

Context:

Gabriola family history

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Researching pioneer family history

by Barrie Humphrey

One might think that an island would be ideal for small-scale amateur historical research—a somewhat isolated population, easy to define, probably intermarried, and possessed of a rich oral history. When the Gabriola Historical and Museum Society began to research Gabriola’s history, we soon found otherwise. Although the island’s population was over 4000 at the last census, most have arrived in the last thirty years. In 1965, the population was estimated at 600, and for much of the last century, it was around 250. One of the island’s few remaining long-time residents pointed out a few years ago that there were then fewer than ten people living on Gabriola who were here in 1950. Young islanders have always been drawn to the possibilities offered by the larger world. June Lewis-Harrison, our local historian, had recorded and published much of the local oral history ten years before,¹ and it was not easy to see where to go next.

The society decided to commission a local historian to go through issues of the Nanaimo Free Press, from its first issue in 1874 up to 1894, looking for references to Gabriola.² This material was entered into a computer database of more than 800 articles, which could be searched for key words or names. The lives of some of the early settlers began to take on more definition, as we read about births, deaths, and marriages; and accidents, crops, and children in school.

Early in 1996, the society opened a website,³ which included, in the archives section, a “family history page”—a list of the names of early settlers insofar as they were known,⁴ and an offer to exchange information by letter or e-mail. We anticipated that we could trade material from the Nanaimo Free Press for information from descendants of the early settlers. We also began to collect information from other sources, especially the BC Archives. As our knowledge about some of the early Gabriola settlers began to increase, “family pages”⁵ for specific families were added to the website—the Chapples in January 1997, a partial Gray page the following March, and a Canessa page in August. Although a number of enquiries were received about other sections of the website—notably, the petroglyph pages—no one seemed interested in family histories. Not a single e-mail was received on this topic. We started a small program, in which museum members could “adopt” a family of newcomers, research it, and publish their findings online. This program produced one more family page—the Martins—by the end of 1998. By this time, the number of family names on the posted list had grown to 63, but there were still no responses.

¹ *People of Gabriola—A History of our Pioneers*, D.W. Friesen & Sons, Cloverdale, 1982.

² Selections from this search have been published in Neil Aitken, *Island Time—Gabriola 1874-1879*, Reflections, Gabriola, 1993.

³ http://www.island.net/~gm_chin . Funded by the Canadian Heritage Institute Network (CHIN).

⁴ Names of families on Gabriola before 1900 were drawn from *People of Gabriola*, the Nanaimo Free Press database, the 1881 census (on microfilm at the Nanaimo library), and from the assessment rolls of 1884/5 (held by the Nanaimo Community Archives).

⁵ Usually consisting of a family tree, photographs if available, and documented events involving the family obtained from the newspaper database.

Early in March of 1999, we began to count the number of visits to the website and its major subdivisions.⁶ We were not surprised to learn that visitors were most interested in petroglyphs—there were 303 visits to the petroglyph page from March to June. The archives page had received only 75 visits in the same period—less than 20 per month. We began to think that the outside world had little interest in this aspect of the island’s history, and speculated that early residents of Gabriola had left no descendants.

July brought the first e-mail family enquiry, from a descendant of the Flewett family living in Victoria.⁷ Another query in August, from a descendant of the McLay family living in California, stimulated the creation and posting of a McLay family page, as a way of conveying what the museum knew about this interesting family.⁸ In September, a second Flewett descendant, also on Vancouver Island, e-mailed us. This turned out to be the most productive of all our contacts so far, leading to contact with two more Flewett descendants in November. All four helped us create a Flewett family webpage, which was posted on the museum’s website in December of 1999.⁹ In October, a third query, from a descendant of Magnus Edgar, led to yet another exchange of information, though no webpage has yet been posted. There was an increase in visits to the archives webpage in 1999 from 19 per month in the first half of the year, to 30 month during the second.

⁶ There are sections on petroglyphs, archives, displays, about Gabriola Island, how to get here, etc.

⁷ William Flewett was among the first European settlers on De Courcy Island. His farm was later sold to Brother XII.

⁸ This connection was lost after several interesting exchanges. We were unable to re-establish it.

