

A Burnett Genealogical Odyssey

Terry Burnett

Summertime in Columbia, South Carolina is almost unbearable. Natives even refer to the city (only half-joking) as “the screen door to hell.” So when my wife, Sally, told me that the average July daytime temperature in Boone, North Carolina was 75 degrees, I immediately told her to make a camping reservation.

We arrived at the campground in Boone just after dark on Friday night and as I sat outside our motor home reveling in the delicious cool, I noticed a young man across the way wearing a kilt. I suddenly realized that we had come to Boone during the famous Grandfather Mountain Highland Games.

I had never been to the Games, but had always wanted to “get in touch” with my Burnett Scottish roots, so on Sunday, with a great deal of anticipation and no specific expectations, we took a shuttle to the top of Grandfather Mountain and started walking around.

The experience changed my life. The pageantry was amazing. The music, the colors, the shared sense of connection to all things Scottish, the sights, smells, laughter, the youngsters - both girls and boys in their highland finery, the skirl of the pipes, all contributed to making me feel a part of something bigger and grander and yet more intimate than I could have expected.

To top it off, I had the pleasure of meeting Jim Burnette and other Burnett kin at the House of Burnett tent. I was immediately “all in” and decided then and there to throw myself into participation with the House of Burnett.

I signed up for membership. I bought a kilt and all of the necessary (and some not-so-necessary) habiliments. I decided to offer my services as a convenor for local and regional highland games, such as those in Charleston, Columbia, Myrtle Beach, and Greenville, South Carolina.

My membership included a subscription the Burnett Banner, which is a wonderful and lively family newsletter full of great stories, great information, and great people. One of the most interesting recent articles I found is archived under the Genealogy heading. It was an article by Terry Burnett Barwin, who is managing the Burnett Y-DNA Project. The Project is designed to trace the Y-DNA lineage of Burnett males so that common ancestors can be identified for as far back as eight or more generations, thus allowing insight into shared ancestry often in spite of the absence of early birth, death, marriage, baptismal, land, etc., records.

I contacted Terry, and not only did she encourage me to participate in the Project, but she immediately and graciously began to examine my own sparse Burnett genealogy. Terry is a very accomplished Genealogist, whose careful and thorough research opened to me a whole new world of knowledge and insight into my Burnett ancestry.

Terry’s persistent digging transformed the way I see my past - and yes, it is *my* past. Most of us

see genealogy as names and dates and places - mere disembodied facts without relevance or connection to who we are. But I met *people*. I met a man named John Burnett (likely the first of my line to come to America), who risked everything, who left everything, to come to Virginia in 1675 to make a home and a life. I met James Burnett, born about 1750, who served in the Virginia Line during the American Revolution. He endured the bitter winter of 1777-78 at Valley Forge with Washington, and then fought at Monmouth Court House in New Jersey. I got to know my great-uncle John Lawson Burnett, who graduated from Vanderbilt Law School, served in the Alabama House and Senate, and ultimately served ten terms in the US House of Representatives from Cherokee County, AL. He authored a controversial immigration reform bill and became the target of a terrorist bomb plot in 1919 (I felt like his story was taken from the evening news!). I met adventurers, risk-takers, entrepreneurs, business and mine owners, soldiers, politicians - even slave owners. Through wills, diaries, news articles, lawsuits, and obituaries I began to understand them not merely as names and dates on headstones, but as people - as *my* people.

As a part of this odyssey, I began to appreciate that where I came from and from whom I came has informed who I *am*. Their history is *my* history. Their adventures, successes, failures (moral and otherwise) are in some measure my own. I would not be here, I would not be who I am, without them. Their blood flows in my veins and in my son's and daughter's and granddaughters' veins.

Through my participation in the Burnett Y-DNA Project and Terry's unerring research, I have come to see that I am part of this larger, grander Burnett story. You are too. We are connected to our Burnett ancestors and to each other through shared blood, pain, and joy. And there is nothing better.

I encourage all Burnett men to participate in this amazing Project. The monetary cost is small. The investment of time is negligible. But the reward is great. This Project has the potential to bring us all much closer together as a larger family, and to lead us all on an odyssey that can connect us to our past, our present, and indeed, our future.