

NARRATIVE INHERITANCE:  
THE FACTS AND FICTIONS THAT SHAPE OUR LIVES

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By

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the powerful impulse that drives people of all backgrounds to research their family of origin. In addition to understanding the motivating forces behind genealogical pursuits, this thesis will attempt to answer the following questions:

How does who we think we are impact who we become?

How is our life story shaped by the stories we believe about our family of origin?

How do myth, reality, perception, and meaning influence the way we consciously and unconsciously frame and enact our life story?

Does understanding our past give meaning to our present?

This research endeavor employs a phenomenological approach to analyze data for meaning and themes. To mine and study this data, the author intentionally embarks on her own genealogical quest and describes the journey from a first-person point of view.

The author uses the Comport family as a case study—drawing extensively on the life events of her paternal grandfather, Lionel Frederick Comport. The author chronicles the family's transformation from 19<sup>th</sup> century English farmers to 20<sup>th</sup> century film pioneers. While tracing the Comport journey from Hoo to Hollywood, the author discovers she is a direct descendent of the family whose tragic fate is believed to have inspired the opening scene of the novel *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens.

This thesis uses a qualitative approach to explore and understand the cultural phenomenon of genealogy. It also probes the intersection of genealogy, mythology, and psychology. The author's research methods involve scouring everything from 18<sup>th</sup> century parish records to modern day online resources such as Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org, as well as observing the popular NBC television series *Who Do You Think You Are?*

Moving across cultures and centuries, the author discovers that creating a story in which to frame our past, present, and future is part of what it means to be human. And yet these stories that inform so many aspects of our existence are very likely to contain elements of fact and fiction. The desire to understand where we came from and ultimately where we are going is a universal longing—one that drives us to attempt to understand both our temporal and eternal points of origin. The implication of these findings: narrative inheritance is a powerful force that shapes our lives and impacts how we engage the world around us.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Special thanks to Georgetown University Adjunct Professor Dr. Joseph P. Smaldone, whose course “Your Family in History” sparked my interest in serious genealogical research and led to the discovery of a century-old series of *Los Angeles Times* articles that unlocked even more research doors.

Special thanks to the unnamed *Los Angeles Times* reporter or reporters whose rich account of the night in 1901 when a gunman nearly killed my paternal grandfather helped me piece together a critical part of my family narrative for future generations. Though your articles were published without a byline, this writer will never forget your work and will always wonder how your lives intersected with my grandfather’s.

Special thanks to *Los Angeles Times* editor Larry Harnisch who helped me travel back in time to 1901 and find some fascinating and obscure material for this project. His research skills and knowledge of the City of Angels are overshadowed only by his willingness to share the contents of his eclectic Rolodex.

Special thanks to Dr. David Hoyt, Executive Director of the American College of Surgeons, for sharing his expertise on the nature of major trauma. His insights from the perspective of a trauma surgeon gave me a better understanding of what my grandfather may have experienced on the operating table.

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Special thanks to preservationist David Raposa for allowing me to tour the historic site my grandfather once called home. The Joseph Lee Starr Dairy Farmhouse is the last remnant of the 20-acre Starr/Estrella Dairy that employed and housed my grandfather.

Special thanks to the staff at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences' Margaret Herrick Library located in Beverly Hills, California—especially Sandra Archer, Head of Reference Services, and Mary Mallory, photograph archivist, for their generous help identifying some of my grandfather's early film work.

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And finally, my heartfelt thanks to my thesis mentor, Dr. William J. O'Brien, whose intriguing courses in theology and literature introduced me to a magical way of thinking. It was Dr. O'Brien's thought-provoking question, "What story are you in?" that planted the seed that grew into this thesis exploring the power of narrative—both real and imagined—in our lives.

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## INTRODUCTION

A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other.

~ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

The idea for this thesis unknowingly began with the simple yet profound question—what story are you in? A power-packed query posed by Georgetown Professor William J. O'Brien during a course on theology and literature. I found the idea of existing in a story intriguing and began applying the concept to my literature studies. Later I found myself asking the question to help understand the people and places I experienced during travels to some thirty different countries. I have always had a bit of wanderlust, but my recent work with an international non-profit set the stage for more meaningful conversations with people from diverse cultures. Coming from all corners of the globe we were definitely in different stories, yet during these lively conversations universal themes began to emerge in each of our lives. At this stage I still saw the question more in literary, cultural, or religious terms but the proverbial light bulb was about to further illuminate this idea of living in a story.

The concept took a decidedly personal twist after a moment of interdisciplinary insight during Georgetown Professor Joseph P. Smaldone's genealogy-themed class "Your Family in History." For many years I have had a deep interest in psychology and how our family of origin impacts the way we interact with the world. As one generation gave way to the next, patterns of behavior became apparent. Making the connection between the narratives we believe and the lives we construct would take years of observation and asking the right questions. As my genealogy research lured me into the

attic of family memories, the question—what story are you in—began to haunt me. Scattered about this repository of facts and fictions were trunks of family “secrets” I was well aware of and had spent years trying to dance around. This metaphorical attic also contained trunks of treasured family stories—some tattered and torn from the telling and retelling; others forgotten and fresh and full of possibility to a descendent like me. A descendent who on the surface appeared to be swept up in the hobby of genealogy but in reality was driven to find something I could not articulate. The question, what story are you in, invited me into the stories of generations past. And studying those dusty old chapters revealed more than just a series of historical facts. What I found in the stories of my ancestors unexpectedly provided a certain sense of peace about my present.

I had experienced what author John S. Dunne refers to as “passing over” to other lives and other times and in doing so came back to my own life with a “new understanding” of my place in the world (Dunne 1978, 198). Dunne’s theory of passing over includes the idea that we must put our memories into the form of a story before we can arrive at an insight upon which we can act (Dunne 1978, 160).

In passing over to the lives of my ancestors, I had also answered for myself a key question of this project—does understanding our past give meaning to our present? While this thesis admittedly began as a very personal quest to discover more about my own family of origin, the original proposal outlined a lofty interdisciplinary plan to explore the phenomenon of genealogy as a hobby that touches on key human values. In addition to understanding how our past might give meaning to our present, I wanted to explore how our perception of family history impacts and shapes our own life story—the life we create. For this I turned to the writings of one of the intellectual pillars of

psychology, Carl Gustav Jung, who keenly notes that man “never perceives anything fully or comprehends anything completely” (Jung 1964, 4). Jung’s theories on psychology were fundamental in understanding the complex role perception plays in how we view and shape the story of our lives.

Delving into the psychology of genealogy also meant a journey into the world of myth, because our perception of reality is shaped by a host of facts and fictions we embrace, reject, and wrestle with in conscious and subconscious ways. If perception shapes the way we see the world, myth provides the meaning. At the suggestion of Professor O’Brien, I consulted the work of Romanian scholar Mircea Eliade to find meaning-oriented themes in genealogical research. Eliade is best known for his theory of eternal return—an idea that explores humanity’s drive to return to the moment of origin or creation. The concept is one of Eliade’s most influential contributions to religious studies and is considered a key factor in understanding the role of myth and ritual. In *Myth and Reality*, Eliade writes, “myths reveal that the World, man, and life have a supernatural origin and history, and that this history is significant, precious, and exemplary” (Eliade 1998, 19).

To a novice genealogist, marrying Eliade’s theory of eternal return with family history research seemed like a mismatched couple. In the end it was a fruitful union that illuminated the mysterious and powerful impulses that drive people to engage in genealogy.

Even the seemingly simple exercise of writing about genealogy in history became a challenge in trying to untangle reality from myth, fact from fiction. It is not always easy to tell where the facts end and the fictions begin. But one thing is clear: these facts

and fictions are the threads with which we weave our stories on the loom of generations past, present, and future. And as this thesis unfolds we will examine the role these stories—our narrative inheritance—play in shaping our identity and in turn our lives.

To attempt to answer the question, what story are you in, I first had to consider the stories that have shaped my own life. As any psychologist will tell you, that is no easy task. Thankfully this thesis explores the role of both fact and fiction, and I readily admit to shaping those elements from my family lore into a story I can embrace. I feel somewhat fortunate to have the “glamour” of old Hollywood to hide behind, because pulling back the curtain on one’s family of origin for an audience is an act terrifying enough to give anyone stage fright.

## CHAPTER 1

### GREAT EXPECTATIONS AND GRIEF

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages.

~ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

For the purposes of this thesis I have chosen to use a case study of the Comport family with the primary focus on the life events of my paternal grandfather, Lionel Frederick Comport, a colorful character whose life included a few dramatic plot twists and plenty of adventure. But before his character takes center stage, we must examine a story that spans four centuries and involves a man regarded as a master of his craft—the illustrious poet and playwright William Shakespeare.

With all this talk of narrative inheritance and the facts and fictions that shape our lives, it seems fitting to begin with an example that illustrates just how easily the two can become one. I must rely heavily on memory for this example and therein lies the first challenge: perception and memory are fluid. The only tangible to trigger my memory is a small purple notebook containing a few comments made during a family history conversation with my father. Here is what it says:

#### Grandfather

Lionel Fredrick [*sic*] Comport  
Comport Stock Ranch  
Grandfather born in Kent, England  
mentioned in Shakesphere [*sic*]  
came to United States when young

Yes, I spelled Shakespeare's name wrong but I spelled my grandfather's middle name incorrectly as well. A mistake that illustrates the second challenge of sorting fact from fiction: human error.

And the third challenge we shall consider: verification. According to the way my notes are written, my dad indicated my grandfather was mentioned in Shakespeare. I jotted down that awesome little "fact" in my purple notebook and sometimes used it as an embellishment when telling the story of the Comport family and my grandfather's rags to riches transformation from dairyman to Hollywood animal trainer.

Comport and Shakespeare. The narrative possibilities are too good to be true. As a lifelong writer, I could hope for few things greater than to be linked to a man who could tell a story so well his works have captivated audiences for nearly 500 years.

But after living with the story for a few decades, I now realize it cannot be true. At least not in the way I would like it to be true. I must point out the little purple notebook is an artifact from the BG or "before Google" era, so researching a lead meant making a trip to the library and reading volume upon volume of related material. And while I was interested in family history, my efforts at that stage did not go beyond asking a few questions and scribbling random notes on whatever writing material was available.

Fast-forward to my current state of intrigue with my family of origin and you will find a more fastidious researcher—a more critical thinker, one who would quickly do a little fact checking and come back to my father with better follow-up questions to the conversation recorded in the purple notebook.

Case in point—comparing my grandfather's birth and death dates with those of William Shakespeare. The historical record, including a trip to his gravesite in Los

Angeles, California, shows that Lionel Frederick Comport was born on September 1, 1880, and departed this life on November 23, 1959. While we do not have Shakespeare's actual date of birth, church records note his baptism on April 26, 1564. Shakespeare's death is recorded as April 23, 1616.

That means Shakespeare missed meeting my grandfather by a mere 264 years.

With this glaring detail in hand I realized I had likely misunderstood my father, misread my notes, or had a grandfather who really could tell tall tales. Shakespeare may have been a genius of a wordsmith, but he was not clairvoyantly writing sonnets about my unborn grandfather.

Regardless of the facts, I had developed a wishful attachment to the ol' Bard narrative and was not willing to let the story die anything but a Shakespearean death. So I started searching for a different family link to Shakespeare, which in all honesty meant Googling a variety of Comport-related terms I can no longer remember. As I recall it took some time, though in the end my efforts yielded an impressive narrative prize. The Comports may have lost a vague link to Shakespeare, but we were about to gain a more substantial billing in the work of another literary master—Charles Dickens, the English writer regarded as the greatest novelist of the Victorian period.

As I eagerly researched this story of literary prominence, I began to realize it was a narrative inheritance of unfathomable sorrow. A notoriety born of a loss that tests the limits of language. And yet this sorrow from my family's past now whispers to me about my present and my future.

Dickens had recorded in fiction the most devastating fact a family must face—the death of a child. In the case of the Comport family, it was the deaths of thirteen children.

All but two dead before they could hold a spoon. All buried in a series of eerily lifelike sarcophagi on the grounds of St. James' Church in the isolated English hamlet of Cooling.

And if my research stands the test of time, I am the great, great, great-granddaughter of Michael and Jane Comport, the parents buried in the midst of those tiny tombs.

My research and that of other scholars indicates Michael and Jane Comport lost seven of the children buried at St. James' Church: Mary (1767), William (1771), William (1773), Frances (1775), James (1777), William (1779), and Elizabeth (1779). A combination of secondary source documents indicates the remaining six babies are the grandchildren or great-grandchildren of Michael and Jane Comport. Sarah Elizabeth (1799) is the daughter of Michael and Jane's son, George Comport. Elizabeth (1797) and Thomas (1800) are the children of Michael and Jane's son, Michael Comport of Decoy House. And the three great-grandchildren, Sarah Anne Baker (1837), John Rose Baker (1837), and Ellen Elizabeth Baker (1854) are the children of John Rose Baker and Sarah Anne Comport, the daughter of Michael Comport of Decoy House.

This sea of graves, this monument to a family's unspeakable grief is believed to be the inspiration for the opening scene of Dickens' novel *Great Expectations*. Originally published between 1860 and 1861 as a weekly serial for Dickens' journal *All the Year Round*, the story opens in a churchyard: "My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip" (Dickens 1999, 9).

We soon learn that little Pip has endured his own unspeakable losses:

As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the day of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones. The shape of the letters on my father's, gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man with curly black hair. From the character and the turn of the inscription, "*Also Georgiana Wife of the Above,*" I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. To five little stone lozenges, each about a foot and a half long, which were arranged in a neat little row beside their grave, and were sacred to the memory of five little brothers of mine—who gave up trying to get a living, exceedingly early in that universal struggle—I am indebted for a belief I religiously entertained that they had all been born on their backs with their hands in the trousers-pockets, and had never taken them out in this state of existence. (Dickens 1999, 9)

The novel is considered one of Dickens' finest works. As such, his characters and choice of topography continue to generate interesting theories about the real life influences on the author's work. For the purposes of this thesis, we shall focus solely on the theory of the Comport graves at Cooling serving as the model for the opening scene of *Great Expectations*.



GRAVES OF THE COMPORT FAMILY, COOLING CHURCHYARD

ILLUSTRATION BY ARTIST F. G. KITTON

FROM THE 1891 PUBLICATION OF

*A WEEK'S TRAMP IN DICKENS-LAND*

BY WILLIAM R. HUGHES

The most comprehensive and plausible modern research I found on the Comport-Dickens link comes from *The Companion to Great Expectations*, edited by author, professor, and Dickens expert David Paroissien. In addition to a black and white photo of the Comport graves, the 506-page study includes an illustration titled “Comport and Baker Gravestones, St James’s Cooling.” This illustration appearing on page 57 is comprised of a sketch of the graves and a list of the names of the children buried at the site, along with the dates of death and the names of their parents.

Paroissien’s factual annotations on various aspects of the text are richly detailed, allowing the reader to visually step into the scene. Consider this passage on the Comport graves:

Thirteen such small rectilinear tombstones lie on the south side of St James’s Cooling, near the porch door. The “lozenges’ are in two sets grouped around a single headstone with three winged cherubs at the top. Three stones west of the headstone mark the graves of the infant children of John Rose Baker and his wife, Sarah Anne, nee Comport. The second set of stones east of the headstone commemorates children born to the Comports of Cooling Court, Cooling Castle and Decoy House, High Halstow. Coffin-like in shape, each is wider at the shoulders, lying horizontally in the ground with a curved surface upwards. The stones of the three Baker infants are approximately three and half feet long; the ten Comport stones, identical in shape, are about six inches smaller. (Paroissien, 2000, 25-26)

While I have always found the shape of the children’s tombstones haunting and unusual, Paroissien explains “small tombstones like these are relatively common on the Hoo peninsula in north Kent.” Even though the small Comport headstones at Cooling may not be unusual, they are still “the accepted model” for Pip’s graves in part because they “are the smallest and the most picturesque of any in the area” (Paroissien, 2000, 25).

The most compelling evidence of the connection comes from Dickens’ friend and later biographer John Forster. Shortly after Dickens died, Forster wrote that the Cooling

churchyard and nearby castle ruins possessed “a weird strangeness that made it one of his attractive walks in late year or winter ...” (Forster 1927, 216).

