

The Ancestors Want You to Find Them

by Douglas Mobley



I have been bitten by the genealogy bug. And it all began with a collection of about 150 postcards I acquired in the 1990s, and about 550 negatives and a journal and notebook of my grandfathers in 2004. About six years ago when my mother was simplifying her house prior to a move to a smaller house, I noticed a big garbage bag on the floor of the living room, and found that it was full of old pictures and that came from my grandparents. I took the bag. If I had come a day later, the whole collection might have been lost.

When I retired, I finally had the time to put these negatives, postcards and journals into a pictorial view of a large part of my grandparents lives. I was able to follow them as a couple from Colfax, Washington in the 1890s to Discovery, British Columbia in the 1900s – then to Prince Rupert for the 1910s. About 100 post cards and the journal lead me through their 99-day trip in 1916 from Prince Rupert all the way to Cuba and back. My grandfather died in 1920, but the picture trail carried on the journey of my grandmother, my dad and his sister – to Victoria, a farm in Cumberland, and back to Victoria, and finally back to Courtenay about the time I arrived on the scene.

This work lead my wife and I to take a trip to all the places that my grandparents had lived – everywhere from Colfax to Atlin and Prince Rupert. This would give me the opportunity to walk in their footsteps, see the way things are now, and compare to how things were back then.

In May 2008, we left for Prince Rupert, where my grandparents lived from 1909 until 1920. I picked a B&B via the Internet on the basis that it looked very much like a townsite house. We arrived on the ferry after dark, checked into the B&B, and in the morning, I got up and looked out the window. We were overlooking Cow Bay, and I noticed that the profile of the hills very closely matched some of the old negatives. When we went down for breakfast, I took the picture of the hills and a picture of Gramma's house in 1913 with me. I mentioned to our hostess about the hills looking very much like the old picture, and asked if she had ever seen a house looking like my grandparents house. She said to me, "Come this way," and lead me to a window on the south side of her house, and said, "This house looks very much like your photo." I had somehow picked a B&B that was built in the 1920s on the vacant lot beside my grandparents house!

After three days we left Prince Rupert and took the Alaska ferry to Skagway. People at the Goldrush National Historical Park people were able to identify several of the pictures as points on the White Pass and Yukon Railway. Knowing that my grandfather had been a member of the

Arctic Brotherhood, and that post #1 of the brotherhood is in Skagway, we went there. A lady there was able to identify one photo as men in the Arctic Brotherhood uniform. She said, "Come this way," and showed me a photo of well over 100 men all dressed in the same outfit. I told her about the 'coincidence' in Prince Rupert and she didn't seem at all surprised, saying, "The ancestors want you to find them." Was my trip being guided by an invisible hand?

We took the White Pass & Yukon train from Skagway to Carcross. The train stopped at the end of Bennett Lake. My grandfather had crossed via the White Pass in the winter of 1897/98, I knew that this was the spot where he and thousands of other men had built their boats during that winter, waiting for the ice breakup, before leaving for Dawson and GOLD!

We drove on to Atlin, and while Discovery, where they lived, no longer exists, there were several buildings in Atlin that were hauled the five miles down the road after fires destroyed large parts of Atlin twice. One of the buildings was the Arctic Brotherhood meeting hall – another was the town jail. When we went to the Atlin Museum, there was a picture of my grandfather's general store on the wall – how cool was that? I also found two of my grandmother's photo albums there – one is a family photo album with photos of friends and family (about half of which I haven't determined who they are) and the other with pictures of Atlin and Prince Rupert.

Six months later we went to Colfax after getting a researcher to find material on my grandmother's family, who came there in 1877 by wagon train from Kansas. The researcher put me in contact with a second cousin who we visited on their farm. I knew that his grandmother and my grandmother were sisters and but I didn't know they had kept in touch until the 1940s. They even had pictures of my Dad passed down from his grandmother. It explained entries in my grandmother's bible that included his family. My grandmother had written in the family photo album I discovered in Atlin "Given to me on my 16th birthday by my sister Mary." Mary was the grandmother of this second cousin!

I know a lot of my family roots but my journey of discovery is not over. I'm sure that the ancestors have and will continue to assist me in this journey.