

How I Got Started in Genealogy: With Special Thanks to Family, Friends, Mentors and Peers

By Joe Petrie

When I give Beginners Seminars, I always tell attendees to start their family history by talking to the elders in a family to gather their memories, recollections and vital records.

My start was nothing like that. I never set out to be a genealogist. Over 30 years later – after a long learning process, I became a Genealogist. Not a certificated Genealogist but still a genealogist.

This is my story.

My Family History activities started one evening when a nephew asked me how we were related to Daniel M. Petrie an Emmy winning director who was born in Glace Bay, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia in 1920. My answer was: I don't know but I'll find out.

At that time, my connection to Daniel Petrie was through our late mothers. My mother was his older sister's best friend. In fact, in the early 1920s, Mom boarded (lived) with Daniel's family. Daniel was a baby. My mother baby sat for Daniel. Later in the 1950s - 1960s, Daniel's mother stayed with us every year for two months – a month on her way to and from Daniel's house where she stayed the winter.

For my nephew, I produced a Petrie Pedigree Chart on graph paper and sent a copy to Daniel asking him if he could tell me how we were related. His note back said that he never knew and recounted that our parents often sat around kitchen tables (ours, his, or his parents) trying to figure it out. His final sentence was: "More later." I figured that he'd call me or I'd call him.

A few weeks later, I received a 1 inch thick package of Petrie genealogy. It was the "More later" information. There were copies of 5X8 index cards prepared by another Petrie relative and given to him when he was filming "Bay Boy" in Sydney Nova Scotia. I tried to figure it all out and eventually entered all the data into a freeware genealogy database. I learned that Daniel and I were third cousins once removed.. Our genealogical connection was George and Isobelle Petrie, who moved from Halifax to Sydney in 1785. That is not a very close connection but remember that our real connection was through our Moms and not through our Petrie families.

Well, when I finished entering the Petrie records that were provided to Daniel from an unknown author (ultimately found to have been provided by our cousin Col. Francis Xavier McGillivray Retired of Glace Bay and Ottawa). I surmised that I was now a family historian. I think that decided then that I was eventually going to become a genealogist. Let's call it a genealogist in training.

I also decided to track down Xavier to thank him for his research. That alone took me 10 years or so! It was more like detective work than what I thought of as genealogy. Genealogy to me was the science and art of collecting and documenting dead and living relatives. In fact, my wife Ellen sometimes kids me by stating that I spend more time with dead relatives than with living ones. She is absolutely correct! I gradually learned that Genealogy is like detective work. I is also hard work.

Soon after I entered all Xavier's information, I asked all of Dad's living first cousins and his sister to provide me with information on their families. That was a revelation! Not all families provided information. That took a little to get used to. Also, I found that the names that I knew for second cousins especially were Family names and Street names.

All the children in one Petrie family were called by their middle names: Joe, Annette and Mike had different first names. Here I was in my thirties learning that other cousins like Letty and Thedie had real names. Those surprises and my reaction told me that I was not ready to be called a genealogist.

At that time, I still did not call myself a genealogist. I used the descriptor: Family Historian. It was appropriate because I was still learning what a Genealogist does and how to do it quickly and efficiently. I talked to people who were like me “doing Genealogy”. I used Family History Libraries, the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, the Beaton Institute Library and the Library at the New England Historic Genealogy Society. I branched out into my Mom’s families. I collected family information in large batches from my Mom’s sister Mary A Tobin of Halifax who was the real genealogist in all her families. I collected amazingly large batches of family information (especially Boutilier information) from Charles “Chick” Buchanan. On one trip to Cape Breton, my database tripled in size from 2000 records. I became a Family History Gatherer. Technically, I am still a gatherer with about 30,000 electronic records. I have a pile of paper on my desk with Bezanson information (Catherine Boutilier descendants – Catherine was an original settler of Lunenburg whose parents died in transit). The Boutilier family migrated to Halifax Nova Scotia in 1752 from Etobon, Montbeliard - now part of France – in a mass migration and were settled in Lunenburg Nova Scotia by the British Army in 1753.) The records may be entered soon.

