

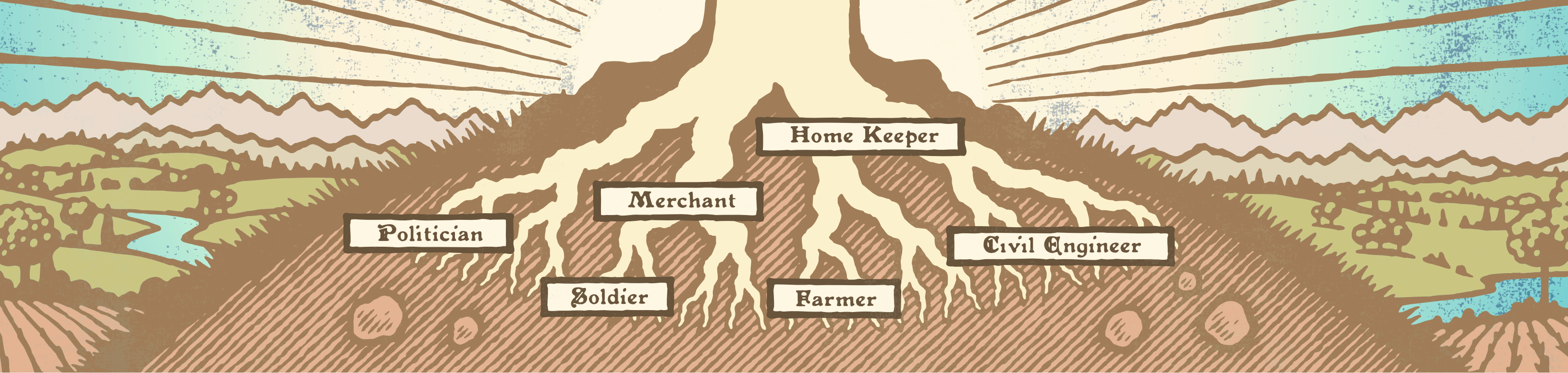


Buried Treasure

A new book by Jackie Hogan, professor of sociology and anthropology, explores the fascination with finding our roots.

RESEARCH
BY S.L. GUTHRIE
ILLUSTRATION BY KEN JACOBSEN
⌚ 10 MIN.

"In all of us there is a hunger, marrow-deep, to know our heritage — to know who we are and where we have come from." — Alex Haley



W

hen the ABC TV miniseries “Roots,” based on Haley’s 1976 novel, aired more than 40 years ago, not only did it generate a record-breaking audience, both entities raised awareness about African American history and helped to inspire a global interest in genealogy.

At the time “Roots” aired, just 29% of Americans polled said they were “very interested” in family history, according to industry powerhouse Ancestry. In the nearly 15 years between 1995 and 2009, that number almost doubled, from 45% to 87%.

Likewise, the industry itself has done a record-breaking business. In 1983, Ancestry published more than 40 family history magazines and reference books. Today, the company’s website (ancestry.com) has more than 2 million customers and the DNA records for over 10 million people, making it the largest in the world. Many additional websites, magazines and books have since come along, as have television programs like “Genealogy Roadshow,” “Faces of America,” “Who Do You Think You Are?” and “Finding Your Roots.”

Whatever the format, Americans are obsessed with genealogy.

Professor of Sociology and Anthropology Jackie Hogan looks at the current craze in her new book, “Roots Quest: Inside America’s Genealogy Boom.” More than simply seeking to learn the names, dates, places and stories of ancestors long gone, she writes these family historians, “seek a sense of belonging — to family, to community, to nation and to history.”

The project began while she researched material for her book “Lincoln, Inc.: Selling the Sixteenth President in Contemporary America.” Hogan conducted interviews, went to historic sites and museums, and attended conferences, events and lectures. She discovered a common thread in each.

“What struck me is how many people were so proud of their ancestral connections with Lincoln,” Hogan said in a recent interview. “Maybe their great-great-great-aunt had tea with Mary Lincoln or something like that. It got me thinking about how important ancestry is to our sense of who we are. It’s not vanity. I really don’t think it’s vanity that’s motivating people. It’s a desire to belong, to know where we belong in our family history, but also in our national history.”

FAMILY HISTORIANS “SEEK A SENSE OF BELONGING — TO FAMILY, TO COMMUNITY, TO NATION AND TO HISTORY.”

— JACKIE HOGAN

Joy of discovery

At the root of the family search is often the excitement people feel at solving a puzzle or mystery. Hogan said the people she met shared experiences of going to the county courthouse and digging in boxes in the basement.

“They find incredible treasure. Not gold and diamonds, but they find land deeds and birth certificates and who knows what.”

