



June 29, 2024

This newsletter may interest particular those related to persons related directly or indirectly to Grace and Clifford Retson. My genealogy website is located at <http://www.retson.ca/retsongeneology.html>

Cross Country Travels

From June 1 to June 9th along with my wife and two daughters I visited Hawaii on a very enjoyable trip. We were invited by the two daughters to join them in order to celebrate our 50th wedding anniversary. While we have already celebrated our 50 anniversary, the actual date of our marriage was June 29, 1974. We met in Toronto where we were both attending University of Toronto. We lived in the same graduate residence at the corner of Saint George and Bloor Street, and many of our common friends were able to attend the marriage in Hamilton, Roberta's home town since immigrating from Italy at the age of 9. We lived in Nova Scotia for 10 years before returning to Ontario. By now I have actually lived in Ontario twice as long as I have lived in Nova Scotia.

During the past trip to Hawaii I left my phone on airplane mode which meant that I did not receive emails or text messages during most of my trip. Upon returning I found the number of emails and texts required about a week to catch up on. I have increased my use of public trees and on-line databases such as Wikitree, Family Search and Find A Grave as the ability to share information has increased exponentially over the years. I have also found that increased ability to share can at times become quite overwhelming. On occasion I miss some and if this has happened to you I apologize.

As I checked through border control where my photo was taken. I wondered if some day my descendants would have record of my trip including the photo. For well over 200 years passenger lists, and government records have assisted genealogists to track their ancestors, establishing country of origin, dates of immigration and naturalization. The greatest interest inevitably turns to the earliest trip which marks a significant event in an ancestor's life. Interesting facts include those who accompanied the ancestor. Did he come alone, with his family to follow, or was he accompanied by a sibling.

Later trips carry less significance but provide information about return visits to the old country and other significant events. Upon discovering an early trip of my Grandfather William R. Retson I recall him telling me that, following his marriage on Christmas day, 1907, he returned to visit his parents to introduce the new bride. His brother George returned to Scotland in 1962. He was killed when he momentarily forgetting that his native country man drove on the wrong side of the road.

Modern travel is generally by airplane and accomplished in less than a day. Even trips to Australia and New Zealand that sometime add stops in Europe and Asia by way of United States and are generally completed in 2 days. Earlier trips by our ancestors by boat, may have extended weeks or even beyond a month. Pictures bring us fond memories of the places we visited. The picture of the 4 of us was taken on Princess Street Edinburgh on our 2006 trip the last time the four of us traveled together. The picture in front of the submarine Bowfin at Pearl Harbour followed my one and only tour of a submarine. Both girls got a free pearl which along with this picture will remind them of a perfect day in Hawaii.

Racism, Castism and Unconscious Prejudices

While in Waikiki, Hawaii I went into a Barnes & Noble book store and purchased a “Caste: the origins of our discontents” by Isabel Wilkerson.

A generalized definition of caste and castism from the internet is

the system of dividing society into hereditary classes

any class or group of people who inherit exclusive privileges or are perceived as socially distinct.

I looked up a definition of racism on the internet and found two that were was in Oxfords [Simply because it was available]. According to the same source, Oxford’s English dictionaries are widely regarded as the world’s most authoritative sources on current English.

prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism by an individual, community, or institution against a person or people on the basis of their membership in a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority or marginalized.

the belief that different races possess distinct characteristics, abilities, or qualities, especially so as to distinguish them as inferior or superior to one another.

I was so impressed with this book that I almost immediately bought the audible as well as the Kindle version of the book.

The immediate reason was that I found a term for an issue that I have grabbed with for some time that was included more than simply colour or physical discrimination. Secondly it helped me come to terms with an issue that has been raised on what should or should not be included when discussing genealogy and one’s past.

Within a week of returning home I got into a discussion with my sister about my use of the term for describing some blacks as “black as soot”. My sister who is much more knowledgeable about “black” culture than I indicated that this expression would be regarded as derogatory by many because many regard lighter colour as superior to darker skin culture. I was not entirely ignorant of the fact but had not applied it to my own perceptions.



Until I got my first job in a neighbouring town I did not personally know any blacks. During my years in university and shortly after, all the blacks that I knew including my best man, the Jesuit priest of Mugabe from Sout Africa, Mugabe's sister and many other blacks from the Coady Institute from Antigonish might be considered "superior" and all were darker skinned. I suspect for this reason I may have developed an unconscious bias towards shades of black in people. Not wishing to hold anyone in lessor light I will drop the expression.

I remember when I first arrived in my new home town I heard the expression "I call a spade a spade". I would ask the person if they knew what a spade is and would be told that it was a shovel. I would ask then ask them why they would call a shovel a spade. Most wouldn't have any idea that the use of the word "spade " was a derogatory term for a black – the equivalent for using the N word.

