

Searching for an Unknown Father or Ask no questions and you'll be told no lies

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I was born in the early 1930s, when 'children should be seen and not heard'. This and the aforesaid 'ask no questions' were drummed into me by my maternal grandmother, in whose house I was born on the coldest morning for forty years.

The household consisted of my grandparents, my single mother and her younger brother who was also single. It was a happy childhood, as long as I obeyed the rules, because grandmother had a strap, which she would use if necessary. She was the only one who ever used the strap on me.

When I was six, we moved to our beach house on the northern beaches of Sydney, and when I was nine in third class, the teacher asked us for the names of our parents. Of course I said that I had no father, so innocently on arriving home I asked grandmother if my father had been killed in the war. Mum was at work, or I would have asked her, but my Gran's curt 'yes' convinced me that she was lying. I had asked a question and had been told a lie!

When I was twelve, my beloved grandfather died from a stroke. I was the only one to witness this, so my father figure was gone. My uncle had married which left us without any males in the house.

Uncle eventually divorced and moved back home and all went well until my mother died when I was 18. Gran was showing signs of dementia and uncle and I had to go to work in the city. He remarried and I decided to leave home.

Clearing out my mother's papers I found an incomplete application for my birth certificate, with my father's name on it. Unbeknown to me he had tacked a 'John' in front of his two christian names.

I eventually married and before the ceremony, I did a search at the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages in Sydney for my father's death, with no results, so I was no further on in my investigations. That extra 'John' was the problem.

I had a little information given to me by friends of my mother. My father was married with a 5 year old son when I was born. Father was separated at the time he met my mother and they formed an attachment.

As the years passed I adopted and raised three children and my uncle arrived back on the scene and I met up with my cousin's daughter. She was researching her mother's family and didn't know too much about my side of the family, so I became interested in helping her. Then she suggested that I try researching my father's family, but how would I start?

I joined my local Family History Society and also the Society of Australian Genealogists in Sydney. This was the best move I had ever made because I put an enquiry in the Society's journal *Descent* which was answered by someone who had attended high school with my half-brother. This man, well known in the genealogical world, had met my father and had spent school holidays with my paternal grandparents in the Blue Mountains.

He gave me a lot of help with the grandparents' dates and places of death and burial and, because I was then living in the lower mountains, I was able to search for their graves. On getting my grandfather's death certificate, I discovered that my father had predeceased him, having died just a few years after my mother. He had been living in Manly and had probably seen me going to high school.

I am convinced that my Mum had given him photographs of me over the years, and that he had visited our home once when I was not there and been hastily sent on his way by my grandmother. I now know that he had met my mother at work in Sydney and that is where she had given him photographs. He and his wife were divorced by that time.

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I then started looking at the *Genealogical Research Directories* and found someone who was researching 'my names'. On making contact with this person, I found that he knew my father's younger brother and he eventually was able to persuade this uncle of mine to let him copy a photograph of my father to give to me. Success, and new cousins. On a holiday to Queensland, I met this relative, his mother and two aunts.

I also made contact with another of my father's cousins. I had written to a Kempsey newspaper enquiring about my Irish great-grandfather and his family. Someone saw it, contacted a friend in Nowra who phoned her cousin in Sydney and contact was made with my father's side of the family. I now see more of my father's family than of my mother's family.

The most amazing feature of this story is that the name my maternal grandmother had given me was her step-father's, as she was also illegitimate and she knew it too! Her mother had three children before marrying Gran's step-father. We knew of two, but found another one in our searches. Gran only mentioned her brother Bill, but we found Frederick!

Compiled by Beryl Watson, whose maternal family can be traced back to the time of William the Conqueror, mainly through illegitimate births, and also Switzerland on a direct line. My paternal family can be traced back to Ireland and Scotland with a little bit of Fiji and Italy tossed in.