! Add to this, the fact that according to the marriage registration document, my uncle’s wife was 8 years older than my uncle at the time of their marriage. Her parents may have disapproved of the age disparity, and certainly the fact that he was in the Canadian Forces and would be going back to Canada may have had a bearing on their disapproval of the marriage. So, to me, it was mystery solved!

I related this story at the round table discussion we had after our March meeting, and one of our branch members said “So, I suppose you searched to see if his ex-wife had remarried?” and I had to admit that Yes...I DID do that! She had remarried, and had children. Again: why did I do that? She wasn’t remotely related to me at this time.....curiosity, again.

I have listed only two of the many mysteries I am working on, or have worked on. The more I solve, the more I seem to find.

When I am doing personal research, or when I am assisting others, I find myself constantly asking the question, “**what if**”. **What if** they aren’t listed on this census because they have moved; **what if** the family of your ancestor’s brother kept better records than your ancestor, and **what if** we find the brother and his family, and **what if** they have a bunch of information posted somewhere that will give you a clue; **what if** the spelling of the name is not the spelling that is on some of the early records; **what if** the

ages you have recorded from family lore are not correct; **what if** the date of marriage you were given by your ancestors is not correct; what if, what if, what if.....

I encourage you to allow yourself to think outside the box when you are doing your research. Look at all the angles; allow yourself to think of all the possibilities; let a bit of 'doubt' creep into all your so-called family "facts". Sometimes when you free your mind of the set-in-stone facts, you find out the facts weren't quite as set-in-stone as you thought.

Above all, enjoy the process – don't be discouraged if others don't quite 'get' your enthusiasm or if a bit of family information isn't received by older family members enthusiastically! In the dead of night, when you are staring at your computer screen, and you find that bit of information you have wanted to find for the last 10 years, you can silently raise your arm in victory and (silently) yell "YES