



Don't Believe Everything You Read or Hear

We know this in everyday life, but for some reason, we seem to ignore this counsel when it comes to genealogy. Passed down to us as precious cargo by our parents and other elders, our family lore takes on the veneer of inviolate truth. But no matter how sincere the intentions of the messenger, chances are that more than a little distortion has crept in.

Just think of the game “telephone” you played as a kid. You whispered, “Did the ice cream melt?” into the ear of your playmate, she passed it on to the next child, and it emerged five whispers later as, “Did the mice scream ‘help?’” This is what happens to family tales. Through a combination of misunderstanding, forgetfulness, embellishment and deliberate twisting, they morph over the generations. There’s virtually always a seed of truth embedded, but accepting the entire story as fact will often throw off your research.

Blinded by the tale, we get locked into a paradigm that prevents us from finding the reality. One of the most startling examples of this is Annie Moore, the first immigrant to arrive at Ellis Island. Statues of her stand both there and at the Cobh Heritage Centre in Ireland, but that didn’t stop us from getting her story wrong. For years, people believed a saga that had her moving to Texas and eventually New Mexico before meeting a tragic end. While working on a documentary, I discovered that this adventurous Annie wasn’t the one who arrived at Ellis Island from Ireland.

It took some effort, but eventually we learned the truth. The real Annie never left New York City and her real story was much typical of the hardscrabble existence of many immigrants. Annie died in 1924 – yesterday in genealogical terms – and yet, we all fell for a romantic myth. Why? Because an elderly woman announced to her family that her mother – another Annie Moore – was *the* Annie Moore, and no one ever questioned the claim. That was all it took for a touch of wishful thinking to slip into American history.

And don’t think just because it’s in black and white that it’s necessarily accurate. This is particularly true of immigrant ancestors who often didn’t know their own birth dates. For instance, you should routinely question the names given for an immigrant’s parents on his or her death certificate because the informant was probably a child of the immigrant who never even met his old country grandparents. Confusion can creep in other ways as well. When my grandfather’s birth certificate listed Greece as the birthplace of his mother, I squandered valuable time seeking my Greek great-grandmother, only to discover she emigrated from Poland. How could Greece and Poland be muddled? She was of the Greek Catholic faith.

This doesn’t mean you need to toss aside the family stories and discount everything you find, but it does mean you should examine every piece of data with a critical eye. To give you a head start, here’s a short list of commonly held beliefs that should make you wary:



- *Our name was changed at Ellis Island.* No, it wasn't. Your ancestor changed it after the fact, probably Americanizing it by lopping off a couple of syllables (Villapiano becomes Villa), translating (Weiss becomes White), dropping accents or "extra" letters (Smolenyak used to begin with Szm), picking an Anglo-sounding version (Lewinsky becomes Lewis), and so forth. Ellis Island was staffed with people who spoke dozens of languages and were mostly checking names against lists generated at the port of departure. In spite of what you might have seen in the movies, they didn't substitute Italian village names for surnames or arbitrarily assign "more American" names to immigrants.
- *We're descended from a Cherokee princess.* Not so much. I'm not sure why, but with this tale, it's always Cherokee and it's always a princess. No one ever claims to have a Chippewa Cree prince for an ancestor. White settlers sometimes referred to the daughter of a chief or other Native woman of some note as a princess, but there's no such thing as an Indian princess. What *might* be true is that you have some Native ancestry, but that claim should also be investigated.
- *Three brothers came to America. One went north, one went south and one went west.* You can cut yourself a little more slack on this one because there obviously must be some families where this is true, though the more typical pattern was for whole families to come as a unit or chain migration – meaning the father or maybe one brother came first, made enough money to send back for another brother or two to join him, who then made enough money to send for still more family members. More often than not, the north-south-west aspect is an attempt to link geographically dispersed families of the same surname. Fortunately with DNA, it's now possible to test such tales, but if this assertion pops up in your family, exercise a little caution.

Again, I'm not suggesting that you ignore all those stories Grandpa told you. Even with the ones that have grown grander over the generations, there was likely a very real person or event that sparked the tale, so they're definitely worth checking out. Consider this a chance to sharpen your detective skills! Think of family lore or any suspicious or unsupported information as a hypothesis and then try to prove or disprove it through your research.

The above is excerpted and adapted from [Who Do You Think You Are](#), companion book to the television series of the same name, by [Megan Smolenyak](#).