In *The Life of Charles Dickens*, Forster alludes to the link between the Comport graves and the opening scene of *Great Expectations* like this:

To another drearier churchyard, itself forming part of the marshes beyond the Medway, he often took friends to show them the dozen small tombstones of various sizes adapted to the respective ages of a dozen small children of one family which he made part of his story of *Great Expectations*, though, with the reserves always necessary in copying nature not to overstep her modesty by copying too closely, he makes the number that appalled little Pip not more than half the reality. (Forster 1927, 216)

While other elements in the fictional scene are the subject of debate, scholars point out this may be nothing more than a case of creative literary license. In the 1999 Norton Critical Edition of *Great Expectations*, editor Edgar Rosenberg writes that Dickens “relied on his composite skills in drawing Pip’s village” so that the fictional scene unfolding before readers is actually a combination of settings including St. Mary’s Church at Lower Higham and St. James’ Church at Cooling. According to Rosenberg “the lozenge-shaped tombstones are imported from the churchyard of Cooling” but Dickens reduced the “actual number of gravestones from thirteen to five” (Rosenberg, 1999, 10).

More than a century before Rosenberg’s work was published, this link between the Comport graves and *Great Expectations* was recorded by writer William Richard Hughes in the 1891 publication of *A week’s tramp in Dickens-Land*:

Readers of *Great Expectations* will remember that the scene in the first chapter between Pip and the convict, Magwitch, is laid in Cooling churchyard, and on reaching this spot we are instantly reminded of what doubtless gave origin to the idea of the five dead little brothers of poor Philip Pirrip, for there, on the left of the principal pathway, are indeed, not five stone lozenges, but ten in one row and

three more at the back of them, such peculiarly-shaped and curiously-arranged little monuments as we never before beheld. They consist of a grey stone (Kentish-rag, probably, but lichen-encrusted by time) of cylindrical shape, widening at the shoulders, coffin-like, and about a yard in length, the diameter being about eight inches, including the portion buried in the earth. Four little foot-stones are placed in front, and separating the ten little memorials from the three at the back is a large head-stone, bearing the name – ‘Comport of Cowling Court, 1771.’ (Hughes 1891, 351-352)

Not all authors mention the Comport name in connection with *Great Expectations* and Pip’s graves but the link is a part of literary lore. I asked Paroissien about his choice to include the Comport name in *The Companion to Great Expectations*. During a phone interview from London he explained, “among Dickensians or at least people who study his work, then the name Comport comes up, it is quickly connected ...” (Paroissien 2012).

Consider too that “Dickens grounded *Great Expectations* in a world he really knew” including the “regional world of the Hoo peninsula of north-east Kent” (Paroissien, 2000, 7). And the Comport surname has a long, long history in the area both before and after Dickens lived in the region. As my research indicates and Paroissien points out in his study of *Great Expectations*, “The Comports were a long-established Kent family whose ancestors date from the twelfth century” (Paroissien, 2000, 26).

In my quest to learn more about the Comport connection to Pip’s graves, I came across another curious passage written by Charles Dickens that actually includes the Comport surname. The intriguing prose appeared in the May 5, 1860, edition of Dickens’ *All The Year Round* journal as part of a series called the *Uncommercial Traveller*. This passage comes from a UT article titled *City of London Churches*:

Jane Comport must have married Young Dowgate, and come into the family that way; Young Dowgate was courting Jane Comport when he gave her her prayer-

book, and recorded the presentation in the fly-leaf; if Jane were fond of Young Dowgate, why did she die and leave the book here? Perhaps at the rickety altar, and before the damp Commandments, she, Comport, had taken him, Dowgate, in a flush of youthful hope and joy, and perhaps it had not turned out in the long run as great a success as was expected? (Drew, 2000, 110)

I wanted to learn more about this passage because in addition to including the Comport surname, it included the given name of Jane. Could this be my great, great, great-grandmother Jane Comport nee Smith? The same Jane Comport whose lifetime of grief is recorded in stone at the Cooling churchyard? Or perhaps her daughter of the same name who was half-orphaned at the age of four by her mother's death in 1789. Secondary sources reveal that the younger Jane Comport outlived her mother by 26 years only to die just before reaching the age of thirty.

Nearly a year after first stumbling upon the passage, I found a possible answer about the Comport-Dowgate affair in an annotated study of Dickens' work as a journalist. The fourth volume in the study titled *Dickens's Journalism: 'The Uncommercial Traveller' And Other Papers* also includes another affirmation of the Comport link to Pip's graves:

As G.J. Worth has suggested (The Dickensian, Vol. 83 [1987], pp. 19-20), Dickens probably borrowed the name of 'Comport' (p. 110) from the surname on the ten small graves of children in Cooling Churchyard, Kent. The same graves re-emerge shortly afterwards as the 'five little stone lozenges' marking the tombs of Pip's brothers and sisters in the opening installment of *Great Expectations* . . . (Drew, 2000, 106)

It was the family lore about Shakespeare that led me to Dickens so it seems an ironic twist that Dickens should lead me back to Shakespeare. But that is exactly what happened. During my earnest search for answers about the Comport clan in England, I found myself symbolically back at the beginning. That little purple notebook with

random notes on family history does indeed contain a bit of truth. As it turns out, the historical record indicates the Comport clan has a literary link to Shakespeare not through death but birth. The seven children of Michael Comport and Jane Smith buried in the St. James' churchyard and possibly my great, great-grandfather Thomas Comport were born on the grounds of Cooling Castle and Cooling Court—a 12<sup>th</sup> century fortress built to defend the River Thames.

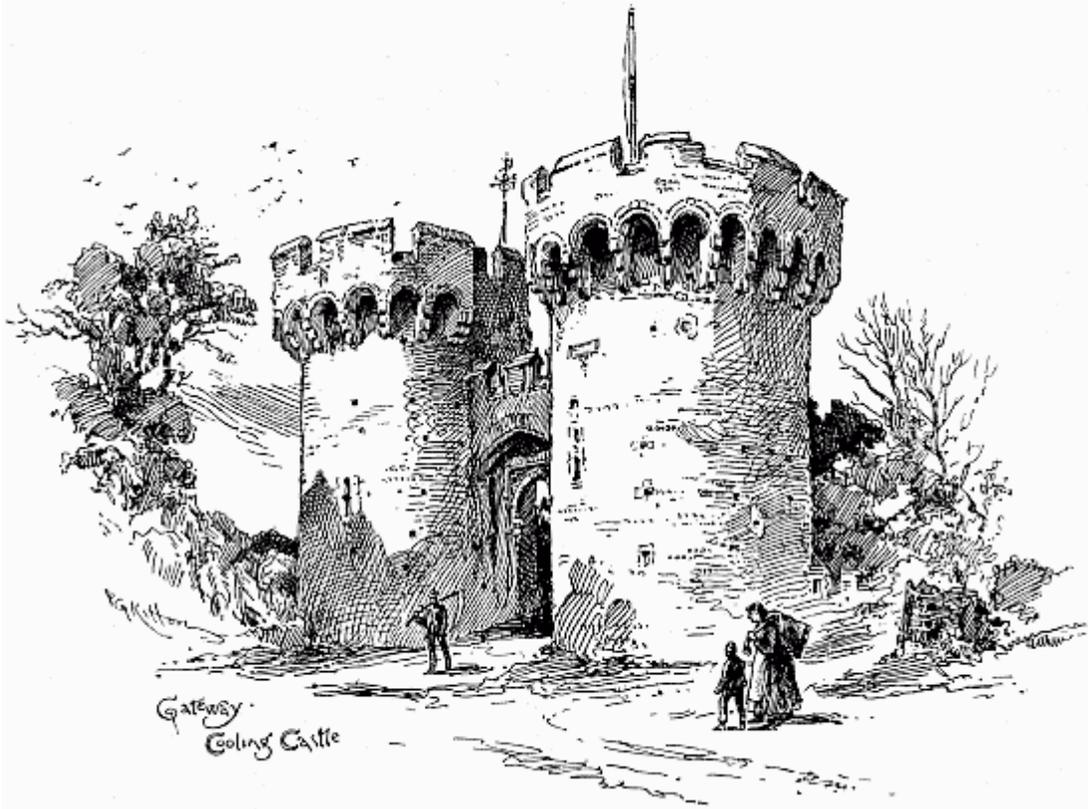
In *The Great Expectations Country*, a 1929 book dedicated to the topography of the Dickens novel, author Laurence Gadd describes Cooling Castle like this:

The castle covers eight acres of ground and within the main gate there is a house of modern appearance, strangely contrasting with the massive grey walls surrounding it. When Dickens lived at Gad's Hill, the house in the castle was occupied by a wealthy farmer named Merton. In the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century it belonged to Michael Comport, whose initials are to be seen cut in a metal standard over one of the towers .... (Gadd 1929, 3)

In 1772, author Thomas Fisher provided this historical record of the castle in *The History and Antiquities of Rochester*:

The pious and intrepid Sir John Oldcastle, who in the reign of Henry V. fell a victim to papal cruelty, resided in this castle [castle]; part of it is now a farm house, in the occupation of Mr. Comport /\*. Near the twenty-seventh stone is Gad's hill, supposed to have been the scene of the robbery mentioned by Shakespear [sic] in his play of Henry IV. (Fisher 1772, 189)

A footnote in the Fisher publication puts the Shakespeare link in more detailed context: “We have some reason to think Sir John Falstaff, of truly comic memory, inhabited Cooling castle, and that his name was Oldcastle; as appears in an old manuscript of Shakespear's [sic] Henry IV” (Fisher 1772, 190).



GATEWAY, COOLING CASTLE

ILLUSTRATION BY ARTIST F. G. KITTON

FROM THE 1891 PUBLICATION OF  
*A WEEK'S TRAMP IN DICKENS-LAND*

BY WILLIAM R. HUGHES

In my search to verify the stories about my family of origin, I would find yet one more connection to the world of English literature—a brief poetic interlude in my epic quest.

On March 2, 1866, my great-grandfather, John Huggins (aka Huggens) Comport married Caroline Besty (aka Betsey) Meers in the parish church of St. Marylebone. In researching the church I learned that just twenty years before, the walls of St. Marylebone had witnessed the marriage vows of the acclaimed poetic lovebirds Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett. The Browning union would yield one son, the Comport's union—seven sons and seven daughters.

Sidney. Minnie. Herbert. Florence. Ernest. Louise. May. Octavius. Stuart. Mabel. Rodney. Olive. Freda. And Lionel Frederick, my grandfather. Unlike the generation that came before, all but one of these Comport children would survive. Infant May gave up her “universal struggle” at two months of age but her thirteen siblings lived to make the transatlantic journey from their ancestral home on the Hoo peninsula to a distant land called America.

On what must have been a chilly day in February 1887, the family of fifteen departed London on a gleaming steel steamship called the Richmond Hill. It is not clear what drove sixty-year old John Huggins Comport and his thirty-nine-year old wife Caroline to wrangle a brood of children ranging in age from toddler to twenty halfway around the world. But one thing is clear: while the facts of their ancestors' lives had shaped fiction, they could not anticipate how the fictional forces of their adopted homeland would shape the lives of their descendants.

Like thousands of immigrants before them, the Comport family had gone west in search of a better life. John Huggins Comport died before the dawn of the bright opportunity that would provide multiple generations of the Comport clan with various movie-related careers. His wife, Caroline, would leave this earthly realm shortly after those 19<sup>th</sup> century pioneers, Frenchman Louis Lumiere and American Thomas Edison, unveiled two inventions that would give birth to both a new industry and shaper of modern culture—the Cinematographe and the Vitascope. Lumiere’s Cinematographe was a device that combined a portable motion picture camera, a film-processing unit, and a projector. Edison’s Vitascope became the first commercially successful projector in the United States. At the 1900 Paris Exposition Lumiere is quoted as saying, “the cinema is an invention without a future” (Monaco 2000, 38).

But history would prove Lumiere wrong. His invention, combined with the creative genius of his peers, would launch an industry that would give rise to a powerful and far-reaching narrative machine—the motion picture. A story-telling vehicle capable of fueling fantastic dreams of fame and fortune just as easily as it could extinguish the hopes of aspiring stars, drawn like moths to the fiery lights of that mythical land known as Hollywood.

This is the story of how my paternal grandfather, Lionel Frederick Comport, stepped into that narrative in part by settling in a sleepy little district in the farmlands of Los Angeles that would become home to the region’s first permanent movie studios. That Lionel F. Comport, an immigrant dairyman nearly extinguished by a single bullet, should settle in a place named Edendale seems symbolic of the opportunity that would unfold before him. It may or may not have been a place of bliss or perfect happiness, but

here in Edendale a boy from England would seize the anything-is-possible promise of America and shape a storied future for himself and his descendents.

And so begins my quest to understand the Comport journey from Hoo to Hollywood and to explore the powerful role narrative inheritance plays in each of our lives.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE BULLET OF MYSTERY

No young man believes he shall ever die.

~ William Hazlitt, *The Immortality in Youth*

My paternal grandfather, Lionel Frederick Comport, died years before I was born but his legacy lived on in family stories about his life—particularly the night he was shot while making his rounds as a milkman. The details were sketchy and there was often a little wink and a befuddled smile when you asked, “Who shot him?” but the story went something like this:

One night while delivering milk on the dark streets of Los Angeles, your grandfather was shot in the stomach. The doctors had to cut out a foot of his intestines—dramatic pause—and then they put his innards back together with this little metal device called a Murphy button.

The storyteller usually included the unpleasant but necessary detail about how the so-called Murphy button later passed through his system and that is how the doctors knew he would be all right. The natural follow-up question about who could have shot him induced the wink, the befuddled smile, and some mumbling that perhaps the mysterious gunman was a jealous husband.

It is impossible to say what kind of company my grandfather kept in 1901 as a nineteen-year-old living on and working for the twenty-acre Starr/Estrella Dairy farm in what would become modern day Los Angeles. Perhaps the story was shaped and embellished, as stories often are, by his lifelong reputation as a prankster and, after losing his wife twenty-one years before his own death, a ladies man.

And so the listener was left with this odd set of “facts” involving a milkman, a mysterious bullet, and a Murphy button. It was a heck of a story that ended happily with my grandfather’s survival. And in the telling and retelling, it was a story that gilded my grandfather’s life, and by association his descendants, with a magical layer of luck and fortitude. Who needed any more “facts”?

That is what I thought until I stumbled upon a 1901 newspaper article from the *San Francisco Chronicle*. In addition to the shooting story, the more prolific, glamorous stories of his life revolved around his self-made career as a movie wrangler. During a quest to fill in the numerous blanks of his role in early Hollywood I visited film libraries, scoured old scripts, and skimmed movie-related books hoping they might hold a few clues about his career. I found a few odds and ends but not enough to satiate my curiosity. So in addition to these conventional research methods, I conducted Internet searches of historical newspapers and other online resources. At first these proved even less effective. My time was usually rewarded with a variety of articles using the word comport as a verb to define the manner in which one behaves. Or an image search that almost always turns up comport as a noun showing lovely photographs of the footed glass bowls known by the same name.

But one day in October 2009 I found something that could have inspired author Mark Twain to coin the phrase, “truth is stranger than fiction.” A search on Footnote.com turned up the bold headline, “HIS LIFE SAVED BY A ‘MURPHY BUTTON’. Remarkable Recovery Made by a Milkman Who Was Shot in Los Angeles.”

The story was brief but it spoke volumes to me about the night my grandfather was shot. Having established my own career in television news, I was immediately

struck by the fact that this story was running in a San Francisco newspaper. Why had I not found a single mention of this “remarkable” story in any of the Los Angeles papers of the era? As I read on, the story became even more intriguing. The July 28, 1901, *San Francisco Chronicle* article said the young milkman was “mysteriously shot” through the abdomen and “was thought to be fatally wounded.” The paper called his recovery “phenomenal” and reported that the “operation is a most difficult one.” It was the last sentence of the article that stunned me. According to the paper, the doctor was being congratulated on his success for being the second surgeon in Los Angeles to “successfully perform the operation.” That meant my grandfather was Police Surgeon Pierce’s first successful Murphy button patient!

I had grown up with the story of the milkman and the Murphy button but never did I realize that my grandfather nearly died. Perhaps the storyteller didn’t emphasize that possible outcome or perhaps the simple immortality of youth acted as a deterrent to more nuanced questioning. But now the mysterious gunshot of 1901 reverberated in the form of what-ifs and questions about the events of that night. With no known children at the time of the shooting, his death would have ended the futures of multiple Comports—mine included. This realization turned an intriguing story of my youth into a fascination with learning more about my grandfather’s brush with death.

