

Have you ever wondered how a very simple newspaper article could change a person's whole perspective about their family dynamics? Perhaps you've never really thought about it. I know I certainly didn't until it happened to me and to my siblings. So, what was this article and how could a few lines in a 1934 newspaper article make all of us sit up and take notice?

In order to answer this, I need to go back in time. I grew up in a loving family that consisted of my Mom, my Dad, and my 5 sisters. A brother had been born to my parents but sadly he died at 5 months of age. So, in essence we were a family of 6 girls and my parents. Unlike some families where the children didn't know their parents' birthdates or perhaps the year their parents got married, this sort of information was always available to us. We did not have any secrets where those vital statistics were concerned.

With the exception of one sister who disputed this, I and the rest of my sisters said we grew up poor, but we didn't know we were poor because we always had food on the table, a home, clothing to wear.....and our home was filled with love.

In 1986, tragedy struck when my Father died suddenly – one month before his 75th Birthday and just a few months after my parents had celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary.

In the late 1980's my Mother paid me a visit and during that visit she said she had applied for a job that required her to give detailed information about her birth, any marriages, etc. and she revealed that she had been married before she and my Dad got married. W H A T??? To say I was gobsmacked would be an understatement. I asked her for details and I 'think' she told me the name of the person she was married to. I say "think" because I was so shocked, I barely remembered any of the details she told me. I did remember that she said the marriage had been annulled and that 'he was a very bad person'. End of story.

Fast Forward 24 years: the President of the Wetaskiwin Genealogical Society had attended a provincial meeting and as arranged beforehand, had purchased copies of the latest publications from the Camrose branch of Alberta Genealogical Society (AGS). She brought the copies to our June meeting and asked me to take them home with me for future inclusion in our Wetaskiwin branch resource centre. I was reluctant to take them home as I was not the committee chairperson for the resource centre. I conveyed this to her but she said "you should take them home over the summer – who knows, you might find some of your family in there". Of course, I silently doubted this as none of my family lived in Camrose or in the Camrose area. So, the books came home with me, and they sat on a chair in our dining room for weeks.

At the end of summer, I decided to browse through the books – a compilation of Births, Marriages and Deaths as recorded in the Camrose Canadian newspaper. As genealogists, I'm sure we all do the same thing: search the index for the family surnames we are researching. I looked for my maiden name; nothing there. I looked for all the surnames relating to my Dad's family – nothing. So then I thought I'd see if there were any listings for my Mom's maiden name. My heart skipped a beat when I saw my Mom's name under 'marriages'. What on earth was this about?

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There, in black and white, was a marriage record for my mother and a man named Arthur Gordon. I could not dispute that this was my mother because her mother and step-father were named and it was my grandparents' names. My world tilted sideways and I knew I had to do some digging.

I had a marriage date of November 8, 1934. I filled out a request with Alberta Vital Statistics to get a copy of the marriage certificate. The application came back, saying they could not find any record of the marriage. They supplied me with a 2-page questionnaire asking me to provide further information that might help with their search. I filled out the questionnaire and provided AB Vital Statistics with the information from the newspaper. A few weeks later I got a reply, advising that a manual search of the records could not find a record of the marriage. Very strange: after seeing the information in the Camrose branch publication, I had searched online and found the original article and that named the minister who had performed the ceremony and the fact that it had been performed by a United Church clergy. Why wasn't there a record of this at AB Vital Statistics? A hand-written note with the response from AB Vital Statistics suggested that because the marriage was performed by a United Church clergy, I should consider contacting the United Church Archives at the Provincial Archives of Alberta (PAA).

A phone call to the United Church Archives only yielded a message machine telling me that if this was a research question, I should contact the PAA. I then phoned the PAA, only to once again get a recorded message. I did leave a message, briefly outlining why I was calling and giving them a brief outline of the information I was looking for. The very next day, I got a call back and the person asked for more information. I told her the story, relating what we knew (or thought we knew) – she said she would see what she could find.

