

Chasing McKays : Research #2 Illinois

by Robin Ogilvie

Having made two trips to Scotland, it was time to break down some brick walls in the U.S.A. There were a few questions that I had been unable to answer. 1) What had happened to the oldest brother's young son, Archibald, who should have been about eighteen when the family arrived in America? He wasn't mentioned in the 1860 census. 2) Where was Mary, mother of young Archibald? The 1860 census showed another wife. 3) When were the McKay brothers married? I hoped to find answers to all of these questions during my trip to southern Illinois in September 2011.

Boarding my plane in Orlando, I changed planes in Dallas, boarded a tiny 2 by 1 seater, and made the lovely evening flight to Springfield. Looking out the window, I gasped at the sight down below. A golden necklace of petite highways connected by bursts of canary diamond towns were strung across the entire area. It was too dark to make out where we might be; there were no cities, only small towns and miniature hamlets.

I arrived late at night in Springfield, a beautiful town devoted totally to Abe Lincoln. A few days later, I rented a car for the drive south. Almost immediately after leaving Springfield, the land flattened into beautiful farmland brimming with golden corn and bright green sorghum. Huge farms of a thousand acres or more stretched into the distance, each one with its usually white farmhouse and barns centering the holding. Occasionally a gentle hill rolled along the fields adding more beauty to the landscape. There seemed no end to it. The highway edged over west to St Louis before heading south again and over the Mississippi River to Chester, Illinois, county seat of Randolph County. Here, after climbing up the steep hill from the river, I saw the

courthouse where my great grandfather, George Gemmel McKay, became a citizen. With a thrill, my quest had begun.

Next day, armed with GPS navigation, I set out for the Old Salem Cemetery in Lively Grove, Washington County, the town where they all had lived. Located way off any road, it was the devil to find. I finally stopped at a small city hall where a very kind woman left work and led me about three miles to the turn off for the cemetery, assuring me it was a safe place cared for by a friend's son. It certainly was beautifully cared for but not a soul visible anywhere. There are times then I wonder about my hobby. I walked through the entire grounds, taking half at a time, but found no McKays. I did find the family of my great-great uncle Archibald's second wife: among them, her first husband and several children. There was a good deal of empty space, several new markers and many broken ones. Undoubtedly many graves were there but missing stones.

Back in the car, I made my way to Nashville, county seat of Washington County. For years I had tried to find records for this county on the internet. There were none. The county clerk told me that the people who used to run the genealogical society were either in the old folks' home or had died and no one else was interested. Even the state of Illinois ignores the place. But there are marriage records going back to the 1830s in the Nashville City Hall!

A guard sitting at a table in the entrance hall said, "No cell phones, please." I placed mine in a locked cabinet. No guns, either, but he figured I didn't have one and motioned me towards the metal detector. Of course, it screamed. "That's O.K., go on through," he said. Dressed in a uniform and all, he couldn't have cared less.

In the clerk's office, I asked for marriage records. Out came two books I couldn't lift carried by a mere slip of a woman. They were alphabetically arranged and divided into sections for Registers A-D. I found my great-great uncle's under Register A and marked down the page number. He was the first to have married in the U.S.A. Next was young Archibald! This was my first surprise. When I read who he had married, I just about fell off the chair. Then I saw the marriage for my great-great uncle John McKay. They had both married the same girl, Elizabeth Frances Goodman, the first marriage on 21 December 1860 and the second on 11 April 1862. She was the daughter of the widow Uncle Archie had married in 1855.

Elizabeth was just fifteen when she married young Archibald. Immediately, I thought he may have been killed in the Civil War as the dates suggested. However, after going through all of the county Civil War death records at the library the next day, I believe he died from some other cause. I

never found his death or grave. He would have been about twenty-three at his marriage.

The final wedding I found that day was for my great grandparents, George McKay and Louisa Elvira Boole, both school teachers. They were married 21 August 1861 by the Rev. Henry Schneider just before leaving for Lonaconing, Maryland, where George had a new teaching position. All of these marriages took place in Nashville.

I went back to my hotel in Chester and Googled Archie's name and Washington County, Illinois. On a site called Genealogy Trails-History Group, copywrited by Wayne Hinton, I found him. And much more. On 15 May 1855, Mary McKay and Archie were divorced. Before that, on 24 January 1855, Mary married John Craig of Lively Grove. The two dates, of course, are scandalous. Did this sort of thing happen in those long gone days? I checked out Mary Craig in the 1860 and 1870 census. In both she was shown to be born in Scotland and widowed. Her age matched though she fudged a little. Interestingly, it was Archie and his wife Margaret who kept the little girls.

Archie was the first to move to Wisconsin, settling in Otsego, Columbia County in October of 1865. His brother John followed in 1867, purchasing a farm in nearby Fountain Prairie. George kept Braehead and his other land in Illinois, placing sharecropper farmers on them. Later, he bought farms in Maryland. It seemed he never saw a piece of farmland he didn't love.



My name is Robin Ogilvie. Born in New Jersey, I graduated from Rollins College with a degree in English Literature. Always infatuated with radio, I spent the next year at Chapel Hill immersed in the UNC Radio Department where I met my first husband. This marriage ended in divorce but not before the birth of my wonderful daughter. My second husband and I loved boats. We owned an old ChrisCraft Constellation and in 1982, we joined the Coast Guard Auxiliary. We taught boating and navigation. My specialty: working with high school juniors and seniors interested in attending the

Academy. After my husband's passing, I continued in the Auxiliary, finally retiring after twenty-two years.

Seven years ago I visited Mount Dora. I fell in love with the town and decided to buy a house. Back home, I put my house on the market. It sold in three days leaving me with the difficult job of dispersing family things to family, keeping what I thought would fit into the new house. All in three months. Three of my little dogs died during this time. My last little cavalier, Molly, traveled happily in the car with me, loving nights in the motels with a new bed every night.

My addiction is genealogy. It comes with lots of travel and research both in Europe and the U.S., often with a new bed every night. And the strangest bathrooms imaginable!

Patricia gave a talk at the University Club in Winter Park in 2010. She was fun and talented. I knew that writing my ancestor stories needed a fresh spin, so here I am.