

Occasionally, a book comes along that stands apart from traditional genealogies or family histories. Such is the case with Kem Luther's *Cottonwood Roots*. Holding a doctorate in philosophy no doubt gave Dr. Luther the different twist he puts on the common search for one's ancestry. Not a single chart appears in his book. "A written genealogy," he explains, "is a translation of a complex genealogical mentality into a medium of expression that threatens to simplify it to the point of meaninglessness." He reminds us that "what most of us are studying is not a bloodline but a story." Thus, his book is a unique first-person narrative, blending historical context, philosophical ponderings, and research experiences, as he searches for the individual behind a name found on a page of what relatives called the "Luther Family Tree."

Using the present tense, Dr. Luther talks to the reader along the way on his literal journey from his birthplace in Broken Bow, Nebraska, eastward to where his great-great-grandfather, Ebenezer Luther, resided in upstate New York. As he travels the migration route backward that his ancestors once took, he is also taking his readers back in time, with discussions on each of the areas his forebears passed through or settled briefly.

Dr. Luther calls his journey a pilgrimage, not a research trip--although he stops at various libraries and courthouses to conduct research. What makes his travels a pilgrimage is his unwavering focus on finding out about Ebenezer Luther, the person. "My destination is more a person than a place," he states in the first chapter.

From his conversations with the reader as he searches for records in local repositories, Dr. Luther obviously knows how to conduct genealogical research. His awareness of proper research methodology is apparent from his tracing Ebenezer's neighbors when Ebenezer himself did not leave the clues he had hoped to find. Although Dr. Luther goes to great length to discuss the importance and failings of indexes ("That they lack an index," he states in one of his many laments, "is a sign that the writer had... little consciousness of the community of other genealogical researchers"), what is most disturbing that his own book is not indexed. Nor does he cite any of the original, primary sources that he talks about in his narration. His citations are strictly to a few non-genealogical published works. The lack of an index--both for names and subjects--and the lack of primary source citations will leave future researchers, who may want to pursue a different avenue of study for the Luthers, with only clues to follow in their own journeys.

The strength of *Cottonwood Roots* lies in its refreshing, different perspective on family history. Dr. Luther's first-person account offers a philosophical/genealogical journey that is insightful both for himself and for his readers.

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