



The irreplaceable sense of “being there” comes only when you walk the actual landscape of your ancestors’ lives.





# WITH BOTH FEET ON the ground

BY ELLEN NOTBOHM

I HAVE NEVER LIKED THE TERM “shirttail relative.” However unintentionally, it consigns some very interesting people to afterthought status. How many opportunities for information and illumination are lost to this dismissive epithet and its laundry overtones? You never know when a “shirttail” will turn out to be someone quite significant—someone I call a heartstring relative.

This story is about one of my heartstring relatives and the remarkable journey on which he called me. He wasn’t even a “real” relative. He was the husband of our great-grandmother for only a short while in a marriage doomed by a perfect storm of personal and world conditions (“Emma’s Unmarked Rest,” September/October 2007). We’ll call him Adam because he really could be any man. And this story is not so much about him as it is about discovering the irreplaceable sense of being there that comes as you reconstruct the lives of your ancestors in settings afar and centuries previous.

For a long time Adam was only a sidebar to me, a smallish piece of the puzzle that was our great-grandmother’s life. I became increasingly drawn to him as the facts unfolded and his story proved compellingly sad and

mysterious. His brief marriage to our great-grandmother was plagued by numerous miscarriages and the death of a child, ending with her commitment to a state hospital in the midst of World War I, the 1918 flu pandemic, and a crippling drought. Adam sold their farm and seemed to vanish. She recovered, remained in the area, went on. He, on the other hand, eluded every attempt I made to locate him, maddeningly missing from U.S. censuses; death records; marriage, divorce, or probate records; city directories; newspaper searches. Finally, through the slender thread of a 90-year-old life insurance policy, he let me know where he was. He had left a forwarding address in Edmonton, Alberta. From there it was only a few clicks to the Edmonton Cemeteries database, where I found him, his grave unmarked—just like his daughter Emma’s. An obituary in the *Edmonton Journal* confirmed that I had the right man. He had never married again, left no survivors save two distant sisters.

## Take Off

From the outset, my husband had a sixth sense about where this story would take me. He believed there was

**BEING THERE:** In Edmonton, author and researcher Ellen Notbohm found family, facts, and friendship. To the left is the Alberta Provincial Legislature building in Edmonton.

## What About Adam?

If you want to know more about Adam, well so do I. Between the day I first learned his name (misspelled in a letter from a step-relative) and the day I stood at the foot of his grave, almost four years had passed. And one of the first things I realized was, that while I had followed the story to its end, I had started in the middle. I only knew about the second half of his life. Now my journey will turn in the other direction—starting with a 19th-century Massachusetts birth record and working my way forward to the moment he said his first hello to my great-grandmother.

I can tell you this much—Adam spent many of his years in Edmonton working for the iconic Hudson's Bay Company, and he never married again. But these are just more facts; they're interesting, but they do not define the essence of his life. What about his adventures and his dreams? What about regrets or fears?

Those I can't tell you because I don't know enough yet. In my own dreams, I sit knee-to-knee with Adam in comfortable old chairs and ask a thousand questions from a list that grows longer every day—because getting an answer to one opens the door to 20 new ones.

The answers will come in their own time. We 21st-century family historians want everything stat! High-speed Internet is too slow for us. And yet how foolish—maybe even arrogant—it is to think we can reconstruct a whole life, in Adam's case almost 27,000 days, without investing a respectable chunk of our own.

I'll make that investment because he is worth it and because it means that someday I will be able to tell you the rest of the story.

no substitute for “walking the land” and that if I wanted to truly know these ancestors, I had to go to where they had lived. It was that belief that had brought me to the potter's field in Montana where Adam's baby daughter Emma was buried, and now it would lead me to Edmonton.

I started laying the groundwork, a round of phone calls to the cemetery, to the library, to the historical society, to a realtor who had homes listed in the neighborhood where I had found Adam's address in the old Henderson's city directories. And an extraordinary thing began happening. Everywhere I “went,” before I even got there, people warmed to my story and bent over backwards to help. The cemetery administrator e-mailed digital photographs of Adam's gravesite. The realtor did the same for Adam's two homes. The library sent obituaries and city directory information and urged me to come dig further in person. At the historical society, I was invited to tour their renovation project and stay for lunch.

