

# Murder and Mayhem: The Dark Side of Genealogy

John M. Hoenig says sooner or later we all face unpleasantness in the past

THERE'S AN OLD saying among genealogists that every family has a horse thief in its past. Surely every family has faced its share of misery. We can endeavor to produce an accurate picture of the family's past, understanding the hardships endured and the mistakes made as well as the triumphs and accomplishments. However, we do need to be sensitive to our relatives' feelings. If an accurate picture is indeed what we want, then sooner or later, we'll face the dark side of genealogy.

The first clue of something untoward may be in an offhand remark of a relative. Or, you may stumble across something troubling in a death certificate, census form or newspaper article. The subsequent search may provide a great deal of insight into the hard times the family endured and the hard feelings held.

Gravestones sometimes hint at family stresses. Typically, the clue in a gravestone is who is *not* mentioned, as in "Paul, beloved son of Frances, beloved uncle of Sally and Peter". If Paul is an uncle then he had a sibling. If that sibling was still living at the time of Paul's death, then why isn't he or she mentioned? I saw this on a relative's gravestone and knew enough of the family history to recognize the significance.

Similarly, a family member left out of a will, or included with a notably small inheritance, may be a sign of discord. And, not uncommonly, one comes across a photo in a relative's collection that has been mutilated to eliminate someone. This is a sure sign of hard feelings.

Certain events and hardships in the past were considered in a very different light than they are today. Tuberculosis or consump-



**The author's relative, Harry, top left, drowned in the East River of New York City in 1914 when he was 10 years old. Right, the Coroner's report on the death of Harry. Under cause of death is written "Asphyxia submersion (probably accidental)".**

CORONERS' OFFICE, BOROUGH OF THE BRONX  
NEW YORK

Coroner: Tracy Physician: Coates  
No. 71

NOTICE OF DEATH

Reported by: 67th Precinct

Reported at: 71st St.

Name of Deceased: Harry

Age: 10 Sex: M Occupation: School-boy

Place of Birth: Single Residence: 131st St. East River

Day of Death: Aug. 27/14 Time: 11:00 A.M.

Place of Death: 131st St. East River

Time of Death: 11:00 A.M.

Father's name: John Occupation: Carriage Driver

Mother's name: Rose Occupation: Housewife

Cause of Death: Asphyxia submersion (probably accidental)

tion was a serious disease. My cousin Joe was a physician who fled into Russia during WWII and tended the wounded on the battlefield. I heard that when he came to New York after the war, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and had to go to a sanatorium for treatment. I don't know if he contracted the disease in Europe or while he was working as a physician in New York. However, the New York State Archives website indicates there is a registry of TB

cases (1939-75) so I might be able to resolve this question simply by the date his TB was diagnosed.

Understanding the sensitivities of the past is a worthy goal in itself and is also important for finding and interpreting information. Not only was tuberculosis a serious disease, there was a stigma associated with it because it was considered a disease of the "lower classes". One relative told me she had heard that her grandmother had died of pneumonia at age 34 in 1914. However, when this relative grew older she figured out that didn't make much sense. So, she asked her mother if grandma had instead died of tuberculosis. Her mother said yes. However, another relative, in his 80s, told me Rose died of asthma. He had never heard the true story and I didn't tell him.

The story is even more tragic. Eleven days after Rose died, her 10-year-old son, Harry, snuck out the house to go swimming with his friends in the East River. Alas, he drowned. The death certificate says the cause of death was "probably accidental". I decided to get the Coroner's case file and, because the drowning occurred long ago, the file was at the New York City Municipal Archives. I wrote to the Archives for the file and sent them a copy of the death certificate. A police report in the file indicates that "a swell from a passing boat knocked him down and he was drowned."

People face a wide variety of problems. As the table on the next page shows, not every problem leaves a clear paper trail. In this article, we examine several case histories to see how various

records provide insights into the dark side of a family's history.

