

Each year thousands of family histories and genealogy source books are turned out by an ever-growing army of amateur and professional researchers. And they are well-armed with an incredible array of specialized computer programs, enhanced microfiche readers, international surname indices, and other fact-finding tools at their fingertips. Indeed, many Americans now point with pride to a cousin Ed or an Aunt Sophie who collects "dead relatives." Amassing and preserving such information for family members and future generations is a worthwhile pursuit. But only rarely is a family history presented in such a way that it is of genuine interest to those outside the familiar realms of kith and kin. Kem Luther's *Cottonwood Roots* is an exemplary piece of genealogical writing that goes far beyond the usual confines of "a family history." This book speaks eloquently to anyone who has, at times, struggled to see beyond a faded family portrait or a time-yellowed document.

While the author is a genealogist, he is also a computer scientist with a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Chicago. Judging from *Cottonwood Roots*, Luther puts his academic training in philosophy to extraordinarily good use. Throughout the book, Luther muses about a rich range of topics, including apocalyptic visions, courthouse architecture, even the "intricate" cultural patterns (and contradictions) of modern-day Amish life.

Luther's book takes the form of a personal journey or "pilgrimage" that beckons him eastward from his Great Plains birthplace in Broken Bow, Nebraska. Curiously, he follows backwards in the footsteps of his pioneering ancestors, a trail that leads him through Nebraska, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and eventually to Erie County, New York. Yet he admits at the outset, "My destination is more a person than a place, and to get to that person I have to go through another person, and another, and each person in the line can only point me vaguely on.... If you have to know exactly where you are going before you leave, you do not go" (p. 3).

Along the way, Luther pauses to reconstruct the past lives of his ancestors, to glimpse a little of the world through their eyes. He even dares to probe the depths of their grief and sorrow. For example, when the author writes about the deaths of several family members due to typhoid fever in the 1890s, he does not merely allude to their deaths on the prairies of central Nebraska. He recounts, in painstaking detail, the 104 degree fevers, severe headaches, muttering deliriums, bloodied bed sheets, and degenerative schizophrenia that filled many a pioneer home after typhoid fever hit.

Kem Luther's journey back, through time and space, is more than a quest in search of shadowy ancestors or overgrown family shrines. It is a journey marked by an ever-deepening sense of self-discovery and self-understanding. While intensely personal, Kem Luther's journey is intensely illuminating as well.

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