

Researching Family History at the Detroit Public Library

by Thomas F. Coleman

On August 10, 2010, I paid a visit to the Burton Collection at the Detroit Public Library near the campus of Wayne State University in midtown Detroit. My sister, Carolyn Skalnek, was my companion and fellow researcher for the day.

The Burton Collection is a compilation of records about the history of Detroit. Among the many genealogical materials are church records, immigration documents, newspaper obituaries, and family histories from the 1800s and early 1900s.

When our search for naturalization records did not produce results, we turned our attention to microfilmed documents from St. Anthony Catholic Church. The Steil family and the Lukaschewski family had been parishioners at St. Anthony.

We found relevant entries as we reviewed church registers for baptisms, marriages, and funerals. Carolyn's digital camera captured images of these pages.

We found entries, in Latin, documenting the baptisms of our grandfather, Frank Steil, and his siblings, Anna, Valentinus (known to us as uncle Bill), and Florence. Then, as now, it is common for siblings of the parents to become the Godparents of the baptized child. George's brother John, was the Godfather of Anna. His sister Elizabeth was the Godmother of Frank, and his brother Valentinus was the Godfather of baby Valentinus (William).

Funeral records for our great grandparents, Rudolph and Anna Lukaschewski, and their daughter Theresa, were also there. They were so young when they died. Rudolph was 64, Anna was 54, and Theresa was 23.

Once we finished with the microfilm, we turned our attention to the card catalogue, looking for any index cards for Coleman, Paterson, Steil, and Lukaschewski. We found a few entries for members of the Steil family.

There was an obituary notice for our great grandfather George P. Steil who died in 1939. The notice said that, in addition to surviving children, he had two surviving sisters, Katherine Steil and Mrs. William Stephan, both of Traverse City. That struck a chord with me since I recalled seeing some photos of my mother as a child riding a horse in Traverse City.

There was also an obituary notice for George Steil Jr., our grandfather Frank's brother, who died the

following year. George had been a foreman at the Packard Motor Car Company for 35 years.

Then we found a 1966 clipping about our grandmother, Catherine Steil. The obituary said she had been a Grey Lady, volunteering her services at Providence Hospital for 23 years. The 1981 obituary notice for our great uncle, William Steil, was there. He lived to the ripe old age of 90.

On a happy note, we found a story from the Michigan Catholic in 1998, about the 50th wedding anniversary of James and Dorothy (Steil) Storz. Dorothy was the daughter of George Steil Jr. and the first cousin of our mother, Kay Coleman.

We also found numerous entries for Steil and Lukaschewski households in the Detroit City Directory. The earliest listing for George Steil was in 1881 while the earliest listing for Rudolph Lukaschewski was in 1889.

Our research process then turned high tech. The librarian gave us access to a computer and a database for the Detroit Free Press from 1830 to 1921.

We found two real estate notices, one good and one bad. There was a notice, published in 1877, that our great grandparents, Calvert and Sarah Coleman had defaulted on their mortgage. That was several years before our grandfather, Roy Coleman, was born. Then, in 1895, there was a notice that title to a home on Alexandrine Avenue had transferred to Rudolph Lukaschewski. That was one year after our grandmother, Catherine Lukaschewski, was born. The Lukaschewski family had discovered the American dream of home ownership, not long after they arrived here from Poland.

Carolyn and I laughed when we found several announcements in the Free Press about the C.A.I. girls. When they were in their early 20s, Catherine Steil and her girlfriends created a group known as the Can't Afford It Club. They would rotate meetings from home to home and engage in social and recreational activities that did not cost money. One day they had a sewing bee, another time a sing along, and another day they had a popcorn contest. Catherine was the group's treasurer.

From births to deaths, and from home buying to mortgage defaulting, our day at the Burton Collection paid off handsomely. At a later visit to the library with my brother Larry Coleman, we found additional news articles on the Steil and Coleman families. The Detroit Public Library was a valuable resource.



Thomas F. Coleman searching indexes at the Detroit Public Library.