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Family Chronicle

The Magazine for Families Researching their Roots

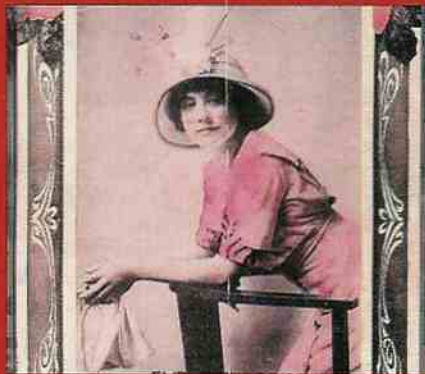
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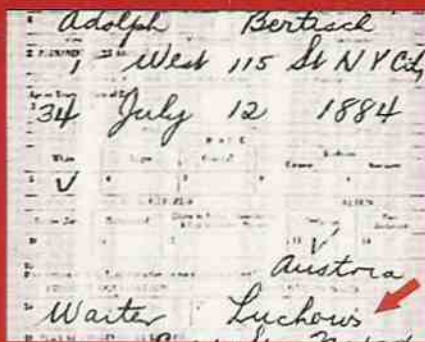
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Property Tax Research:
The bane of your ancestors can be your bounty



◀ **What's a Palatine?**
A closer look at Germany's emigrant hotbed

A Box Back in Time:
How a genealogist used her skills to find family relics



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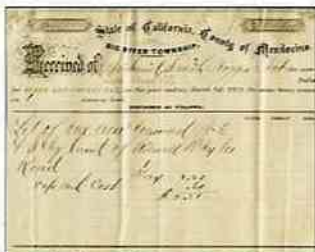
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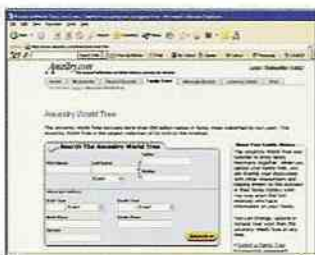
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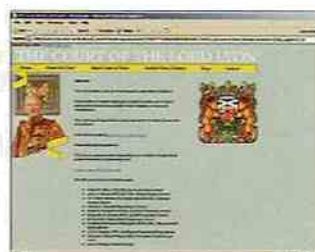
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Finding Homes for Orphan Heirlooms

Megan Smolenyak recommends rescuing and returning other people's heirlooms.

IT'S A GROWING TREND — an emerging sub-hobby of genealogy. More and more of us are rescuing orphan heirlooms that have strayed from family hands and doing the detective work necessary to return them to descendants of the original owners.

Sometimes we come into possession of these items accidentally. Perhaps you purchased an old house and found some treasures in the attic or closets. Maybe you work at a church where a stranger dropped off an old family Bible and it was passed on to you because everyone knows you're a family historian. Or you might have bought an old frame at a garage sale, only to discover some sepia-toned photos tucked into the matting.

Others of us do it deliberately. We just can't leave that forlorn photo, autograph book or marriage certificate at the flea market or antiques store. The thought of these pieces of memorabilia adorning the walls of a theme restaurant is too painful to bear, so we buy them and take them home with the notion of finding someone who will appreciate them. Avid rescuer Marge Rice, for example, has scooped up and returned 623 photos to 470 people by posting on appropriate message boards.

Reverse Genealogy

Whether we are the accidental or deliberate temporary custodians of others' family treasures, we're pulled into the world of "reverse genealogy," where it becomes necessary to work forward in time

based on a few pieces of information (perhaps a name and photography studio's imprint on a picture) from some point in the past.

Once you enter this realm, you discover that it's not quite the

always an appropriate home for them.

I confess that I am one of these habitual rescuers, so in the hope of encouraging others to adopt this hobby, I'd like to illustrate the process of "reverse genealogy" by walking through three of my most recent orphan experiences.

Elizabeth Brice

I spotted the photo at an antiques store in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia. The photographer's imprint told me it was taken at the Baker Art Gallery in Columbus, Ohio, and on the back, someone had noted the date (17 August 1907) and scrawled "Elizabeth Brice in the social whirl." I was intrigued by the way the woman pictured was staring down the photographer and the wry commentary. I had to take her home with me.

