



How DNA Unlocked My True Family History – At 80 | Larry Noedel

ADVERTISEMENT

Thursday, October 24, 2019 11:10am | [LIFE](#)

I was adopted at birth by a loving family who never shared any of the facts of my family history. In fact, they went to great length to keep my adoption a deep secret.

I knew my birth date and that I was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in a private home. I knew that I was immediately adopted and that my birth mother was from out of town.

That's it. I had no names or any other specifics. The only birth certificate I knew of was made out by my adoptive parents when I was 17 years old. You can imagine that I didn't expect to ever know any members of my birth family.

Then, in 2015, like millions of other Americans, I ordered a DNA test.

My objective was simply to learn something about my ethnicity, just like those people on TV. I imagined that my ancestors came from Eastern Europe or maybe the Middle East. Wrong! DNA said that my ancestors were mainly English and Irish. That was the first of many surprises that changed my perception of who I was and where I came from.

The second surprise was that my ethnicity test resulted in a list of people who seemed to share a small amount of my DNA known as "matches."

Soon I received a few emails from some of those folks asking if I'd like to share family information with them so we could determine how we might be related.

Of course I had to tell them that I really didn't have any information to share because while I now knew my ethnicity, I didn't know a single person in my family tree.

One of those people wrote back and said that even if I didn't know anyone in my tree she could still help me find my birth family if I wanted the help. That just didn't seem realistic to me at the time so I politely thanked her, put [Ancestry.com](#) and the whole DNA issue aside, and got on with my life.

A couple of years later, in 2017, I learned that a legal change in the state of Missouri allowed adoptees like me to obtain their original birth certificates. I immediately applied.

To my delight, several weeks later it arrived in the mail. For the first time I could see the name I was given at birth. It was totally different from the name I have known as mine all my life.

I also saw my birth mother's name, her age, and place of residence... Detroit, Michigan.

Now, I thought, while it was possible that my birth mother provided inaccurate information, at least this gives me something to search for. However, four months later, after chasing down each and every lead imaginable I had to reach the conclusion that the information my birth mother provided for that original birth certificate was almost certainly deceptive. There was simply no record of anyone living in the Detroit area in the 1930s with a name like the one provided by my mother on that birth certificate.

I was back to zero but still in research mode. I remembered the woman who offered to help. And I realized that DNA was my only option.

So, I contacted her again and told her that I would gratefully accept her offer.

We started immediately. She explained the step-by-step procedures I would need to follow and helped me whenever I had questions along the way.

We began by again reviewing those people who came up on my DNA match list. Those same distant cousins were still there. But an exciting new match popped up as well. Exciting because this person appeared to be a much closer relative than the others on the list.

And, my newly found apparent relative had posted a small, 13-person family tree on the website.

Using her family tree as a starting point, over the next several months I was able expand what she posted using the Ancestry.com search tools. Soon I had my own hypothetical tree of many hundred people going back many more generations.

I had to consider my tree “hypothetical” because it was based only what I was able to develop working with public records. At this point I knew that I was related to some of the people in my tree, but I couldn’t be sure which were my immediate ancestors.

Most of all, I was looking for my birth parents, my birth mother in particular. That meant considering all of the people in my tree in the generation that preceded me.

After eliminating those who were not of childbearing age when I was born, and those who never had children, I felt fairly confident that I had identified my birth mother. If I was right, she had lived all of her life in Rolla, Missouri, about 100 miles south of St. Louis, had been divorced before I was born, and had two other children, both born before me when she was married. She had died about 20 years before I began my search.

And, if I was right about this, that close DNA match who allowed me to develop my hypothetical tree would be my half-niece.

Contacting a suspected but unsuspecting relative is a serious matter and I needed more evidence before I felt comfortable doing so.

For one thing I wanted to have some idea of how my birth mother, who was from a rather well-known family in Rolla, would have explained her time away from Rolla.

I found the explanation in historic Rolla newspapers. In the first half of the 20th century, small town newspaper “personals” were quite popular. Residents reported all kinds of minor social events in the papers from card parties to club functions, visitors, and vacations.

A week before I was born, the Rolla personals indicated that my birth mother had gone to St. Louis with her aunt to attend a light opera.

A week after I was born, she was reported returning from a visit with her out-of-town aunt. I was convinced that these items were placed to explain to local readers why she was out-of-town for two weeks. Of course, the real reason was to give birth to me.

