

# Family history can be hard to prove

April 17, 2009 05:46:00 PM

[Linda Kleback](#)

*Genealogist Linda Pazics Kleback formerly was a researcher at the Bay County Public Library. She now lives in Maryland. For an archive of her columns, go to*

<http://www.newsherald.com/search/?q=Kleback&fistype=site&x=23&y=5>

Back in my days as a genealogy specialist at the Bay County Public Library, one of the biggest challenges I had to face was trying to help patrons prove or disprove a family story or tradition. Perhaps you have some of these in your families.

Over the years I heard the same tales many times. "My ancestor was a Cherokee princess." "My family 's name was changed at Ellis Island." "Three brothers came to America together..."

Convincing researchers that these tales may be completely wrong or may have been garbled over the years can be tough! I was delighted to see a great article posted by Dick Eastman in his Eastman's Online Genealogy Newsletter on April 14th. "Family Stories and Other Fairy Tales" is one of the best discussions of family stories and their possible pitfalls that I've ever seen. The article is available at [http://blog.eogn.com/eastmans\\_online\\_genealogy/2009/04/family-stories-and-other-fairy-tales.html](http://blog.eogn.com/eastmans_online_genealogy/2009/04/family-stories-and-other-fairy-tales.html) .

The reader comments posted after the article are great, too. Seeing how other researchers found parts of their family legends to be true is interesting reading!

If you have been working with a family legend, why not examine the tale critically? Approach the research as if it was not your own family. Or ask a fellow researcher to take a look at the story.

Break the story down into sections that can be proven or disproven. If your tradition states that your ancestor was part of a historical event, is it even possible that your ancestor could have been physically present? Was he or she alive then? Had they emigrated to the right country before the event or were they still creating primary records at another distant location? Could another relative have been the one who participated and the names got mixed up over the years?

If your tradition involves possible Native American ancestry, there is good news and bad news. On the good side, we regularly get access to new records that can help document Native American heritage. The bad news is that there are many more people who think they have Native American ancestors than actually do.

The even worse news, especially in this area of Florida, is that you may actually have Native American ancestry and will never be able to prove it. Once we get past the fact that there were never any Cherokee princesses and that high cheekbones and dark hair prove nothing about ancestry, we are left with existing records.

Many records can be found online in places such as [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) or on free sites, many of which are run by interested volunteers. It may also be necessary to take a road trip to some record sites that do not lend or publish their material.

The particular challenge for genealogists working on Northwest Florida families is that we have to recognize that there was a time when being recognized as Native American was dangerous. To escape the Trail of Tears or persecution and even death, many Native Americans denied their heritage and lived as best they could. This caused a break in ethnic tradition that may have lasted several generations. They created no records as Native Americans so there are none to find. You can trace the people but not their ethnicity.

Other traditions present research challenges that can be great opportunities. If your family name couldn't have been changed at Ellis Island, was it changed later? Why? Did your ancestor or his descendants think a change would make them more American? Was the ancestor not literate enough to care how his or her name was spelled when most other people didn't care either?

These things can be hard to document if they can be documented at all, but the search is fun and can lead to other useful discoveries about the family.

Family traditions are a fascinating part of our genealogy research. Some may be true. More will be a little true. Some are just plain wrong. Documenting them can be an enjoyable exercise.

Recognize the statements that steer you the wrong way and set them aside. Our ancestors were fascinating folks, and the real truth can be even better than the family legend.

*Genealogist Linda Pazics Kleback formerly was a researcher at the Bay County Public Library. She now lives in Maryland. For an archive of her columns, go to*  
*<http://www.newsherald.com/search/?q=Kleback&fstype=site&x=23&y=5>*