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... When I first saw all of the names, dates and countries in the family history reports prepared by my cousins, I was mystified. Who are these people?

As I grew up, and well into adulthood, the extent of my family had been composed of parents, siblings, two grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and two godparents. I knew of two other grandparents and had seen their photos, but they seemed ghostlike, and little was said of them. What then to make of Norwegian ancestors named Ingeborg, Rasmus and Thor born in the 1700's?

Fast forward a decade or two, and a candle - better said, a torch - had been lit in me. I had always been interested in history, geography and maps, but combined with a quest for self-knowledge and understanding, I had become a family history researcher. I had the bug.

Two of my cousins had spent years researching our family - before the internet made things much easier. I remain in awe of their efforts. I have built on their foundation, and used the internet and genealogy software to my advantage. But for me this has been more than collecting names, dates and locations, as I am always looking for a story and patterns - and how my ancestors are reflected in me.

The author of an introduction to the National Archives & Records Administration genealogy website wrote that family research can become an obsession. Her view - I think the author is female - is that it is better to view it as a lifelong quest for understanding and enrichment. I took her advice to heart, all the while fighting my own inclination to obsess.

At first my search was focused on my maternal grandfather and a paternal great, great grandfather. The first lived until I was thirty-one - so I knew him, but not well enough, in retrospect. The other was born in Norway in 1843 and had been an architect whose morphing over time resonated with me. So, too, did the arc and phases of his life.

These two were a great start, and although I have yet to see an image of the latter, or know what he was like as a person, I took his research on as if it were a master's thesis. Blanks exist, of course, but I know his house was burglarized in 1896, and otherwise have a trail reaching from baptism to his burial in 1908.

I enjoyed the research, history and stories, and one thing led to another, as they say. I now proudly have accumulated the names of nearly four thousand relatives, whether by blood or marriage, and including a few who are linked somewhere along the line, but where, is as yet unclear. I know the names of about four hundred and fifty grandparents alone, some born as early as the 1100's.

One of the key reasons that I have been able to discover the earlier ancestors has to do with their occupations. A couple of branches on my paternal, Norwegian side are heavily populated with parish priests, a few bishops, public officials, mayors, and others who tend to leave a trail - and whom others have researched prior to me. Families like the Meldals and Schjelderups produced continuous generations of priests in the Trondheim area, for example. Their history in word and image prompted me to gather a few family portraits, which captures a moment in my research, and is a work in progress.

Those earlier ancestors plug into the rest my family in the 1700's, when church and other records are more accessible. The vast majority of my other relatives were farmers, or craftsmen, and lived lives that read regularly in the digitized church records of Norway.

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As for the records in Germany and Poland, where my maternal side is from, Angus Baxter, the author of several genealogy how-to books, has written: "It is probably harder to trace your ancestors in Germany than in any other European country. You must arm yourself for the fray with patience, determination, a sense of order, and an infinite capacity for hard work - in fact, with all those admirable characteristics associated with your German ancestors." Part of this situation has to do with the destruction wrought by two world wars, but more is emerging, and will continue to do so over time.

So, with these images and stories, I share the delight of discovering, for example, that one of my grandfathers was the bishop of a large area of sixteenth century Norway, as well as learning about the tremendous strength and willpower of my relatives who, much later, emigrated from Europe in order to improve their lives.

- Steve Heimerle, August 2011



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13. NIELS JULIUS HESLER

1833, Skien, Norway  
after 1865, California?

*Great, Great Granduncle*



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▲ Various sources state that Julius was a merchant, shopkeeper, creative shoemaker, artist, painter, city councilman, and a “unique character.” I might add he seemed to be a bit of a rascal, too, a glimpse of which one can see in his photograph taken about 1859.

The third of my great, great, great grandfather’s sons, his early days read normally, except that he was baptized at home when seven days old, suggesting the prognosis for his survival was not good. His home baptism was confirmed in the Skien church a year later, though, and he was confirmed in 1848.

Julius and his older brothers Carl Edvard and Johan were probably trained in the craft of shoemaking during their grammar school days. They lived in a house that was also a master shoemaker’s shop. Once they were confirmed, and then reached adulthood, though, both Carl and Johan left the nest - and the country. Julius’ life appears to get complicated, if not begin to unravel, when he was twenty-three. By the time he was twenty-seven he had launched three separate families of descendants.

One of these was the result of his marriage to a pregnant Anne Marie Müller of nearby Solum on June 23, 1857. But on July 12, Maren Andrea Larsdatter, also from Solum, gave birth to a daughter with Julius in the coastal town of Tjolling, about twenty miles from Skien. On October 23, Anne Marie gave birth to Dorothy Marie, who would live only two weeks.

A few months older than he, Anne Marie was the fifth child of harbormaster Jacob Kruise Müller. She and Julius had two more children, in 1859 and 1860. She and the two children were living without Julius and with another family in Skien when surveyed for the 1865 census, but five years later, Anne Marie had been granted a divorce and remarried. She died in Olso in 1896.

Meanwhile, Maren returned to Tjolling with her child, Julie Marie, married a farmer, and died in Skien in 1907. Julie married twice, and died in 1939. Her descendants live in Norway.

There’s more. Julius was creating his own soap opera. Although still married to Anne Marie in 1861 - and with one and two-year old children by her - he fathered a son named Herman by Anne Larsdatter in Oslo. Herman married, and when surveyed for the 1910 census was a bricklayer in Oslo.

It is not too much of a leap to imagine that Julius’ behavior was appalling to his father, who was during this time was an assistant to the parish priest, a deputy of the Norway Missions, and a leader of home services and Bible studies.

The web Julius created had perhaps become claustrophobic. One version of his story says he left for the US during the Civil War, and died during or even in it. But I discovered another version while researching his brother Johan’s trail in the US.

Johan - who went by John in the US - was married, and had set up a successful shoemaking business in the Gold Country town of Mariposa, California by 1861. They corresponded, and John may have sent him one of the weekly newspaper ads he had been running in the *Mariposa Gazette*. In 1862 this ad appeared next to his:

Julius Hesler, House, Sign and ornamental painter. Lining and paper hanging done in the neatest manner. Furniture repaired and varnished. Carriages and wagons painted and ornamented. Orders left at the Boot and Shoe Store of John Hesler, Main Street, Mariposa, will be promptly attended to.

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This with variations ran until 1865. I had proved Julius came to the US, but have yet to find any other evidence of his time here, or his demise.

Coincidentally, this ad had also proved the Johan Hesler I knew lived in Norway was the same as the John Hesler living in California. Feeling like a Sherlock Holmes or Miss Marple, I let out a loud yelp when these connections had been made. My co-workers came running, and I shared the news with them.

A few words about Julius' two children by Anne Marie Müller, born in 1859 and 1860. Family history suggests they were unhappy with her new husband, and went to live with her brother - their uncle - Charles, in Durham County, England, in about 1875. They stayed. Charlotte married a Swedish master mariner, John Peter Sundwall in West Hartlepool, England in 1880, and with him had four children. She died in 1950.

Jacob Kruise Muller Hesler became a successful ship owner and timber merchant in West Hartlepool, married twice and fathered five children. Some of the ships he built and owned served in World War One, and a German submarine sank one.

He was Vice Consul for Norway in England and travelled to New York City in 1916 on matters related to this work. In recognition of his contributions in this role Jacob was made a Knight of the Order of St. Olav, receiving the King's license to wear the Order's insignia in 1931. Two of his sons, both named Jacob, died within three months of each other in France during World War One. Another son was too young to enter the service, married, and among his children is a son now living in Scotland.

As a parent might say to a misbehaving child: Julius! See what you started!