But when I did, I couldn't find any trace of her. I tried the conventional approach, starting with census records, looking for a Brice family from Ohio with a daughter named Elizabeth. Given the date on the photo, I checked the 1900, 1910 and 1920 censuses — no luck. No family fit the profile. I tried other resources, too. Online family lineages at

Ancestry.com, Genealogy.com and Familysearch.org all failed to reveal any families with a likely Elizabeth, Eliza, Liz, Lizzie or Beth. The USGenWeb site for Franklin County, Ohio teased me with a promising listing for Brice Cemetery, but didn't lead me to my mystery woman.



Elizabeth Brice's fixed gaze caught the author's attention. The back of the photo was labeled "Elizabeth Brice in the social whirl".

same as traditional genealogy and that it has its own special challenges. Sometimes even your best efforts can't locate the family today, and sometimes a family truly has died out. But with a little persistence, most orphans can be rescued, and even if you can't find a family member, there's almost

Perplexed that she wasn't making an appearance anywhere, I finally decided to spend my energy making it easier for interested parties to find me. I contacted Mary Ann Allen, the webmaster of Photographs from the Past (www.photographsfromthepast.com), and asked her to include the

her trail: Elizabeth Brice was her stage name. Born under the somewhat less glamorous name of Bessie Shaler in Findlay, Ohio in 1892, she was a singer and actress who performed in vaudeville and musical comedies across the US, including on Broadway. In fact, her first success was in a play

tening to her as I write these words. Elizabeth/Bessie has been rescued from anonymity and delivered into the hands of someone who truly appreciates this remarkable woman's life story.

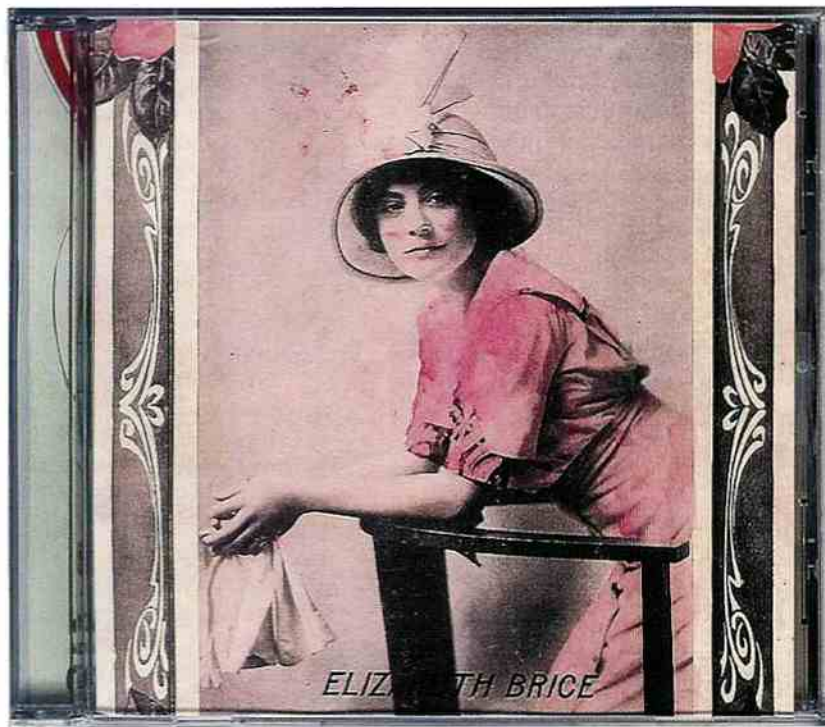
Helen Wellinger Reed

Earlier this year, I wandered into an antiques store in Williamsburg, Virginia, where I live. As always, I kept an eye out for interesting orphans, but I never expected the peculiar display I discovered taped up in one of the booths. On a piece of cardboard wrapped in plastic, someone had gathered about eight or nine documents obviously pertaining to the life of a woman named Helen (Wellinger) Reed. Among articles from a Hagerstown, Maryland newspaper were her original birth certificate and the marriage certificate of her parents from 1891. Also included was the photo of a young girl I assumed was Helen herself.

Eight dollars later and this odd little collection was mine. I didn't know what her married name might have been, but since I had her exact birth date, I entered it and "Helen" in the SSDI index. Seventy-four hits popped up. Guessing that she applied for Social Security while living in Maryland, I limited the search in this manner. It was apparent that the single candidate that emerged must be the Helen that I was seeking because she had passed away in Hagerstown. Now I knew her married name and that she had died in 1996.

I backed up to the 1920 and 1930 census records to try to find Helen's siblings. There were nine, but I noted that Helen was one of the youngest and was not optimistic about finding others alive. Still, I pursued this possibility, but sadly found one after another in the SSDI.