Now I felt I had enough evidence to call my suspected half-niece. We talked for quite a while and to my great relief she was very open to the idea that we might be related as I thought.

Then it was her turn to surprise me. She said she'd like to get her aunt's reaction to my story. Good grief, I thought to myself, her aunt would be my older half-sister, and she must be very much alive! Before ending our phone call I suggested that if her aunt would take a DNA test, it would provide conclusive evidence of our relationship.

A couple of weeks later my niece contacted me to say that her aunt found my evidence quite credible.

Further, she had already taken a DNA test with a different provider than I had used.

I was able to go to that providers website and upload my DNA data. Within a few days I had a new set of DNA matches. And, there she was at the top of the list, my half-sister! And just below her one of her sons, my half-nephew. I could now say with confidence that I had found my birth mother and the whole family on my mother's side!

My sister and my niece were as amazed and happy about this discovery as I was. Over the next several months we had many, many calls and emails and exchanges of photos and other information. We made great strides catching up with what had been going on in each of our lives for the past many decades.

In May 2018 we had our first face-to-face meeting in Seattle, where some of my sister's children lived. That was followed by her 90th birthday party and family reunion where I was welcomed by all six of my nieces and nephews, their husbands and wives, and several of their children. Since then we regularly talk and visit and have all come to feel that I really am part of the family.

DNA has also led me to discover my birth father.

It took an additional test designed to reveal paternal ancestors. This test allowed me to figure out my father's surname.

When I mentioned that surname to my newly found sister she recalled that prior to World War II a young man with the same surname was one of our mother's closest friends.

Armed with that information I again went to work on the hypothetical tree, now concentrating on my father's side of my family. It now seemed very likely that the man identified by my sister was in fact my father. He had also grown up and spent many years in Rolla, Missouri in the newspaper business before moving away. Of course his position with the paper would have made it easy for him to place the newspaper items that explained my mother's trip to St. Louis.

According to my still hypothetical tree, my suspected father had a son living on the East Coast. I figured that if I could get his DNA profile I could prove that his father was my father and we were, in fact, half-brothers.

Again, I screwed up my courage and contacted him. Ready for another surprise? His DNA test couldn't help me because he too was adopted! Talk about irony!

After we both recovered from that shock, he helped me find a first cousin of his adopted father who did take the test and confirmed our relationship, proving that I had located my birth father.

And, in short order I established contact with the rest of my father's living family and found another welcoming set of relationships. With that my family tree was no longer hypothetical. It was as real as could be.

So. what did I learn?

First, DNA allowed me to discover my true family history and connect me with many living relatives... my sister, several nieces and nephews, and scores of cousins.

That has been profound. It has utterly changed my perception of myself and my life up to this point. It has changed me. It has allowed me to forgive my adopted parents for keeping my past secret. It has allowed me to feel true kinship and develop close relationships with people I didn't know existed a couple of years ago.

I now have a family tree with more than 2,000 individuals. Most interesting to me are my ancestors from the past couple of generations, a number of whom lived in Missouri since the mid-1800s. Several of my earlier ancestors lived in America before the founding of the United States and a few lived out their lives in England and Ireland.

And, to keep the story interesting, I even found one who embezzled a pile of money, escaped, and was never found.

Second, I learned that there are people who are willing and able to help. All of this happened to me because a woman who I had never met offered to help me. Since getting involved with genealogy, I've discovered that there are many such people all over the country who are interested in helping, including some right here in Western Washington.

If, like me, you have taken a DNA test and aren't sure what to do next, or if you just want to learn more about DNA testing, you're in luck.

On Saturday, Oct. 26, the Bainbridge Island Genealogical Society is partnering with the Bainbridge Public Library to hold their second annual [Family History Day](#) at the Bainbridge Library.

The whole purpose is to provide free help for anyone interested. You can drop by between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. for more information or you can register in advance to reserve a seat in a beginning genealogy class or schedule a one-on-one computer-assisted session with one of their very knowledgeable helpers.

You can register by stopping by the Bainbridge Public Library, going to their [website](#), or calling them at 206-842-4162 during normal business hours. Check out bigenealogy.org for all the details.

And, by the way, if you have any questions about my story and how DNA worked for me, I'll be there to answer them.

Larry Noedel is a Bainbridge Island resident.

BAINBRIDGE ISLAND
REVIEW

© 2019, Bainbridge Island Review and Sound Publishing, Inc.

[Subscribe](#) | [Newsletters](#) | [About Us](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact Us](#)