The next month, a more determined search through historical newspapers would lead me to a series of articles that provided more “facts” than I could have hoped for, a few of them bordering on unbelievable. On July 11, 1901, the day after the shooting, the *Los Angeles Times* would report the story under a headline reading, “The Bullet of

Mystery. Why Was Comport Shot and by Whom? Young Milkman Victim of Assassin. Only One Chance in a Hundred of His Recovery – Police Foiled.”

The unnamed reporter or reporters responsible for the article filed a story rich with details and speculation. In what some might call a symbolic foreshadowing of my grandfather’s future career, the article reads at times like a movie script:

Just as he rounded the corner of Twentieth and Toberman streets he heard a shot fired within a few feet of him and the same instant felt a slight twinge of pain in the back. Turning in his seat he saw a man running away from him. Thinking the man had shot at and slightly wounded him and never realizing that he had received what is almost certain to prove his death wound, Comport wheeled his horses and started after the fleeing man, whipping the horses into a run. (*Los Angeles Times* 1901)

According to the article, the man in question disappeared into a yard out of reach of the horse-drawn wagon, so the young Comport then turned the team around and “delivered milk to two customers” before the pain of his wound forced him to rethink his actions (*Los Angeles Times* 1901). Over the course of the next few hours, his life would be caught up in a series of events and decisions reflecting the enormous changes taking place as the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave way to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Los Angeles was still a young city—incorporated in April 1850 just five months before California was recognized as a Union state by the U.S. government. Between 1848 and 1900 the region would witness the rise and fall of the Northern California Gold Rush, the arrival of the transcontinental railroad, and the discovery of a major oil field not far from the scene of the crime.

From a news perspective, the month of July 1901 started off with a record of events that, with the exception of the colorful language and century old prices, sound as if they were ripped from today’s headlines.

On Monday, July 1, 1901, the front page of the *Los Angeles Record* consists of just three news stories and a large advertisement for Hale's department stores. The main headline reads "Society Takes To Wash Tubs And Laundry Girls Go Out To Enjoy The Sunshine," and the story takes up two-thirds of the page. The story involves a stalemate between the Laundry Workers' Union and laundry house owners over the question of a ten-hour workday. The copy is full of flourish and detail similar to that found in "The Bullet of Mystery" articles written about the night my grandfather, Lionel Frederick Comport, was shot.

The *Record* coverage of the laundry dispute includes this colorful description in the first column of the story:

Miss Laundry Girl this morning went to her work as usual, and stayed just five minutes. Then she went to the coat rack, took down her hat and pinned it on her head, gave her hair a little pat here and a little dab there, smiled sweetly at the boss, and walked out of the building. She numbers about 275, and this little performance was repeated 275 times. Then the men and boys rolled down their shirt sleeves, put on their coats, and walked out, too, only they didn't smile sweetly at the bosses, nor pat their hair nor smooth their bangs. (*Los Angeles Record* 1901, July 1)

In column three, the story also goes on to offer this insight into the daily life of 1901 Los Angeles that my grandfather may have witnessed:

It has been so nice to have a real clean young man call at the kitchen door and respectfully ask for soiled things, and it has been this way so long in the city that some of the inhabitants had actually forgotten the old, useful household combination of the tub, the wringer and the cotton rope in the back yard.

This morning the sound of rubbing and running water could be heard in the Figueroa street district. Tubs that had been hanging for years in the woodshed were taken down and allowed to soak up, for immediate use. (*Los Angeles Record* 1901, July 1)

This laundry drama story shared the front page with just two other headlines that day. One story tells the tale of starlet Miss Edmunds taking a trip to San Francisco to buy

outfits for her triumphal tour of the United States because “the dressmakers of Los Angeles were not nearly up to date enough for the fastidious star-to-be ....”

And the final news story found on the front page is the untimely death of a rancher. J.R. Wyley of Long Beach is said to have died after being hit by a streetcar “at the ill-fated corner” of Los Angeles and Second streets.

Sharing the front page with these news stories is a large ad for “Hale’s Good Goods” promising “Reductions That No Store Dares to Meet” during its “Grand Pre-Inventory Sacrifice” sale. Some of the items mentioned in the ad include: Wash Suits at 95 cents which the ad proclaims are “Worth Up to \$3.50; “Slightly Damaged Curtains” are listed as “Your Choice at 50c each” and for just 39 cents “10 dozen handsome black satin underskirts, made with a flounce, good and full, very durable and perfect in fit” (*Los Angeles Record* 1901).

Two days later and just a week before my grandfather was shot, the laundry strike was still front-page news. The Wednesday, July 3, 1901, edition of the *Los Angeles Record* would play up the story with a bold font headline reading, “The Girls Have Nearly Won Their Fight For Shorter Hours.” On this day, stories from around the nation also made the front page including news of a deadly heat wave in New York that had so far claimed “nearly four hundred deaths,” a child custody case between the county’s former coroner and his wife, and a one-sentence mention that while “the big Homestead hotel at Hot Springs burned to the ground...there was no loss of life nor no panic” at the Richmond, Virginia, landmark.

With the fourth of July holiday approaching, page two of the Wednesday, July 3, 1901, edition of the *Los Angeles Record* includes a number of ads for holiday excursions

including a \$2.50 round-trip boat ride from Los Angeles to Santa Catalina Island to witness the “Grand Illumination of the Island.” Merrymakers preferring to celebrate on land could take a Southern Pacific Company train to one of the area’s many beaches with ten ride tickets between Los Angeles and the beaches selling for \$1.50.

But these alluring promises of sunny beach days were about to be replaced by an undercurrent of fear caused by a string of mysterious shootings the *Los Angeles Record* would sensationally attribute to “Jack the Shooter.” On July 10, 1901, the five o’clock edition of the *Los Angeles Record* would be one of the first papers in the city to report the news of the shooting attack on Lionel Frederick Comport with a dramatic bold type headline reading, “Third And Fatal Midnight Shooting Impeaches Police Efficiency: L.B. Comfort Assassinated While Driving a Milk Wagon and the Police, as Usual, Have Absolutely No Clue to the Assassin – Perhaps There is a Jack the Shooter.”

The clever nickname for the elusive Los Angeles suspect was likely used to sell more newspapers though the use of the term “Jack the Shooter” does not, according to the historical record, fit the shooting crime spree. The moniker is a play on Jack the Ripper, the London serial killer who slashed at least five women to death and removed one of his victim’s wombs. The mutilated bodies were often found in posed positions left in close proximity to packed dwelling places. While this 1888 crime spree occurred in the impoverished and crime-ridden Whitechapel section of the city, the horrific nature of the murders and the killer’s ability to elude discovery in one of London’s most densely populated areas fueled international news coverage.

Jack the Ripper’s reign of terror began the year after the Comport clan emigrated from London to the United States. Lionel would have been almost eight, his oldest

brother Sidney, twenty-one, and his youngest sister Freda, three years of age. A family bold enough to move halfway around the world with thirteen children in tow would be good candidates for keeping up with current events both at home and abroad. One can only imagine the emotional trauma they experienced if they read the *Record's* sensational, albeit misspelled, headline and accompanying story that says, “At the California hospital is L.B. Comfort, a milkman, mortally wounded, and the physicians are momentarily expecting his death” (*Los Angeles Record* 1901).

He had escaped the Dickensian squalor of London only to be gunned down by a Wild West assassin. An attack the July 11, 1901, edition of the *Los Angeles Times* would call “one of the most mysterious shooting cases which has ever occurred in the city.” But this London-born boy would surprise both hardened police officers and trauma surgeons with his “wonderful nerve” in pursuing his assailant and later his remarkable recovery (*Los Angeles Herald* 1901, July 11). While Comport may have chased the gunman in a moment of what-the-hell-just-happened adrenaline, he now had a greater purpose to once again wheel the horses around and drive them rapidly toward a dark stretch of road known both then and now as Washington Street—he needed help—and on this night that help would appear in the form of Patrolman Broadhead, a police officer making his rounds on foot.

That he found an officer so quickly may have been just one of the many miracles bestowed upon him that night. While the shooting happened near the heart of the city, the police force of 1901 numbered less than 70 men who struggled to keep the peace in a burgeoning region that attracted the likes of “law-abiding farmers, ranchers, and

storekeepers” as well as “gamblers, disillusioned miners from the Sierra foothills, saloonkeepers, horse thieves, and renegades” ([www.lapdonline.org](http://www.lapdonline.org)).

The pay was low and the hours long. “They received \$75 a month with two dollars deducted for pensions. Eight hours was the regular shift but there were far more duties than men, and all officers put in many extra hours without compensation” (Sjoquist 1984, 48).

In addition to long hours and low pay, the patrolmen of 1901 had little to work with. Most “walked a beat and rode a streetcar when responding to a distant call” (Sjoquist 1984, 48). If they were assigned to a larger beat they had the luxury of a bicycle. On the night my grandfather was shot, Patrolman Broadhead used the milk wagon to transport the injured Comport to the signal box so the officer could summon an ambulance. Though the city of Chicago first used a motorized ambulance in 1899, Los Angeles would have to wait until 1904 for its first electric ambulance. Tonight, Comport would be taken to the Central Receiving Hospital “with all the speed possible” provided by a team of horses (*Los Angeles Times* 1901).

The Central Receiving Hospital served as the “frontline first-aid station for those who needed to be stitched up and sent on to bigger hospitals” (Rasmussen 2005). Like the growing city it served, the Receiving Hospital grew and transformed from an 1868 ad hoc “hospice for victims of pestilence” to a modern 1957 facility where Sen. Robert F. Kennedy received his last rites on June 5, 1968, after he was shot at the nearby Ambassador Hotel (Rasmussen 2005). The hospital would be rebuilt five times on different locations over the years but in the early morning hours of July 10, 1901, the horse-drawn ambulance carrying Comport would race through the night to the Central

Police Station and Receiving Hospital located on 1<sup>st</sup> Street between Broadway and Hill. The early protocol linking the Receiving Hospital with the police department called for the injured to be treated first by a police surgeon. If he couldn't finish the job, the patient was transported to another facility.

According to the July 11, 1901, edition of the *Los Angeles Times* on the night Comport was shot, "Police Surgeon Pierce was summoned and made an examination of the wound. He saw at once that the man was fatally injured, and told him so, at the same time asking him for a statement of the shooting and particularly whether he knew who had shot him." Comport reportedly stuck to his original story and that "he was as rational as man can be, and was much cooler and less excited than some of the officers who assisted in the examination of his injury" (*Los Angeles Times* 1901).

Police Surgeon Pierce makes no mention of the interrogation in his journal report sticking as one would expect to the medical facts at hand: "I found a bullet of about 38-calibre had passed through the back, entering midway between the lower border of the ribs and crest of the illium, about two inches from spinal column on left side" (Pierce 1901, 440).

If the first draft of history is correct, this tense scene of medical treatment and police interrogation would play out at least three times before Comport ended up on the operating table at the nearby California Hospital, a facility better equipped and staffed to accommodate surgery.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported "as the operation is one of great danger, another effort was made to induce Comport to make a final statement, for up to that time the police and others who had heard what he had said believed that he was not telling the

whole truth. Chief of Detectives Bradish was at the hospital before the operation and told the wounded man that he might never regain consciousness, and asked him whether he had anything more to tell about the case” (*Los Angeles Times* 1901, July 11).

Of the three Los Angeles newspapers known to have covered the Comport shooting, only the *Los Angeles Record* reported that Comport “said that he had three enemies but refused to mention their names.” The same edition of the paper also reported “his manner indicates that he has some information which he does not care to disclose” (*Los Angeles Record* 1901, July 10). This version of the story no doubt adds another layer of intrigue to an already mysterious story, though it should be noted he was making these statements to the police after he had been shot and shortly before he reportedly lost consciousness.

The next morning, the July 11, 1901, editions of both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles Herald* would report that Comport could tell police very little about the gunman or a possible motive. Patrolman Broadhead is quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* as giving this account of questioning Comport about the shooting:

I told him [Comport] that he was dangerously shot and urged him to tell me all he knew about the matter. He could tell nothing except what he told repeatedly later in the day, and the story he told me then is the story he still tells, and I believe it to be the truth. While he was lying there he moaned several times ‘Who could have shot me? Why did they do it? Say, tell me who could have shot me and what reason they could have had?’ His sufferings were terrible and when we placed him in the ambulance he was almost unconscious. (*Los Angeles Times* 1901)

Family members recount the movie wrangler Comport as a humorous man who would tell you anything if you’d believe it but it is hard to imagine the young Comport bleeding to death and drugged up on morphine able to stick to a story that was not true.

In a 1901 medical journal article written for *Southern California Practitioner*, Police Surgeon Pierce described the night in detail, “as the patient was suffering great pain and showed evidence of considerable shock, I administered one-half grain morphine and one-thirtieth grain strychn. sulph. hypodermically, and had him removed to California Hospital where arrangements were hurriedly made for operating” (Pierce 1901, 440).

From the same journal article we learn that Police Surgeon Pierce was a man “young in the profession,” and was assisted at California Hospital by a team that included Dr. W. W. Beckett, Dr. E. J. Cook, and house surgeon Dr. Harvey McNeil, who administered the anesthetic. Head surgical nurse Miss Lawton assisted the doctors along with nurses Miss Treat and Miss Inghram (Pierce 1901, 440-441).

According to Police Surgeon Pierce’s detailed journal the shooting occurred at 3:10 a.m., by the time Comport found help, was transported to various hospitals, and wheeled into the etherizing room at 5:35 a.m. for a dose of chloroform, “he was terribly weakened from loss of blood” (Pierce 1901, 440-441).

As the surgical team made the first incision they were faced with a peritoneal cavity filled “with blood and considerable fecal matter” (Pierce 1901, 441). After dealing with this situation, they proceeded to repair the first evidence of injury, which was a slit a little more than two-inches long in the colon, followed by two perforations in the small intestine. Police Surgeon Pierce writes that they repaired these injuries only to discover the bullet had also damaged the right lobe of Comport’s liver which they repaired “with some difficulty” using catgut sutures. Pierce describes the worst of the injuries in his medical journal report like this:

Following down the intestines we found the greatest amount of damage in the illium. There was about twenty inches punctured in more than a dozen places, and mesentery badly torn. Will say in passing that the lower portion of the bowel was completely severed as clean as though done with scissors, and into the lumen of which we were enabled to put the Murphy button without any subsequent trimming. It was from the mesentery in this region that we found the worst bleeding, and from its torn vessels our patient was all but exsanguinated. (Pierce 1901, 441)

While Comport lay bleeding to death, the team worked furiously to repair the worst of the damaged bowels. With the Murphy button in place, they soon discovered the bullet had also “slightly injured the capsule of left kidney, and there seemed to be considerable hemorrhage still going on in [the] abdomen” (Pierce 1901, 441).

Police Surgeon Pierce writes that while they washed the cavity with “gallons of hot salt solution,” they could not pinpoint the cause of this additional bleeding. The situation was about to get worse as Pierce recounted in his 1901 medical journal article:

By this time the patient having been on the table one and one-half hours, was in a state of collapse, and although salt infusion had been kept up from the first, and other stimulants given, the anesthetist reported that patient was dying, and the belly wall was hurriedly closed with through and through silk-worm gut sutures, and a guaze drain put in from the back well up into the abdominal cavity. A last search was made for the bullet before closing the wound, and it was found in pelvis underneath the bladder, where it had gravitated while patient was on his feet. (Pierce 1901, 441-442)

The surgical team had practiced medicine as best they could but the outcome was now out of their hands. At 7:00 a.m., the unconscious Comport was put on a regime of salt solution and placed in the care of Nurse Purdam. Two hours later, the patient everyone predicted would die from his wounds made medical history. At 9:00 a.m. on the same day of the mysterious shooting—Comport regained consciousness.

On July 20, 1901, while my grandfather was still in the hospital, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a story under the headline of “Who Shoots Our Milkman?” The story was

prompted by yet another mysterious attack—this time aimed at a milkman by the name of George Allen. He too was shot from the rear, but the bullet hit him in the leg (*Los Angeles Times* 1901, July 20). A strange footnote in the case involves the Police Commission’s August 1901 decision to dismiss one Special Officer B. L. Brock for claiming to have encountered the milkman assassin. Officer Brock reportedly produced his bullet-ridden police helmet as evidence of these harrowing encounters. Police investigators were of the opinion “that Brock punched the holes in the helmet with a pencil ...” (*Los Angeles Times* 1901, August 14).

