

My Eight Great-Grandparents by James Edgar

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Many people don't get to know their grandparents — I'm one of those. My father was the youngest of nine children, so I never even got to meet his father. The two things I knew about my Dad's mother was that she was Grandma Edgar, and she lived a long way away! I never met her either.

My mother's father died when I was five years old, and I have a faint recollection of him visiting us when I was three. He was a farmer in a little village named Endiang, Alberta, Canada. After his death, Grandma Somerville lived for a while at the farm, which ended up as my Uncle Bob's place. He, being my mother's only male sibling, inherited the farm. Grandma eventually moved to Kamloops, B.C., Canada, my hometown, so I got to know her very well. I loved her scrumptious cooking and baking, and we could always drop by her place for a piece of fudge, a bit of cake, or some other sweet.

Being the youngest son of a youngest son places one at a great distance from their forebears — it's only in the past ten years or so that I've researched and found who my great-grandparents were. Before that, it didn't seem to matter much. But it does now; if only I had asked more questions when I had the chance!

Nevertheless, by reading through some of my parents' writings and leafing through their collection of family trees, photos, and stories, I have pieced together who my great-grandparents were, where they originated, and where they lived and died.

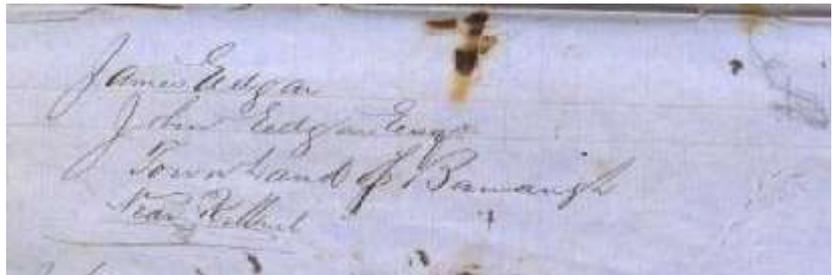
Having done this research has made them come alive in my mind, and I feel I've come to know them — at least as much as I can. Thus begins my story.

It came as quite a surprise to me that my paternal ancestors were Irish. It was an episode in our family that was conveniently overlooked — had I asked my father what our ancestry was, I am positive he would have replied "Scottish!" It was only after he died in 1991 and I inherited some of his papers that I discovered the connection to Northern Ireland.

On one of my regular visits home to Kamloops, my mother handed me what had been part of my Dad's inheritance — an old ledger that originally belonged to my great-grandfather, James Edgar. It was in a sad state of repair, the leather binding was falling off, pages had been cut out, the "kids" had used it as a primer, learning how to write by tracing over the entry flourishes; the book was held together with an old shoelace tied in a knot. In all, it appeared destined for the scrap heap, but closer inspection revealed a goldmine of family data.

Entries on the last page give all the children's full names and birth dates; debits and credits record work performed and debts paid; and there are all manner of political statements, plus poetry about the Ku Klux Klan, St. Patrick's Day, The Indian's Lament, and many others. The ledger is dated in many places, giving an air of authenticity to life and times in the mid-1850s. One signature is "F.A. Edgar, Portage LaPrairie, Manitoba" — this is granduncle Alex, who served in the Northwest Mounted Police and who participated in the famous March West in 1873. Most of the ledger poetry is his.

On page 14 of James' ledger, I found this entry, written sideways on the page:
James Edgar
John Edgar, Esq.
Townland of Banaugh
Near Kilkeel



When I first began researching my distant ancestors, I was unsure of many dates and birth and marriage places, especially since I wrongly assumed a mostly Scottish background. Discrepancies are even recorded on gravestones, like the one shown here, where my great-grandfather is shown as “1800 James 1882.”



