

“Black Sheep in the Family”

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It would be an unusual family indeed that had NO Black Sheep. And the hobby of genealogy wouldn't be as much fun. Rhonda McClure put it well in her excellent book, “Finding Your Famous (and Infamous) Ancestors” when she opined “—researchers take a little wicked delight in knowing their past holds a colorful character or two to spice things up.”

So just what makes someone a Black Sheep? A reasonable definition is: “**A Black Sheep is a Person who Stands Out in a Negative Way from a Group of which He or She is a Member**”. The behavior regarded as NEGATIVE is not always specified and is often of a person in our family whom no one will talk about. This makes us even more curious.

In researching this subject, it became clear to me that there are groups within the Black Sheep Flocks. I have color coded them as follows:

- Black Hole-** Violent Criminals
- White Collar-** Non-Violent Criminals
- Scarlet Letter-** Love Gone Wrong
- Deep Purple-** Mixed Marriages, and
- Gray Areas-** All Other Flocks

It also became apparent to me that our current culture no longer regards some of the past Black Sheep behaviors as completely negative. In fact, some of the areas formerly thought to be totally unacceptable come close to ordinary behavior today. I feel this shift started fifty years ago. Around 1960. But many of my genealogy friends predate 1960 and their ancestors certainly do.

So among our Law-breaking Ancestors, there's a range of bad behavior. If they are outright Murderers or violent criminals, we can regard them as the Blackest of our Sheep. But if they are Con Men or non-violent, we will regret their existence while being glad that they didn't take any human life.

Although they may get away with violent behavior for years, most of the **Black Hole** Black Sheep end up in front of juries and in jail. So for them, we should have Court Records, Prison Records and Newspaper stories. The same is true for the **White Collar** non-violent criminals. Fortunately, we have a recent book by Ron Arons to help us in this research. Its title is “Wanted!- US Criminal Records- Sources and Methodology”.

When he found a direct ancestor convicted of bigamy and sent up the river from New York City to Sing Sing, Ron became fascinated with this topic and the nearly total absence of

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help in researching it. He was able to access his relative's records, and wrote his first book titled “The Jews of Sing Sing” while finding out a lot more about his **White Collar** Black Sheep.

Ron then went on a nationwide exploration to find Criminal Records, and he published these findings in “Wanted!” He studied seven types of records in the fifty states, DC, and in the National Archives. These seven types are 1) Prison Records, 2) Criminal Court Records, 3) Parole Records, 4) Pardon Records, 5) Execution Records, 6) Investigative Records and 7) Police Records. Any or all of these may provide you with vital information on your Black Sheep. Ron's book includes numerous examples of interesting records such as Prison Administration records with physical descriptions and family information.

Criminal Records are scattered around the country, and only fragments of them can be found on-line. It's very unusual to find them digitized and indexed. On this topic, you may have to do your research the old-fashioned way by writing letters, going to courthouses and asking questions. It's not easy work.

If you want to get your feet wet in researching this subject area, one of the largest and most complete databases on-line is for the Central Criminal Court of London, commonly known as “The Old Bailey”. On their website <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org>, you can see a full range of offenses of a big city population and the actual testimony in the cases. Their statistical section is excellent and easy to access.

There are several subcategories within the **Scarlet Letter** Category which I have subtitled “When Love Goes Wrong”. Among these causes of Black Sheephood are Illegitimacy, Adultery, Incest, Abandonment (before Divorce became generally available), Abortion and Prostitution.

Giving birth to a bastard or being a bastard might lead to a life as a Black Sheep. Not even a wealthy, even a royal, father could free the child from the conditions of its birth. But local governments didn't want to be financially responsible either for the mother or her child, and Bastardy records may reveal the name of the father in many cases. Copious records of Bastardy Bonds exist for England and Wales, and these procedures followed to the new colonies in Virginia and Massachusetts.

No less a person than Thomas Dudley had disappointments with EIGHT of his female descendants. Thomas Dudley came to Massachusetts Bay Colony in the Winthrop Fleet of 1630, and he was deputy governor or governor of the colony for 18 years. Even the high-minded Puritans had their Black Sheep. And in the case of Governor Dudley, in the next three generations, eight of his female progeny either committed adultery or produced illegitimate children. And in one case, a Dudley woman abandoned her husband and four children for a life she liked better in Boston. This sad story is related in D. Brenton Simons' book, “Witches, Rakes, and Rogues”

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One of the two major Brick Walls in Black Sheep Research is **Abandonment**. The other one is **Name Change**. Usually, the Abandoners are the men of the family, but on occasion, they may be the women. They seem to disappear off the genealogical screens and may be difficult, but not impossible, to find. There are logical avenues to search. Recall that 150 years ago, most people grew up on farms and learned the many skills necessary for that vocation. They might be reluctant to give up that hard earned knowledge, and so can be found on another farm, perhaps in a neighboring county or state.

Abandoners also go where the jobs are. For men, this might mean building railroads, mining, joining the Army, finding work on a ranch, going to sea, or big-city employees such as bartenders. When a young man disappears from his family, you might want to check Military Records to see if he took that solution to his problems. For women, the most frequent outlet is working as a servant, possibly in the nearest town or city. Other callings for women who depart the family are textile mills, shoe factories, laundries, or work as shop girls in the city. Finally, there are the unfortunate women who become prostitutes.

Genealogist Jana Broglin found that an occupation search of the 1880 census using the Ancestry.com database turned up 6,210 women who reported they were prostitutes, whores, sporting women or concubines. Looking only at the 1880 census of Cook County, Illinois, I found an enumerator who showed ‘House of Prostitution’ for the head of household, but could not bring himself to list the young women boarders in them as Prostitutes.

