

The Process of Gathering Information

Long before I started a formal investigation into the family history of my parents, there were bits and pieces of information our parents and other relatives shared with my siblings and I as children and adults. There was conversation about Germany as the national origin of the Steil family. There were also stories about the Paterson family in Canada and Scotland.

But information was mostly lacking about our paternal grandfather, Arthur Roy Coleman. Except for very limited information about a sister of Roy (Jenny Coleman Freer) and our Dad's half-sister Ruth and half-brother Dodd, we knew almost nothing of Roy Coleman and his ancestors or relatives. Roy's childhood and his life prior to marrying Margaret Paterson were always kept vague. Our Grandpa Roy was a mystery man. My siblings and I rarely mentioned his name or heard it discussed by our parents. Us kids referred to "Grandma Finney" (paternal grandmother) and "Grandma and Grandpa Steil" (maternal grandparents), but the words "Grandpa Roy" or "Grandpa Coleman" never passed our lips.



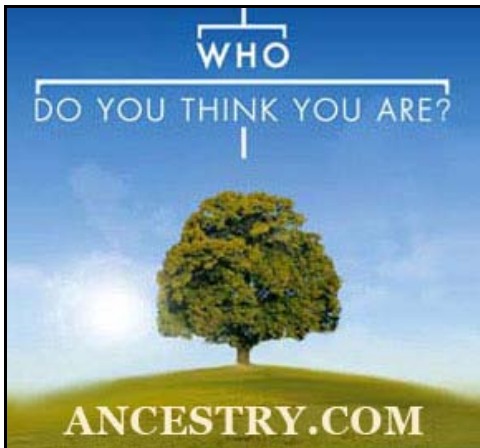
Likewise, nothing was said about our maternal grandparents, Rudolph and Anna Lukaschewski, and their national origin. We were informed that our maternal grandmother's last name was Lucas. The Polish connection was buried in documents that were never shared with us, that is, until the nine of us did a "tour down memory lane" with our Aunt Betty and our mother soon after Mom's 80th birthday celebration.

Our Polish ancestry – which I had suspected for a long time since I had privately discovered a Lukaschewski document at my grandparents home when I was a child, but kept the discovery to myself – was confirmed during that tour. One stop along the way was a cemetery where our maternal grandparents and some other "Lucas" relatives were buried. We stopped at the cemetery office to check on the location of the grave sites. When cemetery staff brought out index cards about the plots, the surname of Lukaschewski was on each card. As we walked to the location of the graves, I pressed my mother on the "ski" part of the name. I pointedly asked her if her mother was Polish. Mom sheepishly replied, "Well, my father would sometimes refer to my mother, in an affectionate way, as 'my little Polish girlfriend.'" There it was – a reluctant confirmation that my maternal grandmother and her ancestors were Polish. This cemetery visit occurred in December 2001. Our mother died two years later, and with her passing went whatever other details about her mother's side of the family that she may have known but had not shared with her children.

Several years elapsed before I felt an urge, a strong attraction, to researching our family history – taking the quest for information about our ancestry to the next level. It was early in 2010 when I started poking around on the Internet to find details about the Steils and Lukaschewskis and Colemans and Patersons. It was during these initial Google searches that I found Clarice Coleman. That connection proved to be invaluable to my investigation into Coleman family genealogy. I often sought information in her 139-page masterpiece – *The Westfall and Coleman Family History* – a book in which she shared detailed family history data, as well as scores of short stories about the lives of our Coleman and Westfall ancestors and relatives.

In May 2010 I found an article on the Internet written by Barbara Starkey. The article was about immigration to the United States from Poland in the 1800s. Mentioned in the article was the surname Lukaschewski. This prompted me to reach out to Barbara for more information. We connected by email and then telephone. I was informed that she lived in the outskirts of Salt Lake City and that he was a genealogist for hire. The Family History Library of the Mormon Church is located in Salt Lake City. I retained her to search for information and documents about my Lukaschewski ancestors. I also asked her to conduct research about my paternal great grandfather Calvert Coleman. She was able to find documents in both of these searches. I incorporated them into the family history archives I was developing.

Clarice and Barbara both advised me to spend some time on the online archives of the Mormon Church. So I went to familysearch.org over and over for several years, mining what I could about the four major branches of my family. This proved to be a very valuable source of information, often giving me links to images of public documents, such as records of births, marriages, and deaths.