It was a short fall: I was in love with Edmonton before I even arrived.

What can you say when you land in a place you've never been and it feels like home? My week in Edmonton unfolded as if I were expected company. In a way, I was.

At the cemetery, the administrator unscrewed the binding of a huge old book, half her size, to copy records for me. She requisitioned further records from a vault at a remote location. “It'll cost,” she told me, “but we'll cover it for you.” At the historical society, several folks gave me hours of their time, a fascinating, detailed walking tour of a vibrant old neighborhood, and century-old stories to go along. The realtor knew the current owner of Adam's home and offered to try to get me in.

At the Edmonton City Archives, a building-within-a-building ensconced, appropriately, in the historic Prince of Wales Armory, the staff apologized repeatedly for the sweltering heat, even as I kept them running on multiple trips back and forth for voter records and maps and local histories (“That's our job!”). The receptionist approached me at the end of the day with brochures for several local history events happening that week that she thought might interest me. She wanted to be sure I enjoyed my time in Edmonton. She told me she had vacationed at the Oregon coast not far from where I live and loved it. We shared that little bond.

At the Edmonton Public Library, I met reference specialist Lyn Meehan, a rare hybrid: a library professional who is also—and perhaps, first—a life-long genealogist. Lyn confirmed that I had done the right thing, coming to the source.

“You have to hold that piece of paper in your hand,” she says. “People rely too heavily on the Internet. The Internet is merely a starting point for the genealogist. Even the best databases have a 10 percent error rate. Surnames and given names can be misspelled or transcribed incorrectly, pages may be missing. That

missing page may be the one that contains the most important piece of information. That's why I always encourage people to go back to the way we did genealogy 30 years ago—going to the point of origin. Go to the courthouse, archive, or repository and look for that original birth, marriage, or death certificate; mortgage; land deed; probate; letters of administration for intestate individuals. And even if you can find it online, know that there can be errors. I still like to hold that original document, examine it myself, just to make sure. Is this the right one I'm looking for? Is it complete?"

Lyn was instrumental in helping me obtain Adam's naturalization records, border-crossing documents, and information about collateral friends and business associates. She sent me to the Provincial Archives of Alberta (PAA) with instructions to look for court records, photos, and maps.

At the PAA, a reference archivist helped me search for a divorce record I hoped I wouldn't find; romantic me hoped Adam and our great-grandmother hadn't ever divorced, just lived in so-called sin with others for the rest of their lives (which, at this writing, appears may be true). When I didn't find a divorce record, the librarian was just as pleased as I was, saying, "It's not very often I get to help someone who is happy to not find something they're looking for." Minutes later, my fingers came to rest on the actual handwritten entry recording his death. Paradoxically, it made him all the more alive and real to me.

And when, in the last moment before I had to leave for the airport, I found—in an archive of more than 2 million photos—a photo of the home in which Adam passed away, the same archivist hastily waived the photocopying charges and wrote up my order for a print. She sent me off with PAA pencils and notepads. After I got back home, the archive's business manager called twice to make sure they got my order right.

## Lucky Ones

Everyone I encountered in Edmonton went far beyond the assistance I asked for. They clearly cared about their city's heritage and the part I play in it, however small. Those kind of connections, forged across distance and time, can

never be had with a mere click of a mouse.

I made friends with a woodchuck along the banks of the North Saskatchewan River one beautiful mauve evening. Meandering my way through many blocks of the neighborhood in which Adam lived for most of his time in Edmonton, spending part of a morning watching children play in the park two blocks from his house, sitting against a tree next to his grave in a woodsy old part of the cemetery (for as long as I could until the little black flies got me)—I walked many of those proverbial miles in his shoes. He chose Edmonton at midlife, for reasons we have yet to discover. I like to think that in my short time there, interacting with the people and the landscape, I could begin to understand why.

