Looking for Family Secrets: A Journey

Beverly Scott
Author of Sarah’s Secret: A Western Tale of Betrayal and Forgiveness
LOOKING FOR FAMILY SECRETS: A JOURNEY

By Beverly Scott
Foreword
Welcome to my journey to explore my family secrets and lore.

My search helped me satisfy long-standing curiosity about my family history and a rumored family secret, on the paternal side of my family tree.

One never knows what will be discovered when shaking the family tree. That was the risk, but curiosity kept me going forward, until I reached the end of the trail. Although I confirmed the family secret, there were major questions still unanswered. As a result, I decided to write a novel, based loosely on the family history I had discovered. As the author of “Sarah’s Secret: A Western Tale of Betrayal and Forgiveness,” I invite you to read and learn about the “back-story” to my novel.

I’d be happy to hear your comments and answer your questions. Please feel free to email me: bev@bevscott.com.

-Beverly Scott

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The Story Was True!
I had ventured into the National Archives to see what I could find about my grandfather, known to us as Harvey Depew Scott. I submitted the request to see his file including his name and Civil War enlistment information provided by my aunt. I was informed that I could come back the next day to review the file.

“Very few Civil War veterans have thick files like this,” the staff person said as he handed me two thick folders. Excitedly I began to read the forms and letters, yellow with age, which documented my grandfather’s lengthy pursuit of Veterans Benefits. At first my only goal was to search for the truth of the whispered story, that he had another family.

It was true! It was documented in these files. That was why my grandmother never received her widow’s benefits.

How My Genealogy Journey Began
In the early years of my adult life balancing my roles as mother, spouse and professional, I didn’t have time to think about my ancestors or my family heritage. However, as I attended family gatherings and funerals when my parents or their siblings died, I began to hear interesting family myths and stories that intrigued me. I was curious about the whispered secrets passed around. I heard about others who were pursuing their family roots. My aunt encouraged me to find information about her father, giving me his enlistment information. Finally, my genealogical journey began.

The National Archives
Reading the old documents, depositions and letters was engrossing. I learned details about Harvey Depew Scott, who I learned was John Howard Scott, born in 1840. He reported in his deposition that his father had died when he was four, so he was raised by his uncle. He claimed his name was wrongly recorded when he enlisted a second time in the Civil War and he swore his only wife was my grandmother, Ellen Russell Scott. Yet his first wife, Harriet Scott Gough, reported in her sworn deposition that he abandoned her in Texas with five children and a sixth on the way.

I wanted to know more. Who were his parents? Were there other relatives that had similar names? When did he marry his first wife and why did he abandon her? When and why did they go to Texas? Could I find an explanation behind these details? Like many other Americans, I was hooked and wanted to do more research to see what I could find out about this mysterious man that my grandmother never mentioned to her family after he died.

What I Found in Indiana
I had learned from the Archive files that he was born in Vermillion County, Indiana. I already knew that my grandmother’s family also came from Indiana, so I made a trip to Indiana to visit cemeteries, libraries and county court house records. I learned when John Howard and Harriet were married. I learned the names of his parents, Paul and Rebecca Scott and when they married. I was intrigued with the stories about Bill Swan, a river boat captain, the uncle who raised him. I found the cemetery with the grave of Captain Bill Swan and a record of John Howard’s mother, Rebecca, who was also Bill’s sister, dying in the
poor house. Her body was given to Captain Swan but there was no record of her grave. I found minimal information about John Howard’s father, Paul. I wanted to know who Paul’s parents were, did he have other relatives, where he lived before he came to Indiana, when he died and where he was buried.

My Grandmother, Ellen

I was more successful in tracking down information about my grandmother, Ellen’s family. I visited a cemetery, now an overgrown in a cow pasture, in Putnam County, Indiana with her ancestor’s graves. I found family marriage and birth records back three generations. I later visited the small Nebraska town where her parents homesteaded and learned stories of her family and her siblings. I uncovered the marriage records listing my grandmother’s name as Eva Ellen Russell marrying Harvey Depew Scott in 1892. She was 22; he was 52. There were records of their Nebraska homestead land claims made right after they married as well as land claims filed by Eva Ellen in the years after Harvey Depew died.