It was also in May 2010 that I joined ancestry.com. I paid extra for a membership that gave me access to international records. Over the past six years, I can't count the number of hours I have spent on the website of ancestry.com. This service has been indispensable to my research efforts.

Visits to cemeteries have been part of the process of documenting family history. But those visits were more than academic research. They were a tangible way to physically connect with a historical dimension of my family. Standing at the grave sites, touching the headstones, pulling weeds away from the markers, feeling the breeze passing over the grave

and the sun beating down on the site, saying a prayer for the loved one, sharing the moment with someone who accompanied me – these were all part of the process. These cemetery visits made the connection to my ancestors more real and more intense than mere Internet research could ever do.

Some of the post-2010 cemetery visits involved me alone, while others included a family member. My brother Larry went with me to Oakview Cemetery in Royal Oak to visit the grave of our paternal great uncle William Coleman. There were a few visits to Woodlawn Cemetery in Detroit, where Grandpa Roy, great Aunt Agnes, Aunt Jean, great Aunt Jenny Freer, and great Grandmother Sarah Westfall Coleman Renton are buried. Larry went with me to Woodlawn on one occasion, while my sister Diane Coleman Rogers and her husband Ray Rogers went there with me another time. Diane and my sister Carolyn Skalnek went with me to Belleville, Michigan to visit the grave site of our great Grandfather Calvert Coleman and some of his Coleman children and grandchildren. My brother Gary helped Ray and Diane install a grave marker at the Trinity Cemetery for our 2x great Grandparents John Peter Steil and Anna Ruhl. Each of these visits was a memorable occasion. I found them to be personally and spiritually enriching. On some visits we went to the cemetery office and obtained documents pertaining to our relatives.

In addition to the Internet research, cemetery visits, and gathering of documents from the library, some of the most valuable information was obtained from face-to-face interviews with family elders and other relatives. During many of these interviews, other family members often attended and listened attentively as the person being interviewed shared information and stories about their memories of people, places, and events.



Tom with Leslie and Marilyn Coleman

Of the descendants of Calvert and Sarah, I interviewed people in several branches. In the Roy Coleman branch, I interviewed Betty Basler (the sister of my father) and Larry Coleman (the oldest child of my parents). I also interviewed and had conversations with descendants of several of Grandpa Roy's siblings. I met with Nancy Barnett and obtained photos from her. She is a descendant of Roy's oldest brother William. I met with many members of the Samuel Coleman branch, another brother of Roy. I did an extended interview of Leslie Coleman and his wife Marilyn at their home in Ypsilanti. My sisters Diane and Carolyn

participated in that interview. I met with my second cousin Bob Coleman and his wife Clarice in Colorado. Bob is a descendant of Roy's brother Claude.

I interviewed descendants of my great grandparents John and Fanny Paterson. My sister Carolyn drove me to Canada where we interviewed my second cousin Bill Stacey and his wife Eva at their home in Chatham, Ontario. Bill is the son of Mabel Paterson who was the sister of our Grandma Finney (daughter of John and Fanny).

I also interviewed two of my mother's cousins in the Steil family. I interviewed Kenneth Steil and his wife Diane at their home in Grosse Point, Michigan. Ken is a child of my Grandpa Steil's brother William. During the same session, I interviewed James Fry and his wife Beverly. Jim is a descendant of Anna Steil Ladensack, my Grandpa Steil's sister. Dorothy Steil, daughter of George Steil, was interviewed at her home in St. Clair Shores. My brother Larry was present for all of these Steil interviews.

After all of this information was gathered – including some 7,365 digital files – it had to be organized and evaluated. Extracting the most relevant information was very time consuming. Although the entire process of research, organizing, and writing was interesting, the most enjoyable part was writing up short stories about the lives of our ancestors – where they lived, and the joys and hardships they experienced in life. Adding the DNA information about myself and my siblings was icing on the cake.

Once bit by the genealogy bug, there is often no recovery. Curiosity about family history can be insatiable. There is always more to learn and more to share. But at some point – and this is that point – it is time to consolidate what is known into a product that is user friendly. Raw data and historical documents are of interest to only the most ardent fans of genealogy. What most people want are stories and photos. So here they are. Enjoy!