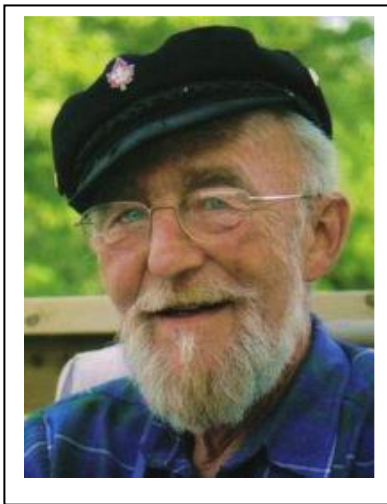


Black Sheep



There has been a lot of buzz lately in the Family History literature about Black Sheep. These are our family members whose behavior did not accord well with the laws, customs, or prejudices of their time and place in history. The question of, course, is what do we do about them?

There are extremists at both ends of the spectrum. One group is in favor of 'telling all'. I sometimes think of them as the muckrakers of the 19th Century who delighted in finding dirt and telling the whole world about it. They are probably more closely related to the vicious gossips who derive pleasure and a sense of power from putting others down. Some of them are just trying to show off their research skills.

At the other end of the spectrum are the ones I call the 'sanitizers'. They will bury any information that does not support the image of the family that they want to promote.

These are also the masters of the euphemism. A serial rapist and murderer may appear as a 'free spirit'. You can find a lot of this in local and family histories.

Between these two poles are the majority of us. Some are looking for a rule that will take the decision out of our hands but I don't think I can help them. In the final analysis, we have to make our own decision on the merits of each case.

Certainly, if the public is already aware of some aspects of the case, it makes sense to put it into the kindest context possible. However, most Black Sheep issues concern stories that have been buried by the family for some time. What do we do?

One of the factors that affects the decision is the severity of the transgression, as it is perceived today. The family tippler is really not in the same league as a mass murderer.

Another factor is recency. Having a distant ancestor who was a notorious highway robber and was hanged for his efforts, may lend a certain cachet for some people. Having Great Uncle Bill in prison for robbing a bank is an entirely different matter.

The most important determinant, in my opinion, is '*cui malo*' -'who will it hurt'. If disclosure is going to cause serious embarrassment, discomfort, or pain to some family members, then, I think, we have to take that into consideration. Surely their quality of life is more important than our right to tell a particular story at a particular time.

I strongly believe that all these stories should be researched and recorded for they are an integral part of the family history. All I am suggesting is that the timing for the general release of parts of the family story has to be partly governed by compassion.

Contract researchers do not have these options. I read recently about one who was hired by a family to look up the military record of a man who, by family tradition, died a hero's death in WW I. They expected to find that he had died while leading a glorious charge 'over the top'. The records showed that he was executed by a firing squad for cowardice. He HAD to report this to the family that had employed him.

The subject of Black Sheep is extremely popular. There is even an International Black Sheep Society of Genealogists, with their own web site at: <<http://blacksheep.rootsweb.com>> . There are also many websites where you can search court and prison records for your relatives. Of course, not all criminals were Black Sheep. Many Irish families (ours included) had members transported to Australia for taking part in rebellions. They often tend to be proud, rather than embarrassed about it.