I then shifted my strategy to trying to find her obituary since it would likely list survivors. I tried my best to find it online, consulting such resources as Ancestry.com's Obituary Collection, Rootsweb's Daily Obituary Times, ObitsArchive



A CD of Elizabeth Brice songs, sent to the author courtesy of jazz music historian and archivist Joe Showler.

photo and the few details I had in her gallery of mystery photos. I also posted it in a few of my other favorite sites for orphaned images, such as DeadFred (www.deadfred.com) and Ancient Faces (www.ancientfaces.com).

And then I did what I had learned to do from past experience. I tucked the photo away for safekeeping and forgot about it. With such sites, you occasionally get a hit quickly, but more often than not, months or even years go by before you get a nibble. It was three years before I received an e-mail about Elizabeth.

Joe Showler, a jazz music historian and archivist in Toronto, Ontario wrote that he had seen the photo on Photographs from the Past and knew who Elizabeth was. His explanation quickly revealed why I hadn't been able to pick up

called *The Social Whirl*. What I had interpreted as an amusing aside was simply a statement of fact.

Equipped with this new information, I quickly found her in census records and traced her life forward to her death in New York in January 1965. Curious, I also explored a couple of online historical newspaper collections where I could discover where she had performed, in which plays and with whom.

Joe and I continued to exchange e-mails and, convinced that he would provide the photo a good home, I sent it to him. About a week later, Joe returned the favor by sending a CD of eight songs which she recorded between 1911 and 1917, allowing me to actually hear the voice of the woman whose picture had captured my attention. In fact, I'm lis-

(www.obitsarchive.com), NewsLibrary (www.newslibrary.com) and the website of the primary Hagerstown, Maryland newspaper (which I located by searching www.newslink.org).

When I found no clues, I decided it was time to call the public library in Hagerstown. I asked for the reference desk and explained that I was looking for the obituary of a woman who had seemingly spent her whole life there. I was put on hold while the librarian quickly consulted a local obituary index. She informed me that there was indeed an obituary and it had appeared two days after Helen's death.

I inquired about the procedure for obtaining a copy and was stunned when I was told there was no charge. I simply had to write a letter and send a self-addressed, stamped envelope (in such cases, though, a contribution is always appreciated). About a week later, I had Helen's obituary. She had no children, but two nieces and a nephew were listed.

From there, it was a simple matter of searching online phone directories. I started by trying to find one of the nieces and was chatting with her within minutes.



More than likely, this is little Helen (Wellinger) Reed.

People can respond strangely when you cold call to offer a piece of their family history back, but she quickly warmed to me. She explained that her aunt had died in a nursing home and someone had sold many of her possessions, but she had no clue that family documents and photos had been included in the sale.

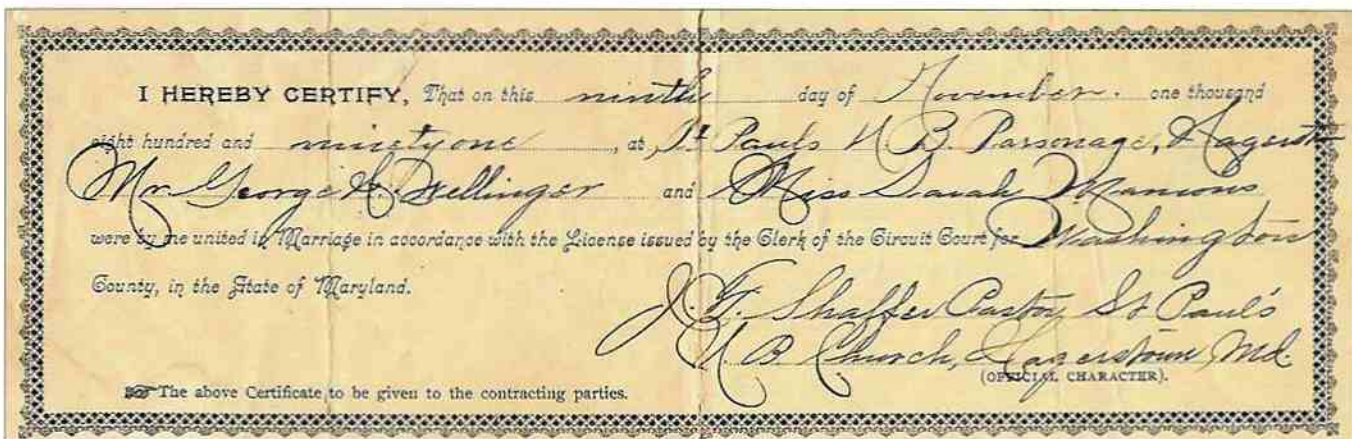
She also had no idea how they had wandered from Hagerstown, Maryland to Williamsburg, Virginia in the eight intervening years since Helen's death, but she was delighted — if astonished — that a stranger was calling to return them. The 1891 marriage certificate of her grandparents, as well as other family treasures, are now in safe hands.

