

Our Sutherland Connections by Margie Parker

Sometimes while doing genealogical research it seems you are collecting disconnected bits of information and then one day you find something that connects the dots and pulls it all together. This is that story.

In 2009 as a member of the Durham Heritage Society we were doing research for the Durham kiosk. Around the same time I began researching my Mother's Sutherland ancestors. I knew from our work on the kiosk that an Andrew Sutherland lived in Durham and two of his children were buried in the Durham Cemetery. However, I didn't think he had any connection to me. At this point I knew my great grandfather's name was Neil Sutherland, that he lived in Watervale, died quite young and was buried in the Hill Cemetery in Watervale. I did not know his parents' names or if he had any siblings.

In Nova Scotia Historical Vital Statistics I found Neil's marriage and learned his parents were Hugh and Nancy. At the McCulloch Center, I searched the Richie records and made a list of all the cemeteries in Pictou County that had a Hugh or Nancy Sutherland. Later in Nova Scotia Historical Vital Statistics I found the marriage of my grandfather, Sam Sutherland, and learned his father was born in Gairloch, NS. I knew that a Hugh and Nancy were buried in Millbrook Cemetery so in Aug. 2011, I visited and found their gravestones

In the summer of 2012, my sister told me about something she had discovered online called Farms and Farmers of Pictou County. This is a collection of articles which were written by R H Ward as he interviewed area farmers. The articles which contained facts of each farm, history of the property and other genealogical information were published in various newspapers between 1918 and 1923. In the Gairloch article published in Oct. 1920, I found the siblings of Neil Sutherland which included an Andrew Sutherland who had moved out West.

The official opening of the Durham Community Kiosk was Dec. 4, 2011. We had installed a box that contained a guest book for the Kiosk. Periodically, I checked the guest book and then one day in Sept. 2012, I read something in it that sent shivers through me. This is what I read:

*Dave Leyh Edmonton, Alberta Aug 23
2012*

*Nephew of John Gavin and
Henry A Sutherland buried in Durham Cemetery and Andrew Sutherland blacksmith in
the area.*

Lyle Leyh – Westlock Alta. Aug 23 2012

(Hugh Sutherland settled at Gairloch- father of Andrew Sutherland)

So Andrew Sutherland in Durham was my great grandfather's brother and the two children were 1st cousins of my grandfather. Should I try to contact this Lyle Leyh?

I used 411 and got a phone number for Lyle Leyh in Westlock, Alberta. Would I call? It took me until Dec to get up the courage to call and there was no answer. Then in Jan. 2013, I got a phone call from Lyle Leyh. He and his son, Dave had visited Nova Scotia for the first time the previous summer. Lyle was 88 years old. Before he left Alberta he had purchased a Sutherland tartan hat, with the hope that it might lead him to his Sutherland connections. It did not but what he wrote in the guest book did.

Lyle called me a few more times and that spring he called to say he had talked Dave into taking him back to NS next summer. He continued to call as he counted down the weeks. It was obvious how excited he was over this trip. He also sent me pictures and charts of his genealogy.

The big day finally came in Aug. 2013. They flew into Halifax and rented a car. The first person that he wanted to meet was my Mother and so the first visit was with her. Although Lyle and I are 3rd cousins he is much closer in age to my Mother than to me. They would stay in Pictou County for a few days and I would show them around before they headed to Cape Breton. So here we were my sister and I driving around the back roads of Pictou County with two perfect strangers. All that afternoon we drove around Durham, West River, Watervale, Gairloch and Millbrook as we pointed out where his ancestors had lived. What was so amazing was how relaxed and comfortable we felt. The conversation was so at ease, it seemed that all of us just couldn't talk fast enough. The highlight was seeing Lyle, visibly shaking with tears in his eyes, standing in the Millbrook Cemetery in front of the stone of our great-great grandfather, Hugh Sutherland, and hearing him say "I never thought I would ever be here in Nova Scotia and find where my great-great grandfather was buried".

After they returned to Alberta, Lyle sent me a coil-bound book called the Munro Manuscript. It was written by a Munro descendent from Texas in 1992 and contains a chapter on Andrew and Helen Sutherland. Andrew Sutherland's wife was Helen Munro daughter of William Munro of West River. In 1879, Helen was pregnant with their 11th child when they left Durham and went West to Manitoba. Lyle's grandfather, Donald Sutherland, was born in June 1879 in Emerson, Manitoba.

Lyle continued to communicate with me the following year and said he regretted not meeting the rest of my family. So in Aug. 2014 he and Dave returned to Nova Scotia for the 3rd consecutive year and visited the rest of my family. When we went to visit my brother it was again like they had known each other all their lives.

One never knows when you sign a guest book where it may lead you. The memory of Lyle standing in the Millbrook Cemetery will be with me forever.