While the suspect in the mysterious milkman shootings appears to have escaped arrest, the remarkable recovery of Lionel Frederick Comport would go down in the annals of medical history. In a presentation to members of the Southern California Medical Society, Police Surgeon Pierce would cite the Comport shooting and surgery as a case study supporting “clinically that considerable portions of the intestines [can] be removed by resection without detriment to the patient ...” (Pierce 1901, 439).

In wrapping up his presentation, Surgeon Pierce told the audience that Comport was discharged from the hospital on August 8, 1901, having recovered “from a gun shot wound, the severity of which few would have [the] vital force to survive” (Pierce 1901, 442).

The same vital force that sustained Comport through the 1901 shooting ordeal and cutting-edge surgery would serve him well in the next chapter of his life involving Holsteins and Hollywood.

## CHAPTER 3

### FROM HOLSTEINS TO HOLLYWOOD

Fortuitous circumstances constitute the moulds that shape the majority of human lives ....

~ Olympia Brown, *American Suffragist*

After Comport's harrowing brush with death, he returned to life as a dairyman and several years later acquired a ranch of his own. He married a young woman named Lillian Ellen Hopkins and in 1905 they welcomed their first child, a daughter they would name Carolyn. The family expanded quickly with the births of five more children: Edward, Louise, Raymond, Lionel O., and Lillian, the baby of the bunch. The ranch, with all its budding ranch hands, might have continued to function solely as a dairy were it not for another fateful event shaping the future of Lionel's adopted homeland—the migration of motion picture production from New York to Los Angeles.

According to the Comport family narrative, Lionel F. Comport was making a living as a dairyman when Hollywood came calling or in this case, Hollywood's long forgotten predecessor, Edendale. A September 1938 *Popular Mechanics* article featuring "Barnyard Wizards of the Films" supports that narrative story line: "when producers kept renting his cattle for pictures, he decided to go into the [movie] business. The barn that once housed a herd of Holsteins and Jerseys is now filled with a collection of animals the average farmer wouldn't keep ten minutes" (*Popular Mechanics* 1938, 119A). With the dairy cows bringing in more money making movies than milk, Lionel began expanding the ranch and forging a new future training just about anything with four legs or feathers.

A number of newspaper and magazine articles quote Lionel F. Comport as saying he got his start in motion pictures around 1910. While it's difficult to pin down the exact date he rented his first cattle to moviemakers, a look at the historical record provides some revealing details. The 1910 U. S. Federal Census lists Lionel F. Comport as operating a dairy on Ivanhoe Road. Today the area is known as Silverlake and now lies in the shadow of the Golden State Freeway and Dodger Stadium. But back in 1910 it was Edendale, home of the first permanent movie studios in Los Angeles including the Selig Polyscope Company. In 1909 former magician and budding filmmaker William Selig opened his namesake studio in Edendale in partnership with director Francis Boggs. The Edendale studio would become the backdrop for hundreds of short feature films including the early westerns featuring real-life cowboy turned movie star, Tom Mix.

Mix came to town with a reputation as a tough, gritty actor who “insisted on doing most of his own stunts, in the course of which he suffered a number of severe injuries” (Edelson 1980, 26). His on-screen success allowed him to set up his own movie studio lot called Mixville—a 12-acre compound that recreated the Old West. While Mix rode to stardom upon his trusty steeds Old Blue and Tony, what's a Western film scene without a herd of cattle and a few chickens—especially if they are roaming around the neighborhood?

Part of the fortuitous circumstances that helped my grandfather make the transition from Holsteins to Hollywood included the fact that the Comport dairy farm operated in the shadow of larger-than-life Mixville. Lionel F. Comport was a fourth generation English farmer, but in order to keep up with the fictions of the Hollywood

narrative machine he would need to reorder the facts of his life as a dairyman to assume the role of a Hollywood movie wrangler.

And Edendale would become his garden of reinvention. More studios set up shop in the area, including the 1912 founding of Mack Sennett's Keystone Studios. Sennett, who became known as the inventor of slapstick comedy, helped launch the careers of Charlie Chaplin, Bing Crosby, W.C. Fields, and the Keystone Cops.

The film industry would continue to grow and by the 1920s Hollywood would become the epicenter of the U.S. film industry. Family oral history puts the Comport clan on the set of the *Our Gang* series produced by Mack Sennett's rival—producer Hal Roach. Unfortunately, movie credits for animal wranglers were uncommon in those early days and nailing down the exact episodes they worked on is an elusive albeit amusing exercise.

A decade later the Comports would be on hand as one of the world's best-known child actors debuted in a series of film shorts known as *Baby Burlesks*. While the films themselves generated some controversy for their portrayal of young children, they featured soon-to-be superstar Shirley Temple. The Comport family archives include a photo of Lionel Frederick's oldest son, Edward, on an African-themed set with Temple and an elephant. The photo is unidentified but given Temple's age in the picture, the elephant, and the set decoration—the photo was most likely taken during the filming of the 1932 *Baby Burlesks* short *Kid in Africa*.

In 1937, little Miss Temple would star in the Twentieth Century Fox picture *Heidi* as a Swiss orphan taken from her adoring grandfather so she can live with a wealthy family as a companion to another child. While I have not found any Comports listed in

the film credits, the family archive collection includes the November 20, 1937, edition of *Collier's* magazine with this write-up on some of the animal actors trained or owned by Lionel F. Comport: “Mr. Comport has chickens warranted not to shy at Joan Crawford or Greta Garbo. He has goats which will butt Shirley Temple, but not too hard” (*Collier's* 1937, 84).

On the occasions when I would ask my father to talk about his film career he often mentioned working the goats on *Heidi*, so it is possible both he and my grandfather worked on the film.

In 1938 the cost to rent a goat willing to work “amid the excitement, lights, and cameras of the sound stages” ran from “\$7.50 to \$15, depending on their skill in butting” (*Popular Mechanics* 1938, 120A). That same year “Comport’s charge for a typical barnyard scene—a cow, two mongrel dogs, forty chickens, a few ducks and a horse” ran fifty dollars a day. (*Popular Mechanics* 1938, 120A)

The Comport connection to producer Hal Roach may have landed them a job working with one of early Hollywood’s most popular slapstick comedy acts—the dynamic duo of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. While the two accomplished actors were under contract with Hal Roach Studios they made a film called *Swiss Miss*. The 1938 film casts Laurel and Hardy as mouse trap salesmen who travel to Switzerland in hopes of selling more mouse traps. Their plan goes bust and they end up working odd jobs at a hotel to pay off their bills.

One of the highlights of *Swiss Miss* is a four-minute scene featuring Laurel attempting to coax a burly St. Bernard dog into letting him drink the rescue dog’s cask of brandy. Every time Laurel reaches for the brandy keg, the dog growls, slaps his paw at

him, or simply walks away. Only when the clever Laurel creates a mock snowstorm of feathers, lies down, and pretends to be freezing to death does the rescue dog spring to life shielding Laurel from the “cold” with his body and allowing him to drink freely from the cask. The American Film Institute catalog lists Lionel F. Comport as dog trainer and his son-in-law Cecil Higgins is credited as an animal trainer on the *Swiss Miss* production.

Family conversations about the Comport movie ranch almost always included a tale or two about the series of swaybacked horses whose roller coaster backsides earned enough to keep everyone in plenty of hay and put Lionel F. Comport in the company of some of Hollywood’s biggest stars.

In 1934, Paramount would assemble a cast that included W.C. Fields, Pauline Lord, and ZaSu Pitts to star in *Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch*. The movie plot centers on a poor widow with a farm. In addition to a script that called for plenty of farm animals, the film may have exposed Lionel to some creative inventions. Publicity stills from Paramount Pictures, now in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) collection, show comic actor W.C. Fields moving from stage to stage in a flying chair. The typewritten copy on the back of the photo notes this clever transportation method was “suspended from the studio monorail system” and was created “because Fields injured his knee severely in a fall on a concrete tennis court” (Paramount Pictures 1934, AMPAS still photo collection).

Grandson Henry Howe, who spent summers at the Comport Stock Ranch, recalls “Lionel had all the livestock in the picture [but] they needed a swaybacked horse.” The Howe family was living in the Northern California town of Petaluma and “knew of a

swaybacked horse in the area—it was a real sway” so Lionel drove hours and hours to buy the horse he would “make a lot of money with” (Howe 2011).

The November 20, 1937, edition of *Collier's* magazine mentioned earlier features a write up on the “Mrs. Wiggs” swaybacked horse, known offscreen as George:

His most valuable single possession is an old sway-backed horse named George, which is an old hand at acting. George appeared in, among other pictures, Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch. He earns \$25 a day for his master and has piled up several hundred thousand dollars already in fees. Mr. Comport bought him for few dollars from a rancher north of Santa Barbara. (*Collier's* 1937, 84)

In addition to landing various movie roles, the sorry looking swaybacks also attracted a fair amount of press coverage. An article by Paul Harrison appearing in the December 14, 1938, edition of the *Telegraph-Herald* had this to say:

You have seen Giddap and his astonishing spinal depression in pictures. You may not have thought him funny because he seems to be such a pitifully malformed creature. But you'll be glad to know that Giddap is as healthy as any horse and happier than most. He can walk, trot, canter and even will buck on a frosty morning. He's 21 years old and probably is good for 10 more.

His owner is Lionel Comport, who since 1910 has rented animals of all kinds to movie companies. He has had six other swayback horses, and the most profitable of all was Giddap's predecessor, George. George earned \$15,000 in his time working in two-reel comedies.

Giddap used to belong to a Japanese gardener in Detroit, where he was spotted three years ago by one of Comport's scouts. The crowbait was in terrible condition at the time, so Comport got him for \$35. Fat and sassy now, Giddap earns \$25 a day as a movie comedian. 'He's smarter than most horses, too,' Comport said. 'I had no trouble teaching him to take direction by silent arm signals when he's before the cameras. And he'll whinny if I hold up a bucket of grain.' (*Telegraph-Herald* 1938, 4)

And even if they weren't getting movie roles or full column write-ups, the swaybacks seemed to have a way of staying in the limelight. One swayback by the name of Nellie had her photo splashed on the pages of newspapers across the country—my grandfather proudly standing beside her.

In 1942 a single movie scene would launch one of Hollywood's best-known animal stars and provide the Comport trainers with three decades of movie and television work. The film was a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studio production called *Lassie Come Home* and the overnight success was a troublesome collie that barked so much, the owner gave him to my father's experienced and talented colleague Rudd Weatherwax. In *Great Animals of the Movies*, author Edward Edelson describes the crucial scene in which Lassie, known off screen as Pal, must swim across river rapids:

Pal swam as instructed—and then added a touch that couldn't have been anticipated. When he came out of the river, Pal didn't shake himself off as most dogs would. Instead, the collie walked a few steps and then dropped, as with exhaustion. In a line reminiscent of many a Broadway melodrama, director Fred Wilcox is said to have told Weatherwax, "Rudd, Pal went into the river, but Lassie came out." (Edelson 1980, 8-9)

The difficult dog left at Weatherwax's training kennel had enough spunk to outshine a young Elizabeth Taylor who was just getting her start in the movie business. The child actress would find her own ride to stardom in the form of a horse named Pie in the 1944 MGM production of *National Velvet*. But while there would always be just one Elizabeth Taylor there would be at least five Lassies. The success of the film launched a dynasty "that produced seven feature films, a television series that ran nineteen years, and a long series of commercial endorsements" (Edelson 1980, 9). The Comport photograph collection includes a picture of my father, Lionel O. Comport, sitting on a cow with Weatherwax and one of the collies that played Lassie. The photo is just one example of why animal training is said to be an art, not a science. The long-running television series would challenge both my father and Weatherwax to convince unlikely animal pairs to perform for the cameras as "Lassie spent most of her time out in the woods, protecting

small, defenseless animals from wolves, cougars, and other predators” (Edelson 1980, 22).

My father recounted some of those challenges in an interview with a local Southern California newspaper, “I’ve taught cottontails to run in front of Lassie, white rats to come when you call them. Once I had to put 100 white rats in a cornfield and then have them come out. It sure was hard to get them out of that cornfield” (*Valley Times* circa 1961). With the majority of Lassie’s furry and feathered friends trained or supplied by Comport Animal Rentals, there would be plenty of animal actor stories to tell in the years to come.

The 1950s would bring a number of changes to the Comport Stock Ranch including an exciting and hectic new avenue for animal actors, a change in ownership, and in 1959 the death of its founder Lionel Frederick Comport.

It is easy to look back on history and observe the sea changes that were taking place and reshaping the lives of those living in that era. Lionel F. Comport had already witnessed the invention of the silent motion picture and later the “talkies” that sent a number of silent screen actors’ careers falling like shooting stars. The early 1950s were about to usher in yet another new communications tool that would radically transform Hollywood—television. While the 1920s saw a number of advances in television technology around the world, it was not until 1948 that commercial television programming became a part of the communications landscape in the United States. And for the Comport Stock Ranch this meant television programming that called for regularly appearing animal actors. While none of the Comport animal actors became household names, they did get plenty of work alongside their famous four-legged brethren on

television shows such as *Lassie* and *Mister Ed*—a program featuring a talking horse. The Comport animal actors would also land supporting roles on *I Love Lucy*, *Bonanza*, *Gunsmoke*, *Star Trek*, *The Carol Burnett Show*, and the popular television game show *Let's Make A Deal*.

After four decades in show business, Lionel Frederick Comport drafted an agreement to officially sell the ranch to his youngest son—my father Lionel Octavius Comport. The original document, dated August 1, 1955, lays out the terms of the agreement and is signed by Lionel Frederick and all three of his sons. The yellowed piece of paper lists the terms of the sale and shows that my father bought the ranch for a sum of \$3,065.00 to be paid over time at the rate of \$100 per month. The letter of agreement includes a detailed list of what was running around the Comport Stock Ranch: 40 head sheep, 15 head goats, 3 milk cows, 3 white face cows, 9 head burro, 1 white mule, 1 swayback horse, 1 hog, 24 geese, 1 skunk, and 8 head calves. The transaction also included 3 trailers, a 1951 Dodge pickup truck, and the most expensive item in the lot—\$750 worth of hay. With the agreement signed, my father, perhaps in a nod to the evolving nature of their work, changed the name of the ranch to Comport Animal Rentals. In his first year as full-fledged owner, the business would continue to thrive and begin to fill the Comport mantle with a number of Hollywood awards.

A favorite Comport movie story, and one I've told the most in an attempt to explain the life of a wrangler, involves the making of the 1956 film *Friendly Persuasion*. The film is an adaption of author Jessamyn West's novel *The Friendly Persuasion*, which tells the story of a Quaker family's conflict over the Civil War. The film stars Gary Cooper as the story's protagonist, Jess Birdwell, and Dorothy McGuire as his deeply

religious wife, Eliza. Actors Anthony Perkins and Richard Eyer portray their children, Josh and little Jess. In the midst of this serious war story Ms. West once called “both too complex and too simple for Hollywood,” (West 1957, 5) is a comical battle taking place on the family farm between little Jess and his mother’s pet goose, Samantha. The script called for a mean goose that was good looking—a combo not often found among such moody fowl. So like any Hollywood casting agent, my father conducted auditions for the role of Samantha—which in this case meant he would place ads in local newspapers and then drive hither and yon around Southern California to find just the right goose or, in this case, geese. As the story goes, my father trained a good-looking goose with mild manners to eat out of the hand of actress Dorothy McGuire. The frustrated fowl that constantly gives Richard Eyer grief was trained to attack by a bit of bait and switch. Comport grandson Robert Higgins, who helped his uncle Lionel O. Comport train the various geese, recalls “we’d go out and get a goose and the way you’d do it was put feed in your pant’s cuff and they would try to get it out. And then after awhile you’d leave the pant cuff empty and the geese would still look there—then we’d feed it out of our hand as a reward” (Higgins 2009).

Onscreen this little trick made it appear as if the goose was biting the actors. This touch of movie magic also created more work for my father. A *United Press* (UP) article appearing in newspapers across the country in November 1956 quotes my father as saying, “the goose was supposed to be in just a few scenes but after [William] Wyler [the film’s director] saw what the bird could do he added many more scenes” (Mosby 1956). In reality there were at least five geese, each one trained to do something different. And even then, they didn’t always cooperate when the cameras were rolling. A fact

acknowledged by the talented and accomplished Wyler who may have found directing geese a unique challenge, “You try one goose and she won’t do it right so you take another. They all look alike—all white geese. You try a third goose, she goes the wrong way. Try the next one. Finally one of them would do it right” (Madsen 1973, 322).

