

Who Owns a Secret?

A Genealogical Conundrum

In my book, *Canary in a Cage: The Smith-Bennett Murder Case*, the lead character struggles with the decision whether or not to reveal a long-kept secret. She asks for guidance from her dear friend, a wise and practical elderly Irish woman, who responds: “A secret is a singular burden and to share such a thing often relieves the burden of the owner at the expense of the person who receives it. Too true it is that the one who tells the secret to another rarely asks permission of the person who will hear it and be expected to conceal it. At some point, the one with whom the burden was shared may feel they cannot or must not keep the promise of silence. Only they know when that time has come.”

The discovery of secrets while doing genealogy research is not uncommon. Those revelations can be exciting or shocking and, being unplanned and unexpected, often result in difficult decisions and unintended consequences. Very recently, in doing some investigating at the request of a friend, I had an experience that illustrates such “difficult decisions” and potential “unintended consequences.” Notice that I said I was doing some *investigating* rather than saying I was doing some *research*. That is a deliberate choice of words as this assignment was an exercise in leveraging my genealogical skills to not only delve into a family’s past but also in trying to determine if a specific relative, born in the 1940s, was still alive.

My friend Patricia is the owner of a small local business. We met when I became one of her clients over ten years ago. Over the last decade she had given birth to a little girl (Nina, the light of her life) only to have her marriage end in divorce several years later. Patricia’s former in-laws were divorced about 30 years ago and she was told her mother-in-law (Maria) “left” her husband and children and made a new life, remarrying and moving out of state. The topic was clearly “don’t ask/don’t tell” and Patricia’s questions met a stone wall of silence. That might have been the end of it until Patricia became a mother herself and wondered about the mysterious woman who was her daughter’s paternal grandmother.

More than once, Patricia told me that she had a “thirst” to know more about and perhaps even find her mother-in-law. Knowing that I am a genealogical researcher, she asked me if I might try to trace Maria and discover if she was still alive. I explained that I did not search, as a private detective might, for clients’ living relatives. Her



**Philadelphia neighborhood
where Maria was born.**

sincerity of purpose made me waiver and I offered to do some genealogical research on the family instead. Patricia had very, very little in the way of information to get me started. She told me what she knew and, as I had promised, I set off to find Patricia's ex-husband's family history.

I had good success with the paternal line, working back through multiple census records to build the story of Patricia's father-in-law's Irish and Scottish roots. I was excited to find that among those Scots, who had emigrated from the Glasgow area, there was one (Patricia's daughter Nina's great-great-great-grandfather) who had served in the Union Army (13th New York Heavy Artillery Regiment) and died in a Tidewater Virginia hospital during the Civil War. I was even lucky enough to find his burial place in a Virginia military cemetery along

with a photo of his gravestone on Find-A-Grave. I was able to trace that Scots line back to a Lanarkshire shoemaker born in the late 18th century.

It was his son, born in about 1819, who came to America with his wife in the 1850s, settled in New York City and would die a decade later in the Civil War. His widow persevered alone, raising her children in her adopted homeland.

The Irish branch of Patricia's father-in-law's family line arrived in America in the early 1890s, some 40 years after the Scottish branch and settled in northern New Jersey. Census records revealed two generations working in jobs such as railroad engineer, grain elevator receiving clerk and railroad shipping clerk. The family remained in the Bergen County area, where Patricia's father-in-law would be born about 40 years later.

I constructed a family tree chart for Patricia and Nina and wrote a narrative telling the story of Nina's paternal grandfather's Scots and Irish heritage. Turning my efforts to Patricia's missing mother-in-law Maria's family line, I had no such success. The wall of silence yielded only crumbs of information and even the correct spelling of the Maria's maiden name was in question. Patricia, on amicable terms with her ex-husband, decided to try again, tactfully asking him questions I had given her and also asking if there was anything else he could remember about his mother's family. Each of those conversations brought a bit more remembered information and, armed with that, I agreed to try one more time to research the mother-in-law's family.

