

Chasing Family History *by Al Lewis*

What started out as a simple search for a family grave-site ended up taking on an unexpected, surreal twist.

I've always held firm to the belief that a person's character is a compilation of ancestral genetic traits extending back through untold generations. With this in mind, I couldn't resist the opportunity to uncover my own ancestral roots in one of London's oldest cemeteries.

As a small boy, I vividly remember sitting with my grandfather

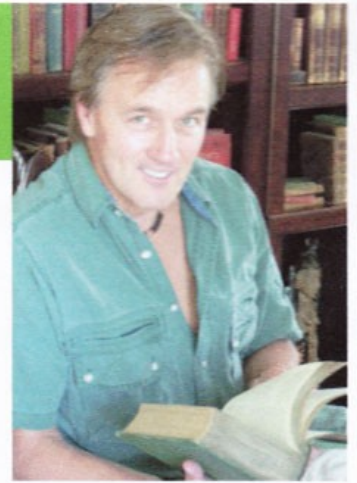
on the wrap-around veranda of his old, red Saskatchewan farmhouse, listening to the many stories of his early years growing up in England. Ralph Henry Garden came by his surname honestly, as he was well known for the wonderful landscaped gardens that he created in and around the newly settled, turn of the century town of Wolseley. The old cement pond, with its resident frog population that kept my brothers and I entertained for hours, was surrounded by a massive lawn ringed with vegetable and perennial gardens of spotted tiger lilies and aster daisies. Two large greenhouses stood in the north-west corner of the property. It's those familiar smells of fresh soil, plant material and humidity that still resonate in me to this day.



After settling in the scenic Qu'Appelle valley in the late 1890's, my pioneer grandparents would survive World War 1, combat duty in Europe, the great depression of

the '30's as well as drought and the harsh prairie elements. Ralph Henry lived to the ripe old age of 88.

It was likely from those impressionable moments spent together when I was young that the dye would be cast for the search on which I was about to embark. I was preparing to chase down the birthplace of my grandfather, Ralph Henry Garden in the suburb of Tottenham and with further detective work, hopefully the gravesite of his mother and father, John and Isabella Garden who died in 1893 and 1895 respectively. After confirming locations with my cousin, Shelley, our resident family genealogist, my mission was set.



My Air Canada flight from Ottawa arrived at Heathrow at 10:00 o'clock in the morning and I got down to the hotel in central London, near Regents Park, by 11:30. This was to be a quick, purposeful trip, and sleep time would likely be minimal. I forced myself up after only a two hour cat nap, and my plans for seeking out my roots started taking shape.

A very helpful concierge at the hotel photo-copied a detailed map of the Tottenham area and provided me with the necessary underground subway and bus connections.

"Take the tube to Kings Cross from Baker Street, change trains, proceed to the Seven Sisters stop, hop a bus and then walk about 6 blocks north, 3 blocks east. Hope you got your best walking shoes with you, mate!" he joked.

I felt I would need a combination of well honed hunting skills as well as a lot of good fortune if I was going to meet with success in my search. There I was on my mission, jetlagged and in possession of only a street address and a cemetery name from which to work. What I didn't take into account was the fact that the area I was going into had the reputation of being one of London's roughest and most impoverished districts. I was warned to avoid being on the streets, especially after dark. This was during the month of February, and nightfall can be expected anytime after 5:00, co-incidentally about the same time that the London underground takes on a life of its own.

I set off with map in hand and mission proclaimed, eagerly seeking out tales of my British roots. The directions provided by the friendly hotel staff were carefully followed as I made my way across northern London on the tube, double-decker buses and finally on foot. I soon found myself staring down a short, non-descript street called Townsend Road. There it was, just as the map had promised, the street of my grandfather's birth on November 6, 1880. This series of tightly bundled together brick homes seemed brilliantly planned to accommodate maximum density even in the mid 1800's. Within minutes I was standing in front of number twelve, the address my cousin had determined to be my destination. There I was, on the same spot that over one hundred and twenty years ago, my grandfather had likely played soccer on those streets with his young friends. How was he to know by the age of fourteen, that he and his two brothers and one sister would be boarding an ocean liner for the prospects and uncertainty of a small Canadian farming community in the province of Saskatchewan, in the new village they called Wolseley?



With the search for my grandfather's birthplace satisfied, I turned my attention to locating the cemetery of Tottenham, one of the oldest burial sites in London. This is where I would begin to look for the final resting place of my grandfather's parents, John R and Isabella Garden. Disease and death prematurely knocked on their door, ironically within 18 months of each other, at the young age of 43 years. The year was 1895 and my grandfa-

ther, barely a teenager, soon found himself to be an orphan on the mean streets of Tottenham. Fortunately, the land of opportunity known as the Canadian prairies came calling. This was to be their future. This was to be their destiny.

I now had my own agenda before me, to pay respects to my ancestors who died 111 years earlier. Within forty-five minutes, my journey had taken me to the cemetery I'd been seeking. It was getting late and to my surprise the scope and magnitude of the grounds turned out to be much larger than I'd expected. Hundreds of dilapidated old tombstones seemed to grow out of mother earth, often twisted and angled by the invasive roots of neighbouring trees. Many were so weather-beaten that their inscriptions were barely legible. I began to wonder how I would even begin to look for a gravesite that was more akin to looking for a needle in a proverbial haystack. Luckily, I was able to make contact with the resident groundskeeper. "Would there be anyone who might

be able to help me locate the gravesite of my great-grandparents?, I asked hopefully.

The maintenance worker replied with a stiff cockney accent "...not too likely guv'ner, the director is off today and he's the only one with a map who could help you. Besides, I'll be locking the gates in 25 minutes".

With an unexpected sense of urgency, I now had to work as fast as I could. I began to suspect that I may have to be content with just being in the cemetery itself, which resembled something out of an old Vincent Price movie. The sky darkened, and the air chilled as the pervasive London fog began to move in and out of the grounds. I moved briskly, scanning the inscriptions on the antiquated stones with humility and respect. The time frame I had to work in ticked away until I reached the point where the gates were to be locked within 10 minutes and I would have to say farewell to my search.



A main tributary road lay before me, leading me to the next exit. Without warning, a localized gust of wind accompanied by swirling leaves seemed to interrupt my exit plans and suddenly, for no obvious reason, I felt as though I were being led in completely the opposite direction. For reasons I cannot explain, I chose instead to jump over a 5' spiked fence, walk about 15 yards straight ahead, and make a left turn until I came face to face with an ornate and stately stone that sent chills up my spine with an inscription that read clearly:

JOHN GARDEN
Died December 19, 1893
Aged 42 years.

ISABELLA MARY
Died August 27, 1895
Aged 43 years.

At first glance, I didn't believe what I was seeing. In a sea of tombstones, with the light of day running out, I was stunned by my discovery. Goosebumps immediately ran a path up my arms. Even though my moments of shared reflection were to be brief, there was a feeling of personal triumph running through me.

I had answers but I also had questions. What was behind the intervention that allowed such fulfillment to a very personal search? Could this possibly be a haunting reminder that we are, indeed, more connected to the past than we realize.

Al Lewis is an Okanagan based travel writer and photo-journalist.

EDITORS NOTE:

There are a number of websites that may be of assistance in guiding you to make a connection with your ancestral past.

Genealogylinks.net

offers over 4300 pages with over 50,000 free genealogical links for US, Great Britain, Europe, New Zealand, and Canada.

In addition, The Genealogy Handbook, published by Readers Digest, is available through Amazon.ca

May you meet with success in your own personal search!