

FAMILY FORTUNES, FRAUD, AND THE GENEALOGIST

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"Many a man who does not care a fig (or persuades himself that he does not) for a respectable ancestry becomes immensely interested when he thinks there is a fortune at the end of it."

---Mrs. William Lawson Peel

Retired FBI agent Delbert Hahn's excellent article in the January/February 1994 issue of Ancestry, "False Heirs: The Hall-Edwards Estate Fraud," detailed at length a particular case of people swindled into investing money in claims to mythical inheritances. This "golden carrot" of money in escrow, unclaimed estates, or funds in the Federal treasury, however, remains the great El Dorado of American genealogy. It has a very long history. As early as 1847, a group of Gibbes heirs pursued a family fortune alleged to be in England. On 15 April 1886, the *Montgomery Monitor* of Mt. Vernon, Georgia reported the disappointment of 800 "heirs" in Detroit, Michigan in learning that not only did the Lawrence-Townley, formerly known as the Chase or Chase-Townley and subsequently known as the Perogrine-Edward-Townley, estate did not exist but neither did the family that allegedly had left the fictional \$800,000. The editor of The Monitor, added that this case "affords a remarkable example of the credulity of persons who probably believe that they can get possession of this 'estate,' which lies on the surface of the moon, and in no other place."

At the same time, other Americans were pursued a false story that American heirs could claim a massive inheritance left by the sixteenth century British sea dog Sir Francis Drake. The story was completely spurious but the Devon Record Office has, according to its inventory, some 1,827 letters between 1908 and 1912 alone claiming this mythical fortune. For more on this case see the book by Richard Rayner, *Drake's Fortune* (2002).

Such documents raises the question the resource value of genealogical research done by misguided, would be, heirs to the mythical fortunes. Books and periodicals have been published by associations of "heirs" claiming fortunes in Manhattan, Texas, England, and elsewhere. No doubt a great deal of information has been compiled and saved of genealogical value, however misguided the compiler's intentions may have been, but because of the motives involved, such works must be suspect. One of the most valuable sources ever compiled for southern research, for example, was created by heirs seeking money. The claims filed on behalf of some 400,000 people at the turn of the century attempting to be beneficiaries in Guion Miller's successful law suit on behalf of the Cherokee Indian Nation (National Archives Micropublication M1104), provide a great deal

of genealogical data found nowhere else. However, while I have found these claims generally reliable in genealogical data, some of the claims were fraudulent and instances can be found where false information was used to fraudulently link up claimants to documented Cherokees. Like any records, the Guion Miller claims must be used carefully and unbiased judgment.

My family found a valuable genealogical record from such fortune hunting. Because of one of alleged lists of British estates due to American claimants published by London attorney Robert Gun in the late 1800s, my family pursued the reported Rigby estate. In the Pickens County, Georgia loose superior court records, I located an 1875 deposition of a Margaret Allred (b. 1791), detailing the descent of my Allreds and of the Sitton family of North Georgia from her English born grandfather John Rigby. I doubt that my family ever received any money from the Rigby estate but because of their efforts I have this deposition from which to add several people to my family tree! I never found a reported list of 500 Richards descendants in the Pickens County records. They tried to claim a Richards-Balz estate in Baltimore, Maryland. I want it, not for the "fortune," but for the family information.

Among the other estates sought by would be heirs, I also find in my "Family Fortunes" file references to the estates (not necessarily the families) of Ball, Hall-Edwards (Anneke Jans; claiming Trinity Church and a large part of Manhattan), Jennings, Holt, Tyson, Moore, Strickland, Wood, Humphries, Aneka Jans, Sir Hugh Mosher, Ingraham, Hedges, Hyde (three), Kern, and Van Horn. I am sure that my collection is not exhaustive. Many others are listed in the previously mentioned Gun's index and also in such works as William Montgomery Clements, *The American unclaimed money index, 1890 to Jan. 1, 1914; an alphabetical index to advertisements in newspapers of the United States and Canada for the twenty-four years ending Jan. 1, 1914, asking for next of kin, heirs at law, legatees and unclaimed money and estates; including New York, New England and New Jersey dormant bank accounts, public administrator's accounts, Supreme court funds, and unclaimed titles to real estate throughout the United States and Canada, 1890 to 1914* (New York, 1914), a copy of which is in the Georgia Archives, and similar works. Inez Strickland Palmer has published a history of the Strickland claims, *Fortune or Fantasy? Wilson Strickland's 1,476 Acre Survey* (1994) and Ben Strickland, *Wilson Strickland and Associates* (1986).

The ethics of aiding in such fortune hunting should presents a problems to the genealogical community. Can a private researcher ethically work for persons perpetuating such a fraud? In one instance, I worked gathering records for a British company hired by individuals hoping to inherit money from a Texas oil well on land that allegedly belongs to the heirs of Pelham Humphrey. The story went that heirs of the original owner of the oil land could claim billions of dollars being held in escrow. I knew this particular case had been repeatedly thrown out of the Texas State Supreme Court, not for the least of reasons that Pelham Humphrey and the money are both fictions. The heirs, even if they proved their relationship, held no claim and no money awaited anyone, anywhere, from the oil

produced from that well. The Georgia Department of Archives and History had microfilmed their records on this family to protect the records from unauthorized theft, alterations, and additions by the hundreds (thousands?) of persons researching this claim over the years. For more on this case see Roger L. Shaffer, *Spindletop Unwound* (1997).

However, I took the job, on the grounds that what my client did with my report was not my responsibility. Years later, I was at the Birmingham Public Library and by chance encountered a researcher working on this same family fortune. She explained that she was helping Texas authorities to take legal action against persons promoting this and similar frauds, that the State of Texas was tired of these cases being revived every time the statute of limitations ran out. I was both relieved and delighted to tell the researcher my experiences. However, just when I felt that some sanity and honesty had finally entered into this matter, the researcher explained that her personal claim to the oil well money had just been proven and that the billions had been located in a New York bank.

Taking this ethnical issue one step further, when or if do you refuse to work for a client refusing to face the truth? All private researchers must deal with clients refusing to believe the results of the research. Ordinarily, what the client refuses to believe does not believe remains the responsibility of the client. However, what if you know the client wastes their limited funds on useless research by you on the client's self delusions? One such client hired me to research her alleged Indian ancestry to qualify the client for an Indian card. The client paid me well and regularly. She provided me with a copy of a Bible record with Indian enrollment numbers and with the names of brothers formally living on an Indian reservation. However, the numbers in the Bible proved to be phony (certainly invented by my client) and when I located the brothers, they had no idea what she was talking about. When only one rational explanation remained, I stopped taking the client's money. Another researcher hired by the client interviewed me by telephone. I told the truth and hoped immediately afterwards that what I said was not taped.

In considering the above problems of the search for questionable family fortunes and the suspect records created to pursue such claims, we should not ignore the fact that real British estates owed to American heirs produced records of credible genealogical information. Abstracts of records of many of these early estates have been published for England by Peter Wilson Coldham and for Scotland by David Dobson, both through the Genealogical Publishing Company. Within the last few years, individual states in the United States have passed laws that encourage private companies to locate, for profit, heirs and claimants to life insurance policies, forgotten bank accounts, abandoned securities etc. These efforts are legitimate. For information on how you might be the beneficiary to a real fortune see John Sims, "Is a Windfall Waiting for You?," *Reader's Digest* (United States edition) March 1993, pp. 93-95.