I have since discovered these things: James Edgar, born in 1805 in Kilkeel, Co. Down, Northern Ireland, came to Canada with his father Charles and younger brother Robert in about 1818. The three of them, in the forests north of Québec City, chopped down enough trees to build a ship, filled it with lumber, and sailed it back to Ireland, whereupon they dismantled the ship and sold the lumber. With the proceeds from that sale, the entire family of father, mother (née Susan Cummings), the two sons, and at least three daughters, sailed to Canada and bought and farmed a tract of land near Lancaster, Ontario, right on the banks of the St. Lawrence River. They and many of their offspring fill the country churchyard cemetery in Bainsville, a small village just east of Lancaster.

My searches for information on the Kilkeel Edgars have taken me on many a journey to Northern Ireland. Through the power of the Internet, I contacted an Edgar in England, named Steve, who it seemed could be a relative of mine: we both had male ancestors named Edgar from around Newry, Northern Ireland, in the late 1700s — we must be cousins! We started calling each other “Cousin” and began visiting the Auld Sod in 2005, looking for ways to connect our two families — we have returned annually ever since. After a couple of fruitless years of searching, my wife, Jodie, suggested that we should have our DNA tested. This was a fairly new prospect in those days, so we started looking for a firm that would do such a test at a reasonable cost.

We located Relative Genetics in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA, that had exactly the program we were seeking: they would supply the test kit, analyze the DNA, provide the test results, and host a family group Web page. I had my test completed in the autumn of 2006; Steve's was completed shortly afterward. Here is the surprise — we aren't related and wouldn't be in 10,000 years! Since that time, we have tested over 45 Edgars and have learned much about DNA testing and analyzing the results. Most interesting to us is that we have found four distinct families of Edgar, each having a different DNA type (termed Haplogroup), which shoots down the notion we had that we are all descended from one man! But, I digress....

Great-grandfather James Edgar married Ann Elizabeth (Betsy) Snider in 1840, a daughter of John Peter (J.P.) Snider, who was a UEL. The UELs (United Empire Loyalists) remained loyal to the British Crown during the American Revolution, and were considered outcasts in the newly minted United States of America. Rather than stay amid their sworn enemies in the USA, they chose to leave. The grateful Crown gave each family tracts of land in and around Cornwall, Ontario. There is quite a settlement of UELs in that area to this day, and many people who pride themselves to have the U.E. following their name! Should I wish to apply, I could be one of them twice over, since Betsy Edgar's mother was also of a UEL family, Jennet Wood, descended from John Wood, who was born in England about 1590.



James Edgar

James and Betsy had nine children, most of who survived into old age. These people and their neighbours settled the new land, and were the true pioneers of the fledgling country of Canada.

Nearing his 80th year, James Edgar was struck from behind by a Grand Trunk Railway train as he walked down the tracks near the Edgar farm in 1882. He was deaf and never heard the frantic whistling or the noise from the oncoming train. He died instantly.

My grandfather, Charles Stephen Edgar, owned the farm by then, being the third successive Edgar on the land. Great-grandmother Ann (Betsy) Edgar lived with Charles and his family into her early 90s, passing away in Bainsville in 1907 January 4. My father was one month old, to the day, when his grandmother died. The land is no longer in our family, and all the Edgars are scattered to different parts of the continent — they either married and left, or left and married!



Betsy Edgar

Charles Stephen Edgar married Christena Mary (Tena) McRae, the second daughter of Malcolm McRae and Margaret Campbell. Both Malcolm and Margaret were 2nd-generation Canadians, and both were born within a short distance of each other — he in West Hawkesbury, Ontario, and she in Vankleek Hill, Ontario, two kilometres apart. Malcolm and Margaret were offspring of Scottish “settlers” who left their homes and families in the early 1800s, more of those who came to this land to carve out of the wilderness the young country of Canada. In those days, it was “Upper Canada,” meaning upstream on the St. Lawrence River from “Lower Canada.” The distinction also separated the English-speaking people from the French of Québec. The country was actually incorporated in 1876, previously operating as a colony of the British Empire.