### Charles and Martha Shields' Marital Problems

My colleague Jeff Shields was lucky enough to get a detailed family history written in the 1920s by his greatgrandfather, Parker Shields. Curiously, Parker barely mentioned his father Charles, saying only that he was a US Civil War veteran. In fact, Parker wrote more about his grandfather than his father. The reason might have remained obscure but for Jeff's digging. Jeff found an index of Civil War muster rolls on the Ancestry.com website which led him to Charles' civil war pension records. The National Archives charged \$30 to copy them — a bargain considering Jeff received 160 pages. Included were the dates and places of Charles and Martha's marriage and of their deaths; also addresses and professions, information about their children, and samples of their handwriting. However, there was more.

### The Marital Problems.

The documents also indicate that, as an elderly man, Charles abandoned Martha in Illinois and went to Arkansas. Martha made a claim for 50 percent of his pension, claiming to be abandoned for no cause and destitute. Her income consisted of renting four rooms, but only during the warm months of the year because the house was cold in winter. She further claimed that her husband ran up debts before he abandoned her and she was legally liable for the debts. For his part, Charles claimed in an affidavit that she had more money than she indicated, and he left because she mortgaged the house to give money to her (i.e., their) son Charles Jr. for a business that

failed. The government asked her to prove she was poor and she asked in exasperation how she could prove what doesn't exist, saying in a letter to the Interior Department, "This is impossible as no one can, or will, state in oath what [her income] is."

An examiner summarized the situation as follows: "This claimant owns a valuable property in Danville Ills. ... Claimants [sic] witnesses admit a value of \$2500 and soldier puts it at \$4000. A part of it she rents at \$20 per month &

found why Charles' son Parker did not trumpet his father's virtues.

### Jack Bacher, Opium King and Convicted Murderer

Imagine searching the *New York Times* database for family members and coming across a 1943 article about Jack Bacher, the "opium king" of New York, Atlantic City and Philadelphia, being arrested for a murder 14 years earlier. (Actually, the article mentioned a different name but, as we'll see, Jack Bacher was one of the aliases used by this criminal and I'll use this name for the sake of Bacher's descendants.) Now even though the murderer's name is uncommon, and most people with that name are apparently Jewish and from Galicia or Russia, I knew that there are some of Italian, Swiss and English origin. So, there was little reason to think he might be a relative. Still, I was curious.

By coincidence, I was able to visit the National Archives Regional Branch in New York City a

short time after finding the Bacher article. I found a computerized index to criminal cases in the US District Court for the Southern District of New York and looked up the name.

There he was — on trial for selling 17 ounces of heroin to an undercover agent in 1954. It was his third trial in that court, having been convicted of narcotics violations in 1924 and 1938. But what about the murder trial? I hadn't been thinking clearly. Ordinary murder is a state, not a federal, crime. I needed to look for the murder trial in the city court. This case was so old the court file was in the Municipal Archives. Narcotics violations are federal crimes; hence, the case files at NARA.

Type of "Unpleasantness"	Source of Information
Bankruptcy	NARA regional branch; newspapers
Mortgage foreclosure	Court records (mostly); newspapers (especially auction sales)
Lawsuits	Court records
Adultery, bigamy, divorce	Divorce records; census records (divorce); pension records; evidence by omission (in will); mutilation of photos
Premarital sex, abortion	Compare marriage date with date of birth of first born; census record showing young women staying with relatives instead of being home
Illegitimate children, Abandoned children	Census record (young women staying with relatives); Wills and probate papers
Treatment of homosexuals; People of other races or religions	Possibly newspapers; often evidence is omission
Health issues (e.g., th, rd burns), mental illness, mental retardation, accidents, addiction)	Census records (especially 1880 supplemental schedules); Draft records; probate records; death certificate; Coroner/medical examiner file; military service and Pension records; asylum and sanatorium records; records with physical description; family photos; th registry (e.g., NY)
Murder, suicide	Death certificate; coroner/medical examiner file; newspapers; police records
Criminal activity, other miscellany	Court records; newspaper articles; prison records; census records; julius rosen
Treason, dishonorable discharge	Military records

**Families face many kinds of hardships, some of which are particularly cruel, embarrassing or humiliating. Records may exist that shed light on the problems.**

admits an average receipt of \$10 per month.

"She mortgaged the property for \$1500 to start her son in business: he failed but she has his note & he is employed at good salary in Denver (\$1500 last year). He has no family, and claimant admits he is paying interest on the loan.