Eddie McDowell

On the same jaunt to the local antiques store, I noticed an entertaining photo of a young man wearing roller skates. On the back, someone had scribbled "Eddie McDowell, Feby 1891." No location was provided, but the nature of the pose suggested that this was a professional photo taken for publicity purposes, so I decided to start my search with historical newspaper collections. I consulted both

Ancestry.com (www.ancestry.com/search/rectype/periodicals/news/main.htm) and Godfrey Memorial Library (www.godfrey.org), as I've found that their collections overlap, but also complement each other. Each has some content that the other doesn't.

It didn't take me long to find a few articles about various exhibits



The 1891 marriage certificate of Helen (Wellinger) Reed's parents.

in which Eddie performed. Apparently, he had quite a reputation for speed and “trick and fancy” skating, and liked to challenge all comers to try to beat him.

It seemed that there should be more articles than I was finding, so I started using wildcard features, which turned out to be a good idea. McDowell was sometimes listed as Mc Dowell (note the space) or M'Dowell. Searching this way popped up several additional articles, including one about his brother Emmett (also a champion skater) who had died from slipping on an icy sidewalk in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The article discussed how Eddie and his other brother George had been in a train wreck while trying to bring Emmett home to Philadelphia to be buried.

Now I had a location and the names of some siblings, so I was ready to trace Eddie's family. I also noted that Emmett was 41 in 1906, suggesting that Eddie was probably older than I had imagined. He looked like a teenager in his photo, so I had estimated that he was born in the mid- to late 1870s. In fact, he had been born in 1869.

Using census records, I was able to piece together a portrait of his family — his immigrant Irish father, his Pennsylvania-born mother and his brothers and one sister. As I traced the family forward in time, I found a repeated pattern of early deaths — mostly before marriage. In fact, there was only one member in the succeeding generation in Eddie's family — a niece who sometimes lived with Eddie and her father after her mother passed away. Unfortunately, it appeared that she had also since passed away.

For all intents and purposes, the family had died out. Now what? I found the photo a nice contrast from the usual staid poses of our ancestors, and it seemed

that someone would appreciate it, but who? I popped on the Internet, and searched on a few terms that had appeared in the articles on Eddie. One of them — “roller polo” — led to a listing for The National Museum of Roller Skating in Lincoln, Nebraska.

By clicking around the site, I



Eddie McDowell strikes a pose.

was able to find an e-mail address for the museum's curator, Deborah Wallis. I sent her a message explaining the research that had led me to her and asked whether she would like the photo. About an hour later, I received a response: “Yes, we would be very happy to receive the photograph. Would it be also possible for the museum to receive a copy of your research?”

As Ms. Wallis later elaborated, “We have so many photographs come in without any sort

of identification even from family members. So it is great to hear that you knew so much about Mr. Eddie McDowell, the subject of the photograph. Now when we put the photograph on exhibit, we will be able to tell the history of McDowell's skating career. We are very happy that you thought of us as a home for the photograph.” So as with the photo of Elizabeth Brice, this orphan didn't go to a relative, but it did go to an organization which will properly care for it.

Don't Leave Them Homeless

It's hard to imagine how many millions of orphan heirlooms are in circulation. A quick search on the term “antique photo” at eBay just turned up 745 hits, and this is obviously just the proverbial tip of the iceberg. With so many orphans, it's easy to decide that it's not worth the trouble. After all, how meaningful is it to rescue just one of these countless items?

How meaningful? Ask yourself how you would feel if your phone rang and a stranger offered you a Bible, photo album or collection of documents that belonged to your family 100 years ago. A single rescue can feel like a miracle to the recipient. And even if the family is no longer with us, there's

always a good home waiting for any orphan. So the next time you see some sepia faces starting back at you at the local flea market, please consider taking them into foster care!

Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak, author of Honoring Our Ancestors: Inspiring Stories of the Quest for Our Roots, In Search of Our Ancestors and They Came to America: Finding Your Immigrant Ancestors, can be reached through www.honoringourancestors.com. **FC**