I started to think of myself as a genealogist in training when I agreed to do Daniel Petrie’s Pedigree Chart. The 5 generation Pedigree Chart is now in the Library at the Beaton Institute. At one time, it looked to me (or maybe I hoped) that his mother Mary Ann (Molly) Campbell was possibly a Petrie and possibly a Boutilier. (She was neither.) About that time, from Charles Buchanan’s records I learned that Dad was a Boutilier (although he never knew it). I knew that my Mom was a Boutilier (she and her sister talked about it). So I guess that I hoped that they may have been related to Daniel’s mother.

I gathered for about 30 years. I described myself as a Family Historian who gathered information on over 60 families.

Two years ago last June, shortly after I retired in May 2011 from MassBay Community College (my third retirement in 10 years), I was at the Norwood Public Library to read my Petrie Family US Border Crossing Records in Ancestry Library. After overhearing a wonderful reference librarian trying to help an individual with a genealogy question, I thought to myself that I could help out here. Before I left that day, I volunteered to help people with their genealogy. In fact, that day, I introduced myself to the Director and the Adult Programs Librarian as a family genealogist with over 30 years of experience.

It was the start of a series of seminars, workshops, individual 1-on-1s etc. In fact, my wife and I began seriously collect information on her families. A son volunteered me to help with 1-on-1s at the Irish Cultural Centre of New England in Canton MA. I even conducted a Seminar there. Before the Seminar, I joined the Association of Professional Genealogists in the Fall of 2011 after getting advice from friends who were doing genealogy and chance meetings with certificated genealogists. I started to call myself a genealogist.

Last week, I helped a woman looking for a great, great grandfather in Buffalo New York, I think we found him in Pennsylvania, a veteran of the Civil War. We assume that he relocated to Buffalo after the War.

Later, I helped a woman with her grandparents from Italy. We found her grandfather’s Naturalization Case document which identified his place and date of birth in Italy.

Yesterday, I helped a woman and her daughter with her Irish roots. I sketched the daughter’s Pedigree Chart for the two families back 5 generations.

I am scheduled to do a series of 1-on-1s in Norwood and in Brockton. One involves gathering documents to prove that two boys are entitled to their American Indian tribal heritage. Another involves an individual from a part of Poland that that was ceded to Lithuania after World War II. A third wants to trace her family to England. Others want to find where in Ireland their ancestors came from. One woman wants to learn how I found out that her family was from two townships in County Cork Ireland.

I am also scheduled to do Beginners Seminar at the Brockton Senior Citizen's Center.

This is the typical work that a genealogist does. And the good news for them is that I do it free!

What is next? Certification? No way! There is a great deal of time and effort required for certification. At age 74, I simply do not want to make the investment.

The following is an obituary for Daniel Mannix Petrie, Sr. followed by some additional comments from my discussions with him. I think it explains why my nephew wanted to know if they were related.

OBITUARY: Daniel Petrie; won Emmys, and directed 'Raisin;' at 83

By Myrna Oliver

LOS ANGELES TIMES

LOS ANGELES - Daniel Petrie Sr., the prolific Emmy Award winning television director who also made such memorable motion pictures as "A Raisin in the Sun," died of cancer Sunday (August 22) at his home in Los Angeles. He was 83.

Mr. Petrie earned his Emmys for the television miniseries about the Roosevelts, "Eleanor and Franklin" in 1976 and "Eleanor and Franklin: The White House Years" in 1977 starring Jane Alexander and Ed Herman.

He also was nominated for Emmys for "The Man in the City" in 1972, "The Execution of Raymond Graham" in 1986, "A Town Torn Apart" in 1993, and for two productions he produced as well as directed, "My Name is Bill W" in 1989 and the children's program 'Mark Twain and Me' in 1992.

Mr. Petrie earned television's Peabody Award in 1977 for "Sybil," starring Sally Field.

