

# Tracing Skeletons in the Closet

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## **Skeletons in the Closet: Learning to Live with Human Beings for Relatives**

In the movie, *ffolkes*, Sean Connery plays a Welshman who had 5-7 sisters. He learned to braid hair, iron dresses, correct makeup mistakes, and all sorts of other "maid" duties. When asked why he had never married, he stated with conviction, "I much prefer cats."

**Family skeletons**--the most sensitive and carefully guarded secrets of the family--are also among the most important genealogy discoveries you can make. They disclose intimate family relationships: mixed or inter-racial marriages, common-law marriages and live-in arrangements, divorce, adoption, bigamy, desertion, hidden royal connections.

The best sources for these skeletons are family members, close personal friends of the family, employees of family members, and neighbors. Next best evidence comes from personal papers like letters, journals and diaries, memoirs and reminiscences. Heirlooms and photographs can provide other indirect evidence. And census records and newspapers are often the entre to extending a pedigree you thought you could never crack. Court testimony in prostitution, insanity, criminal convictions (and suspicions), banishment and deportation, medical cases, and psycho-social case files of government investigators are also excellent sources.

The most common scandals in a family are: **women**--marriage or birth of children. **Men**--military service or lack of it, and money. See Dawne Slater-Putt, "Finding the Skeletons in our Closets," *Heritage Magazine* (Jan-Feb 2002): 32-38; and Kory E. Meyerink, "Hidden Sources for Hidden Secrets," same issue, pp. 20-31. James E. Petty, "Discovering Your Family Skeletons," same issue, pp. 8-19 places various family stories in the historical contexts of the times to demonstrate how simple facts become skeletons.

### **Transmission of Family Cultural Values**

Family Background

#### **Father and Mother**

Relationship to Father

Relationship to Mother

Relationship to Brother(s)

Relationship to Sister(s)

Other Family Relationships

Family Life-style

Transmission of Values

## **Marriage**

Expectations of Marriage  
Early Married Life  
Influence of Cultural Heritage  
Views of Child Rearing  
Family Life-Style Changes

## **Children**

Relationship to Father  
Relationship to Mother  
Relationship to Brother(s)  
Relationship to Sister(s)  
Other Family Relationships  
Contact with Cultural Values  
Transmission of Values

### **What did you hear at the top of the stairs?**

Family themes are transmitted through the experiences of the growing child. Acquisition of taboos, expectations, cultural heritage, social orientation; in short, the family value system is experienced and acquired through the growing years. This is what the child will live by and pass on to the next generations. Much of this heritage is absorbed unconsciously. The child is the real link between generations--acquiring a set of values and a perception of himself and his world and passing these themes on to his own posterity.

### **Writing down the scandals, stories, and questions of the past**

- Quote public documents. Some states consider private and confidential today, what is not already "public knowledge."
- Weigh carefully what you tell--if you are the guardian of the family secret, you have the responsibility and the challenge of deciding what to tell. Remember that your relatives may not feel comfortable sharing family stuff with strangers, especially if ridicule could occur.
- If there is no "malice aforethought," legally you may be protected.
- Construct a chronology of relatives to see if real events line up with what you have been told. If they do not, use the discrepancy as an entre question in oral interviews with cousins still living, who might know the correct answer.
- Where the majority of the records and facts agree, those facts are usually true. Where they fit together partially, some truth may be present. Where they disagree altogether and where you cannot substantiate family lore with real events, use with caution.

## Factors which affect accuracy

Eye-witness, first-hand accounts--"things I have seen with my own eyes" or "heard with my own ears"

--Generally 75% accurate. Actions reported, 90% accurate. Colors, facial expressions of others, only 50% accurate.

Second-hand accounts--"things I have heard about the subject" or "things I have read"

--More accurate if a length of time has elapsed since the event.

Male report--more accurate overall.

Female report--more complete, with careful details.

Children under 14 years of age--free from prejudice, but less reliable. Children are easily led.

They will tell what you want to hear, not necessarily what you want to know. So handle with care.

## Court Records: Civil, Criminal, Equity, and Probate

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Unlike today, when some citizens have never been inside any courtroom, our ancestors were required to attend - indeed fines could be levied for non-attendance. Even so, few Americans have escaped "the long arm of the law" - as a litigant (plaintiff or defendant), a witness, a juror, an officer of the court, an employee of the courthouse, or participant in an administrative matter. There are more than 125 court actions; namely:

|                              |                            |                              |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| accidents                    | dependency                 | freight                      |
| admiralty                    | disability                 | fruit growing and processing |
| admissions: county poor farm | discrimination             | gambling                     |
| adoptions                    | divorce                    | gifts                        |
| alimony                      | domestic animal matters    | gossip (common scold)        |
| appeals and court reports    | dwellings                  | guarantees                   |
| apprenticeship               | elder care                 | hazards                      |
| bankruptcy                   | embezzlement               | heirs                        |
| bastardy                     | employee-employer          | immunities                   |
| behavior                     | relationships              | imports                      |
| bonds                        | escrow                     | income                       |
| breach of contract           | exports                    | incompetent estates          |
| child support                | extra-legal courts         | indecenty                    |
| claims                       | factories                  | indentured servants          |
| conflicts                    | family matters             | interstate commerce          |
| conspiracy                   | family support             | investments                  |
| contracts                    | fatherhood                 | joint contracts              |
| court-martial                | fees                       | jurisdiction                 |
| cruelty                      | ferry permit               | land titles                  |
| damages                      | foundlings                 | leases                       |
| deeds                        | franchise                  | legacy                       |
| delayed birth certificates   | freedom, religious worship | legitimation                 |