The same day, I got a call from PAA telling me they had found a record of the marriage and the divorce. What a surprise: I was not even looking for divorce records. As luck would have it, Wetaskiwin branch member Carole Koop had arranged for a tour of the PAA for branch members the very next day. I told the person at the PAA that I would be there the following day and she said she would leave the file at the front desk for me. I scarcely slept that night, anticipating what I would find in the files.

As I started looking through the file handed to me by PAA staff, I became quite confused. The documents listed a man named Richard Thomas Thompson. Who was this? Did I get handed the wrong file? No, Alice.....read on.

The file contained an affidavit issued by my mother. Some of the relevant points in the affidavit were: the marriage took place on the 8th day of November, 1934. My mother hadn't known him very long: he was in the area where my grandparents and my Mom and her siblings lived – working on a threshing crew that had moved into the region. On or about the 12th of December, 1934 he disappeared. The RCMP were contacted and a result of this contact revealed that the 'groom' had resided in the province since 1932. In fact, he married another woman on the 30th of November, 1932 and was still legally married to her!

Information revealed: first marriage was conducted at Westlock, AB, 30th November 1932. According to the information on the Certificate of Marriage issued by the Province of Alberta at that time, the groom

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was Arthur Garry Stevens. He said he was born in Grand Forks, ND, USA. His parents were: Thomas L. Stevens and Fannie T. Buschoik. The groom's occupation at time of marriage was – **Mechanic**, and he says he is a Bachelor.

When he married my mother, he was now Aurthur (sic) Eugene Gordon. He was born in Langdon, ND, USA. His parents were: Edward Earnest Gordon and Mabel Helene Stapleton! The groom says he is a Bachelor, and his occupation at time of this marriage was – **Electrical Engineer!** A big step up in career status from 2 years prior.

After my Mother filed the paperwork, the RCMP started searching for this Mystery Man.. It wasn't until 7th October, 1935 that he was found residing near Regina, SK. At that time, he was known to the Commissioner of Oaths in Holden, AB as Arthur Gordon Stevens. However, the affidavit served on him listed his name as Richard Thomas Thompson!

Now you know why I gave this article the title "Pick a Name, Pick a Profession". Obviously, as a genealogy person, I have tried to find out more information about this mystery man. But where do I look? Do I look at information relating to any of the multiple fake names he used? I can't even try to dig deeper into this using his parents' names because those names also appear to be a figment of his imagination. I did order copies of both marriage registrations: although the 'groom' used different names, the one common denominator was that the letter "G" appeared at the start of either the first, middle or last name. When he signed the marriage licenses, he wrote the "G" in a very distinctive way. This allowed me to confirm that the same person signed both marriage licenses.

The PAA did have notations in the file about the court case, and I do have a photo of Mr. Mystery Man. He has a very nice number pinned to his jacket: 8223!

A few years after finding out all this information, I had a 'lightbulb moment'. When my Mother passed away, her collection of photos and photo albums came to me for archiving. I removed all photos from the sticky pages in early photo albums and created brand new albums, complete with identifying labels. My mother had written very detailed information in her original albums: names, events, etc. However, there was one picture that always puzzled me: it was a picture of my Mother and a man, standing in front of a farmhouse. Under the photo, my Mother had written "Me and ?" It never made sense to me: why did all the other photos have such good captioning but she didn't know who was in the picture with her? It all made sense now: she literally did not know who he was. What name could she possibly have put under the photo?

This whole revelation caused such sadness for me: to think that my Mother had to go through all this ordeal just before Christmas – a holiday that was always celebrated fully in our family. I cannot imagine the strength and determination she must have had in later years, making sure that the days and weeks leading up to Christmas were happy memories for her family. I'm also sad that I didn't know any of this until after my Mother had passed away. I wish I could have given her a big hug and told her none of this was her fault. She had shown amazing strength and resilience in the face of this betrayal.

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Shown below – the photo of my Mother and ?

Also, the photo from the file at the Provincial Archives of Alberta – Mr. Mystery Man #8223