An executive with the national board of the Directors Guild of America and with the American Film Institute Center for Advanced Film Studies, Mr. Petrie was the patriarch of a Hollywood household. Dorothea Grundry Petrie, his wife of 57 years, is a television producer; his son Daniel Jr. is a writer, producer and director lauded for "Beverly Hills Cop" and "The Big Easy" and currently president of the Writers Guild of America West; his son Donald is a director whose most recent credit was "Welcome to Mooseport," and his twin daughters, June and Mary, are respectively a producer and an actress.

Mr. Petrie, nominated 11 times for Directors Guild awards, earned them for the two Roosevelt productions and for the 1984 television movie "The Dollmaker," starring Jane Fonda.

In 1996, he was honored with the Robert B. Aldrich Award for outstanding service to the guild over 30 years as national board member, Western Council member and negotiating chairman.

"Dan was one of the true heroes of the Directors Guild," the current president, Michael Apted, said in a prepared statement. "He was known for his kind and thoughtful nature, but when it came to defending the economic and creative rights for DGA members, Dan was one of the toughest leaders at the negotiating table. His loss to the guild is incalculable."

Although best known for directing dozens of series, mini-series, movies, and specials for the small screen, Mr. Petrie also directed several popular films.

"A Raisin in the Sun," starring Sidney Poitier in 1961, Mr. Petrie's second motion picture, won a special award at the Cannes Film Festival. Other credits include: "Buster and Billie" with Jan-Michael Vincent in 1974; "lifeguard" with Sam Elliott and Anne Archer in 1976; "Resurrection" with Ellen Burstyn in 1980; and "Fort Apache the Bronx" with Paul Newman and Ed Asner in 1981; "Square Dance" with Jason Robards and Wynona Ryder in 1987; "Rocket Gibraltar" with Burt Lancaster and Kevin Spacey in 1988; "Cocoon: The Return" with Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn, also in 1988; and "My Favorite Martian" starring Christopher Lloyd and Jeff Daniels in 1999.

"There's a common thread in all of his work of a real concern for the human condition," his son, Daniel Jr., told the trade paper Hollywood Reporter. "He explored difficult subjects, often ahead of his time " including "A Raisin in the Sun, which dealt with racism, and "The Dollmaker," starring Jane Fonda, which dealt with women as breadwinners.

Mr. Petrie's autobiographical "The Bay Boy," which he wrote and directed in 1984, starring Kiefer Sutherland and Liv Ullman, earned Genies, the Canadian equivalent of the Oscar, for best picture and best screenplay.

He also directed for the stage, including Athol Fugard's "A Lesson from Aloes" at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles.

Born in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, Mr. Petrie earned a bachelor's degree in communications at St. Francis Xavier in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, served in the Canadian Army during World War II and then earned a master's degree in adult education at Columbia University and did postgraduate work at Northwestern University, where he taught acting.

A US resident since 1945, he began his career as a Broadway actor, making his debut in "Kiss Them for Me," and by 1950 he was moving into the new medium of television as a director for "Studs" in Chicago, starring Studs Terkel.

Mr. Petrie was active in the American Film Institute as well as the Directors Guild.

In addition to his wife and four children, he leaves seven grandchildren.

Some of my Notes from discussions with Daniel and Dorothea:

Daniel was the first Canadian soldier to study in the USA under the Canadian G.I. Bill of Rights.

After completing his Ph. D. course requirements at Northwestern University in Chicago, Daniel taught at Creighton University in Omaha Nebraska where he was the Chairman of the Speech, Radio and Television Department. A legacy was his donation of a Lab to his Department.

Daniel was a Trustee at St. Francis Xavier in Antigonish.

Dorothea was an actress. She is an author and producer. Her book "Orphan Train" is really part of her family history. She was skilled in staffing her and others' productions. As a producer, she is an Emmy winner. She has at least two Emmys which I touched on my last visit to Daniel and Dorothea's house. She is a member of the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. More importantly, she is a mother and grandmother.

Finally, I miss my cousin and friend, Dan Petrie.

Joseph F. Petrie

Memberships: Founding Member, Friends of Irish Research; Association of Professional Genealogists; New England Historic Genealogy Society; Cape Breton Genealogy and Historical Association; and Family History Society of Newfoundland and Labrador.