Later I found the newspaper report of Harvey Depew Scott’s death in 1911 in Hanley, New Mexico a small community outside of Tucumcari. Why were they in New Mexico? How long had they been there before Harvey Depew died? How long did my grandmother stay in New Mexico? I knew I needed to go to New Mexico, but first, I wanted to learn more about John Howard in Texas.

Harvey Depew Scott (aka John Howard Scott), my grandfather, as a young man.  Ellen Scott (nee Eva Ellen Russell), my grandmother, many years after her husband died.
John Howard Scott in Texas?

One of the depositions in the National Archive files from another Civil War soldier confirmed that his sister, Harriet, had married John Howard. She lived in Fort Worth, Texas when the deposition was given. I wondered if I could find more information and learn when and why John and Harriet and their children moved to Texas.

First, I explored the census records. I discovered that in 1870 John and his family had moved to Illinois; but, in the 1880 census, John was not listed. Instead, Harriet was listed with six children living in Parker County, Texas. What happened to John and why was Harriet in Texas?

Harriet Was Left Destitute

I turned back to the depositions. The government agents had tracked Harriet down in Fort Worth, thanks to her brother’s deposition. She reported that in the 1870’s, the family moved to Weatherford, Texas, a small rural community in Parker County west of Fort Worth, but no hints as to why they moved to Texas. In November 1879, John Howard had gone into town with a load of corn and never returned. Harriet said she was left destitute with five children and a sixth on the way. She looked for John tracking him to Fort Worth but ultimately lost the trail and assumed that he was dead. Five years later she had re-married and was running a boarding house in Fort Worth.

Following the census records also revealed three more generations of John Scott’s in Fort Worth, Texas, but no John Howard Scott. I wanted to know what had happened to him when he left Weatherford in 1879. Since I had found interesting information in libraries and historical societies in my search in Indiana and Nebraska, I decided the next stop in my journey was a visit to Texas.

He Got Out of Town Without a Trace

I had no better luck than Harriet. I could find no trace of John Howard in Weatherford or in Fort Worth. He got out of town and left no trace. I did find in the Scott family plot in the Fort Worth cemetery with two of the three generations of John Paul Scotts. In the library, I found the obituary for John Howard’s oldest son, J.P. Scott Sr., a “Pioneer in Business” who died in 1959 at age 92. It is Interesting that the obituary reports he “moved to Fort Worth from Weatherford after his father died”.

Where did John Howard go when he left Weatherford? When did he change his name to Harvey Depew Scott? What did he do between 1879 and 1892 when he married my grandmother? My journey and my search weren’t over yet. I still had many questions.

Clues in the Depositions

John’s first wife Harriet had reported that he had abandoned her in 1879. She believed he was dead and remarried five years later. But I knew he lived until 1911 under the name of Harvey Depew Scott.

Looking for clues, I combed the depositions he gave to government agents when he was trying to prove his identity as a Civil War Veteran.
He acknowledged that he was in Kansas and that in 1880 he worked as a cook for an “overland” expedition from Fort Dodge to Laramie, Wyoming. Another time he reported that he worked cattle.

**Longhorn Cattle Drives**

1880 was one of the peak years for cattle drives from Texas to Dodge City. Thousands of longhorn cattle were driven by drovers up the Chisholm Trail and the Western Cattle trail. It is estimated that over five to six million cattle driven up the Western were packed into wooden railcars and shipped to Kansas City, Omaha, St. Louis and Chicago. Some cattle were to be delivered farther north and were driven across western Kansas to Ogallala, Nebraska, Dakota Territory, Wyoming, Montana and as far north as Canada.

Going from Texas to Dodge City at ten to fourteen miles a day easily took two to three months. Life on the cattle drive was dusty, lonely and frequently dangerous. Any strange noise or unexpected event especially at night could precipitate a stampede of the thousand to fifteen hundred skittish animals. Heavy rains meant flooded rivers and the trail drivers had to get reluctant cattle into rushing water, make sure none of them were carried downstream with a fast-moving current or got stuck in the quick sand at the river’s edge.

**Dodge City: A Wild and Lawless Town**

Cattle towns provided distractions and entertainment for the drovers. Dodge City was infamous as a wild and lawless town. A typical frontier town, it acquired a reputation of glamour, excitement and opportunity. Buffalo hunters, cowboys, gamblers, gun slingers and railroad men were drawn to Dodge City for thrill of adventure and easy come, easy go money.