Hogan found the homestead document for her family farm in Nebraska. What made the discovery more meaningful was the accompanying evidence from neighbors and friends used to prove the claimant had done something with the land as required by the Homestead Act.

“(They) had to testify as to your good character. So, I have all these lovely descriptions of my Irish ancestors and their character and how many windows they had in their house and how many cattle they had. It’s just this little homestead but it does give you this really vivid picture of what their life was like.”

Healing relationships

While the discovery can elicit emotions of elation and pride, learning more about a loved one’s history can also help heal old wounds. After a parent or grandparent has died a child may realize how little they know about their family, leading them to become searchers. “Sometimes they feel like they’re actually relating to (the parent) better than when they were alive, because they’re getting these insights from doing the family history,” said Hogan.

For example, an ancestor who had suffered horrifically during wartime might explain why they weren’t emotionally available, or drunk or were abusive.

“Especially with your parents, there’s sort of an expectation built into us that they’re going to be emotionally available for us, and when it gets violated, it’s hard,” said Lane Beckes, associate professor of psychology. “... It can be hard for people who have gone through a major trauma like that to connect in the same way emotionally, which then gets passed on to the next generation.

“If the kids can understand where a person (ancestor) was coming from, it can help resolve some of that emotional stuff. It at least helps you realize, ‘It wasn’t about me, it was about his own issues, his own history, his own struggle.’”

Running into brick walls

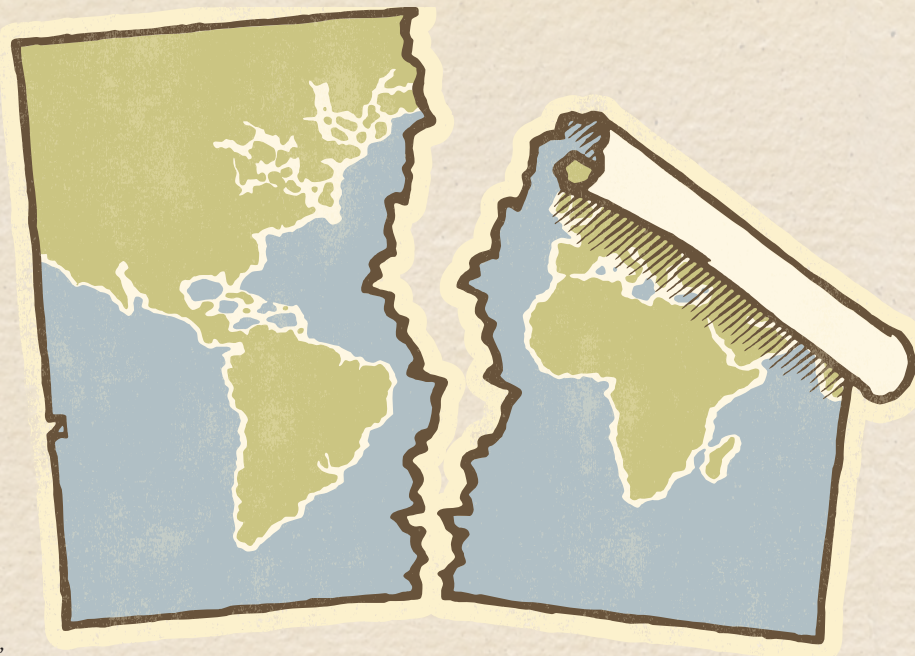
However healing or satisfying the discoveries are, Hogan said people should not assume the information they see on a public family tree is accurate. “This is especially true the further back you go where physical records are often non-existent,” she said, noting that it’s important to see if there are verifiable records attached to the ancestor in question.

In particular, many black people have difficulty finding documentation. Hogan said those families can often only trace their roots back to 1865 because that was the first time previously enslaved black people were documented. “Before then you might get a reference that would say, ‘one slave girl but no name,’ and no indication of anything else” she said. “It’s what genealogists call, ‘running into a brick wall.’”

Finding information connected to poor relations is also difficult. Hogan discovered she had many Irish Catholic ancestors, peasant farmers who immigrated to the U.S. from Ireland during the time of the Great Famine. The only documentation she could find, however, were a few baptismal records.

“They were Irish Catholics, poor peasant farmers, and so there are almost no records on them ... The state, at that time, did not really consider Catholics worthy of keeping records on (because) they were a persecuted group.

“Basically, all genealogical research shows us the same pattern, which is that if your family was well-off you’re going to have a great time researching them because they have left all kinds of documents. They’ve left land deeds and wills and maybe newspaper articles were written about them. If you were from a poor, disenfranchised or marginalized group, there’s almost nothing. And so those are really challenging.”