Reading about prostitutes revealed the brutal nature of “the oldest profession”. Subject to ill treatment and disease, these women also stole from and battered each other. The short-term need to survive led only to a brutal existence. If any of you have a female relative whom you suspect was a prostitute, my overall impression is that she’s fortunate to have simply survived the experience.

People who **Abandon** their families or are branded as Black Sheep for any reason are very likely to **Change their Names**. And this becomes a major brick wall for Black Sheep searchers. The Legal Requirements for Name Change vary all over the map, and they are not really required at all. You can take any name which pleases you.

In California, legal changes of name are made at the County level. The same courthouse where you find marriage licenses and certificates. You need to have a date and a place to even find a legal name change here. I could not find that the counties had indexed or digitized any of their name change records.

The most difficult name change situation for your Black Sheep is the completely new name. This can be hard for the individual Black Sheep to accomplish. People are used to being

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called by their birth name, especially the first name. They very seldom change the first name unless they absolutely have to such as when they're running from the sheriff or a spouse.

Variations on this subject were explored using “Halliwell’s” book on people in the Hollywood movie business. I don’t suggest that your Black Sheep had the benefit of a movie producer or agent in choosing his or her new name. But there are patterns of name changes to report to you. And thousands of Hollywood people did change their names when they entered the movie business. So there was lots of data to analyze.

Many of you will know the most famous name changes of stars. For example, many people know Cary Grant’s birth name was Archibald Leach, Judy Garland was Frances Gumm, and Marilyn Monroe was Norma Jean Baker. But beyond these most famous of the famous, there were numerous actors, writers and directors who took new names. Dozens of different celebrities chose certain name options, and these categories may inform genealogists.

First of all, the Hollywood name changers tended to *abandon their ethnicity*. They left behind their German, Jewish, Latin and Eastern European roots. An example is Doris Kapelhoff whom we know as Doris Day. They also turned their *middle names into new surnames*. Estelle O’Brien Merle Thompson became Merle Oberon. Phoebe Annie Oakley Mozee reduced her name to just Annie Oakley. Another name change approach was to *shorten the original surname*. One classic example is William Claude Dukinfield became W.C. Fields. Some celebrities would drop the beginning of the old name. Others would leave out the beginning.

Going against family expectancies in Marriage leads many people into the category of **Deep Purple**, or Mixed Marriage. There are four sub-groups of these Black Sheep. They are mixed marriages by reason of **Race, Religion, Culture** and **Class**. All of these are becoming outmoded in our modern culture. But they certainly were a factor in the lives of our ancestors.

In my wife’s family, a female ancestor married ‘**beneath**’ herself. The young woman had been sent from Chicago to exclusive eastern schools. But she came home in the summer and fell for a tall, dark and handsome university student. She married him and was immediately persona non grata in the family, a Black Sheep. He was the descendant of German immigrants. Not the right class for the family. Not until my wife’s generation did this family connection come back together.

There are many reasons for branding someone a Black Sheep. If you’re a Polish family going to a Catholic church in Chicago and your son starts dating an Italian girl, this might violate an unwritten family rule *even though* both young people are of the same religion. Likewise, the perceived range of offenses against the family widens when the issue becomes marrying a person of another religion or another race. Is our culture more accepting of these marriages today?

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One of my closest friends has a grandfather who was disowned when he announced he wanted to become an **actor**. The family didn't want to see their name on a theater marquee. He then compounded the problem by marrying an actress. In the early 1900s, everyone knew that actresses were disreputable, not much better than women of the streets.

Among the **Gray Area Black Sheep** are Persons with Addictions, Mental and Physical Disabilities, persons who commit Suicide and Homosexuality. When you find a shunned family member, consider these gray possibilities. A person with severe mental problems is not usually regarded as a Black Sheep today. More an unfortunate member of the human race but often put out of sight of family and society. But the presence of mental instability in a family can lead to a whole family being shunned by their neighbors. They become an entire flock of Black Sheep.

Another group of Black Sheep are the men their families wanted to get out of sight so they wouldn't wreck the family's reputation. Their offences usually were failure to pay gambling debts, drinking and carousing, or consorting with the servants, especially that comely upstairs maid. They were shipped out to the frontiers of Canada, Australia and the United States. Family funds, or remittances, were sent to them periodically or in a lump sum for presumed investment.

This group of Black Sheep was known as **Remittance Men**. The British Remittance Men tended to be well educated in classics such as Latin and Greek, but with very little practical or scientific training. Their education included horseback riding, hunting and sports like rugby and cricket. Ideal training for frontier life. Many Remittance Men drank up their funds as they were received, but some of them became successful in ranching. Stories of their wild exploits are well recorded. The modern versions of these Black Sheep, now including young women, are often referred to as **Trust Fund Babies**.

It may be that the country and the culture are also becoming more understanding of the happenings which led to persons being tagged as **Black Sheep** in the past. Some of the family grievances of yore may simply be more acceptable in today's society. Among these may be inter-faith and inter-racial marriage, illegitimate birth, and homosexuality.

Whichever category your Black Sheep falls into, discovering them in a wide range of unusual records can add an interesting chapter to your Family History. In her chapter on Black Sheep, Rhonda McClure suggested all the following record groups for your research: Family Histories, County Histories, Census Records- federal and state, State and County Records, Newspapers, Court & Prison Records, and True Crime Books or magazines.

You're in for some hard work in locating your Black Sheep. Have Fun.

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