⁹ http://www.island.net/~gm_chin/flewett.html

In the next year, 2000, visits to the archives page continued to increase, reaching a rate of about 40 per month. A new counter was added specifically for the family histories page, which showed that 80% of those visiting the archives page went on to visit the families page. There were nine e-mail enquiries during the year, of which five were from descendants of families we had not heard from before—McConvey, Canessa, Easthom, Rollo, and Finnamore. The three McConvey enquiries¹⁰ were quite frustrating—all expressed interest, promised help and information, but were never heard from again. The Rollo enquiry, from a descendant who had done considerable genealogical research, offered some marvellous family photos. After some information sharing and discussion, he built his own family page, to which the museum page now links. Another family page, the LeBoeuf family, which was one of the “adopted” families, was posted in June 2000.¹¹

In 2001, visits to the family webpage continued to increase, from 30 to 40 per month. Growth in e-mail enquiries generated by these visits doubled—eighteen enquiries, of which nine were “new” families.¹² A Martin descendant e-mailed us from California in January, one from Vancouver in February, a third, from Ladner, in August, and a fourth, living in Nanaimo, contacted the museum directly. None of the four knew of the others. This family history is turning into a large project. In all, in almost three years, we have been in touch with 33 people descended from 17 families. Only six of the 33 bore the

¹⁰ Two from Ireland, one from Canada.

¹¹ Lynda Poulton & Barrie Humphrey, *The LeBoeuf family*, *SHALE*, No. 1, pp.22-25, Nov. 2000.

¹² Degnen, Dombain, Reid, Martin, Shaw, Silva, Phillips, Gray, and Stubbings.

original family surname. Women outnumbered men almost 2:1. Many were retired, some were young—one became a parent during our correspondence. Most found our website while doing family genealogy research. It was common for them to say that they wanted to leave something to their children or grandchildren. Not surprisingly, almost half were from the west coast of North America—20% from Vancouver Island, 14% from the BC coast, and 11% from the western USA. Another 31% lived elsewhere in Canada, 14%, elsewhere in the USA, and 9% in the British Isles. One request came from one of the First Nations of Vancouver Island, who asked for copies of the histories of families with aboriginal wives from their lands, to be used to help their descendants trace their ancestry.

Our involvement has ranged from one or two exchanges of e-mail in nine cases to protracted correspondence, which still continues, in six. We have corresponded with only one descendant of most families (10 out of 17), but are in occasional correspondence with six members of one family.¹³ This, the Flewett family, has become our model of the best outcome to be hoped for. We have exchanged information and photographs, and speculation about missing pieces of their history with them. We have put distant relatives in touch with each other (with mutual permission). New information about the family, when it appears, is distributed through an e-mail list, and will be added to the Flewett family page after editorial discussions via e-mail.

Other family contacts, though less extensive, have resulted in the acquisition of archival materials and copies of family letters,

¹³ On January 30, 2002, as this was being written, a seventh descendant e-mailed the museum.

papers, and photographs.¹⁴ Family treasures, oral traditions, and stories have provided detail that could not have been found otherwise. How else could we have learned that James McLay was an amateur astronomer and taxidermist, if not from a descendant with two stuffed Gabriola owls in a glass jar? Who but a descendant of the Shaw family, living in Ontario, would have researched the family's life there prior to coming out west? This descendant provided us with copies of Ontario census pages from 1861 and 1871, while we sent her copies of BC census pages from 1881, 1891, and 1901. When the museum's historical researchers, working from the past towards the present, encounter family genealogists working in the opposite direction, the results appear to be fruitful for both.

We don't know whether the doubling of queries in the last year is due to increasing Internet use, the increasing popularity of genealogical research, increases in the number of names on our list,¹⁵ links to our page being developed on genealogy sites, a combination of these, or some other factor we haven't thought of. We suspect that the boom may be short-lived, but we have already learned a great deal from the contacts we have made with descendants of first settlers and their aboriginal wives. Not least, we have become increasingly aware of the extent to which settlers depended on their neighbours and families for survival on Gabriola. We look forward to learning more about this aspect of the island's history in the coming years. ◇

¹⁴ The museum has been pleased to receive several completed family genealogies and donations of money.

¹⁵ In April 2001, the list was increased to 107 names, largely due to research at BC Archives. Since then, only another 10 names have been found.