Many Americans search for their ancestral roots

By JOSEPH P. KAHN
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Charles Fisher was not what anyone would call an important historical figure. Temperance was not his strong suit, either. By the time his grandson, Joseph Santai, got to know Fisher up close and personal, as the saying goes, the old man was well into his 60s and deep into his cups. He was, recalls Santai, a 53 year-old house painter, "not a pleasant drunk. He had a lot of anger in him, I guess. But Charlie never talked about himself much." Still, an aura of romance surrounded Fisher, and it exerted a powerful tug on the then-young Santai, who grew up feeling deeply confused about his own identity. At age 11, Fisher had run off with the circus and become a contortionist. Later, he performed in a traveling Wild West show, lived with an Indian tribe, rode with the U.S. cavalry, and painted landscapes with Native American themes. Married to Santai's maternal grandmother, Fisher sired seven daughters. He died in 1975.

Santai was raised in an orphanage in rural Pennsylvania, along with two older sisters. After his parents separated — Santai was only 3 — he had limited contact with his father. To Santai, for whom family history was a don't ask, don't tell proposition, Charlie Fisher came to symbolize more than a colorful forebear with a curious past. He was a missing link, a vital part of Santai's quest to find his own fixed place in a whirling galaxy of distant generations and dimly glimpsed connections.

"I grew up with this great mystery of why I was where I was," explains Santai, sipping a cup of coffee one morning in his cluttered East Cambridge, Mass., apartment. "I expected someday someone would talk about family secrets, but no one ever did. Slowly, it dawned on me there were other ways to find out a lot of this stuff."

The path Santai embarked upon four years ago, amateur genealogy, is enjoying boom times across the United States. As waves of new immigrants wash upon our shores and the traditional nuclear family grows ever more fragmented, millions of Americans have been inspired to search out their ancestral roots and attach limbs and branches to their family trees.

According to a 1995 survey by American Demographics magazine, more than 100 million Americans have expressed interest in untangling their often confused ancestries. Nineteen million are actively involved in the pursuit. An additional 64 million have successfully constructed some sort of genealogical diagram; while many of these are rudimentary at best, others go back 10 generations and more. Millions more of us have set out to locate the old family homestead or make a pilgrimage to the land of our ancestors.
To facilitate this detective work, armchair (and now lap-top) genealogists draw upon the resources of hundreds of local libraries and historical societies; virtually any New England town big enough to have a post office also has some sort of records bureau that contains files on births, deaths, marriages and other vital statistics. Other valuable repositories include the National Archives, in Washington, medical and military records, and the granddaddy of them all, the Latter-day Saints Genealogical Society Library, in Salt Lake City, which houses 270,000 volumes, 2 million rolls of microfilm, and information on more than 2 billion people scattered across the globe.

High tech is having an impact on the field of genealogy as well. Computer sites on the World Wide Web, specialized databases and customized software programs are adding a fresh dimension to a practice as old as oral history and as modern as an Internet chat room. Family Tree Maker, just one of dozens of popular software programs on the market, has sold 500,000 copies to date. And new versions of such programs are being rolled out every year.

“A couple of generations ago, genealogy was more narrowly focused,” says Maureen Taylor, of the New England Historic Genealogical Society, in Boston.

All that changed, says Taylor, when “Roots,” the ABC-TV miniseries based on Alex Haley’s bestselling book, seized the country’s imagination in 1977.

For genealogists, the second mega-media event was Ken Burns’ Civil War series on public television. Like “Roots,” the brilliance of Burns’ work rested on his ability to tell history through the lives and eyes of common people, not merely the politicians and military leaders who have traditionally defined it.

The New England Historic Genealogical Society, which celebrated its 150th anniversary last year, has 17,000 members and is the oldest and largest of the country’s genealogical societies. Within its Boston headquarters is a three-story library containing 150,000 volumes and more than 10,000 rolls of microfilm.

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