The film-going public got its first glimpse of *Friendly Persuasion* on November 1, 1956, when the movie opened at Radio City Music Hall in New York City. The film itself got moderate reviews but my father’s work training the requisite number of geese for the role of Samantha earned what some might call the animal world equivalent of an Oscar—the PATSY Award which stands for Performing Animal Top Star of the Year.

The film also provided a poignant example of the power of story both onscreen and off, and how narratives are sometimes revised to fit the needs of the listener. In *William Wyler: The Authorized Biography*, author Alex Madsen writes about how the director dealt with the fact that film audiences preferred not to hear that the role of Samantha was filled by a flock of geese:

At previews and premieres Wyler attended, people were so charmed by Samantha as a “scene stealer” they wanted to know more about her. ““Who was that goose?”” they asked. Patiently, he told them several geese had actually played Samantha. The disappointment, if not downright hurt, he read in peoples’ faces soon made him drop the truth in favor of a touching story of fowl love. (Madsen 1973, 322)

Author West, who waited ten years to watch her novel turned into a movie, made this observation of the Hollywood narrative machine while visiting the set as the film’s technical advisor, “it did not seem possible that the hunger of people for a story could be strong enough to call into being an entire industry, strong enough to make millionaires, to

transform private persons into public stars, to impose ways of dress and of speech and thought upon all of us” (West 1957, 251).

Samantha the goose may have stolen a few scenes from her *Friendly Persuasion* costars, but it was Harry Hare in *Geisha Boy* who finally garnered Comport Animal Rentals their first marquee star and provided a family story that convinced me that my father was a modern day Dr. Doolittle. Even my father called the 1958 film one of the most challenging assignments of his career. An article appearing in the November 23, 1958, edition of the *Spokesman-Review* quotes Comport as saying, “the rabbit is the most difficult to train because he’s afraid of strange places and won’t cooperate once you get him on a sound stage” (*Spokesman-Review* 1958, 17).

Not only did Comport have to get Harry the rabbit and his various understudies to perform on a sound stage, he also had to teach them to perform a variety of very non-rabbit-like tricks. The Paramount Pictures film features comedian Jerry Lewis as the unemployed and inept magician Gilbert Wooley. Desperate for a job, he signs on for a USO tour of Japan with his clever and mischievous rabbit, Harry. The film’s director, Frank Tashlin, who directed cartoons for Warner Bros., expected the real life rabbits to perform some Bugs Bunny-style antics such as leaning on a suitcase with one paw, praying alongside Jerry Lewis, and my personal favorite—getting sunburned as he floats on a rubber raft in a swimming pool—all while wearing dark sunglasses and bathing trunks.

The unusual scenes called for unusual measures—and for more than one rabbit. The 1958 *Spokesman-Review* article quotes my father as saying, “...you can’t expect any one rabbit, no matter how smart, to do all the stunts called for in ‘Geisha Boy.’ So, I did

the next best thing and taught a different trick to several rabbits” (*Spokesman-Review* 1958, 17).

The raft-lounging Harry actually spent some time in the Comport family pool preparing for his sunburn scene. Like all Hollywood actors, Harry got a little help from the makeup department—in this case my father did double duty as animal trainer and makeup artist using a bit of pink dye to help Harry appear sunburned on camera.

Both the pool scene and the suitcase scene required the use of mechanical aids. “In some instances we had to tie Harry down to keep him in a certain position,” my father said in one interview, noting that for the suitcase scene they put Harry on an invisible stand and strapped him to the trunk (*Spokesman-Review* 1958, 17).

Straps or no straps, getting a rabbit to hold any position on a sound stage with lights, cameras, and a beehive of activity is a challenging feat. And one that did not go unnoticed in Hollywood—Comport’s work was once again recognized with a PATSY award from the American Humane Association.

Though my father would win more awards and acclaim in his profession, it was one of the last big awards that family film pioneer Lionel Frederick Comport would live to see bestowed upon the business he founded. On November 23, 1959, at the age of 79, Lionel Frederick Comport died leaving a colorful narrative inheritance that would live on and bloom most prominently in my father’s work.

Whether the script called for raft-lounging rabbits or nice looking mean geese, my father built a reputation as an animal trainer who could do the impossible. They were not always the jobs that made Hollywood headlines, but they made for good family stories. I can still remember the way my father would shake his head and wring his hands when

telling the turkey story. He wasn't one for the limelight and not prone to Hollywood style banter, but you could tell from the expressions on his face that the turkey wrangling gig was one heck of a challenge.

Dog trainer William R. Koehler was so impressed with the younger Lionel's turkey wrangling skill on the 1968 film *Boomerang, Dog of Many Talents* that he chronicled their work together in his book *The Wonderful World of Disney Animals*. The film's plot required Boomerang the dog to herd a wayward flock of hundreds of turkeys in the late summer heat. Koehler writes, "Experienced turkey breeders said what we were about to attempt was impossible" (Koehler 1979, 138). The turkey breeders advised that moving turkeys in temperatures above ninety-six degrees would result in certain death. But the production schedule called for filming the turkey scenes in August and September when desert temperatures were expected to range from 100 to 115 degrees.

Koehler goes on to write:

So the problem was to do an impossible job, protect the birds and keep them comfortable. Because the job was impossible, Barney Rogers called Lionel Comport. "Compie" was literally born into the business of handling motion picture livestock. His father had been active in the field as long ago as 1925. The years Compie had spent with the animals had given him an intuition that took over when mere knowledge failed. (Koehler 1979, 139)

The turkey wrangling was part intuition and a lot of exhausting work. My father bought hundreds of baby turkeys and raised them for the movie, which meant lots of special warming cages and midnight baby turkey checks. The turkeys were trained to follow a wagon by learning to associate the thumping of a bucket with mealtime. Hear the thump, follow the wagon, get fed.

Koehler describes the scene:

Finally, the big shot was organized, and a megaphone boomed “Action.” The wagon rumbled forward, and from its interior came the thumping on the pail. Big toms gobbled excitedly from various places in the flock and the big bronze mass surged after the wagon. By halfway point none of the turkeys had broken ranks in favor of the nearby shade trees. (Koehler 1979, 141)

According to Koehler, the crew began to suspect something was different about my father’s turkeys. His birds seemed to ignore the searing temperatures while area papers were reporting on the heat-related deaths of local turkey flocks. One night when filming wrapped for the day, my father released the turkeys to feed on the green pastures. Koehler marveled as they took flight several times in the late afternoon heat and then asked Comport about the turkeys unusual behavior. A grinning Comport replied, “I took them off all grain before the picture started, except for the little we used to bait them. They’ve been getting nothing but green stuff off that irrigated field” (Koehler 1979, 142).

When conventional wisdom said they were about to attempt the impossible, my father’s years of “talking” to the animals told him just what it would take to get the turkeys to perform for the cameras.

## CHAPTER 4

### GENEALOGY AS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON

Every book is a quotation; and every house is a quotation out of all forests, and mines, and stone quarries; and every man is a quotation from all his ancestors.

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *American essayist and poet*

In the previous chapters, I have taken a journey into the lives of my ancestors to try and understand how their stories and the stories I believe about them have shaped who I am and some of the life choices I have made. Along the winding path to discover my own narrative inheritance, I have become deeply interested in how the facts and fictions we believe about our story shapes each of our lives in ways we are likely to never fully understand. It is here in this chapter that we begin to turn our attention to the powerful impulses that drive man to understand his story by searching for connections to his past. Some people would argue this past goes all the way back to the very creation of the world.

As American essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson keenly observes, "... every man is a quotation from all his ancestors" (Emerson 1883, 44). We are, each of us, a series of quotations—difficult to understand when we look only at the standalone chapters from birth to death. In the immediate swirl of our lives we are mere quotations—a parade of facts and events that range from exciting to mundane. More often than not, it takes the vast sweep of history to reveal in these same quotations the context of our story and how it relates to the story of our family of origin as well as the story of humanity.

Genealogy has taken many forms over the course of history but its power as a cultural phenomenon transcends borders, race, language, and religious beliefs because it allows participants to weave the quotations of their lives into a story that helps them make sense of their place in the world. It is important to note that genealogy is in some ways a language of its own and as Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung observes, “No language exists that cannot be misused” (Jung 1933, 11). But that is where the complex role of perception comes in—a fascinating factor we shall save for another chapter. For now, we begin by exploring some of the evidence that genealogy is a cultural phenomenon with roots in the very heart and soul of humanity.

In order to trace the historical roots of genealogy, it seems logical to start at the beginning. But finding that elusive beginning is impossible, proving it a lost cause, and coming to any sort of agreement on the topic is fuel for centuries of wars.

When outlining this chapter, the idea of a look at genealogy in history seemed so straightforward. Go to the library, find relevant books, research the historical timeline of genealogy, and write up the findings in a few pages of interesting prose. As I dove into the research material, my original vision became murky for I soon realized the history of genealogy is intricately entwined with mythology, cosmogony, ancestor worship, and a plethora of concepts I had not intended to explore in this chapter. Our lives, it seems, are truly shaped by fact, fiction, and a host of mysterious unknowns we try to explain in the form of story.

For purposes of illustration let’s take the story of Adam who, according to the Bible, was the first human being to walk the earth. Consider this text found in the New International Version translation of Genesis 1:26-27:

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

In the Jewish tradition, the book of Genesis appears in Judaism’s most important text called the Torah. Genesis Chapter 2:7, or Bereisheet in Hebrew, elaborates on the creation story of Adam like this: “Then the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”

The creation story of Adam also appears in the religious text of Islam. That text known as the Quran refers to a vicegerent, which can be defined as a representative of God. Quran 2:30 reads like this:

Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: "I will create  
A vicegerent on earth." They said:  
"Wilt Thou place therein one who will make  
Mischief therein and shed blood?—  
Whilst we do celebrate Thy praises  
And glorify Thy holy (name)?"  
He said: "I know what ye know not."

The Muslim faith tradition upholds the Quran’s original Arabic text as the literal word of God. Quran 38:71-72 speaks of the Lord creating a man from clay, breathing his spirit into him, and instructing the angels to fall prostrate before this new creature.

If Adam and Eve were the first humans to inhabit the earth and bring forth children, then all genealogical paths would logically lead back to Adam. Taking this theory a step further, one could argue that if Adam is indeed created in the image of God, and if we are all descendents of Adam, then we are all in a sense descendents of God.

No matter what one thinks of this train of thought or the texts under consideration, the fact that we have this story of creation appearing in multiple cultural traditions

illustrates the deep need for an answer to one of humanity's most captivating questions: who am I and where did I come from?

In *The Dictionary of Mythology*, author J.A. Coleman dedicates eight pages to summarizing the various myths cultures around the world weave in an attempt to answer this haunting question. As he aptly notes, "each culture has its own version of the creation of the universe, some more than one" (Coleman 2007, 245).

One Cambodian creation myth included in Coleman's book proposes: "In the beginning there was a holy state of nothingness from which appeared the holy jewel, Prah Keo, from which arose the earth, Prah Thorni, and all that is in it. Man was created from the earth and woman from man's shadow" (Coleman 2007, 246).

The industrious Egyptians crafted multiple creation stories including this version: "A lotus flower appeared, floating on the primitive waters, and opened to reveal the sun that created the world" (Coleman 2007, 248).

An example of the connection between creation myths and genealogy can be found in Greek culture:

The ancient Greeks employed genealogy as much as their neighbors, but their goal was to prove descent from a god or goddess. This was sought in order to achieve social status. Genealogy had a recognized place in Greek history from the 5th century, but was very unscientific by modern standards, consisting largely of material found in epic poetry. (Potter-Phillips 1999)

In my quest to explore the history of genealogy, I came across the previous example in a concise yet information rich article that first appeared in the July/August 1999 issue of *Family Chronicle*, a genealogical magazine. The article, written by Donna Potter-Phillips and now available online at [FamilyChronicle.com](http://FamilyChronicle.com), also notes that many other ancient cultures kept genealogical records including the Assyrians, the Egyptians,

and the Chinese who “had a succession of dynasties, with the names of the emperors and other rulers all carefully documented.” According to the Potter-Phillips article, this record keeping among the Chinese dynasties was carried out from 221 BC until 1911. The reason: “Chinese religions promoted active ancestor worship, so descendants had need to know the identity of their ancestors from this religious perspective” (Potter-Phillips 1999).

Travel around the globe and you will discover the phenomenon of genealogy colorfully woven into the fabric of various cultures in countless ways. Some cultures had the methodology and materials to keep written records, while more transitory cultures relied on oral traditions to keep the memory of their ancestors alive. As Potter-Phillips notes, “the Maori people can repeat their pedigree back to about 1200 AD, when their ancestors first arrived in New Zealand, coming in canoes from other Pacific Islands” (Potter-Phillips 1999).

Today the University of Auckland maintains an online guide to exploring the fascinating and complex study of Maori genealogy. The first section of the guide encourages readers to consult Ross Himona’s website “Whakapapa Maori.” Curious as to the meaning of Whakapapa I decided to investigate. According to Himona’s website:

Whakapapa includes not just human genealogies, but is also used as a metaphor for the act of Creation and for the evolution of the Universe and all living creatures within it. The diligent researcher will therefore be able to quite easily trace his or her ancestry back through the 800 to 1000 years of human occupation to the first settlers and to their waka (canoe), on from there to the gods, and thence to the very act of creation. The recorded human genealogies reach back for 30 generations and more. (<http://maori.com/whakapapa/>)

In the practice of Whakapapa, we once again find the history of genealogy entwined with the epic story of creation. Humanity’s first breath mixed up with our

insatiable desire to know from whence we came. As Potter-Phillips points out in her article on the history of genealogy:

Ancient genealogy suffers from four marked defects: it can hardly be disentangled from mythology; it is fragmentary, frequently unreliable and contradictory; it confuses tribal origins with individual names; it is artificial in that often its main purpose is to offer a descent that would allow a person to qualify for office, priestly or secular. (Potter-Phillips 1999)

It is difficult to fully separate modern day genealogy from the ancient traditions. Past generations and cultures may have relied on epic poetry or oral recitations to build a family tree. The modern age has theoretically ushered in more reliable documentation. I use the term theoretically for one must acknowledge that even a piece of parchment can be knowingly fraudulent or accidentally convey the wrong facts.

While you may not be trying to trace your lineage back to the act of creation, religion still plays a role in the foundation of modern day genealogical searches. The historical record shows that in 1538, during the reign of England's King Henry VIII, his vicar general, Thomas Cromwell, ordered "every parish priest to keep a register for weddings, christenings and burials" (Thompson 1919, 42).

In the 1919 volume *Parish History and Records*, author Alexander Hamilton Thompson explains how this order played out, "the parish was charged to provide a 'sure coffer' with two keys, one for the priest and the other for the wardens, in which the book should be kept: the entries for the week were to be made every Sunday by the priest in the presence of the wardens" (Thompson 1919, 42-43).

Despite the harshness of the order the "early registers were kept unsystematically" in part because the edict was viewed with "some suspicion and opposition" (Thompson 1919, 43).

During the next century, the Church of England issued stricter orders including the requirement that parishes use parchment books rather than whatever writing material was on hand. And in “1644 the committee for the Directory of public worship” ordered the recording of births in the parish registers (Thompson 1919, 43).

To the modern researcher, the charm of parish registers lies in their ability to provide factual information alongside “many interesting personal details” written by priests who “took a refreshingly elastic view of the nature of their contents and, in addition to merely official records, made notes of remarkable occurrences in the church and parish during their incumbency” (Thompson 1919, 44).

In many countries the church practice of recording these important life events predates official record keeping later outlined by civil registration laws. Again this varies from country to country but in England civil registration laws began appearing in 1653. By the early 1800s, English laws favored shifting record keeping duty from church to state. The establishment of these civil registration laws also created a more uniform method of recording and storing vital statistics.

It is important to note that the implementation of uniform standards in no way guarantees the information is accurate. During the course of my genealogical research, I have found numerous mistakes in 20<sup>th</sup> century civil records—the most common being misspelled names and questionable birth dates. This can be attributed in part to handwritten documents being misread or miscommunication between two parties who may not speak the same native language. As with most research, original source documents or scans of them provide the clearest historical snapshot and allow the researcher to ask objective questions that may lead to further investigative paths.

