



Tall Tales And Legends

by Sue Lisk

YOU MIGHT SAY I'M ON THE TALL SIDE OF "SHORT". BUT MY BEING smaller than average doesn't mean I necessarily recognize others as being "tall". If someone towers over me by more than a foot, I might notice. But I'm rather accustomed to looking up.

I remember one day when I was walking outdoors to a class at university with a very tall female friend. As we passed in front of a building of black glass, I happened to notice our reflection and burst into laughter. I'd never realized how funny we looked walking together.



How tall are the tall tales in your family? The truth may be hidden in the shadows.
(Photo by Bob Bretzlaff)

We often fail to think about or investigate things we take for granted. You may have believed stories or tales you've heard about your family or ancestry without questioning them. But now that you're a self-respecting genealogist, that won't do. You'll have to start wondering and researching to evaluate the probable truth of some of those tales.

Let's take a look at a few websites that offer examples of both specific and commonly encountered ancestral legends and some approaches for discovering the truth of such tales.

Mixtures of Fact and Fantasy

Many types of family stories you've heard passed down through the generations are probably not entirely correct. Don't accept them at face value. You'll often find that at least a portion of the tales are true, but it's up to you to attempt to separate fact from fiction.

LegacyTree Genealogists share three examples of these types of stories that they have encountered when dealing with some of their clients. You can read the article at www.legacytree.com/blog/family-legends-place-genealogical-research.



Portions of the tales you hear may be true. Artist Brendan Rose's sculpture, "The Lock West Monster", in Syracuse, NY, makes use of this idea. Portions of the historic locks of the Erie Canal still run through the town. Photo by Carol M. Highsmith. (Library of Congress)

The first example deals with a family castle and a mismatch between a story involving wealth and a presumed ancestor of humble means. Assembling the pieces of the puzzle involved consulting a will and numerous records to confirm a particular occupation. Although there was no family castle, a castle was indeed indirectly involved.

The second example concerns a famous ancestor. While they found that certain connections existed, they were not those the client supposed.

The third case involves two skeleton-in-the-closet tales. The author explains that the family stories passed down via gossip, and not spoken of openly, are often the hardest to confirm. You may be able to find clues that suggest that certain portions of a story are true, but not the entire tale.