"This mortgaging of the property to start son in business brought about the separation. The [soldier] has nothing but his pension of \$12 per mo."

Martha's claim was denied, and she didn't get any benefits until 1903 when Charles died and she qualified for widow's benefits.

Although we may never know who was to blame for the Shields' marital problems, we may have

I scanned the federal case file and discovered Bacher had a long record of criminal conduct starting with his arrest and conviction for burglary (grand larceny) in 1912 at the age of 16. He was convicted of the murder charge and sentenced to death in the electric chair. However, after three years, the sentence was changed to 7-to-8 years.

Bacher evidently hadn't learned his lesson from his various terms in prison because further reading of the file revealed he was convicted of selling the heroin in the 1954 case.

The court documents indicated he was born in New York and was 58 in 1954. He also had a wife named Pearl at the time. He was a shipping clerk living in Brooklyn when he was arrested in 1954. His arrest record indicated he was in Philadelphia around 1930 and Atlantic City around 1932.

He appeared in the 1920 census, confirming the place of birth and approximate age, and revealing another wife, Beatrice. His parents were listed as Austrian, thus making it more likely he was one of my distant relatives. The Social Security Death Index revealed he was born on 11 July 1896, and died in Miami, Florida in 1973.

I found Bacher's birth record from 1896 and it indicated Jack's parents were from Galicia. Galicia was the easternmost province of Austria — the province from where my family came. His surname is exceedingly uncommon. Most people in Galicia with that name lived in one of two areas about 150 miles apart: the city of Tarnopol and city of Kolomea. If Jack's family came from the Kolomea area, they were almost surely my relatives.

The New York City court

records were much more informative than the federal records, both from a genealogical perspective and for learning Jack's story. I got the impression that Jack had a lengthy "rap sheet". At the time of his arrest for grand larceny in 1912, an organization called the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children wrote



**Face of a murderer: Jack Bacher. This photo is from the District Attorney's case file at the New York City Municipal Archives. Bacher used many aliases in his lengthy career as a criminal. The small, inverted Y-shaped scar on his lower cheek was mentioned in his WWI draft registration card and confirms his identity. (See also the article Picture Stories 5 on page xx of this issue.)**

to the Court and summarized the trouble Jack had been in as a youth — getting caught in the middle of the night in the public toilet of an apartment building, snatching a woman's purse, etc. Evidently, Bacher had always been trouble. A little searching of the Internet revealed the Society is 130 years old and has an archives that can be searched for genealogical information. The District Attorney's notes indicated that Jack said in 1912 that his parents were ill, and that was at least partly confirmed in another document that said his father was an invalid. There was a home address, and an indication that Jack had a brother Max and an unnamed sister. Around 1924, Jack switched from stealing to selling drugs. He used at least six aliases including Mike Mason, Michael Sanders, Whitey Heller and various variant spellings of his real name. When he was interviewed

in connection with the murder case, he indicated he married his first wife Betty (Beatrice) around 1918 or 1919. She died around 1928 from a tooth extraction. He was asked if he smoked opium and he replied yes, for about 10 years. His second wife, Pearl, was also smoking and she was arrested with him during one of his nar-

cotic busts. Eventually, she abandoned him and went to Miami. Jack moved in with his mother — his father was evidently deceased — and I learned his mother's address. When he was arrested for hiring two people to commit the murder, Jack was involved with another woman, Mary Schwartz. She was apparently loyal to him because after he was convicted of the murder, she wrote to the District Attorney for permission to visit Jack in prison, to which the DA had no objection. Some time before Jack died in

1973, he moved to Florida. He died in a retirement home there. The death certificate says he was a retired TV dispatcher. In the DA's file, I found a business card — apparently Mary was a motel manager in Florida. So, it looks like Jack might have gone to Florida to be with Mary again.

Jack was constantly in trouble with the law throughout most of his life. The information I've found provides some context for his life.

Perhaps he was somewhat neglected by his parents when they were ill, leaving him free to roam the streets and get into trouble. The loss of his first wife may have been difficult. His abandonment by his second wife does not appear to have been a blow as he was apparently already taking up with Mary. According to one of the people Jack hired to commit the murder, Pearl had been a madam in Philadelphia. Jack's

mother appears to have shown at least some loyalty because he lived with her for a while in the early 1940s.

