

Wandering west on a genealogical road trip

I had not returned to searching for my paternal roots in Missouri for over 20 years. In 2001, I took my parents out there for my father's last high school class reunion. Meanwhile, life intervened and I had not set aside time for such a trip again. I had become a grandmother and eventual caregiver to my parents. During that interval all my older relatives had passed away, including my parents. There were only a scant number of more distant relatives within a 100-mile radius. That alone should have stopped my desire to return to the area. Instead the desire and urgency grew stronger.

I was determined to stand on the farmland of my ancestors, smell the sweet farm-scented air, hear the nearby creek trickling by, visit my cousins, research in local courthouses, and visit the small cemeteries where my forebearers were laid to rest. It was a tall order.

Preparation is key on a genealogical trip. You need to research as much as you can in advance, contact and arrange meetings with people, and look at local maps to make the best use of your time.

My husband and I carried along a spray bottle of D/2 biological solution (the industry standard for cleaning tombstones), soft brushes, a portable pressure sprayer for water, and plastic scrappers. We were equipped to clean tombstones as we went.

We made our homebase at a nice hotel in Springfield, Missouri. From there we took day trips out to various locations in southwest Missouri. On one such day we explored Jasper County, looking for a small family cemetery with roughly a dozen graves. No family members had lived in that area for over 140 years. We drove over and around the rolling hillsides, and then we spotted it. The stones were mostly upright and fronted a corn field. I quickly noticed that the surrounding area had been mowed. Here were my great-great-grandparents, Jesse Ruddick and Matilda Findley Ruddick.

They were Quakers who had moved, with family members, from Indiana to Missouri after the Civil War. The moment was very special. Over the years I had tried to gather facts about their lives, their children, and more. I had used census records, newspaper articles, family records, and more. I was fortunate enough to have been given their portraits from the 1880s. And here they were.

I decided, on the spot, to find the person that had been mowing and obviously caring for this sacred ground. I wanted to thank someone. I knew no relatives resided anywhere remotely nearby. Who was this caretaker? I knocked on farmhouse doors and eventually discovered "Leon" who is 85. He owns the property and, when he purchased it decades ago, he didn't even know a cemetery was there. His kids discovered it under some brambles. He cleared it out and has taken care of it, despite not knowing who these people were.

He was delighted to meet us, invited us in, and showed us around. He took us over to a modern log building where he housed his late wife's glass and crock collection, and his own International Harvester collection of toy tractors. The right interior wall was lined with multiple Winchester gun safes. He said, "I want to show you something." He opened the combination lock on one of the gun safes and pulled out a small pad of old papers that were bound together. It was the land records for the property going back to the first owner in the 1850s. I was stunned to see documents that contained the records of my ancestors. Leon then added to my stupefied joy by saying, "I want you to take this home. I know you will return it." He didn't know us at all — an out-of-state car and its occupants arriving at his farm unannounced. He was so kind and generous. We took the records home to Maryland, scanned them, and promptly sent them back.

Thus began an endearing correspondence. Leon doesn't really cook, so I have been baking him batches of cookies and sending them to him. He'll then call me up and frequently says, "You know, you just can't eat one." He is a sweetheart!

He has brought in a man with a divining rod who discovered four more small graves — probably babies he said. Leon has made four crosses to mark those areas. I've also given him printed genealogical details about the individuals buried there. There were already five young granddaughters buried there before Jesse and Matilda were interred.

The land records contained vital family information that I would never have found elsewhere. Jesse and Matilda had bought the land in 1869. Jesse wanted to sell off 159 acres in 1886 to clear debts. He had co-signed various notes (loans) on behalf of some of his sons and a son-in-law. They had failed to pay their debts, and Jesse was left holding the bag. In order to sell that portion of his farm, he needed Matilda's consent as it was part of her dowry. I discovered she was incapable of giving consent. She was insane. It was described that she was taken with a malady suddenly two years previous. She could no longer talk, or pay attention to anything. Their son, my great-grandfather, a Civil War Union veteran, traveled south to testify that his father was feeble from being kicked by a horse 5-6 weeks previous, and his mother was totally incapable of doing any business or signing papers. In 1890 the court agreed to let Jesse sell that portion of the farm. Matilda only lived six more months and Jesse died two years later. That proved to be rich genealogical material in something as unlikely as land records. Other family members are quoted on the situation. They were speaking, in their own words, from the grave. To a genealogist, that is pure gold.

Descendants moved on to Alabama, Oklahoma (then known as Indian Territory), and Texas. The cemetery was forgotten . . . until Leon decided to care for it.

Prior to this trip, I could never have anticipated these findings and meeting my new friend, Leon. I'll continue to bake cookies for him, and send them west with letters.

I would encourage anyone to try to revisit the paths your ancestors took and be open to whatever truths you can uncover. It is incredibly satisfying. We truly stand on the shoulders of these folks. Our very lives are a result of their decisions and labors.

And many thanks to my spouse, Cal Bloom, for driving, helping clean tombstones, and suffering politely through family-tree discussions.

Guest columnist Susan Ruddick Bloom retired as Chairman of the Art and Art History Department at McDaniel College. She is a published author, lecturer, and photographer.

*Image 1: Submitted photo
Ruddick (1815-1890)*

Caption: Jesse Ruddick (1819-1892) and Matilda Findley

*Image 2: Submitted photo
Missouri, 2023.*

Caption: Sue Bloom and Leon at his home in Jasper Co.,

Image 3: Submitted photo

*Caption: Leon and Cal Bloom studying land records
associated with the Ruddick family's ownership of its farm in Jasper County, Missouri. 2023*

Image 4: Submitted photo

*Caption: Sue Bloom standing between the graves of her 2x
great-grandparents in the Ruddick Family Cemetery, Jasper County, MO. 2023*