Although killings didn’t happen every day, they were not a rare occurrence either. In the saloons where drinking, gambling and female entertainment occurred, arguments among the rough characters who frequented these establishments were usually settled by gun fights. The men shot dead were often buried in unmarked graves on famous Boot Hill. Wyatt Earp, his brother, Dave Mathers and other famous gun slingers and killers hung out in Dodge City.

Did John Howard join a cattle drive from Texas to Dodge City and then go on to Wyoming? Did the lure of Dodge City entice him north from Texas? I believed there was a strong possibility he was in Dodge City or passing through during its rough and tumble days in the 1880’s.

**Glendo, Wyoming Under Water**

Although I could not find John Howard in the 1880 US Census, I found Harvey D. Scott living in Wyoming in 1890. The US Census records were destroyed by fire in 1890 but the National Archives had homestead records for Harvey D. Scott living in Glendo, Wyoming. In addition, the 1890 Veterans Census showed a Harvey D. Scott in Laramie County, Wyoming. This was when he changed his name. Some of the cattle drives continued north to Wyoming so perhaps he stayed with the drive as a cook and left the crew in Wyoming. I wanted to know more about his stay in Wyoming. I wanted to see where he homesteaded. Unfortunately, when I arrived in Wheatland, the county seat of Platte, Wyoming, I discovered Glendo, and the surrounding land is now under water from the Glendo Reservoir.
Land Records

The County Clerk’s Office land records confirmed that he “proved up” on his land, meeting the government requirements of living on the land, building a home and farming the land for five years. He received the land deed in 1892 and sold 40 of the 160 acres in 1893 for $450. From my earlier visit to Thedford, Nebraska, I knew that he had married my grandmother, Ellen in Thedford in 1892. Since she taught school in Wyoming, they must have met there.

I had also learned Ellen and Harvey bought land from her brother and her father in 1892 and 1893 so perhaps the sale of Harvey’s land in Wyoming helped to pay for the Nebraska farm land. Ellen sold the remaining 120 acres in Wyoming after Harvey’s death for only $40. Maybe it was so much less because there was less demand for land due to livestock losses in the recent severe winters; or it was the ending of the open cattle range in Wyoming. It is easy to imagine that my grandmother needed money in 1913 and sold it at a loss in desperation.

I had found my grandfather with the name we knew as an unmarried man homesteading in Wyoming seven years after he abandoned his first family. He married my grandmother in Thedford, Nebraska in 1892 and bought land from her family. Their three oldest children were born there.
Oklahoma

I continued to comb the documents I had copied from the National Archives and discovered that H.D. filed for Veterans Benefits due to disability in 1897. According to the documents they moved to Dewey County, Oklahoma in 1898. Thomas County, Nebraska land records show they sold their Nebraska farm land back to Ellen’s family in the same year. The family is listed in Oklahoma in the 1900 Federal Census.

However, by 1909, H.D. was living in a “canvas home (a tent with board siding) and ‘batching’” it in Arizona, according to the documents filed by Pension Bureau Examiner. “He is evidently in very straightened circumstances…as a great sufferer from asthma.” He reportedly went to Arizona “two or three times to get relief from his affliction.” But, he left his wife and four children in Oklahoma.

But why did they move to Oklahoma? Was H.D.’s health already deteriorating in 1898? Alas there are no clues in the Archive documents.

Oklahoma was one of the last territories to be open for homesteading. Dewey County was Cheyenne and Arapaho Indian land. In 1892, it was opened for settlement. A search of homestead records however, does not show H.D. or Ellen filing a land claim in Dewey County between 1898 and 1910. During my road trip to Oklahoma, unfortunately, I did not get to the Dewey County Court House to review land records before they closed. But H.D. Scott and wife must have purchased land there from a private owner, because later I discovered records in Thomas County, Nebraska that Ellen’s father and brother bought land in Dewey County, Oklahoma from Ellen and H.D. in 1901. Perhaps it is they who were investing in land in Oklahoma and H.D and Ellen purchased it and then resold it to them. I know from family lore that H.D. raised horses but as his health deteriorated, he may not have been able to continue that pursuit.
As I mentioned, the family is listed in Oklahoma in the 1900 Federal Census. My father was born in Oklahoma in 1907. Recording of births did not begin in Oklahoma until October of 1908. I have a notarized statement from the woman who attended my grandmother when my father was born documenting the date and location. I also have a picture of the house in which he was born taken many years later in the 1950’s. When I visited Dewey County in search of his birthplace recently, the small town they lived near, no longer exists.