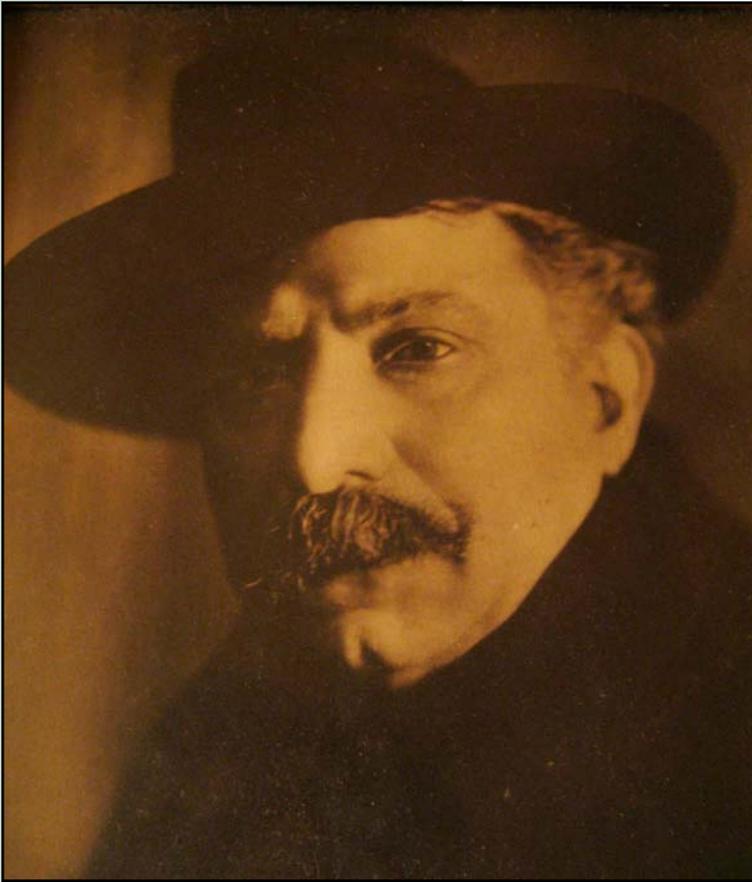
Even having the correct spelling of Maria's maiden name, her approximate age and her believed place of birth in Philadelphia provided no breakthrough as she was likely born just after the 1940 U.S. census was taken. Patricia's ex-husband had, however, provided another piece of information that would prove critically important: the married name of his mother Maria's Aunt Luisa, someone who had helped raise his mother. In starting to search through 1940 and earlier U.S. censuses looking for a record of that aunt, I estimated that she would have been born before 1920, most likely between 1912 and 1918. Fortunately, her married surname was uncommon which would reduce the number of possibilities returned in my census searches but I still had the distinct



Old view of Glasgow Scotland.

disadvantage of not knowing her maiden name.

I quickly found a man of the approximate right age and surname that I suspected was her husband. He had lived in Jersey City, served in World War II and I found a ship passenger record for him in the 1950s as well. I also found his Social Security death index record on Ancestry. (He had died in 1996.) None of the records I found indicated that he was married. I had struck out in the 1940 and earlier censuses, finding no record of the aunt. Left with nothing much to work with, I decided to search *all* records on Ancestry.com for the aunt under her married name as I did not have her maiden name. The screen blinked and returned the results. The first item was a “U.S Public Records Index” record that appeared to be for Maria’s aunt. Ancestry’s description of the Public Record Index is as follows:



Nina's newly-discovered great-great-grandfather.

The U.S. Public Records Index is a compilation of various public records spanning all 50 states in the United States from 1950 to 1993. Entries in this index may contain the following information: name, street or mailing address, telephone number, birth date or birth year. Original data: Voter Registration Lists, Public Record Filings, Historical Residential Records, and Other Household Database Listings.

Not only was that record the first one for Maria’s aunt, it was the only one. Dating to 1993, it gave the aunt’s married name, place of residence at that time and her date of birth—the year being 1914. I wondered why a Social Security death index record had not come up for her since she was apparently born 99 years ago. Out of options on Ancestry, I decided to try several different “free white pages” searches on the internet to see if any later listings came up. I got several hits with her name and a location that matched the public record listing on Ancestry. Her age was listed as “65+” in some of the listings and as “99” in others. I found one listing that included a telephone number and called Patricia the week before Christmas to tell her what I had found. I asked if she wanted me to call the phone number. I remember saying that while the aunt surely wasn’t still alive, perhaps a relative would answer (assuming the number was still in service). She excitedly asked me to make the call.