The human touches in the court files cut both ways. My wife Nadine helped me go through the documents. She read a graphic description of the murder, and then the very next document she picked up was a photo of the crime scene with the victim lying in a pool of blood. Meanwhile, I picked up some small yellow envelopes. These contained the four slugs the coroner had pulled out of the victim's head. There were also mug shots of Jack and of his wife Pauline.

With more searching, I may be able to identify Jack's family's ancestral town. My priorities are to find Jack's father's death certificate and grave. The gravestone should tell me the name of Jack's father's father. The death certificate should tell me Jack's father's place of birth (hopefully not just "Austria"). I can also look for information on Jack's brother who was born in the old country. Alternatively, I could try to work forward in time and look for Jack's relatives and friends. The court documents indicate that Jack lived in Philadelphia on and off. That's a good genealogical clue that may enable me to find Jack's son who is mentioned obliquely in a document. But Jack's relatives may not be eager to speak to me as I have no clear connection to the family at this time. And what will I do if I find out Jack was my relative?

### Hard times in the Great Depression

The Great Depression never meant much to me until I became interested in family history. Then I heard that one relative lost a hotel in upstate New York during it. County court records provided a detailed history of the foreclosure and selling of the hotel including a description of the property published as a legal notice in the local paper. This is significant because the newspaper's archives were lost in a fire so the court file may be the only place where this notice can be found.

I also heard a cousin lost a hardware store in New York City during the Depression. Bankruptcies were handled in federal court so I investigated the records available at the National Archives Regional Branch in New York City. Unfortunately, the records consist mostly of a list of court cases; the actual court records were only saved from "high profile" cases. My cousin's business was not listed. The list of cases did contain three people with a surname of interest but it was impossible to tell if they were my relatives. Only the date and name of the business (often just the owner's name) were recorded.

### Defective, Dependent and Delinquent

Supplemental Schedules 1 through 7 of the 1880 federal census dealt with defective, dependent and delinquent individuals. Schedule 1 recorded "insane" people in the following categories:

*Mania* (delirium)  
*Melancholia* (depression)  
*Paresis* (general paralysis)  
*Dementia*  
*Epilepsy*  
*Dipsomania*

The other supplemental schedules dealt with idiots, deaf-mutes, blind people, homeless children (and whether illegitimate, whether criminal), prisoners and paupers and indigents (and whether they had a criminal record).

Unfortunately, such information is generally not available in the other federal censuses. Nonetheless, with a bit of searching you may find interesting records. Try searching the Family History Library catalogue (at [MyFamily.org](http://MyFamily.org)) for keywords like prisoner and coroner. Try also searching the web pages and catalogues of the state and city archives. For example, the New York State Archives webpage describes their holdings of prison and parole records and the TB registry. The New York City Municipal Archives contains criminal court records as well as parole records.

Medical records, including mental health records, may be dif-

ficult to obtain because of privacy issues. I knew of a relative who came to America after WWI. Apparently, she and her mother were traumatized by heavy fighting in their village. The girl wound up in a mental hospital for more than a year and contracted a fatal case of tuberculosis there. Even though she died in the hospital in 1935, the hospital would not release the records to me. I even explained that the hospital could black out any medical details from the record, that I would be happy if I learned anything at all about her. Her closest living relative is a first-cousin. The hospital, however, wouldn't release the records to her — unless she could demonstrate they were relevant to her health assessment.

### Conclusion

Every family has its hard times and in every family mistakes are made. We can learn a lot about our relatives' lives from the extant records. However, the clues may be subtle and any hints you can get from a relative will take you so much farther. In fact, we often wind up looking for documentary evidence that will confirm oral history. I thought when I started my research I would get a sugar-coated history from my relatives. To my surprise, this was hardly the case. I have found that if one is sensitive about personal tragedies, many relatives will share dark family secrets.

### Further Reading:

- McClure, Rhonda R. *Finding Your Famous (& Infamous) Ancestors*. (Cincinnati, Ohio. Betterway Books, 2003).



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