Which is why, on the morning I had to leave, I said smiling-through-a-few-tears words of thanks to Adam for leading me to an unforgettable place I would never have experienced otherwise.

Lyn Meehan understands how profound that sense of



**ALWAYS ASK:** Questions breed answers—and that's exactly what Ellen Notbohm found at the Provincial Archives of Alberta.

## Specify the Specifics

Good advice for visiting any library or archive: have your pedigree with you when you go, and be prepared to ask concise, specific questions. Don't expect to be able to give the librarian or archivist a 10-minute spiel on your family history followed by the question, "What do I do now?" Be able to say, "My ancestor worked for the Great Northern Railroad. Do you have any railroad maps/photo collections/books about the GNR?" Photo collections may be sorted by address, so make sure you know at least the street name if it's a building or house you are looking for.



## Homework

When you visit your ancestor's old stomping grounds, your time there will be finite. Make the most of it by using the Internet and the phone to do as much homework as you can before you arrive. Before I went to Edmonton, I made sure I did the following—

- Gathered current maps of the city with my destination lined out. No GPS needed. Source: AAA.
- Found a map of the cemetery and was able to find the gravesite in less than a minute. Source: Cemetery administrator, e-mail, and snail mail.
- Researched the likelihood that there was a probate—and the answer was no. Source: Provincial Archives, index lookup, e-mail with reference archivist.
- Discovered the naturalization record number from Library and Archives Canada (<http://collectionscanada.ca>) but needed advice on accessing the records. Source: Lyn Meehan, Edmonton Public Library.
- Created a timeline of residential addresses and employment from city directories; knew where the holes were. Source: Edmonton Public Library's online Ask-a-Question and Smart Search services.
- Read Tony Cashman's books, including *The Best Edmonton Stories* and *A Picture History of Alberta*; doing this gave me the look and feel of the times (1920–50) before I got the contemporary version of the city stuck in my head.

place can be. “Standing where your ancestors stood, whether on the old wooden floors of your ancestor's homestead or brownstone, the sidewalks or fields—letting your imagination run wild. ... How long did it take to build the cabin? Where did they put their bed, their clothes, their provisions? What ‘trinkets’ might you find? An old implement, a stone: what might be rusted junk to someone else will find a place in your heart. Or it can be in just the pages of those old books in the archive or repository, how they're brown, crumpled, or curled at the corners from generations of researchers turning from page to page. Sometimes people will lick their fingers and leave their thumbprint for history! It all brings an awe of that particular era. The genealogist with passion understands this. My husband jokes, ‘You have more of a relationship with those old damn dusty books than you do with me.’”

Back home, the leaves turned and more than one person inquired about my summer travels. “Didn't you go to Hawaii?” they ask. “Yes, I admit. But let me tell you about Edmonton.”

## Straight from the Heart: An Epilogue

Right about the time this story hits publication, I'll be returning from my second trip to Edmonton. If all has gone according to plan I will have overseen the placing of a headstone on Adam's grave—59 years to the day since his burial—and offered him a memorial dedication in place of the funeral he never had. “We offer thanks for the gift of memory, which unites life with life. Within it, loved ones transcend death and find their niche in remembrance. In the particular grace of each human being lies his immortality.”

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## Library or Archive?

Libraries and archives are not one and the same. “Archives can be a drop-off place for many companies,” says Edmonton Public Library’s Lyn Meehan, “a safe-holding for history. An archive is a receiving agency whose purpose is to preserve. A library is a collecting agency whose purpose is to accumulate.” When allotting the time you will spend in libraries and archives, keep in mind that libraries are generally better funded than archives. Most library catalogs today are electronic, whereas archive catalogs may still be largely manual. And libraries and archives catalog their holdings differently. Libraries catalog every single item, usually by the system with which we are most familiar, the Dewey call number system: 971.2334 CAS. Archives catalog in multiples or groups, using accession numbers. You may see a number that starts with the year in which the documents were received, followed by the location: 1968.128 Box 10 item 3.



**AT PEACE:** Edmonton Cemetery, Adam’s final resting place.