For centuries, searching for evidence of one's ancestors required visiting a physical place such as a church to consult the parish registers, or a library to scan microfiche films of old newspapers and city directories. In many ways genealogists were like gumshoe detectives, hitting the streets to stalk clues and then pruning the prized puzzle pieces into the various branches of their handwritten family tree.

In the Comport family, that gumshoe detective was Ida Frances Hoffman who grew up in Edendale next door to the Comport Stock Ranch. In 1935 Hoffman married my uncle, Raymond Frederick Comport, and many years later they began carefully constructing the family tree. Part of Hoffman's narrative inheritance to the family is a 1969 handwritten "Pedigree Chart." The three-page document is the result of countless hours of research, at least one trip to the Genealogical Society of Utah, and several transatlantic trips to England. Hoffman's son, William "Bill" Comport and wife Mary Ellen recall Hoffman sending five-dollar checks to far-flung places requesting a genealogical record search.

For many researchers the days of globetrotting to compile the family tree are a thing of the past. At the Seventh Annual Genealogy Fair held in April 2011 at the National Archives in Washington, DC, genealogist Carol Kostakos Petranek told the audience, "Where we're going is the digital age." As with so many aspects of modern life, technology is now transforming the way people search for pieces of their past. While the brick and mortar institutions still exist, researchers may not need to visit them in person. As family trees go high tech, connecting the dots in the dot-com era means you can now search for historical records on your laptop at 3:00 a.m. or on your

smartphone while riding the subway. Petranek calls it “an easier and more friendly way to do genealogical research.”

Take for example the transformation of the New England Historic Genealogical Society—founded in 1845, the institution holds the coveted spot as the first genealogical society established in the United States. The organization still operates out of a brick and mortar building in Boston, Massachusetts, and now houses “more than 20 million documents, artifacts, records, diaries, journals, books, photographs, family papers, bibles, and other items dating back more than four centuries” ([www.americanancestors.org](http://www.americanancestors.org)).

This century the venerable institution added something new to its collection—an “Online Genealogist.” The society’s website, now known as AmericanAncestors.org, features a page inviting visitors to submit their “genealogical mysteries” to longtime NEHGS staff member David Allen Lambert ([www.americanancestors.org](http://www.americanancestors.org)). Lambert takes questions via email or phone and if he can’t answer the question, the website promises he’ll pass on the mystery to another NEHGS staff expert.

This digital age has the power to not only transform genealogical research but to uncover hidden or forgotten narratives. My journey to sort out the family Shakespeare narrative that led to Dickens and Pip’s graves is a prime example of this phenomenon. How my Aunt Hoffman gathered information in 1969 looks very different from the way I have worked to confirm and add to her research some forty years later. Where Aunt Hoffman took a road trip to the Genealogical Society of Utah, I opened my laptop and logged onto the Society’s modern-day incarnation—FamilySearch.org. And what I found there provided a clue that would take my research and the family narrative into another story.

When Aunt Hoffman assembled the five-generation Comport “Pedigree Chart,” she did not include the siblings of my great, great-grandfather Thomas Comport. When I started this research project, I still had no idea which generation or branch of Comport children was linked to Pip’s graves. That late night session on FamilySearch.org provided my first clue—a family group sheet that had the correct birth and death dates for Thomas Comport. Only this Thomas Comport had at least twelve siblings, half of whom died as infants. As I began to dig deeper into the mystery, a Google image search turned up a picture on the photo-sharing site Flickr. That photo, titled “Cooling Church Yard ‘Pips Graves’” features a typewritten list of the children buried in Pip’s graves—six of the names on that list match the children listed on the Comport family group sheet.

For a moment I was stunned—if the information in front of me was correct, then I was indeed a direct descendent of the family that inspired the opening scene of *Great Expectations*. And while that makes for an interesting conversation, what I found sobering was the fact that this was the fourth time in my direct lineage that unusual circumstances nearly wiped out this branch of the Comport clan.

Still all this intrigue was based on secondary source documents and while a research trip to London to scour parish records was on my wish list—life had other plans. In the end I would harness the power of the digital age in an attempt to establish a primary source connection spanning six generations.

I turned to Ancestry.com for its collection of scanned primary source documents. The subscription site bills itself as “the world’s largest online family history resource” and with “7 billion genealogical records from across the globe” I figured whatever needle I was looking for would be in their digital haystack.

As I worked my way back through the family tree, I found the ship passenger list documenting my great-grandparents, John and Caroline's, immigration from England to the United States. A more intensive search would turn up their 1866 marriage record—and from this document I found my first primary link to Thomas Comport. This was a tricky link to navigate as Thomas and his first wife, Catherine, had a son they named Thomas who would take a wife by the name of Mary at about the same time Thomas Sr. was marrying his second wife, Mary. In addition, the younger Thomas died less than a year after his father, making for a nightmarish trip through 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century documents. Even more maddening—both of the Thomas men were old enough to have fathered my great-grandfather John Huggins Comport.

So after hours and hours of online sleuthing, international phone calls, and traditional book research, I was still one generation short of making the link to Pip's graves. Then as I submitted the last genealogical record request I could squeeze in before my thesis deadline, I decided to have another look at a website I had viewed many times for its section of historical images. The site—Medway.gov—is part of a unitary authority established to serve some of the towns and villages of Kent County, England. Since this is a government services site you must navigate around everything from parking to trash pickup information, but on this visit I discovered a promising link—an image database of original parish records.

I started with the Cooling, St. James' image files and five hours later found myself staring at the 18<sup>th</sup> century parish baptismal register that revealed the missing link. In beautiful cursive handwriting halfway down the page appears the following entry:

Dec: 17 Thomas Son of Michael & Jane Comport

In the same parish register, just five lines below Thomas under the year 1767 is another revealing entry:

Nov 16. Mary Daughter of Michael & Jane Comport

For Michael and Jane Comport of Cooling Castle and Cooling Court, December 1766 must have been a time of happy celebration with the birth of their first child—my great, great-grandfather Thomas Comport. But their season of joy would be followed by dark days of death as Mary, and then six of her later-born siblings, succumbed to the grave.

Following this trail of loss turned into a lesson in life for me. A narrative inheritance nearly lost with the passage of time, recovered with a few family notes and a vast digital archive spanning generations. The world around us may be in a state of constant transformation, but connections to our past still hold the power to transfix us.

In early 2010 NBC television launched the U.S. adaption of the British documentary television series *Who Do You Think You Are?* The U.S. version plays on the power of stardom by taking modern day celebrities on a journey of ancestral discovery. The *Who Do You Think You Are?* website proclaims that each episode will take viewers “on a personal and often mysterious quest” as these American celebrities “uncover stories of heroism and tragedy, love and betrayal, secrets and intrigue, that lie at the heart of their family history.” The show’s website also promises to take viewers “back through world history to expose how the lives of everyone’s collective ancestors have shaped our world today” (<http://www.nbc.com/who-do-you-think-you-are/about/>).

In an April 2011 episode, actress Gwyneth Paltrow embarks on a journey to learn more about her great-grandmothers. Along the way she discovers that her link to the

island of Barbados is one more generation back than family stories have led her to believe. Of the discrepancy in personal history she notes, “it’s hard to know the truth about your own parents even when they are telling you themselves, you know everything is subjective and you never really know what the facts are, what the fiction is, and how the two combine” (*Who Do You Think You Are?* 2011, Episode 207).

In the show’s third season, actress Marisa Tomei travels to Italy in an attempt to unravel a murder mystery involving her great-grandfather Leopoldo Bianchi. One of the narratives passed down from the family is that her great-grandfather “was shot in a bar because he was either having an affair with someone and the husband had a pistol, or he owed him money, or both. There’s something that has been shrouded there,” observes Tomei at the start of her ancestral journey (*Who Do You Think You Are?* 2012, Episode 302).

The long-held narrative is briefly rattled when Tomei visits the Cecina Municipal Cemetery and discovers the records on file list Bianchi’s cause of death as an illness. With the help of experts and a series of Italian newspaper articles, Tomei finally learns that her great-grandfather was shot in the back of the head after a falling out and physical brawl with his business partner. This new narrative provides a sense of peace for Tomei who is relieved that her great-grandfather was not a villain or philanderer. “It’s the things we carry with us from our family’s legacy, our family history, even the secrets that we don’t know we are carrying.”

Her mother, Addie Tomei, observes the impact the murder mystery has had on her family, “I think all of this absorbs into us and influences our behavior in some mystical

way, some spiritual way, and affects the generations even to come” (*Who Do You Think You Are?* 2012, Episode 302).

The show, in essence, folds the story of one into the story of many. The famous, and not so famous, threads of humanity that have been woven together through history to create the great American quilt. *Who Do You Think You Are?* is also one more example of how an enduring activity can remain stable in the midst of cultural change. The tools we use to practice genealogy may undergo repeated transformations, but the activity itself endures because the driving force behind it is embedded in the human spirit. As this journey through the history of genealogy reveals—creating a story with which to make sense of our own lives is part of what it means to be human. Genealogy is, and will remain, a cultural phenomenon because it helps us assemble the quotes of our lives and those of our ancestors into a story or stories that have the power to give us insight into our past, present, and future.

## CHAPTER 5

### GENEALOGY, PSYCHOLOGY, AND IDENTITY

For as he thinks within himself, so he is.

~ Proverbs 23:7

What is it that drives some people to search for pieces of their past? Why does who, and what came before, fuel the energy to spend countless hours in county courthouses looking for records, to scroll through reels and reels of microfilm in dimly lit library basements, or surf Ancestry.com until the wee hours of the morning? Looking for roots to the family tree compels some people to cross continents and even oceans in their quest to find those elusive links to the past. Why invest so much time and energy on family members who died long before you were born?

At the most basic level genealogy starts with factual information that includes your ancestors' names along with their birth, marriage, and death dates. Pursued only to this level the researcher has little more than a static list of facts. What I am drawn to, and what I believe others are drawn to as well, is the story behind each of those lives and our relationship to them. Why? Because story is the colorful thread that weaves together families, cultures, religions, and nations. As author Nicola King acknowledges in her book *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self*, "It is commonly accepted that identity, or a sense of self, is constructed by and through narrative: the stories we all tell ourselves and each other about our lives" (King 2000, 2).

We are drawn to story and in turn genealogy because it helps fill the innate human need to attempt to answer the question "who am I?" In *Identity, Religion, and Values:*

*Implications for Practitioners*, author C. Margaret Hall observes, “Identity can be created and nurtured most effectively by considering who each person is in relation to several generations of family members” (Hall 1996, 59).

Almost thirty years passed before the 1969 pedigree chart showing five generations of the Comport paternal line ended up in my hands. I looked at the chart from time to time and wondered about the various people listed who shared my lineage. For the most part they were just names on a piece of paper. Because I was born late in my father’s life, all the preceding generations were long deceased and even those of his generation were expiring quickly. But that list and a few treasured stories helped me match names with events that gave me new insight into my relationship with the generations that came before me as well as some of the hardships they endured to carve out a life in both England and America.

For me once the questions began, they would not stop. What historical forces shaped my ancestors? What joys filled their heart, what sorrows nearly crushed them? What drove them to make some of the choices they made, and how did those choices affect my life and that of other generations? The psychological pull of our family tree lies in its sheer power to provide a frame of reference for our own lives.

In *Becoming: Basic Considerations for a Psychology of Personality*, Gordon W. Allport writes, “Personality includes ... frames of reference, matters of fact and cultural values, that seldom or never seem warm and important. But personality includes what is warm and important also—all the regions of our life that we regard as peculiarly ours ...” (Allport 1955, 40).

Large or small, functional or dysfunctional, rich or poor, few experiences are as “peculiarly ours” as is our experience within our family unit. We may not always like what we find but the answers, like the missing pieces of a puzzle, can slowly reveal a broader picture of the forces within our family of origin that have shaped our own lives in ways seen and unseen. If we study the facts with an open mind and an open heart, the hunt may yield more than raw facts and cherished family stories—studying the pieces of your past can provide insight and perhaps most important of all—understanding.

As King observes, “... genealogy, the tracing of family trees, seems to be a crucial way of establishing a history and finding a point of origin which will, of course, always recede before our grasp” (King 2000, 7).

For some people, that elusive point of origin turns a spark of curiosity into a longing to fill in the blanks. As we get older and gain life experience, we often become more aware of those unanswered questions and wonder if there’s more to the story. We become captivated by the mystery of the missing pieces. Since my grandfather’s story involved a mysterious gunman who evaded capture, I thought it would be interesting to interview a detective. My research leads turned up a source better suited to my case—Larry Harnisch, a *Los Angeles Times* copy editor who has also built a reputation as the leading expert on the 1947 Black Dahlia murder mystery. In 1996, with the case still unsolved, Harnisch pitched a detective-type story on the murder of Elizabeth Short—a woman whose body was found on a vacant lot in Los Angeles mutilated and sliced in half. The gruesome murder transfixed both the press and the public, fueling sensational tales about her life and horrific death. While certainly not a genealogy case, her narrative and that of her family was transformed by the speculation and attracted intense

investigation by a wide range of professional and amateur sleuths. Harnisch calls these unfinished stories “a magnet for someone to come and hang an answer on.”

While my grandfather’s brush with death has a happy ending, part of the appeal of the story is the aura of mystery that still surrounds the events of that night in 1901. As Harnisch noted during our interview, “people like mysteries, people like to play detective.” Harnisch equates this quality to “part of being human, we don’t like unanswered questions and if you deprive the mind of an answer it will create one because a ridiculous answer is better than no answer” (Harnisch 2011).

Whatever it is that draws individuals to research their family trees, once they start filling in the branches they don’t always recognize the tree that has sprung forth from their findings. For some, the majestic oak tree of their youth is suddenly very different from the weather worn oak with the lightning-singed branches they must now face. This is especially true when family members stumble across family history. Harnisch has seen plenty of this in his twenty-three years editing stories for the *Los Angeles Times*, “families launder history, or they put a spin on it, or they bury it. That’s pretty typical. It’s like human nature” (Harnisch 2011). While Harnisch was researching an unsolved murder case involving a teenager, he tracked down the parents only to discover that the family, unable to cope with the unanswered tragedy, told people the teenager was killed in a car accident.

Even those engaged in methodical research sometimes find themselves stunned with their newfound knowledge about their family of origin. In the June 19, 2011, edition of the *Washington Post Magazine*, Trevor Plante, the chief of reference at the National Archives, recounts several such examples including the case of a son wanting to

learn more about his father's early 20<sup>th</sup> century Army service. "I found his dad was on a 'Wanted' poster .... He had deserted, and it had everything that he deserted with—the horse, the saddle, the rifle ...." Plante had succeeded in helping the son find the missing pieces of his father's military past, but it is unlikely the son was prepared for his father's image on a 'Wanted' poster offering a \$50 reward. Of his work with family genealogists Plante says, "sometimes you have to be careful what you wish for. In some cases we're enriching people's family stories, and in other cases we're kind of destroying family myths. They may not have been the heroic person that you thought they were" (Parker 2011).

The word inheritance generally conjures up images of items passed from one generation to the next: estates, bank accounts, and jewelry. When babies are born, people often comment on which parent the child looks most like, meaning which genetic traits appear to have been inherited. Years later when the little darling does a spot-on imitation of a parent, people may quip, "Oh, he's just like his father." Possessions, looks, and traits are the more tangible evidence of our heritage. Yet the family stories told and untold have in many ways a far greater power to shape who we become because they shape our thoughts which in turn often direct our life choices. As Hall notes based on her research and that of others, "A predictable linkage between identities and behavior is that people ultimately act in accordance with who they believe they are (Progoff, 1985)" (Hall 1996, 159).

While some family stories are told with great gusto, there are also those unspoken stories that haunt our lives like lingering ghosts—powerful shadows that follow us throughout our lives. Unless we turn and deliberately search for the ghosts, we are often

unaware of their existence. And yet these shadowy forces shape our lives and drive us in ways we often do not realize or understand. We see our world through a glass darkly until one day we catch sight of the shadow in the form of an event, a pattern of family behavior, the discovery of a long-kept secret. The shadowy power of narrative inheritance can be illuminated by the death of a parent, by witnessing the repetition of addictive behavior from generation to generation, the surprise revelation that one child in a family is adopted; each of these life circumstances can take us to a place of discovery. While this uncharted territory of our lives can appear like a cliff from which we will endlessly fall, it can also, with a different perspective, take on the aura of an enchanted forest that calls us to wander from our safe path to explore, acknowledge, and process things we've never truly seen.

