

My Family's Ancestry: 7/8 Immigrant, 1/8 American

by Thomas F. Coleman

July 4th was always a major holiday when I was growing up. Usually we were staying at our cottage in Lake Orion, Michigan when Independence Day rolled around.

Just like our parents, my siblings and I were “city kids,” but we were fortunate that our mother’s parents had built a cottage in the countryside where their only child and her husband and children could vacation during the summer months. It was a modest two-bedroom place with an oil-burning stove and without hot water or a shower. A jump in the lake was our daily bath.

July 4th or not, we learned reverence for the American flag. The stars and stripes went up the flagpole each morning and at sundown the flag was taken down, folded neatly, and put away.

Each July, we looked forward to watching the Independence Day Parade in downtown Lake Orion. Even though the town was small, it was big enough to have its own parade.

Sparklers and firecrackers were part of the evening festivities. We would drive to a neighboring town for a nighttime display of fireworks.

What was missing from our commemoration of Independence Day was any historical account of our family ancestry. No mention was made of the role that our ancestors played, if any, in the founding of the United States of America.

Perhaps that was because we were mostly a family of recent immigrants, not a family whose ancestors could be traced back to the early American colonies. We were told that our father’s ancestors were from Scotland and Ireland and that our mother’s grandparents came from Germany.

Our celebration of the Fourth of July was more generic than personal. We were not commemorating “our” ancestors who were among the “founding fathers” of our nation. It was a general

sense of American pride that permeated our Independence Day.

Had we known the specifics of our family’s history, we probably would have acquired more of an attraction to the Statue of Liberty than the Declaration of Independence.

That is not to diminish the significance of the founding of the nation and its break from the domination of England. But for a family where most of its ancestors were recent immigrants, the symbolism of that monument on Ellis Island would have been a more natural fit.

Inscribed on a plaque mounted inside the Statue of Liberty are the words: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe

free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”

These words describe most of our ancestors – great grandparents who came to North America from Europe in the 1800s. Our mother’s grandparents were from Germany and Poland. They im-

migrated to the United States in the 1880s. Our father’s maternal grandparents had no connection to the United States. They immigrated to Canada from Scotland. Our dad’s mother was born in Canada, as was his sister Betty.

Our dad’s paternal grandfather, Calvert Coleman, had parents who came from Ireland, probably in the 1820s. So our only connection to the “founding fathers” stems from the ancestors of our paternal great grandmother, Sarah Westfall, who our family knew nothing about until 2010 when I started my genealogy adventure.

So when family history is taught to the descendants of Murray Coleman and Kathleen Steil, respect for immigrants should be high on the list of lessons to be taught. After all, we are 7/8 European immigrant and only 1/8 colonial American.