I realize that I have preferences – sometimes unconscious - for cultural groups, countries, political groups and religions; possibly for Scottish ethnic group over English, lowlanders over highlanders, progressives over conservatives (particularly far right conservative), some fundamentalist religious groups over broadly liberal and atheist groups, tattooed over non-tattooed, filthy rich over philanthropists, and so on. But I hope I can see individuals and show respect for their humanity and attempt to understand their positions while not necessarily accepting or endorsing them.

Paraphrasing from a chapter entitled "The vitals of history",

Looking beneath the history of one's genealogy is like learning that alcoholism or depression runs in one's family or that suicide has occurred more often than might be usual or, with the advances in medical genetics, discovering that one has inherited the markers of a BRCA mutation for breast cancer. You don't ball up in a corner with guilt or shame at these discoveries. You don't, if you are wise, forbid any mention of them. In fact, you do the opposite. You educate yourself. You talk to people who have been through it and to specialists who have researched it. You learn the consequences and obstacles, the options and treatment. You may pray over it and meditate over it. Then you take precautions to protect yourself and succeeding generations and work to ensure that these things, whatever they are, don't happen again.(Wilkerson, Isabel. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (p. 37). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.)

In another chapter entitled "The evil of Silence the author quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer,

"Silence in the face of evil is itself evil, ...God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act."(Wilkerson, Isabel. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (pp. 119-120). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.)

In another chapter entitled "The man in the Crowd" , Wilkenson describes a picture of August Landmesser, the sole man in a crowd of shipyard in Hamburg, Germany, in 1936,who refuses to salute Hitler. The author adds,

We would like to believe that we would have taken the more difficult path of standing up against injustice in defense of the outcaste. But unless people are willing to transcend their fears, endure discomfort and derision, suffer the scorn of loved ones and neighbors and co-workers and friends, fall into disfavor of perhaps everyone they know, face exclusion and even banishment, it would be numerically impossible, humanly impossible, for everyone to be that man. (Wilkerson, Isabel. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (pp. 22-23). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Regardless of whether you are prepared to be that man I highly recommend this book to make one think of our responsibility to humanity in the world we live.

Family Profiles

At a certain point in my genealogy voyage I decided that it would help keep my ever increasing collection of ancestors straight if I drafted a family profile in which, at least I would list every known child, his spouse and birth and death date and place. There were too many George Retsons. The Scots had naming pattern that names of Grandparents would be repeated down through the ages and since in earlier times families would not often relocate to other locations there would be an abundance of the same named persons in a village. By drafting a family profile as each new piece of information came available I would be able to fit it in in exactly the correct location.

A family profile is a story of one line of ancestors. One starts at the end of the descendants of the root and then piece by piece works back to an originating ancestor. Who was the descendants parents? When did they marry? When were they born? What was the story of their life? Where did they live? What was their religious beliefs? What was their occupations? What was the economic prosperity? What was the social and political world in which they lived?

Next I decided I would attempt to get a uniform style of numbering generations, headings and formatting. Thus each profile would bear the Title Our "Specific Name" Ancestors, followed by Contexts, followed by Direct Ancestor, his story including spouse and children and bibliography. Followed by Sources and Websites. In time I added appendices to include common abbreviations, notes on research, and common explanations such as explanations of Calendars prior to 18th century and terms for older generations that non-genealogist would not be familiar with and which could simply be copied from previous profiles to save time. In time I added relationship charts to help quickly identify where an individual fit in the overall picture. This became important as I discovered identical but unrelated family profiles names such as Bateman, Martin, Smith, Green etc. Sometimes with further research I would find that they profiles did join at earlier points in history. One of the most interesting one was the Goulds and Belchers. Two brothers married two sisters so the roots came back merely two rather than 4 roots.

Family profiles once begun are uploaded to the internet and are located at websites listed at <https://www.retson.ca/retsongeneology.html> . They help situate the family and also identify the children of all discovered direct ancestors.

Changing Technology in Genealogy

The latest technological change to genealogical research is the entrance of AI or artificial intelligence. I have commenced using AI for researching my newsletters and genealogy research . I mainly use Copilot from Microsoft which can be found at <https://www.bing.com/chat?q=Bing+AI&FORM=hpcodx>. It can also be accessed at <https://chat.openai.com/> where one has an option of the free version of 3.5 or a more advanced CHAPGPT 4 for \$20 US a month. AI is also entering software and genealogy websites at a dizzying pace. While the advancement has certainly increased the efficiency of processing data I would not rate it as earth shattering as other technological changes in the past such as the internet, genealogy software packages and DNA technology.

This newsletter was sent to individuals who have expressed an interest in this genealogy at some time. If you do not wish to receive future updates, please email me at jretson@shaw.ca and indicate so.