Just a few days before Christmas, I called. The first time there was no answer so I tried again several hours later. A raspy-voiced woman answered. I explained that I was a family history researcher who was trying to help a friend locate a relative. I gave Patricia's married name and the name of the aunt I was tracing. Then I paused. A response came back: "Yes, I know of Patricia and I know her husband and his family." As I listened, she continued on, talking at length about Patricia's husband's family and how she hadn't seen or heard from them in many years. I interrupted politely and asked: "Are *you* Luisa?" She replied: "Yes, I am and please speak up—I'm 99-years-old."



**Nina's newly-discovered
great-great-grandmother**

Actually she was two weeks away from her 100th birthday which she celebrated the first week of January, 2014. Luisa provided me with quite a family history during our conversation, including her maiden name and information about her niece Maria and Maria's mother. That information gave me what I needed to go back and research Maria's Italian family history, but Patricia's burning question still hadn't been answered: Was her mother-in-law Maria still alive and, if so, where was she? Thanks to the new information provided by Luisa followed by more white pages searches, I soon found Maria, in her 70s and quite alive. Patricia, too nervous to call her, asked me to please make the call. I did. There was no answer but I left a message on an answering machine and, a few hours

later, an excited Maria called me back. We talked and I told her about her granddaughter Nina. I don't think I'll ever forget the sound of her voice when she said: "I have a *granddaughter!*"

Patricia has now connected with Maria, as has Nina who happily calls her "Granny." Patricia and Maria are going slow, getting to know each other and having conversations about the sensitive subject of Maria's estrangement from her ex-husband and children. As Patricia says, there are two sides to every story. Time will tell the ultimate outcome of this family reconnection and if any further fallout or any reconciliation results. I recently received a card from Maria thanking me again for helping Patricia and Nina find her. Patricia says I don't really understand what I have done for her and Nina . . . and for others I have worked with to discover their family stories. For me, it is fantastic to have the opportunity to do something I love and then experience the wide eyes, dropping jaws and poignant reactions that come from sharing what I discover.

(Names have been changed in this article to preserve privacy.)



*"Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains
as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge
hidden in every cell of our bodies."*

— Shirley Abbott

Maureen Wlodarczyk

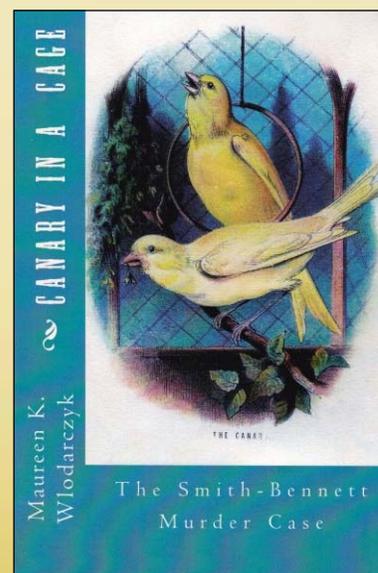
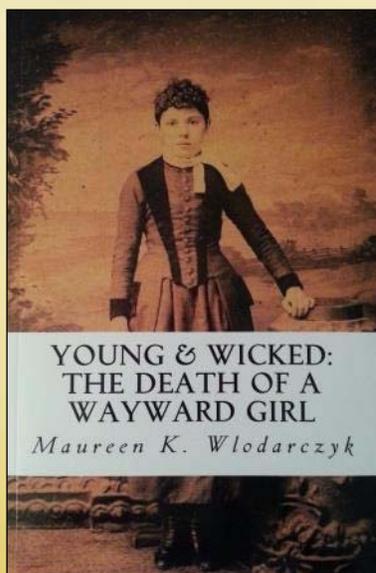
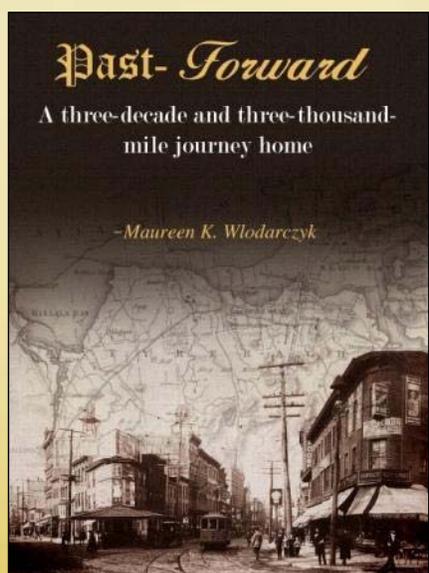
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