

Filling in the Picture

by Andrea Hoskins

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Take a look at this four-generation photograph of my Cotterman ancestors, taken in 1890: My infant grandfather, Leo Kay Cotterman; his father, Charles Mason Cotterman (standing); his grandfather, Benton Cotterman (on the right, holding Leo); and his great-grandfather, Elias Cotterman (on the left). As a kid I was fascinated by this picture. When I knew my grandfather, Leo, he was bed-ridden with advanced Parkinson's Disease. He was unable to speak, or move independently. But here, he was a little boy starting out his life surrounded by three older generations of Cotterman males. I knew a bit about his father and the work that took him to the Philippines in the early days of the last century. I didn't have names for the other two gentlemen, or know anything about their life stories. So, some ten years ago when I began to work on family research, I decided this would be one of my first goals: find out where my Cotterman family originated.



My mother had always told us that her father Leo's family was from Nebraska; that was as far back as she could go. Knowing that my mom had Irish and English roots on her maternal side, we kids would speculate that maybe that's where our grandfather's family was from as well. Maybe Cotterman was the name for the guy who lived in the cottage outside of town. But, when I was able to track the Cotterman line backward from Nebraska to Ohio and eventually Pennsylvania, and found them in Lancaster County, I found myself thinking - wait a minute, isn't this Pennsylvania Dutch territory? When Andrew Cotterman's name showed up as Andreas Katterman, I knew I had my answer.

One of the first of many surprises I uncovered on Ancestry.com was that the Cotterman line was of German descent. I learned how to use church records,

particularly baptismal records, to explore family relationships. I learned the German naming tradition, that help explain why brothers or sisters might all have the same first name. As I continued to dig, I also learned the importance of the historic context. I discovered that my Cotterman ancestors had been part of the greater Palatine migration. I learned about communities of folks traveling together, not just when they left their home country, but when they moved within their new country.

Tracking back through time, I identified my immigrant ancestors: Hans Jacob Katterman and his father Johann Weyrich Katterman - both born in Michelfeld, a town near Heidelberg in the area of Germany now called Baden-Wurtemberg. In 1738, Jacob and his father left Michelfeld to join community members that had already made their way along the Rhine River to Rotterdam and, ultimately, to Pennsylvania, to escape the many years of war, famine, extreme weather and exorbitant taxes to which they had been subjected. Hans Jacob signed the Oath of Allegiance and Fidelity in Berks County, and is listed as a Patriot by the DAR. His son Johannes Katterman served as a private in the Revolutionary War.

Now, back to the picture. Elias Cotterman, on the left, was Hans Jacob's great grandson. Elias, the first to leave Pennsylvania, settled in Montgomery, Ohio with members of his church. Some of the same names that surrounded him in Lebanon, Pennsylvania were with him on the census for Montgomery. I noted that Elias, who had been born Katterman in 1809, signed his name as Cotterman on his Ohio marriage license in 1833. Perhaps, leaving behind the German settlement in Berks County, motivated him to change to a more Anglicized version of his name.

In order to learn more about Elias, I found myself exploring homestead records, which revealed that Elias applied for 150 acres in Boone County, Nebraska in 1880. I found related "Homestead Proofs" dated five years later, in which witnesses attested to the fact that Elias had consistently resided on the homestead since first settling it. The forms listed the improvements he had made, including frame house, frame barn, corn crib, granary, and a well. He had planted 300 "forest trees" and cultivated 60 acres with crops for five seasons. In June of 1885, Elias paid \$3.76 in fees and received a patent for the land.

Elias' son Benton (seated on the right in the photo) was born in Miamisburg, Ohio, in 1839. The 1880 census shows that he has moved with his wife and two sons to Boone County, along with his father and sister. With the help of Fold 3, I was able to track Benton's service during the Civil War. Benton volunteered to serve in the Second Regiment of the Ohio Infantry. It appears that he fought at Missionary Ridge and was with Sherman's force in the march to Atlanta.

Charles, standing tall in the photo, was 6 ft. 2 in. according to his passport application. In the 1885 state census for Albion, Nebraska, his occupation is recorded as postal clerk. The 1900 federal census lists Charles as Superintendent, Railroad Mail Service, living in Oakland, California. An article in the New York Times, dated October 25, 1900 reports that "C. M. Cotterman has accepted appointment in the new civilian government in the Philippines as Director General of the Post Office," a position that he would hold for more than a dozen years, before starting his own business, the Walk-Over Shoe Store, in Manila.

Leo went with his family to the Philippines, but returned to Nebraska to attend the Kearny Military Academy and the University of Nebraska in Omaha. In 1910, having gone home to Manila, he met the young woman who would become his wife and my grandmother, while working in his father's shoe store. Leo chose to stay in the Philippines to raise his family and establish his own successful business - the Philippine Acetylene Company.

Now, when I look at this photo - a snap shot in time, with Elias at the end of his life and Leo just beginning - I remind myself of all it represents - all of the back story. The hints are there. Elias is wearing his dusty shoes and old-fashioned jacket - he traveled across the country and resettled twice. Benton returned from fighting in the Civil War to become a farmer, keeping the full beard and long mustache that was favored when he was a younger man. Charles, in his stylish three-piece suit and pocket watch, was in a position to take off in a different direction, as a businessman and community leader. Little Leo, seen in his plaid outfit with Little Lord Fauntleroy bow - seems to have a life full of opportunities ahead of him.

(A big thank-you to Susan Strawn, fellow BIGS member, for helping me recognize how much of the story of these ancestors - both their past and future - is told through their clothing and hair styles.)