Professor Margaret McNay of The University of Western Ontario knows firsthand the power of such shadow memories. In her 2009 journal article *Absent Memory, Family Secrets, Narrative Inheritance*, McNay writes of how her father's secret past impacted family conversations and interactions:

My father never talked about his childhood or family. He told us he had been born in Glasgow and farmed in Ontario, and I assumed he had immigrated with his family. Perhaps two or three times over the years he referred to his father – as in “my old Dad” – but if I asked about his parents or whether he had brothers or sisters he became silent and turned away. Once, when I pressed, he ended the discussion of the topic forever with a particularly gruff, “Don't ask about that!” (McNay 2009, 4)

His secret began to unravel when, nearing retirement, he needed a copy of his birth registration. That document arrived and revealed, “he had been born in Ayrshire, not Glasgow and that he was three years older than he had thought” (McNay 2009, 5). McNay's mother explained the age difference by saying he'd had a hard life. McNay

knew “it was useless for me to press for more, and my father died in 1983, never having revealed to his daughters anything of his family, childhood, or youth” (McNay 2009, 5).

Then years later while helping her “mother sort a box of books,” McNay was told she should read the volume titled *The Home Children* because, “your Dad was a home child, you know.” McNay’s mother refused to explain further leaving McNay confused when she discovered that the term ‘home child’ referred to orphans. As McNay recounts, “... when I read the book I thought she must be mistaken. Home children were orphans; no one had ever said anything about my father being an orphan, and he had actually mentioned his ‘old Dad’ so he *couldn’t* be an orphan” (McNay 2009, 5).

After her mother died, McNay embarked on what she refers to as half-hearted genealogical research and discovered that her “... father and his siblings had been among tens of thousands of destitute children who in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries had been placed in orphan homes in Great Britain—thus, ‘home’ children—and subsequently emigrated to Canada to work on farms ...” (McNay 2009, 5).

McNay had found the lingering ghost of her father’s past—that shadow of shame that hovered over his life, impacted his family relationships, and left a void they sensed but could not fill. As McNay recalls, “... my father’s unwillingness to *let me in* or to *talk* about it helps explain why ... I never finished my conversations with him—never, really, even began what might have been the most important ones—and why, even as he was dying, a certain distance between us could not be overcome” (McNay 2009, 6).

McNay’s own experience and her research on other families living with these shadow narratives led her to conclude that while, “Secrets serve particular functions in

families ... when they disrupt the construction of narrative inheritance they also disrupt the formation of identity in children growing up in those families” (McNay 2009, 2).

After standing on that proverbial cliff, McNay experienced loss and guilt but then she entered the forest of her father’s past and learned that “... uncovering my father’s story has to do with filling in that void in my past; with achieving a sense of wholeness and completion through comprehending just what it meant that ‘your Dad had a hard life’; with understanding more about what made him what and who he was: and with recognizing my own life as, in part, formed by his” (McNay 2009, 8).

Looking to the past is often a critical component of understanding the present—especially when it comes to unraveling the complexities of narrative inheritance.

Consider Hall’s take on this concept in the following passage:

... identities are only fully understood when they are put into historical contexts, and when individual behavior and patterns of interaction are viewed as being expressed by historical actors. All people are products of their immediate historical circumstances. Thus identity, religion, and history link individuals to both intimate relationships and values, as well as to broad social trends and influences. (Hall 1996,146)

Building on Hall’s idea of historical actors—as we move about the stage of our own lives, we are far too busy learning our own lines to consider the scripts that were written before we ever came into being but whose plots delivered us to this very place. So consumed by our own stage fright, we hardly consider the drama our family’s historical actors experienced as they uttered some of the very same lines that we are trying so hard to make our own.

In *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* author Peter Brooks keenly notes, “what remains to be read will restructure the provisional meanings of the

already read” (Brooks 1992, 23). Though the author is writing about literature, I find the observation applicable to the pursuit of genealogy and its relationship to narrative inheritance. Very often the events of tomorrow change our understanding of the present and the past. As life unfolds in real time, it is easy to overlook how the events of today will become part of the rich fabric of our future narrative.

Since the seeds of this research project started in part with a family story that appeared during the 1901 news cycle, I thought it would be interesting to look for examples of narrative inheritance in current events. In truth the events found me—for once I started thinking about the concept I found more than a few case studies to research and interpret. The 2011 news cycle provides a number of prominent examples of narrative inheritance playing out on the world stage. In addition to potentially shaping the identity of the subject or subjects involved, these stories illustrate the power of narrative to shape a nation’s cultural identity and values. While the selected stories focus on the very public figures of President Obama, Osama Bin Laden, and the newly married Prince William and Kate Middleton, they were chosen because each story represents a component of narrative inheritance that transcends race, culture, and language.

While narrative inheritance often appears like an elusive shadow, there are times when its presence looms so large it can eclipse reality. The April 29, 2011, wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton serves as a dynamic example of this type of narrative inheritance unfolding before us in real time. We are drawn by the pageantry, the protocol, by the fairytale quality of a Prince marrying a commoner. If we are old enough to have watched other British royal weddings, we are familiar with the symbols—the parade of Royals in military uniform, the ladies’ festive hats, the horse drawn carriage,

the balcony kiss. We identify with Kate and William not because of these royal symbols but because the story of love and marriage transcends culture, race, and social status. We may not be in line for the British throne, or any other throne for that matter, but our internal compass longs to find love, acceptance, connection, and that mythical happiness ever after. We may not be in their story, but their love story touches the heart of what it means to be human.

Seen through the lens of narrative inheritance, the image of Prince William dressed in his brilliant red Royal Air Force uniform decorated with medals and blue sash is a powerful reminder of how our perception of our family history impacts and shapes our own life story. Raised as an heir to the British throne, he appears to have accepted his role as a royal and has, so far, managed to live his life in accord with what the narrative of his storied lineage expects.

Consider too, the pre-nuptial actions of Kate Middleton. In many cultures tradition calls for the bride to take the husband's last name as her own. The family unit identified with a single name. But this bride-to-be marked the transition from commoner to waiting Queen with another name change. No longer would she be called Kate as she was in her dating days, now she would be known by her official given name—the more formal Catherine. As she stepped from one story to the next she made a decision to reframe her narrative and perhaps how people identify with her.

On this side of the Atlantic, the conspiracy theory surrounding U.S. President Barack Obama's place of birth is an example of narrative inheritance and identity being played out on the public stage with many different voices competing to be heard. As the first African American to attain the office of President of the United States, Obama's

narrative inheritance is being scrutinized in ways it might not be if his family story fit into the cookie cutter image many people impose on the office of the Presidency. But that's the trouble with preconceived images—they often clash with reality. And the reality is Obama's family story, like millions of family stories around the world, is complicated and messy. An African father, a Caucasian mother, married in 1961 when more than a dozen U.S. states still had laws forbidding such unions. Add to that the fact his mother divorced Obama's father and later "ran off" to Indonesia to follow her passions at a time when the mainstream narrative for American housewives called for a domestic goddess who kept house and had dinner on the table at 5:00 p.m. all while spotlessly attired in a dress and heels. An April 2008 article in *Time* magazine describes her as a "dreamer" who "made risky bets that paid off only some of the time, choices that her children had to live with" (Ripley 2008). In that same article Obama talks about how his perception of his family of origin shaped some of the choices he later made for his own family:

Today Obama is partly a product of what his mother was not. Whereas she swept her children off to unfamiliar lands and even lived apart from her son when he was a teenager, Obama has tried to ground his children in the Midwest. "We've created stability for our kids in a way that my mom didn't do for us," he says. "My choosing to put down roots in Chicago and marry a woman who is very rooted in one place probably indicates a desire for stability that maybe I was missing." (Ripley 2008)

Obama's drifting family roots may have driven him to create a life with a sense of stability but in other ways:

...Obama is his mother's son. In his wide-open rhetoric about what can be instead of what was, you see a hint of his mother's credulity. When Obama gets donations from people who have never believed in politics before, they're responding to his ability—passed down from his mother—to make a powerful argument (that happens to be very liberal) without using a trace of ideology. On a good day,

when he figures out how to move a crowd of thousands of people very different from himself, it has something to do with having had a parent who gazed at different cultures the way other people study gems. (Ripley 2008)

The *Time* magazine article alludes to the power of narrative inheritance, “it turns out that Obama's nascent career peddling hope is a family business. He inherited it. And while it is true that he has not been profoundly tested, he was raised by someone who was” (Ripley 2008).

The conspiracy theories over Obama's place of birth and whether or not he is really a Muslim will likely have little impact on how the President and his family view themselves or the narrative inheritance they will pass to future generations of their family. But the birther story is symbolic of the many ways people get swept up in narratives that may or may not be true. Even after the President's campaign released a legal confirmation of his birth and various officials declared it valid, the controversy still swirled about as evidenced by the plethora of Internet chatter on the topic. No matter what one believes about his place of birth, the controversy touches on the key human values of integrity, our sense of right and wrong, and in this case the moral and legal implications of not following the letter of the law. The United States Constitution specifically outlines the age and citizenship requirements for anyone seeking the Office of the Presidency. Article II, Section 1, reads:

No person except a natural born citizen, or a citizen of the United States, at the time of the adoption of this Constitution, shall be eligible to the office of President; neither shall any person be eligible to that office who shall not have attained to the age of thirty-five years, and been fourteen years a resident within the United States.

The legal math is simple; if Obama is truly not a natural-born American citizen then he's ineligible for the office he now holds. The political and moral math is more

complicated, as his ousting from the office of the Presidency on this issue would touch off a domino effect in the leadership of this country and create turmoil about how to handle the various laws Obama signed into effect. Our national narrative would experience a fair amount of turbulence.

A man once crowned by the Kennedy clan to carry on the near-mythical legacy of President John F. Kennedy now finds part of his own narrative crucified on the alter of political skepticism.

I am fascinated by the power of story to shape lives and nations. And reminded of the famous line in the novel *1984*, “who controls the past ... controls the future: who controls the present controls the past” (Orwell 1949, 32). When the world learned on May 2, 2011, that an elite team of U.S. Navy Seals had killed al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, the narrative machine went into high gear. The *New York Times* ran a story headlined “In Arab World, Bin Laden’s Confused Legacy.” The lead paragraph talks about how a decade ago “in angry Arab capitals” the mastermind of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks was called “hero, sheik, even leader” yet after his death the “man who once vowed to liberate the Arab world was reduced to a footnote in the revolutions and uprisings remaking a region that he and his men had struggled to understand” (Shadid 2011).

News coverage of any event is in essence the first draft of history and as such often subject to numerous revisions. But the capture and killing of bin Laden is so significant that thousands of hours will be spent trying to confirm the facts of what really transpired that night. Years from now it will be interesting to see what gets recorded in

the historical records of the various countries involved and how those “facts” shape bin Laden’s narrative legacy and that of his descendents.

Take for instance the early reports of the bin Laden raid that said “an armed bin Laden took cover behind a woman” (Miller 2011, May 3). Bin Laden’s image as a powerful and fearless spiritual leader begins to unravel with just nine words and two actions. The idea of this elusive mastermind of terrorism taking cover behind a woman when facing his captors paints a picture of a coward at heart. The suggestion that the woman may have been one of his many wives further undermines his powerful image.

However just 24 hours later, the *Washington Post* front-page story read “White House says bin Laden was unarmed, had no human shield” (Miller 2011, May 4). Two contradicting accounts of what transpired during the raid—each with the power to shape bin Laden’s narrative in very different ways. Both his followers and his enemies will continue to look for the “facts” that best support the narrative inheritance they wish to create or preserve. Bin Laden may be dead but how his past is viewed will either infuse his followers current mission with meaning or deflate their loyalty to his cause. The bin Laden story is relevant because it touches on key human values such as the nature of good versus evil and what it means to be a hero—people may disagree on which players in this story are good and which are evil, but they will most likely agree that a hero stands and faces his enemies even unto death while a coward crouches in fear.

Reading these contradicting stories about bin Laden made me think about the news coverage of the night my grandfather was shot. The “facts” as reported in the *Los Angeles Times* and attributed to my grandfather make for a great story. But is it true that he chased the lone gunman after being shot in the stomach and then returned to his route

to deliver more milk? At that moment in history my grandfather took control of the present to tell his version of the past to the police. Though the newspaper reports say they had some doubts about his story, they were unable to refute his version of events. The gunman pursuit story survived and the future narrative inheritance Lionel F. Comport passed down to succeeding generations is that of a tough as nails Englishman, who stared death in the face, gave it one Hell of a fight, and lived to reinvent himself as a Hollywood animal wrangler.

## CHAPTER 6

### MYTH, REALITY, PERCEPTION, AND MEANING

To know the myths is to learn the secret origin of things.

~ Mircea Eliade, *Myth & Reality*

Myth. Reality. Perception. Meaning. These four words have enormous power to recalibrate how we view our narrative inheritance. In this final chapter, exploring the facts and fictions that shape our lives, we will now consult the work of three distinguished scholars: Mircea Eliade, the historian of religion best known for his theories on the role of myths and rituals; Carl Gustav Jung, the influential founder of analytical psychology who proposed the concepts of archetypes and the collective unconscious; and John S. Dunne, the theologian who often frames life in terms of a pilgrimage. I found Dunne's concept of 'passing over' applicable to genealogy and a theory that infuses the pursuit with greater meaning.

The purpose of engaging the theories of these men is an attempt to isolate and understand the universal themes present in both the action of genealogical research and how our perception of our family history impacts and shapes our own life story—the life we create.

Over the course of this journey I have come to realize that part of what is driving my genealogical search is the longing for connection to something greater than myself or even to my family. In learning and analyzing some of the details of my family story, I clearly see several junctures where my very existence hung in balance. That I was born

to live, and learn, and someday die, falls into the category of reality. How I think, and feel, and interact with the world around me, is more complicated.

Each of our lives is influenced by forces beyond our own reality, including how we perceive our place in the world and the meaning we attribute to the events that transpire over the course of our lives. While we can sometimes isolate the reality of a situation, it takes time and persistence to discover the role of perception and meaning in our lives. The more elusive component to discovering how we interact with our world is the role of myth. By setting aside our assumptions and exploring the role of myth, reality, perception, and meaning we can begin to peel back the layers of our life and the lives of those who came before us. In doing so, we may draw closer to understanding the story we have consciously and unconsciously chosen to construct our lives within. This exploration may also reveal the real motivating force for researching our family of origin is a universal impulse running through the veins of humanity.

We shall begin by considering the intersection of mythology and genealogy, as that in a sense is really the beginning of understanding the facts and fictions that shape our lives. In *Myth and Reality* author Mircea Eliade explains, “to know the myths is to learn the secret origin of things. In other words, one learns not only how things came into existence but also where to find them and how to make them reappear when they disappear” (Eliade 1998, 13-14). This concept translates to the world of genealogy in that learning the stories of our family of origin becomes a way of keeping our family alive. When the older generations disappear, the younger generations can, according to Eliade’s theory, make them reappear.

Eliade's research builds on the idea that myths are a tremendously powerful force in our lives, "for knowing the origin of an object, an animal, a plant, and so on is equivalent to acquiring a magical power over them by which they can be controlled, multiplied, or reproduced at will" (Eliade 1998, 15).

But in most cases we need more than simple knowledge of the beginning. As Eliade notes, "... it is not enough to *know* the origin myth, one must *recite* it; this, in a sense, is a proclamation of one's knowledge, *displays* it. But this is not all. He who recites or performs the origin myth is thereby steeped in the sacred atmosphere in which these miraculous events took place" (Eliade 1998, 17-18).

Eliade explores the intersection of the sacred with daily life further in his book *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. There he explains "every act which has a definite meaning—hunting, fishing, agriculture; games, conflicts, sexuality, —in some way participates in the sacred" (Eliade 2005, 27-28). With this definition as a foundation, the act of genealogical research becomes an activity that draws participants into the sacred.

The question of origin appears to be a question driven by human nature itself rather than something we learn from experience. Surely any parent remembers dealing with the innate—where did I come from—question from their children. Deeply entwined with our humanity is an insatiable desire to understand that mysterious point of our beginning. The phenomenon of genealogy across cultures and centuries provides some evidence of this. For Eliade the explanation is both complicated and simple, "the *return to origins* gives the hope of a rebirth" (Eliade 1998, 30).

The phenomenon of genealogy also provides the framework for "a meticulous and exhaustive recollecting of personal and historical events" (Eliade 1998, 89). This act of

recovering the past is, in Eliade's view, a way that time can be overcome (Eliade 1998, 90). In the world of myth, traveling back to the beginning of time allows us to enter what Eliade refers to as "the Timeless—the eternal present which preceded the temporal experience ..." (Eliade 1998, 86).