Getting His Pension Before It’s Too Late
During the time the family lived in Oklahoma, my grandfather was trying to obtain his Veterans Benefits. The documents in the National Archives include correspondence regarding his deteriorating health. In April, 1909 as mentioned above, he was living in a tent in Scottsdale, Arizona, a community of sick people, and according to the Pension Examiner, he was “favorably known considering the short time he has been there” (since November 1908). By this time, he had filed three claims for Veterans benefits. My grandmother wrote to the Examiner when she sent her only picture of him, “I do hope he will get his pension before it is too late.”

The Pension Examiner wrote in April 1909,

In view of his poverty and physical condition and the fact that he has a family of young children and that it is his desire to remove his family to some place in the Rocky Mountain region, a matter of large expense, I recommend that the claim be made special, especially since the examination may take considerable time. He is old and his condition is precarious.

He was 69.

However, due to “discrepancies in the soldier’s statements,” the Pension Bureau ruled that more investigation was required. I wanted to know how they investigated the discrepancies and if my grandfather received his pension before he died in January 1911.

New Mexico
The 1910 US Census lists the family residing in Quay County, New Mexico in the community of Hanley outside of Tucumcari. They must have moved after H.D. returned from Phoenix in 1909. But why? The only clue is his deteriorating health and the recommendation from the doctor that he move to a warmer climate. But why Quay County, New Mexico? I learned from additional research that the area around Tucumcari had been publicized as choice farming land. My grandparents and many others were probably tantalized by the railroad advertisements offering free land and clean air good for those ailing from tuberculosis and asthma. H.D. suffered from asthma as mentioned by the Pension Examiner. With the hope of finding a farming paradise, a warmer climate and improved health, my grandparents moved to New Mexico. In August of 1910, a fifth child was born...a girl.
Discrepancies

In April, 1909 the Examiner had reported that there were discrepancies in H.D. (alias John Howard) Scott’s statements. In reviewing the Archive documents, the deposition given by my grandfather reveals what those discrepancies were. He was shown evidence, in September of 1909 that the soldier John H. Scott was not known by any other name during his service, that he married Harriet Foncannon and that he lived with her for many years. Yet, H.D. claimed he had never married her. When asked which statement was true, he replied “I will not answer. I will not discuss the matter.”

Although my grandfather, now going by Harvey Depew Scott, denied his first marriage, the Examiner must have been convinced that he was really John Howard Scott who served in the Civil War. H.D. Scott finally received his pension in December of 1910, in Hanley, New Mexico. He died one month later in January at age 70.

A Dugout?

What does my thirty-nine-year-old grandmother do now that she is a widow with five children living in rural New Mexico? I know that my grandmother had severe rheumatoid arthritis from an early age. She was not only left a widow but probably disabled. I know she ultimately moved back to Nebraska, but I wonder how she gets there and when she leaves Hanley. I want to know more about life in New Mexico and to find my grandfather’s grave. I planned another road trip…to New Mexico.

First stop was the Tucumcari Historical Museum. I learned almost immediately, much to my surprise, that my grandparents probably lived in a dugout given the time they arrived, 1910. The Homestead Act had opened land to settlers for free as long as they lived on their land. The initial dwellings were frequently dugouts because they were cheap to build and didn’t require lumber and other building materials. A dugout is a home dug into the side of a hill and often covered by straw or sod.
As my research continued I learned that settlers at that time frequently arrived on the railroad with boxcars divided into one area for livestock and another for farm equipment and household belongings. Some also had a raised platform on one end for the family to eat and sleep during their journey. Settlers were lured by the railroad who advertised the “choice farming” and clean air. But nothing was said about the low rainfall and the difficulty of finding water.

I looked for land records of a homestead claim with no results. Because H.D. died a little over a year after they had arrived, and Ellen left for Nebraska, they did not fulfill the requirement to live on the land for five years. I was out of luck in finding where they lived.

However, the museum staff helped me locate my grandfather’s grave which is now on private property. It is a white marker provided by the Veterans Administration with his birth name of John Howard Scott. Thirty years ago, two of H.D.’s sons, my uncles, visiting his grave site discovered that the grave marker was broken and falling apart. Their request for a new grave marker from the Veterans Administration began the family search to learn more about H.D.’s life which I later took over and have chronicled here.

