

Pride in the Past and Snakes in the Cemetery

Sylvia D. Murray, AG

A red-painted hand pump stood at the kitchen sink and young Sylvia pushed the handle up and down to get the water running. At night her Norwegian grandmother lighted the kerosene lamps that the girl was warned never to go near, never to touch. She watched as her grandmother and her great-grandmother stoked the black iron stove. It was so large to a little girl that even today Sylvia thinks of it as taking up a sizeable portion of the farmhouse kitchen. She remembers the flat iron being warmed up on the stove so that clothes could be pressed.

Outside, she followed her Swedish grandfather around as he did chores – the farm grew wheat and raised Rhode Island Reds. “Hated those chickens,” Sylvia says. “They were mean and they chased me. Of course, I’d probably be mean too if I knew I was going to get my head chopped off.” Sylvia tried not to watch when her grandpa got ready to chop, but there was something fascinating about the way the chickens ran around, headless and bloody. Sylvia ran back inside for a blond coffee, the children’s version of the popular Scandinavian beverage and then back outside to play with her dog, Rex. “He was a decommissioned WWII sentry dog retired to a civilian life,” Sylvia says “and he was my best friend.”

How did a little girl end up living with her grandparents on a farm in Montana in the 1940s? “Ah, my mother moved out to Bremerton, Washington when her grandparents went to work in the Naval Shipyards during WWII. She was charmed by a handsome man, married at sixteen, had two children and was divorced by the time she was eighteen.” The farm was a stable and peaceful place, welcoming to children, and Sylvia’s childhood was happy

there. Eventually her mother remarried and Sylvia's new Dad adopted her sister and her.

Her interest in genealogy was whetted there, but only to a certain degree. "My Norwegian grandmother and great-grandmother didn't talk much about the past; my Swedish grandfather had stories, though. But that's not where I seriously started researching."



Sylvia D. Murray, AG, in her extensive home research library, Havre, Montana

Sylvia, whose husband was in the military, ran an Officers' Club in Japan during the Vietnam War. While there, she became very interested in Japanese culture, especially the respect paid to ancestors. Everything interested her from the altars in homes and businesses to the customs of Japanese burials.

When she returned to the U.S., Sylvia began researching in earnest. A typical vacation with her husband would involve genealogical research. There

was much to research because Sylvia, although well rooted with her Scandinavian side of the family, knew little about her biological father's lines. As she researched, she discovered a history of adoption throughout the family, and although she found out some interesting facts – her biological father was married five times – she could never identify his mother. Recently, with the help of DNA, she connected with an unknown first cousin and the mystery of her paternal grandmother was finally solved.

Sylvia taught a course called, simply, “Genealogy” for over twenty years at Amarillo Junior College in Texas. It was geared for the beginner-to-intermediate crowd, and was a well received, popular offering. “I think of myself as a resource,” she explains and goes on to say that she would prefer to give someone all the tools that he or she needs to dig into their family history rather than doing it for them. “It’s not that I don’t want to do it. It’s easy to take a client. It’s just that I think the actual research is so much more rewarding when one does their own. There’s an excitement to the search and great thrills with each find. If someone hands you a chart already completed, there may be knowledge, but no sense of the satisfaction from the hunt.”

After retirement, Sylvia and her husband returned to Montana, the state where she was raised. Now there is no nine-to-five job to get in the way of her passions, and she regularly spends eight to ten hours a day working on genealogical projects, often with classical music playing in the background. Her library, meticulously assembled over the decades, holds over four-thousand books, mostly wonderful old volumes of prime research material. Although she still likes to travel for research, she has such an extensive library that, used along with the Internet, allows her to solve many cases without leaving the house.

What are her favorite areas of research these days? “Homesteaders!” There is no hesitation there. “Followed by dead ends, adoption searches, and Native American genealogy.”

It is disturbing to Sylvia to watch the past disappear in small towns and rural areas across Montana. Where old sod cabins used to be commonplace, now they are torn down or collapse from disrepair. She notices that if a certain

café closes, sometimes a town dies. Musing, she says that it is interesting that most cemeteries are somehow kept up even when other areas of towns are not.

Women homesteaders are of special interest to Sylvia, and she studies extensively in this area. Traveling around the countryside and spotting an “old soddy,” she might start thinking about the life of the original pioneer woman who lived there. She thinks a lot about the prairie women and all they went through. She mentions Prairie Madness or Prairie Fever and talks about the isolation and depression of the early settlers and the thin line between the difficulties of that life and going insane.



The deserted homesteads of the Montana prairie are what inspire Sylvia Murray's research. This old farmhouse is located between Big Sandy and Loma, Montana

These days Sylvia spends a great deal of her time researching in Homestead Records as well as County Records and county histories, three of her biggest

sources for glimpses into the lives of settlers on the prairie. She goes out looking for old homesteads by tracing the wind breaks.

