

YOU ARE HEIR TO MILLIONS !

Margaret S. Rice before Rice Reunion Audience, September 25, 1971, Sudbury, Massachusetts

I must admit that I always have a few qualms when it is announced that I will speak on "Genealogy", because so many people consider it so very dry and boring. Some of my office mates kid me about speaking on so "cultural" a subject, and it reminds me of the gentleman in the cartoon to whom a lady said after his speech, "I was so afraid your talk might be cultural and educational, but it wasn't at all -- it was Good!" Though genealogy, I suppose, would be termed a cultural subject, many other adjectives can also apply to it. It certainly is educational. It is also a scientific subject, an historical subject, a moral subject, a philosophical subject, and most of all, if properly approached, an entertaining subject. I enjoy it, myself, and as the Chairman of the History Department of our local museum in Amesbury, I feel that this is one of the most important phases of my work. I am here today to try to interest you in your own ancestry -- all of it -- not just Deacon Edmund Rice -- and to enlist your help in spreading the doctrine, as it were.

History is a much abused word. Too many people think of it in terms of heavy, dull volumes of unreadable matter when, actually, it is simply a true wonder story in the later chapters of which you and I are living today. YOU ARE HISTORY -- you and your children, your parents and grandparents; your acts of yesterday and today; the very thoughts of your minds and the dreams of your hearts. Those are the things that have made the story of the past and will make the story of the future. And that is what genealogy is -- your own personal history.

It is important that our young people know the story of America, and how can they know that history truly without knowing the people, through the years, who have made the nation -- not just a few of them who may have been prominent, but all of them? And how can we learn about those people unless the present-day members of their families take an active interest? It doesn't matter whether every branch of your family has been in America for three hundred, for thirty, or for three years; whether they came from Britain, Scandinavia, Germany, France, Africa, Italy, or China, or all of them. They are a part of American History, and their story should be told.

We hear a lot today about the rebellion of Youth. They have to know, they tell us, "who they are and where they come from." I don't mean like six-year-old Johnny who said one day, "Mama, where did I come from?" Mama, a devotee of modern child psychology which tells us that when they ask they should be told, thought, "Oh, dear, he seems awfully young, but I guess now is the time." So she proceeded to tell Johnny. It was an ordeal for her, and when she finished Johnny shrugged his shoulders and said, "Oh, I know all that, but where did I come from? Susy Smith says she came from Maine."

Like Johnny and Mama, a lot of us are confused. Do you really know where you came from? Do you know your family? Not just your parents and children, your brothers and sisters or your cousins. If that's all you know, you don't know the half of it! What I mean is those many individuals back through the years who are responsible for YOU as an individual.

First, I would appeal to your ego. You are the product of and the heir to millions of other people who have lived before you -- and I do not exaggerate when I say millions. If, by a remote chance, you could complete your direct lineage for 20 generations, which would take you back to about 1300 A.D., you would have over a million names on your chart counting only direct progenitors (your parents and grandparents, great-grandparents, etc.) and the number doubles with each generation. You may have inherited characteristics from any one of those people. Never before has there been, and never again can there be anyone just like you. Aren't you a little bit curious about that composite group which has resulted in YOU? Don't you sometimes wonder about it?

Look at it in another way. So far as we can tell in any tangible way, the young people of our families are our own immortality on this earth. We live on through them, and by the same token, our forefathers are living on through us. Without each and every one of them, WE never could have been. How can we possibly be indifferent to them -- to who they were, what they did, and even to how they looked?

Heredity, it has been said, is something most people believe in only when their child's report card is all "A's". But you will find that it is a lot more than that. Outstanding scientists agree that heredity is the great determining factor in any person's life. They know that among lower animals they can breed almost any characteristics by proper mating, and there is no reason to believe that the same is not true among human beings.

That grand old Yankee, Roger Babson, said in his autobiography: "The study of ancestry has been a hobby of mine and I recommend it to other businessmen as a change from collecting stamps and similar means of keeping one's mind employed Those who can should introduce their children to the laws of heredity, including genes and chromosomes and the new polymer sciences..... If we could interest our teen-agers in the polymers, it might result in much happier lives and marriages for them, and in more outstanding grandchildren for us."

This is a comparatively new approach to the study of genealogy. The application of present-day chemical research through the study of polymer molecules -- those compounds of chemical elements present in the genes and chromosomes that go to make up each one of us -- casts a very different and interesting light on the reasons people come to be the sort of individuals and the sort of national types they are. Within the last quarter century family study has been rediscovered by the scientists and is largely relied upon in research on development of individuals and races. We might understand the Hippies or Mr. Kosygin and his henchmen better if we could know their family backgrounds.

All families have their questions. What makes Jonathan Jones IV a juvenile delinquent when Great-grandfather Jonathan Jones I, and all the rest of the family since have been such exemplary characters? Well, the family has completely forgotten Grandmother Jones' father who boasted that he was the best horsethief in six Western Counties and thereby made the money to send his daughter East to exclusive schools! And how can teen-age Margie be such a flirt with so Puritanical a background? You see, her mother used to think it quite a joke that Nell Gwyn, mistress of King Charles II of England, was supposed to have been an early member of her family. The world is millions of years old and three simple problems, Blonds, Brunettes, and Redheads, have always been and still are baffling men. And most of us have one or more of them in our own families! Perhaps our children's actions, for better or for worse, can be explained by heredity. Give a thought to that when you are criticizing and disciplining them. A lot of trouble has stemmed from the fact that some people who give all sorts of thought to the pedigrees of their dogs and horses, don't seem to care at all about the pedigrees of their children! It does make a difference whom you or your children marry!

Abraham Lincoln once said: "I do not know what my grandfather was; I am much more concerned with what his grandson will be." And that is a thought we should all keep in mind even as we learn who and what our grandparents were. Remember, we are going to be on that Family Tree, too. Will we be an ornament or a blot? Would our grandfathers be proud of us? Most trees have some bad apples, and too often the sort of person who does not care who or what his grandfather was, doesn't care much about the sort of person he, himself, is. A nation with no regard for its past will have little future worth remembering, and the same could very well be said for a family. I'm certainly not recommending snobbishness. In fact, I think an honest knowledge of our forefathers is most apt to do away with any tendency toward haughtiness and make us very humble. After all, many of the European aristocracy who ran away to America were not exactly admirable characters, and those early Americans who were the most respectable were, in general, definitely middle-class. It's silly for us to pretend anything else, but we can still be proud of them.

Many look upon family trees as symbols of snobbery and think that those who know their ancestry are social climbers interested only in status-seeking. Nothing could be further from the truth. Many of our so-called "socially elect" couldn't care less about family backgrounds, and conversely most of the families who have well-authenticated family charts are surely not what is called "Society." They have little money and though they serve their communities well, they hold little high position. Most of them are simply the solid citizens of their towns, going quietly about their business without fanfare, exactly as their fathers and their grandfathers did before them. They are, after all, the people who have made our world a good place in which to live despite the unrest of today.

It is not high station or monetary means that makes genuine pride of family in our country, but the character, stamina and achievement which those people have had, or gained. We're all immigrants here unless we are pure-blooded American Indians, which few of us are, and just the fact that some of our grandfathers caught earlier boats than others, makes them no better. I have a feeling, too, that the lower deck of the Mayflower or the Susan Constant must have been just as dirty and uncomfortable, perhaps more so, than any later steerage passage. And that very fact makes me even more proud of those people who endured it.

It was the German poet, Goethe, I believe, who said: "All truly wise thoughts have been thought thousands of times already. To make them ours, we must think them over again ourselves, honestly, sincerely, until they take root in our own experiences." I think most of us here would agree that we like the basic thoughts of those men and women who are responsible for our being Americans in this year of 1971. We might be very wise if we would learn enough of their personalities and characters to re-think some of their thoughts and make them our own. Surely we can, if we know them, learn from their mistakes and profit from their wisdom.

I wonder if anyone, even those who scoff at ancestors, can honestly say that he has not at sometime heard voices whispering from the past? Edmund Rice and his fellows were Puritans, and a poet has said, "No Puritans can die. Their manner still lives on and must till all their kind are clay. Restraining hands reach out from Burial Hill....." I know exactly what he means, and I'm sure some of you do, too. I know, as you all must know, that Family Pride can often influence a person's behaviour for the better. Even in this age of derision for tradition and convention, there are many who feel that a Family can give one more of a hold on life. Roots, background, -- call it what you will -- it offers a soundness, a feeling of security that is desired by even the most sophisticated. I personally believe that many of the rebels of today act as they do because, perhaps subconsciously, they resent their own loss of these blessings. If they knew real Family Pride and true family affection, they would not be disgracing their names by rioting in the streets, and committing acts of vandalism.

You will find yourself developing a fine Philosophy of Life, too, if you get acquainted with your family back through the years. I like the inscription on a monument in Amesbury's Union Cemetery. The big, granite stone bears simply the words "Life Forevermore." I have heard it said that those who die are not dead as long as they are not forgotten. Can you think of a nicer way to give our dead "life forevermore" than by handing on their names and telling their stories to the children of their families, generation after generation, far up the future years?

Some of you have heard the story of, again, little Johnny who was busily drawing when his mother asked, "What is your picture going to be, Johnny?" "I'm making a picture of God," answered the boy. "But, Dear," protested his mother, "Nobody knows what God looks like." "Well, they will when I finish this," said Johnny. And I like to think that when I finish the word pictures that I often tell for the children of our family, they will have some idea of how their own forefathers appeared.

To me, Daniel Pierce, the blacksmith of old Newbury, whose name appears on my own family chart in the tenth generation back, is very much a real person after these more than three hundred years. I like to think of him as a big, dark-bearded man, reaching up over his forge, as my grandmother used to tell us he did, to get the bag of coins with which he paid for the Spencer-Pierce-Little property on Little's Lane in Newbury, when he bought it from his nephew in 1647. Another who is still very much alive to me is my great-great-great-great grandmother, Elizabeth Dewey Follett. Widowed in the Wyoming Valley Indian Massacre in Kingston, Penn. on July 3, 1778, she left the scalped bodies of her husband and her oldest son in the smoking ruins of their home, and with her six other children -- all under sixteen and one a baby whom the others had to carry -- escaped to make her way from Pennsylvania to Vermont, over 400 miles, between July and October. Walking the greater part of the way, through trackless forests infested with panthers, bears, savages and other wild beasts; subsisting on roots, berries, nuts and the small game which she and the older children could snare, she brought her family home, establishing a legend that has inspired seven generations of her descendants.

I'm sure an interest in genealogy could turn up equally interesting stories for all of you, and give you the same feeling of pride in your early grandparents. Some of you, I have no doubt, are well acquainted with the names and stories of your forefathers, but others seem to think of that past of their families as a deep, dark secret or a complete myth. To them a Family Tree is only a collection of names of dead people whose lives, many years ago, were as dull as yours and mine appear to most teen-agers today. Of course, they are wrong.

If it is spice they are looking for, the study of their own families can be as exciting as any modern novel or Hollywood production. Actually, from any point of view -- whether you approve or disapprove -- is there any subject that is more completely based on that controversial word, capital S-E-X? Did you ever stop to wonder why your grandmother married your grandfather? Did he catch her on the rebound after an unhappy mesalliance? Couldn't she get anyone else? Was it for social prestige? Or was theirs a truly happy and romantic love affair in a moonlight and roses atmosphere? And why did he marry her? Did he need a good cook? Did her father have money? Was she a raving beauty whom all the gay Victorian blades desired? Or could he just not live without her? It can lead to much interesting conjecture -- can't it? Genealogy is not just a pastime for bored maiden ladies by any means.

If you enjoy a good puzzle, you'll never find a better one, nor one that gives more satisfaction in its solving. But don't just choose some great and famous man whose name happened to be the same as yours and claim him as a grandparent. It has been done, you know, but it could prove very embarrassing to you. You have to be able to prove, by records, that your paternal line traces directly back to him. And to do that, the research is fun. You will find countless stories and meet fascinating

characters whom you will be proud to claim as your relatives. There may be others of whom you will not be so proud -- but I guess that's a part of life, isn't it? Some will be the "salt of the earth" in character and personality, and others will give you many a good laugh.

But don't make the mistake of laughing when ten people in the same room with you, supposedly unrelated, state that they are all descended from John and Priscilla Alden, for instance. Giving only average families to each generation from those early Pilgrims down to our own day, and allowing for deaths, non-marriages, and non-productivity, there are probably well over a million people now living in our country who could honestly lay claim to being of that blood. Of course -- and probably luckily -- they don't all know it. But the next time you hear some stuffy person say, "Oh, yes, all my ancestors came over on the Mayflower," you can give him a big laugh, and back it up with some figures. At the time the Mayflower landed at Plymouth, approximately 12 generations ago, there were in this world 2,048 people destined to become the ancestors of that one person. The little sailing vessel must have been a triple Queen Elizabeth to have carried all for whom that honor is claimed. As a matter of fact, the Mayflower Company numbered just 102, and of that number only 23 of the men are believed to have descendants living today.

Don't start bragging about your pure, unadulterated Scotch -- or Irish, or English, or German blood until you really know, because you never can tell. One man who was sure he would learn he was descended from Brian Boru was greatly disappointed to discover that his supposedly full-blooded Irish grandfather, Michael Broderick, had changed his name from Brodinsky upon arriving in America from Russia. A lady ambitious for social position discovered a Tudor among her not far distant grandparents, but refused to claim him when it was learned that the original name had been Todarenska. Of course, Mr. Todarenska may have been a much nicer person than the Tudors!

Perhaps you have heard of the man who wagered that he could trace his ancestry from Adam and Eve. He was newly rich -- self-made and an outstanding example of unskilled labor -- and with the aid of quack professional genealogists, he gained a family tree to go with his money. Through an intricate network of politicians, contractors, peat-bog workers, and Irish Kings, connected by a wandering Jewish minstrel to the tribes of Benjamin, he finally traced back to the people of the land of Nod, and if you remember your Bible, Cain, son of Adam and Eve, married a daughter of the Land of Nod. So the gentleman claimed to have his descent in black and white from Adam and Eve -- if you want to believe it. I hope none of you is so ambitious, for if you care for authenticity, you will find the work frustrating.

You are lucky if you even know, off hand, the names of all your great-great grandmothers. "Oh, of course," you may say. "That was grandmother's grandmother, and her name was Mehitable Abigail Bradley." Fine, but what about the other seven? Yes, seven, for if you will reckon it up, you will learn that back in the days of the American Revolution there were living eight men and eight women who were to become your ancestors. If you can tell the names of those sixteen people, with the names of their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, you are a somewhat unusual person for genealogists estimate that there are only about a thousand families in the United States whose members can give their ancestry completely and correctly for five generations. The names of people -- at least in the past when records were kept more sketchily than now -- do not live even a hundred and fifty years unless generations of their families have taken an interest. Some lines you will follow easily ten, fifteen, or even thirty or more generations, but five complete generations, means sixteen different lines. However, there are many ways to ferret them out.

First, if you are serious about learning your own family record, don't waste any more time. Write down your own name, those of your parents, then their parents, and so-on,

with dates and places of birth, deaths and marriages. Before you get too deeply involved, you will want to tabulate your data on a formal chart. There are many types of "family trees", as you can see here, but the most simple one, giving direct lines only, is the fan, or circle type. Others give entire families -- brothers and sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins -- and it can get terrifically complicated. In conjunction with such a chart, you will want also to keep a loose-leaf notebook record for leads and anecdotes. Be careful to jot down everything you learn -- full names, even nicknames, dates and places of residence, family stories and connections. Some of the information may be useless, but some will prove valuable in most unexpected places.

Most of the material -- charts, notebooks, and even books on method instructions can be purchased at Goodspeeds Bookshop in Boston, or you can easily make the charts yourself.

Before it is too late question any and all elderly relatives you may have about their families. I'm sure every one of us who has ever done genealogical work has at some-time said, "If I had only thought to ask grandmother about that!" If you get stymied and can learn no more from Great-aunt Lizzie or from the Family Bible, turn to the Vital Records.

If all your lineage is in Massachusetts from 'way back, you are particularly fortunate in your work because every public library in the state has bound volumes of Massachusetts Vital Records, by towns, from 1620 to 1850, with the exception of those few towns whose records may have been destroyed by fire or other catastrophe. You can always write, questioning the town clerks of towns where your family may have lived. Most of them are glad to help and for a slight fee, will search town records for information. Cemetery records are useful. Sometimes land records can help. Old wills, deeds, diaries or journals can often be found in libraries or attics. Library staffs are very helpful and will seek out histories or genealogical volumes which can give much information. We are near enough, also, to make good use of the library of the New England Historical and Genealogical Society in Boston.

But let me warn you not to make your family record a mere listing of names and dates. That is what has given genealogy the name of being dry as dust. Remember the Biblical genealogies? "Hezekiah begat Manasseh, and Manasseh begat Amon, and Amon begat Josiah, and Josiah begat Jechomiah --" and so on ad infinitum! It seems to me there is nothing more deadly than a string of begats. There is so much more to life than begin, beget and begone!

What you will want, I am sure, is a family history that will make your distant grandparents seem like real, living relatives, warm and lovable; probably often stern, but with flashes of tenderness and humor; perhaps usually plodding, but occasionally adventurous; sometimes pathetic, but often heroic.

That is the large, over-all picture of American ancestry -- and believe me, by learning all you can of the lives and loves of your grandparents and great-great-great grandparents, you can create the image for your own family.

And why should we want to know all this? Because the importance of any history is not merely to preserve our inheritance like a precious fossil in a museum.. What is really important is that we give our children an appreciation of the work and deeds of those forefathers and the ability to shape the elements into a new and living pattern -- the capacity to adapt the heritage and apply its fine strength and quality to changing conditions.

More than ever before, our country needs among its citizens a knowledge and appreciation of the blood, sweat and tears that went into its founding and its growth, and of the joys and satisfactions that have accompanied its advancements. It is members of families such as ours that can, and should, take the lead in promoting such knowledge. We have a wonderful country -- we have had wonderful people through the years -- Americans can hold their heads high in any company among the nations of this world, and the debunkers of American History do us all a great disservice.

It is an old Chinese proverb that says: "If the roots are deep, there is no danger that the winds will fell the tree." I like to think that among the descendants of Edmund Rice, the roots are deep.

And if I have "gotten through" to any of you this afternoon, if any of you who are not already bitten are aroused to delve further into your family histories, I will venture to say that it will "get" you, as it does all who are exposed to it. Perhaps you will be fortunate enough to discover a nice pirate in your ancestry. Many a present-day New Englander has wished for one to brighten the Puritan grey of his own family chart! But whatever you may find, remember that those whose names you never heard before are just as much your grandparents as those whose names you happen to bear -- and each one is a part of you.

"Which Grandmother is that?" we used to ask, standing a little back and looking up at the calm face within the gilded frame.

She seemed full kin to everything about -- to other pictures on the parlor walls of thin-lipped boys already eyeing death, and frail young girls whose hair was never gray -- and to the riot of life that ran below, our patterning feet, the crackling of the fire, the gossip of the neighbors come to call.

"Which grandmother was that?" we used to ask, not caring much -- half-curious to know whose was the dark and looped hair, the curving mouth, high-cheekboned face and unrevealing eyes, her hands laid straight, and lace about her throat.

So little that was hers came down the years. She kept her immortality only in those sparse words which Father said: "My father's mother, born Maria Hayes. Taught school at Merrill's corners for a while. Quick wits, they say. I don't remember her."

Why is it, when these trees are starred with buds of gold and green and red on wet, black bark, when I can lift my face to this soft rain, be glad of life and love and summer night -- that all my thoughts go back through space and time to a dead woman's picture on a wall?

All these fair things were hers, as they are mine -- things which she knew and loved and laughed about, and then without a protest laid aside.

And who am I to think of keeping more? Rise where I can by fame, or love, or fight, the time must come when I shall only be a grave, pale face behind a gilded frame to which a child will lift appraising eyes and lightly ask,

"Which ancestor is that?"