Here at this mythical place of beginnings we learn the origin and history of things and in doing so obtain mastery over our present (Eliade 1998, 89). "Myth assures man that what he is about to do *has already been done*, in other words, it helps him to overcome doubts as to the result of his undertaking" (Eliade 1998, 141).

It is much easier to understand how family stories become distorted over time when you consider Eliade's theory that "... the recollection of a historical event or a real personage survives in popular memory for two or three centuries at the utmost. This is because popular memory finds difficulty in retaining individual events and real figures" (Eliade 2005, 43).

And so over time, some of those family stories grow into tall tales that are but shadows of the truths they were assembled from. Eliade's perspective on this facet of human nature is both understandable and more powerful because, "it was myth that told the truth: the real story was already only a falsification. Besides, was not the myth truer by the fact that it made the real story yield a deeper and richer meaning, revealing a tragic destiny" (Eliade 2005, 46)?

Whatever our destiny, the elusive nature of the unknown also plays a powerful role in our quest to sort out the facts and fictions of our family of origin. As Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung observes in his book *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, "a man can hope for satisfaction and fulfillment only in what he does not yet possess ..."

(Jung 1933, 48). This statement captures one of the mysteries of human nature and provides clues as to why people might search for information about their family of origin. Jung's insight into the workings of the human mind help explain why not knowing something can fuel an exhaustive mission to find answers. In reality the information we discover may not soothe our souls but we are prone to think that we will experience satisfaction and fulfillment in those facts we do not yet possess.

Jung's theory of life problems may provide further insight into why people engage in the hobby of genealogy. According to this theory "the serious problems of life ... are never fully solved" (Jung 1933, 103). In Jung's opinion, "the meaning and design of a problem seem not to lie in its solution, but in our working at it incessantly. This alone preserves us from stultification and petrification" (Jung 1933, 103). Anyone who has ever engaged in genealogical research knows that solving the so-called problem usually only leads to an entirely different set of problems that one often feels compelled to continue solving. One missing link in the family tree and a good lead can unleash that inner detective determined to learn more about our family of origin and perhaps ourselves. This aspect of genealogical research can in its own way keep our minds from growing stagnate.

One key point to remember is that no matter where our genealogical research takes us, the facts we find are subject to our own subjectivity. In a chapter contrasting his theories of psychology with those of his famed teacher Sigmund Freud, Jung wryly asks, "Is not every experience, even in the best of circumstances, to a large extent subjective interpretation" (Jung 1933, 115-116)? What we think, feel, believe, and desire all play into how we perceive the recorded events of our life and the lives of those who have gone

before us. As Jung points out, “whatever we look at, and however we look at it, we see only through our own eyes” (Jung 1933, 84). This concept also helps shed light on why people who grow up in the same family unit will offer up very different views on what that experience was like. After years of working with various patients, Jung made this observation, “there are often several children exposed to the same influence, and yet each reacts to it in a totally different way” (Jung 1933, 80).

Our perception of reality is largely influenced by our personality or what Jung calls our psychological type. His pioneering research gave birth to the idea that people express one of two general types of attitudes, which he categorized as introverted—meaning someone who draws energy from reflection and solitary time, or extroverted—meaning someone who draws energy from action and interaction with people. Within these two general types, Jung proposes the four additional functions of thinking, feeling, sensation, and intuition—thus providing a possible eight variants in his theory of psychological types (Jung 1933, 93).

Jung’s theories also offer insight into how the role of perception impacts how we view the actual events of our life and those of our ancestors. While exploring the intersection of the physical with the spiritual, Jung notes, “we must never forget that everything spiritual is illusion from the naturalistic standpoint, and that the spirit, to ensure its own existence, must often deny and overcome an obtrusive, physical fact” (Jung 1933, 188).

According to Jung, there are “innumerable things beyond the range of human understanding” therefore “we constantly use symbolic terms to represent concepts that we cannot define or fully comprehend” (Jung 1968, 4). In his book *Man and His*

*Symbols*, Jung explains the concept like this: “as the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason. The wheel may lead our thoughts toward the concept of a ‘divine’ sun, but at this point reason must admit its incompetence; man is unable to define a ‘divine’ being” (June 1968, 4).

Symbols are by nature, complex because they contain “data ... from every psychic function ...” (Jung 1993, 347). And as Jung observes, a symbol can have “... one side that accords with reason ...” and “... another side that is inaccessible to reason; for not only the data of reason, but also the irrational data of pure inner and outer perception, have entered into its nature” (Jung 1993, 347).

When I look at the picture of the tiny Comport tombstones lined up in the Cooling churchyard, I see not only the obvious symbol of grief and loss—I see a symbol of the mystery of life. I think of a family that faced more heartache than I can imagine, and yet that family—my ancestors—endured the tests of their time with strength and fortitude. I find the power of that symbol enough to sustain me on my darkest days. Jung reminds us that, “the prospective meaning and pregnant significance of the symbol appeals just as strongly to thinking as to feeling ...” (June 1993, 347). He also points out that the same fact may hold great symbolism for one person and yet not a shred of symbolism for another (Jung 1993, 345).

Our perception of reality is also influenced by our psychic life, and according to Jung all that we “experience is psychic” (Jung 1933, 190). Whether an event happens in our physical world or in our mental world, both constitute psychic events or what psychologists like Jung refer to as psychic reality. Jung wryly observes that his “own psyche even transforms and falsifies reality ...” (Jung 1933, 190).

One of the concepts I find most relevant to genealogy is Jung's theory of the collective unconscious and its role in human behavior. According to Jung, the realm of man's unconscious "contains all the patterns of life and behaviour inherited from his ancestors, so that every human child, prior to consciousness, is possessed of a potential system of adapted psychic functioning. In the conscious life of the adult, as well, this unconscious, instinctive functioning is always present and active" (Jung 1933, 185).

In every life there will always be what Jung calls the "unconscious aspects of our perception of reality" (Jung 1968, 4), however there are ways we can work to understand the facts and fictions that shape our lives. For this part of our journey, we turn to theologian John S. Dunne.

In his book *The Way of All the Earth: Experiments in Truth and Religion*, author Dunne observes, "There is a depth which can appear in the most common human experiences. It is an abyss which opens up like a narrow and bottomless crevice at crucial points in a human life" (Dunne 1978, xii). No matter what corner of the earth we inhabit, what tasks fill our days, what language we speak, what religion we practice or deny, we are in the end all human beings. And this means we must all, at certain junctures of our life, walk the path of those who have come before us and those who will come after us. There is no escaping the common human experiences of birth and death, of love and rage, of hope and grief, of asking the eternal questions—who am I, where did I come from, and why do I exist?

Dunne encourages readers to "break the habit of dismissing the individual facts of our lives as mere coincidences and make a habit of treating them instead as significant and appropriate events ..." (Dunne 1978, 32). Doing so he believes will infuse "the

common facts of life, the ones which recur in every human life” with the “power to upset us” (Dunne 1978, 32). By upsetting us he means that “the prospect of sickness, old age, and death will make it impossible to continue living as before and will make it seem necessary to enter upon a new way” (Dunne 1978, 32). This theory adds an interesting dimension to the pursuit of genealogy for it challenges us to look beyond the names, dates, and highlights of our family tree in search of significant events and perhaps a truth that is greater than the sum of its parts.

In his chapter titled “The Simple Life,” Dunne describes a theory I believe reveals one of the reasons some people express little or no interest in genealogy. Delving into our relationships he writes, “is more like a deliberate descent into hell” (Dunne 1978, 41).

Why such a harsh assessment? Consider Dunne’s imaginative and astute reasoning in this passage:

If one undertakes this deliberate descent into hell, the first thing one comes upon, it seems, is the fact that one’s feelings towards other persons are mixed. This is a hard thing to admit, especially when it comes to one’s most important relationships such as those to one’s parents, one’s children, one’s friends. The circles in which a life moves, from this point of view, are circles of hell, the least intimate being the outer circles and the most intimate being the inner circles of that hell. Whenever one loves a person, it seems, one also is likely to hate that person; for whenever a person can cause great joy in one’s life he can also cause great pain and usually does, and so he becomes simultaneously the object of hope and of disappointment, of confidence and of fear, of trust and of mistrust, of affections and of resentment. This is hard to admit to oneself: the reality of one’s love tends to make one deny the dark side of the relationship and to expect pure and unadulterated love from the other person. (Dunne 1978, 41)

For those willing to dig into the closet of skeletons and sift through the historical dust of ages past, there is the hope of insight into these conflicting emotions. And as Dunne believes this “insight into the ambivalence has something of a liberating effect, especially if it is accompanied by the realization that genuine emotional ties are always

ambivalent, for it tends to take away the self-righteousness and the expectations which cannot but be disappointed” (Dunne 1978, 41).

In our previous thesis chapter titled “Genealogy, Psychology, and Identity” we explored the idea of pursuing genealogy as a way to gain understanding about our family of origin and the possible ways we are shaped by the generations that have come before us. Dunne has developed his own theory on this concept of studying other lives, which he refers to as “passing over.” According to Dunne, passing over “is a method of entering sympathetically into another person’s autobiographical standpoint, seeing the whole world anew as that person sees it, and then coming back enriched to one’s own standpoint and to a new understanding of one’s own life” (Dunne 1978, 53).

A key element of Dunne’s method of passing over “involves a sharing of feelings and images as well as insight into the images and feelings” (Dunne 1978, 54). Dunne describes his technique of passing over to other lives as a “process of eliciting images from one’s feelings, attaining insight into the images, and turning insight into a guide of life” (Dunne 1978, 53). In Dunne’s view if we approach this exercise with a spirit of sympathy, receptiveness, and above all compassion, we return to our life enriched “with an understanding of one’s own life which can guide one into the future” (Dunne 1978, 53).

In addition to passing over to other lives and other times, I also in a sense passed over to the fictional world of Pip. He was there at the beginning of my journey and, because I drafted the first chapter of this thesis last, he was there at end.

And so in some mysterious way, Pip has been my guide through this journey of ancestral discovery. After I finished the proposal for this project, I began to investigate

some of the leads I had discovered in a journal article. With a pending trip to Los Angeles, I checked out a book titled *Memory, Narrative, Identity* by Nicola King to review on the plane. What I read on page three sent an eerie shiver over me: “when Pip, on the first page of Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, says: ‘So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip. I give Pirrip as my father’s family name’, a complex relationship between ‘Pip’ and the first and second ‘I’ is clearly in play” (King, 2000, 3).

I selected King’s book for its promise to “explore the complex relationships between memory, identity and narrative” (King 2000, 3). I had not expected to find Pip anywhere on its pages, and yet there he was struggling with his own past and present self just as I was about to embark on a journey to explore my own past, and along the way make sense of my present.

I put the book aside and forgot about Pip’s foreshadowing appearance—until, almost two years later, I began to write the first chapter of this thesis titled “Great Expectations and Grief.” With many more hours of research completed and the other chapters drafted, I now saw what I could not have seen before: in the character of Pip we have an example of the myth of eternal return. He stands before the graves of his dead parents and siblings with a longing to return to that mystical place of origin—made all the more desirable by the glaring absence of his parents—his only physical link to that primordial place. In *Dickens and Heredity*, author Goldie Morgentaler observes:

In both *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, the opening scenes near the parental graves serve simultaneously as a reminder of the end of life and of its source. But if parental gravestones establish an absence in the life of the child, they also suggest an enduring presence, a type of ghostly immortality conferred by the inherited material coursing through the veins of the living offspring of dead parents. (Morgentaler 2000, 64)

Like little Pip in that opening scene of *Great Expectations*, I have stood before the graves of my ancestors and wondered what they must have looked like. My return to origins stretches further back in time than the boy of the marsh country. For unlike Pip, I knew both of my parents, although my mother died young and I never lived with my father—facts that infused her life story with tragic what-ifs, and his life story with an aura of mystery. But the key difference between the fictional Pip and this very real author is my ability to wonder how the story of my ancestors' lives shaped mine. As Morgentaler notes about *Great Expectations*:

When the dead are invoked at the beginning of this novel, it is specifically to deny their future influence on the protagonist, and to replace them with the convict, whose impact on the course of young Pip's life will be far more powerful than that of any blood relative. Pip's lack of hereditary connection makes him the most utterly desolate of Dickens's orphans. Not only are his parents dead, but they are utter blanks. There is not the least speculation throughout the course of the novel to enlighten Pip, or the reader, as to what they may have been like. (Morgentaler 2000, 73)

With no past to guide him and no story in which to frame his future, Pip becomes a fresh canvas for the character of Magwitch, the convict who surprises him in the opening graveyard scene with demands for food. That chance meeting among the tombstones catapults each character into a narrative shaped by twisted perceptions and misplaced meaning. Morgentaler's take on the plot of *Great Expectations* includes the idea that:

... Magwitch's belief that Pip has always acted out of the best motives begins to have an effect. Magwitch is convinced that even as a child Pip had recognized in him 'some small redeeming touch,' and this perception eventually becomes the truth. Pip does begin to see Magwitch's redeeming features and this in turn reinforces Magwitch's belief in Pip's goodness of heart. (Morgentaler 2000, 81)

In the character of Pip we witness a narrative inheritance of great loss and guilt—both from the untimely death of his parents and the shadow of his sister. Pip viewed his past with the broken heart of an orphan, and as a child of questionable character—a perception he formed from his sister’s overbearing focus on the original sin in his life.

And like his creator, Pip will spend a good portion of his life running from his past. The fictional life of Pip in some ways reflects Dickens’ own narrative demons:

Pip, like Dickens, came from lowly origins, felt himself an outcast, yearned to rise, attained wealth, entered polite society, failed to find happiness, and all the while hid what he considered his shaming taint: the formative episode of his childhood. Magwitch, in many ways, is the personification of that taint, and Pip’s self-deluding desire to run from Magwitch when the convict has returned from exile is similar to Dickens’ own attempts to run from his past. Pip’s salvation through Magwitch then becomes Dickens’ mature recognition—expressed more than once elsewhere—that his great gift was partially created and permanently shaped by the childhood experiences he sought to disown. (Stone 1962, 663)

The past can indeed be a gift even if it is something we wish to run from. I believe understanding the story of our family’s past plays a key role in navigating the complicated questions of existence. This journey has not answered all of my questions about the mysteries of life—in fact I cannot say it has answered any of them in a definitive manner. But it has given me a greater appreciation of the mystery that surrounds our every breath. I have come to believe that participating in genealogical research is an act that is at once temporal and eternal. We may engage in such research to find and understand our familial connections in the here and now, but intimately wrapped up in whatever drives us to start the search is an inner longing to understand where we came from and where we are ultimately going. And that is the greatest expectation of all.

On the surface genealogy may not appeal to everyone, but if you delve past the names and dates and into the rich history that shapes all families you are likely to find stories that surprise you, inspire you, enrage you, or confuse you. Yet each story, good or bad, is part of the continuum of humanity—the threads that weave us together like those of a tapestry. The final tapestry may be a work of great beauty but living in our present perspective we see only the unfinished backside with all its knots and twisted threads. With the mindset of Dunne, however, we can pass over to other lives and other times and gain new insight into our own lives. As Dunne points out, “illumination of the mind occurs not so much through the acquisition of new information as through the discovery of a new standpoint from which the available information can be regarded” (Dunne 1978, 116).

Of course I fully acknowledge the ideas presented here have all been filtered through my life experience. Some of my readers may identify with my perspective and insight, while others may shake their head trying to understand the concepts I have put forth and the connections I have attempted to make. That is to be expected. As Jung himself pointed out, “our way of looking at things is conditioned by what we are. And since other people are differently constituted, they see things differently and express themselves differently” (Jung 1933, 117).

My fascination with the story of my family of origin is part of my own attempt to find my place in the world, to be aware of the events that brought me to this place, and to understand how my personal history has and will continue to shape my experience in this world. As Dunne notes, “to arrive at an insight upon which he can act he must put his memories together into a story” (Dunne 1978, 160). By understanding the role of story in

my own life, I have gained a better understanding of how our perception of our family history impacts and shapes each of our lives. While I cannot change the story I was born into, I can be more aware of the lens through which I view my life and the world around me. And then I must remember to adjust that lens from time to time to discover a different perspective. To step out of the story I am entrenched in and try, if only for a moment, to imagine another script.

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