Although I could not find much information about where H.D. and Ellen lived, I was still intrigued by how Ellen, severely crippled, managed to get her five children back to Nebraska. Reviewing the National Archives documents, I found correspondence between the Pension Bureau and my grandmother. She submitted an application for widow’s benefits almost immediately after H.D. died.

**Desolate Surroundings**

Then in the summer of 1911 she wrote that she would be going back to Nebraska and would send them her new address by September. One Government Agent’s report says that they “drove all the way from New Mexico, where the soldier died, to her old home in Nebraska.” From our perspective today, it sounds like they “drove” a car. But I am sure they could not afford to have a car at that time, so I assume
they drove a horse and wagon which matches the family story that her older sons drove the wagon and she laid in the back as they made their way back to Nebraska.

I also learned from the Archive documents that the Government Agent who came in April of 1912 to interview my grandmother in person, filed a sensitive descriptive report of that meeting. She was living in a tent south of Thedford, Nebraska where she had filed a land claim. He reports that

she hopes to establish a home for herself and children; but it looks like a most hazardous undertaking as she is practically an invalid because of rheumatism (sic), and her children are undersized puny looking little fellows, and they are more than a mile from the nearest water...In their present desolate surroundings their condition is pitiable in the extreme.

Not only were Ellen’s circumstances dire and “pitiable in the extreme,” but they were a mile from the nearest water from a river aptly named, the Dismal River. It also appears that this was the occasion when she learned about H.D.’s first wife. The agent describes that

until I informed her of the fact, claimant declares she had no knowledge of the existence of a former wife. Her grief and tears where convincing of the truth. She begged me not to tell anyone in her home neighborhood.

The report, that she begs the Government Agent not to tell anyone, helps explain why no one in the family knew about H.D.’s first family, why my grandmother shared no information about him with her children and why she avoided answering any questions about him. I had exhausted my sources about H.D. and Ellen Scott.

This journey of the genealogical research uncovered a fascinating story that deserved to be told. But, there were several missing pieces. Although I had much to learn about writing fiction, historical fiction, I decided to write this story using what I had learned as the foundation for the story and creatively filling in the missing pieces. The result is the publication of “Sarah’s Secret: A Western Tale of Betrayal and Forgiveness.”

What You Can Do

There are so many resources available if you are interested in researching your ancestors. It may be overwhelming. If you are just beginning, the following resources are a good starting place to begin and to learn.

The National Genealogy Society offers educational programs, publications and other resources.

Contact your state genealogy society such as the California Genealogical Society and Library which will have local resources for the state your ancestors lived and may have a resource rich library like the California Genealogical Society.

Utilize The National Archives as I did. There are many on-line data bases you can search for ancestors who were in the military or who emigrated from other countries. Of course, you can go to the National Archives in Washington, DC in person, too. It is a historical place.

By putting in an ancestor’s name and birth date, you can also search the census records, marriage, birth and death records here.
And you may want to join one of the many on-line genealogy sites such as Ancestry.com to build and document your family tree.

Recommendations: Search for documents that verify your ancestors birth, marriage, death, location, etc. Don’t accept the unverified (without documentation) suggestions on genealogy sites. They may or may not be accurate. And take notes of everyplace and site you have looked.

Happy researching! It is a fun and fascinating journey.
Now Available
Sarah’s Secret: A Western Tale of Betrayal and Forgiveness

Follow the paths of Sarah and Sam, the two key protagonists, as they tell their stories of trust, secrets, and betrayal in the old West. Their pioneer spirit helped to fuel the expansion into the Western territories of the United States. The two are historically on their separate journeys, yet they remain intimately connected. Through the fictionalized Western frontier tale of Sam and Sarah, the author, Beverly Scott, was inspired to reveal rumored secrets from her family history. In the 1880’s, Sam, who is irresponsible, lonely and untrustworthy has abandoned those he loves until he seeks redemption and marries Sarah. After Sam’s death in 1911, Sarah struggles to find the inner strength to overcome loneliness, poverty, and illness, to support her children. After a perilous journey by wagon from New Mexico to Nebraska, she learns of Sam’s betrayal. Will Sarah find forgiveness in her heart and the resolve to accept her new life alone?

You can purchase your copy of Sarah’s Secret at: