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A family history newsletter for:
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Sinsapaugh Sencabaugh Sencenbaugh Sencerbox
Sincebaugh Sencebaugh Sincerbeaux Sincerbox
Sensabaugh Sencibaugh Cincebeaux Sensaboy
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and other variations of the name

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Kissing Cousins (And Other Unusual Branches of the Family Tree)

by Kathie Sencabaugh

While the study below focuses on the descendants of William Sencabaugh of Prince Edward Island (PEI), the trends illustrated in that family are common to many ancestral lines.

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I was in hot pursuit of my great-great-grandmother, or rather, of her maiden name.

Everyone in the family seemed to know that my great-grandparents were Benjamin Horton Sencabaugh and Margaret Clements. A little investigation had revealed that Margaret's father was William Clements, a native of England who had come to PEI as a young man. A trip to the cemetery in Murray Harbour had produced a monument for William Clements and not one, but two, wives. The inscription for the second wife was quite clear. "Elizabeth W. Machon, wife of William Clements, 1831-1912. But simple arithmetic told me that my great-grandmother was a child of the first wife. Here the gravestone had failed me. It read, "William Clements, d. May 23, 1891, Ae. 76; also his wife, Mary Ann, died November 24, 1856, Ae. 42." Mary Ann Who?

Now I sat in the office of Vital Statistics, waiting impatiently to see whether my latest brainstorm had borne fruit. Margaret Clements Sencabaugh had died in 1926, after registration of deaths had become mandatory in Prince Edward Island. I had come seeking her death certificate, in hopes that it would give the names of both of her parents. I could barely contain my excitement as Claire Stedman, certificate in hand, approached me. "Let me see...", she began, "Father, William Clements...mother, Mary Ann Sencabaugh." I was stunned. "Omigod," I remember saying, "they were cousins!" First cousins, to be precise.

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Twenty years after that discovery, I'm no longer shocked, or even surprised, when my research into the families of the Murray Harbour area turns up marriages between closely related kin. Over the past few years I have studied, with the aid of a growing computer database, the complicated network of marriages and intermarriages that bound together the families of several small communities in the southeastern corner of Prince Edward Island. In these communities the occurrence of marriages within the broad definition of the family group was a common and accepted fact of life. The Sencabaugh family of Prince Edward Island was no exception to this pattern.

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In the early generations of the family we find three types of marriages that, from our twentieth century perspective, appear unusual, if not almost scandalous, yet never cease to fascinate us: the cousin marriage, the double marriages, and the serial sibling spouses.

Anthropology, Genetics, and History

Most societies have established at least minimal rules governing the choice of a mate. One of the major bases on which anthropologists define and classify a society is its stance on marriage. A primitive culture is either exogamous (marrying outside of the clan or tribe) or endogamous (marrying within the clan or tribe).

We now realize, or course, that it is genetically preferable to marry outside the immediate clan. A child born to parents who are closely related has vastly increased odds of inheriting recessive genetic abnormalities which may be carried on his parents' chromosomes. Although our ancestors lacked our knowledge of genetics, they seem to have been in some way aware of this, perhaps from their observations of the results of close inbreeding of their own livestock. For whatever reason, the Judaeo-Christian tradition has always prohibited marriages between two people in the closest degrees of kinship – parents and children, siblings, aunts or uncles and nephews or nieces – relationships which the tradition defines as incest.

Cousins, however, were an entirely different matter. The Old Testament relates many instances of cousin marriages. Yet the Canon Law of the Roman Catholic Church, codified during the middle ages, took a clear stand against the marriage of blood relatives. Until 1939, marriages between two people who were third cousins or closer were prohibited without dispensation. The detailed records of marriages and births kept by the parish priests were not only a record of the sacraments of the Church, but also an attempt to keep track of just who was related to whom, and how closely, in order to ensure that people did not enter into consanguineous marriages. For the royalty and the nobility of the middle ages, for whom marriage within the family was the preferred means of preserving and consolidating the family's wealth and power, the laws of consanguinity were honored more in the breach than in the observance; but it is probably safe to say that the common person, lacking the means to procure a dispensation, was less likely to marry a kinsman, and probably had healthier children as a result.

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