And while some might see DNA testing as a holy grail of discovery, Hogan said searchers should be aware that the results are only as good as the genetic samples a company has in its database.

“Most of these genetic databases have a ton of European-descent samples ... but each company will give you slightly different results, even if you have pretty simple (DNA). There was a study done by a researcher who had submitted the same DNA sample to a dozen different companies. With 50% of them, the results were very different. It just depends on what genetic material they have in their database.”

Testing becomes much more problematic, Hogan said, if you have an unusual background. “Indigenous genetic material is really uncommon in (most) genetic databases, in part because indigenous people historically were treated really badly by the medical establishment of the colonizers who came in, so, they don’t want to give up their genetic material for testing ... That means that genetic material is really underrepresented in the databases, so you get all kinds of errors with those smaller populations.”

She did note one benefit of DNA testing for marginalized groups: their genetic material can offer a clue, albeit a flawed one.

“Sometimes it’s the best record that people from particular groups can have,” Hogan said. “It can give them a placement, a tie to a particular tribe or a particular area of the world that they didn’t know.”

A lack of data isn’t the only difficulty people in marginalized groups face. Just after the Civil War, paranoia regarding African Americans’ emancipation led to an obsession among some white people to trace their family’s ancestry to prove racial purity. The same held true for immigrants coming from Europe and Russia. Hogan noted this was part of the American eugenics movement, which later informed Hitler’s policies.

“It was the genocidal policies that were the most extreme form of eugenics thinking, keeping bloodlines pure. Then in American genealogy, that went out of fashion after World War II because of its association with Nazis.”

Thankfully, times change. Hogan noted how the civil rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s generated various ethnic pride movements. People became much more interested in showing ethnic diversity.

“Time and again, I have heard genealogists be very disappointed to learn that, in fact, they’re all white ... They see ethnic diversity as literally more colorful, more interesting,” she said. “Ethnic diversity has become more valued, so people value that in their own family trees as well.”

**BLACK
PEOPLE CAN
OFTEN ONLY
TRACE THEIR
ROOTS BACK
TO 1865.**

Little fragments of identity
Although becoming a more globalized society has many wonderful aspects to it, Hogan said it can lead to feeling a loss of cultural distinctiveness. She believes Americans’ booming interest in genealogy is, in part, a response to a current sense of rootlessness.

“We are moving more than ever before; moving cities, moving houses, moving between marriages,” she said. “People are changing their family structures. We’re changing our employment more often. We’re less likely to live in the same hometown where our grandparents grew up ... We’re becoming a more secular society. People no longer have the religious certainty that they used to have.

In the book’s final paragraphs, Hogan noted that genealogy has become a multibillion-dollar industry and asks, “What are genealogists really buying?” In spending money to learn the details, we are buying “little fragments of ancestors” or in a larger sense, “little fragments of identity.” Yet, like many things, those with more resources will be able to build better trees, and their records are more likely to be preserved over those families with lesser means.

“And this has implications for our identities,” wrote Hogan. “... It is often said that you cannot choose your family, but an examination of roots work across cultures and over time demonstrates that ancestry and kinship are not simply natural facts waiting to be discovered.

“Ancestry and kinship are actively and creatively constructed. Likewise our true identities — who we really are — are not simply waiting to be uncovered; our identities must be actively and constantly created. And in our age of rootlessness, we do this, in part, through our roots quests.” **B**



Interested in learning more about your ancestors?

Start by watching TV programs like “Who Do You Think You Are?” and “Finding Your Roots.” Hogan believes these shows provide the motivation you’ll need because you’ll see others walking in the footsteps of their ancestors and feeling a sense of meaningful connection.

Next, take a look at one of the websites listed to the right and start building your family tree. Hogan recommends being cautious and skeptical of the process and the results. “If it seems super easy you’re probably not doing it right,” she said. “You need to look very carefully at the sources of the information and corroborate, corroborate, corroborate to make sure you’re finding the right John Smith.”

If you get stuck in your search, a professional genealogist may be the answer. The Association of Professional Genealogists (apgen.org) can guide you on the best practices for hiring someone. Hogan suggested attending genealogical society meetings or conferences to get further help.

Free Websites

- FamilySearch.org
- FindAGrave.com
- Archives.gov
- FamilyTreeMagazine.com
- USGenWeb.org

Fee-based Websites

(most offer a free trial)

- Ancestry.com
- MyHeritage.com
- AfriGeneas.com
- Newspapers.com
- FindMyPast.com

DNA Testing

- Ancestry.com
- 23andme.com
- FamilyTreeDNA.com