

Found! Unclaimed Persons

What do family historians and coroners have in common? They're teaming up to help find the families of unclaimed persons from all over the country. Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak tells you how.

BY MEGAN SMOLENYAK SMOLENYAK

I USUALLY WRITE ABOUT orphan heirlooms, but this time I thought I'd introduce a concept that's both related and radically different: unclaimed persons. Orphan heirlooms and unclaimed persons are similar in that they both involve locating the living, but beyond that, they're worlds apart.

What's an Unclaimed Person?

Unclaimed persons are people who go to their graves with no family to claim them. They aren't John and Jane Does; unclaimed persons are individuals whose identities are known, but whose next of kin aren't. And because our society has become so mobile, so busy, and so fragmented, the number of unclaimed persons is escalating.

I learned about the phenomenon when I tripped across a newspaper article that mentioned the struggles of coroners' offices trying to cope with this issue. Several examples were offered, including one from Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania, in which the family Bible of an unclaimed person was in the possession of the coroner. That sparked a light-bulb moment.

In the course of writing *Found*, I've rescued a number of family Bibles, so I thought I could use the same genealogical detective skills to locate the family of this man. I called and offered my services, explaining that I was a professional genealogist and detailing my experience with this kind of research. They invited me to visit.

Evolution of Unclaimed

I met with officials in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and wound up locating the next of kin on several of their cases, though not for the one that originally attracted my attention. I also did a little googling and came across <www.unclaimedpersons.com>, a website hosted by San Bernardino County, California. I was startled to find a database of several thousand unclaimed people, who had died in California.

I browsed through the website, plucked about half a dozen cases, and located the next of kin. The research was very similar to the sleuthing I do for orphan heirlooms, the primary difference being that the cases were fairly contemporary. I called the office in San Bernardino and shared my results.

This all happened shortly before Marcy Brown and I launched RootsTelevision.com, an online channel of free genealogy videos. As soon as I explained the situation to Marcy, she and I agreed that we

could produce a show to bring attention to this serious, but addressable, problem.

It took a while. We needed to approach coroner's offices, solve more cases, coordinate schedules, and film and edit a couple of episodes. Since my personal experience had started with Lackawanna and San Bernardino counties, we featured them in the premiere episode.

Unclaimed Persons, the Show

At the end of May 2008, we uploaded the first episode, which you can watch at RootsTelevision.com (search for "unclaimed" in the "Search Video" field). Two cases are featured. The first, the Finch case, was the Lackawanna County one that sparked my interest. Although I didn't solve it at the time, we did manage to return the family Bible that had been among Finch's possessions (it belonged to another family). Finch's case was solved shortly after.

The other case is about a man named Higgs who died in a jeep in the desert. The most compelling part may be an interview with Higgs's brother, who received the call from the coroner. Listening to the brother brings Higgs back to life, in a sense, and helps you understand how a body can go unclaimed. A supplementary video explains the research involved in this case.

When we put this first show online, we knew there would be interest, especially within the genealogical community. Still, we weren't prepared for what happened.

RootsTelevision.com was inundated with e-mails from family historians who wanted to offer their research talents to the cause. Since RootsTelevision.com is a two-person company, our resources were already stretched. We brainstormed ways to harness this spirit of volunteerism as quickly as possible. A website made sense, but that would take time. We needed something fast.

Unclaimed Persons, the Facebook Community

Earlier in the year, I had registered on Facebook and swiftly found myself addicted. In addition to personal profiles, Facebook offered a group option that could be set up almost instantly. It might not be perfect and offer all the functionality we desired, but it would be a quick solution to creating a gathering place for people who had contacted us individually.

We launched Unclaimed Persons on Facebook, blogged about it, and told some other people, asking them to blog as well. Our numbers started growing. First there were just a few of us, then we jumped to triple digits, and before we knew it, there were more than 400 volunteers.

We needed a system. The RootsTelevision.com show had left San Bernardino's <www.unclaimedpersons.com> data-

base overwhelmed, the coroner's office struggling to keep pace, and some cases being solved multiple times.

Fortunately, the show had also attracted calls from other coroner's offices around the country, so we had a list of cases that weren't anywhere online. Before long, a structure began emerging: volunteer case managers and administrators oversaw individual cases. Folks like Dee Welborn and Terry Elliott devoted their efforts almost full-time. With some trial and error, we eventually developed a process for posting, tracking, solving, and submitting new cases. It still needs tweaking, but it's getting better all the time.

And we quietly continued to court additional coroner's

Unclaimed persons are individuals whose identities are known but whose next of kin aren't. The number is escalating.

offices, assuring each that volunteers wouldn't make contact with family and educating them about how genealogists can sometimes find relatives who haven't been found through other means.

Unclaimed Persons, the Website

We still needed an easy-to-find, permanent, and public location online. Enter <www.unclaimedpersons.org>.

The website includes videos, guidelines for potential volunteers, a case submission form for medical examiners, feedback from coroners we've worked with, our solved-cases count, and more. If you're interested in participating, watch a few videos to get a feel for the work involved; click on a Facebook icon to join the group. Then jump in or monitor discussions until you're ready to contribute.

What's Next for Unclaimed Persons?

Unclaimed Persons has taken on a life of its own. If you'd told me six months ago that there would be a volunteer force more than 400 strong working with coroners across the country, I would have said you were dreaming. So it's hard to fathom where we might be in another six months. The one thing I do know is that this partnership of coroners and genealogists is providing a valuable service that's very meaningful to the families involved. As our website says, every life is worth remembering.

MEGAN SMOLENYAK SMOLENYAK, co-founder of RootsTelevision and the Unclaimed Persons initiative, welcomes orphan heirloom submissions at <www.honoringourancestors.com>.



AS IT HAPPENS. You can learn more about how the group has helped find family members of unidentified persons by watching the videos at RootsTelevision.com.