“Do you know what a wind break is?” She asks. “When the homesteaders filed for their land, they had to promise to do certain things such as plant trees to create wind breaks. They had to report how many trees were planted and what kinds. For years, the best way to find old homesteads was to look for the wind breaks.” But these days, most of the trees are over one-hundred years old and many are dying and more have fallen. This creates the same kind of sadness that Sylvia sees when she notices a café closing. Once a wind break is gone, an old homestead may become unidentifiable. Once a town’s only café closes, its downtown area may slowly shutter, and life leaves town the same way.

Knowing that most early settlers were buried on their own land, Sylvia was able to research and find the Holte homestead in North Dakota where her Norwegian great-great grandmother died in childbirth. It was a long search, and the first visit discovered the location of the homestead, but not the location of the grave. Talking with locals gave her some good leads, and she was contacted when someone discovered what they thought might be the graves. On her second trip Sylvia was able to view the spot where her great-great grandmother and four of the woman’s children were buried.

Sylvia is animated when speaking of homesteaders and the prairies. “Do you know how a lot of folks got up here to Montana?” she asks. “A fellow by the name of J. J. Hill, “the Empire Builder” and founder of the Great Northern Railroad, advertised a deal - \$15 for a railroad car and folks could bring all their belongings and livestock. The railroad he ran was essentially necessary for homesteaders. It surely was the fastest and cheapest way of getting people out here.”



Sylvia Murray studies a long-abandoned school outside Cottonwood, Montana. The state has the largest number of active one-room schools in the nation.

When not researching homesteaders, tracking down wind breaks, or lamenting another “old soddy” destroyed by the elements, Sylvia is working on her second favorite specialty: dead ends. Dead ends, or brick walls, cause a different kind of excitement in Sylvia. She recalls one particular case she was puzzling over which involved a family out of Missouri. “No one in the family wanted to talk,” she says. But, of course, everyone wanted to know. What Sylvia discovered after much research was as convoluted a family situation of any she had come across.

“They could trace their ancestry to a particular woman, but there was not any information about her husband despite the fact that she had three children by him in a six-year period.” Sylvia discovered that the woman had a mother who remarried one year after her first husband died; her oldest daughter – the

woman in question - was thirteen at the time. Further research showed the mother and daughter giving birth to children during the same time period. The main mystery was: who was the father of the daughter's children? Sleuth Sylvia put a great deal of effort into this search and eventually proved that it was the stepfather.

Due to the many adoptions in her family tree, Sylvia likes to work on adoption cases. She is often able to combine three interests: homesteaders, dead ends/brick walls, and adoptions into one search. "Folks give up too easy," she scoffs. "As for me, bring on your dead ends. I like to work a case that someone else has thrown up their hands on." It's good to hear that as almost everyone has one of those problems lingering in the back of their minds or the back of their files. Having a penchant for working with the difficult should ensure that Sylvia continues to work those lengthy hours of research that she loves.

Sylvia has been involved with the Family History Center since 1982, first in Texas and now in Montana, in many different capacities: director, consultant, and trainer. She writes articles under the byline of *Researching with Geniebug*. Volunteer work for her includes serving on the Montana State Employers Advisory Council as well as teaching an after-school genealogy program for kids.

"In this part of Montana, I work with a lot of Native American children. Some of them have had tough lives, haven't known their parents well, and are being raised by their grandparents. I teach with the belief that genealogy can make you feel special." As part of her program, Sylvia tries to help the children trace their trees back to someone they can hold up as a hero or heroine, someone who captures their interest because of what they did in life.

"Pride in the Past is what I call it." Sylvia says. "My biggest goal in teaching is to instill self-esteem by learning more about the everyday people in a person's ancestry. There is always someone there who fascinates and holds a

kid's attention. Maybe that person won a battle, was a respected craftsperson, or an excellent horseman. Maybe they were in the military or homesteaded land. There is always someone in the tree who can be found to lift a child's self-esteem. That is my purpose in exposing kids to genealogy."

Sylvia's interests are so varied, her effervescence so contagious, that one could listen to her forever.

When asked if there is anything she *doesn't* like, Sylvia's responds:

"Yep. Snakes in cemeteries. I have been in my fair share of burial grounds up here in Montana, and one thing some folks don't know is that Montana snakes *love* cemeteries. Oh, I have run into my fair share of them, sunning themselves on horizontal markers and coiled around vertical ones. We have poisonous snakes here in Montana, so it's a good thing to remember when visiting graveyards. The best time to do it is after the cold settles in, when the chances of running into snakes is not as great."

When not working on genealogy, Sylvia and her husband – who she refers to as "my best buddy" - go deer hunting in season. Sylvia reads a great deal, especially history and historical fiction. She likes to sew and make patterns, and cooking is a trip around the world: the Scandinavian favorites of her childhood to the Japanese food that she grew to love during her years in Japan to her current passions: Mexican and East Indian cooking. She has as many favorite spices as she has genealogical specialties!

"But I can't sing and I can't knit," Sylvia confesses. No one cares. Any genealogist with a hankering to work again on yet another brick wall is someone who doesn't need any other talent.

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