About the McRaes I know little else, only that they originally farmed in the Hawkesbury area, where 9 of their 11 children were born, that both of these great-grandparents lived in Glengarry County into their 80s, and ended their days there — he died on the family farm “Glen Roy” and she in Williamstown, Ontario. What little I do know I obtained from living McRae cousins, namely Jean McRae White of the USA, and Barbara Malcolmson-Baily of Ontario, Canada. Fortunately, I have the results of their research, plus some family photos.

Malcolm McRae Home at Glen Roy
Lot 13, Concession 9, Charltonburgh, Glengarry County, Ontario



Left to Right: Tena MacRae; John “farmer” McDonald (visitor); Kate MacRae; Willie M. MacRae (two sisters and a brother)

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On my mother’s side of the family, thanks to much early research by my aunt, Mum’s sister, Mary (Somerville) Schoonover, I have extensive histories going back several generations to the Somervilles of Clackmannanshire, Scotland, and the Swanstons of Galashiels, Scotland.

My mother’s grandfather, Thomas Bennett Somerville, came to Canada in the early 1860s. By 1864, he had met and married my maternal great-grandmother, Jean Mitchelson. She was descended from a couple both of whom were originally from Québec (Lower Canada). Apart from her important dates, and birth, marriage, and burial places, that is about all I know of her. Except that I’m very grateful that one of their children was my grandfather!

As for Thomas Bennett Somerville, however, I have exact information. He was born in Dunfermline, Fifeshire, Scotland in 1834 October 29, was married in Lucknow, Ontario, 1864

August 16, and died 1928 January 27 in Cargill, Ontario, a town he helped found. Just about the time Thomas arrived in that part of Ontario, Henry Cargill was harvesting trees from a large tract called the Greenock Swamp. Cargill owned much of the forest — accumulated by purchasing acreages from the crown and other local landowners. Somerville worked for and with Mr. Cargill, helping to operate the numerous sawmills and a gristmill.

This work stood Thomas in good stead, as afterward he worked in the town of Lucknow, Ontario, with his brother, James Somerville. The two of them owned and operated the first lumber and gristmills in Lucknow. When James Somerville founded the town, it was just a sawmill, Stauffer’s Mill. He bought the mill and land rights, and took the name Lucknow from the on-going battle in India (the “Siege of Lucknow” or the “Indian Mutiny” in 1857), in which the British Army successfully defended the town for months before being evacuated. As an aside, most of the street names in Lucknow, Ontario, are taken from the names of British Army generals who fought during The Siege, *i.e.* Ross, Outram, Havelock, Willoughby, Rose, and Canning. In 2008, the town named a street “Somerville” for my great-granduncle, the “Father of Lucknow.” The Siege has the distinction of having the most Victoria Crosses awarded in one day — 24 on 1857 November 16!



Jane Somerville



Thomas Bennett Somerville

Thomas Bennett Somerville is buried alongside his wife and two of their daughters in a gravesite named South Kinloss, which overlooks the valley setting of Lucknow.

Finally, my remaining great-grandparents, Andrew Swanston and Catherine Ritchie, were both born of pioneering families originating in Scotland — Andrew’s from Galashiels and Catherine’s from Broomielaw. Her father, John Bethune Ritchie was postmaster in Greenock, Ontario, a small village just west of Walkerton, Ontario, and Walkerton is where most of these people are buried.

Andrew Swanston was born in a more southerly part of Ontario — Eremosa, a village in Wellington County. After a stint of farming in Greenock Township, Andrew worked as a night watchman for much of his adult life, part of it in a factory in Cargill, then ending his career in Walkerton, where he kept night watch for twenty years.

In my efforts to become acquainted with these relatives, I have trekked to eastern Canada to visit their graves and to see where they worked, lived, and raised their families.

While there are few written records available, I have managed to trace living family members through the power and magic of DNA testing. I have cousins all over the globe who have become one large extended family through the connectedness of the Internet and social networking; and these cousins have similar goals — to find out all we can about our forebears and their lives.



My maternal grandmother is Norma Giffen Swanston, at centre