

In *Cottonwood Roots*, Kem Luther tells the fascinating story of his search for his genealogical roots, beginning from his birthplace in Broken Bow, Nebraska, and traveling across the Midwest to Pennsylvania and New York. His journey is both literal and figurative: he is searching not only for courthouse records and tombstone inscriptions but also for some sense of who ancestors such as Ebenezer and Aurilla Wait Luther might have been. The book is divided into three sections, each containing a series of chapters in which the author recounts family stories and imagines what the lives of his ancestors might have been like.

Luther presents an engaging and fluid narrative. Employing the metaphor of the safety rope used by midwestern farmers of the past to get to and from their livestock during winter blizzards, he explains early in the narrative, "I do not know what highways of the spirit I will travel. There is a danger that I could lose my way in the conceptual storms. As long as I can see the ancestral line in the family history, however, I know where my purpose lies. If I cannot see the larger end, if I cannot turn like the needle of a compass to the direction in which I should go, I can always hand-to-hand it down the line of ancestry, son to father, until I have regained my sense of direction" (p. 5).

I appreciate *Cottonwood Roots* for its methodological insights into genealogical research. The author explains the value of courthouse indexes; he discusses effective strategies for searching backward and forward in one's ancestral lines; he acknowledges the subtle relationships that the genealogist develops with the individuals who are the object of his or her research.

I also appreciate *Cottonwood Roots* for its philosophical insights. Luther analyzes the implications of landscape on the psyche; he assesses the significance of what is not listed in public records as well as what is. Most importantly, he ponders the vast difference between compiling genealogical charts and attempting to reconstruct the stories of ancestors' lives. For Luther, reading the stories that lie between the lines is as central to his search as reading the genealogical information on the lines. "The presence of the story is what makes genealogy hard to write. The rest, the construction of the sequence from the network, can be learned by rote. The real problem is how to follow and develop the narrative. It is so difficult that it is a wonder that it gets done at all. I have known many hobbyists who couldn't seem to pull out of the data-collection phase. The problem is, I think, that the lines of narrative never jell. When it gets too bad, you do what I have done: chuck it aside and go on a pilgrimage, hoping to bring back the initial sense of joy and curiosity, and find the tale whose telling will bind the scattered lives of a family line" (p. 63).

Perhaps Kem Luther's greatest insight in *Cottonwood Roots* is his acknowledgment that the interaction of the writer's imagination with the cultural records is what makes the story meaningful--and the search worthwhile.

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