

Dear Family and Friends,

December, 2020

It's been quite a year, hasn't it? We sincerely hope that you and yours have managed to stay healthy through it all.

The Kuening family has taken a simple yet effective approach to avoiding infection: each day we march into the back yard at precisely 5 PM and yell "GO AWAY, COVID" over and over at the top of our lungs for three minutes. The rest of the time we hide in the house. If somebody arrives with mail or a delivery, we pretend we're not there (a technique that is especially effective with bill collectors). We're convinced that our daily ritual is the reason we have kept the virus at bay, and recommend it to you highly.

However, it's fair to admit that we're starting to get a little bit bored. As in "I will gnaw my own foot off if they don't put something good on TV in the next THIRTY SECONDS" bored. Of course, "good" and "TV" are contradictory terms, so things have been getting a bit tense in the household. A month ago Pat and Geoff got into a huge fight (involving clubs and maces, although the grenades fortunately remained in the closet) about whether cheese should be shredded with the coarse or fine side of the grater. (Our new cat, Luna demonstrated her promising future as an international negotiator and solved the conflict by the simple expedient of eating all the cheese.)

Fortunately, serendipity intervened. One day, while Xandie was working on graduate-school applications, Geoff casually mentioned that he didn't really know what his father had done in World War II. "I know he was a Marine in the Pacific, but he never talked about what happened," he said. Well, if you've ever had contact with graduate students—or even a budding one like Xandie—you know that they are always looking for an excuse to do something other than what they're supposed to be doing. Boom! Before you could say "search engine" she was typing away at her keyboard.

The thing about Xandie is that she's good with this Internet thing. We mean, *really, really* good. You want to know how good? We'll be driving down the freeway, glance off to the side, and see a moderately unusual building. Maybe it looks kind of like a blend between a gas station and a church. "That's an interesting sight," we'll say. Three seconds later Xandie will announce, "It's the First Baptist Church of Exxon, left-handed prayer division. It was founded in 1982 by Father Ralph Enron, who was a descendant of John D. Rockefeller and came to prominence in the 1970's when he discovered that mixing LSD with petroleum could cause cars to fly."

70-year-old military records are a bit trickier to dig up, but they were no match for Xandie The Internet Maven. 24 hours later she started printing out all sorts of forms and documents. First she found where Grandpa Jack had done his training ("jdenl", it said next to his name, which Geoff suggested probably stood for "just doesn't ever need lunch"—turns out that instead it means a much more boring "joined by enlistment"). From there she soon tracked down the dates he was sent back East, when he was sent to Guam to be an intelligence officer (obviously something that didn't rub off on Geoff), and when he came home after it was all over (but somehow the clerks didn't take note of the two wool blankets he liberated from the Navy, nor of the time he singlehandedly vanquished 437 enemy soldiers who had dared to raid his platoon's beer supply).

But that was only the beginning. Did you know there are hundreds of Web sites devoted to genealogy? Who woulda thought that anybody besides Xandie would be interested in such things? Geoff sug-

gested that there might be one named whoismydad.com¹ or perhaps amiroyalty.com² but Xandie chose the much more mundane ancestry.com because they offered a 14-day free trial. Xandie is living on a graduate student's budget (practicing for next year) so she signed up and then canceled at the end of the two weeks. But in the meantime... hoo boy was she busy.

"Did you know your grandfather was a judge?" she asked Geoff. Well, yeah. Cows at the county fair, right? "Nope, realio trulio. And his father too." Strange; Geoff had always assumed that his family's encounters with the law had been on the other side of the bench, if you know what we mean. But there it was. She had found it on the Internet so it must be true. And in no time at all she had traced both branches of Geoff's family back to the time when they had first set foot on American soil (which apparently happened in 1242 as part of a Viking expedition, but it took them until 1835 to get American citizenship because they hadn't learned to spell their own names).

Meanwhile Pat sat on the couch looking grumpy and making drawings of wildlife. What about *her* relatives? After all, her grandfather on her mother's side had been a "gaoler" in Wales (we think that's a person who speaks Gaelic, or maybe Gaolic). And British is an *old* society that has been keeping records for a very long time. Like, decades for sure. Maybe there was something interesting, like she was descended from the cavewoman Glog (well-known as the inventor of fire) by way of Charles Darwin—which would nicely explain her recent interest in bird-watching (then again, maybe she's just turning into Catwoman).

So off went Xandie again. Unfortunately she couldn't prove the connection to Glog (apparently cavepeople couldn't read and write), nor Darwin. But she had soon filled out family trees for both of us. Sadly, there isn't any royalty on either side. But it was kind of fun to discover that we actually had great-great-great-grandparents. (Geoff had always surmised that the Kuennings had sprung fully formed from a German beer vat as a result of an unfortunate yeast accident.)

But wait, there's more! Xandie (re-)connected with her birthmother this year, so that gave her two more family trees to explore. And there was still a day left on the Ancestry trial. Yay, more diagrams! More official records to print out! Pat had to buy five boxes of paper (at 5,000 sheets per box) to handle the demand; we now have enough data to start a nice fire if it suddenly decides to snow in Claremont.

In the process, by the way, Xandie discovered that both she and Pat are illegitimate blood relatives of the famous British poet, Lord Byron. You know, the one who wrote *Don Juan*? And Byron was father of Ada Lovelace, who was the first computer programmer ever. So everybody in the family is weirdly connected!

Or at least weird.

Love,
Geoff

Pat

Xandie

From Pat's Nature Journal



¹It actually exists!—but it sells exercise equipment. Go figure.

²It doesn't; perhaps Geoff should build it.