The History of My Family:
As It Was Told To Me

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Purpose of Thesis

The purpose of this thesis was to enable me to understand more fully where my ancestors came from, how they fit into the immigration patterns of the United States and what they were like as people. I focused on my paternal grandparents' family (Skerritt/Acheson and Maxwell) and my maternal grandparents' line (Henry/Steele and Neuhauser or Newhouser.) Through personal interviews and research into the movement patterns of my ancestors, I retraced their arrival in America. I also followed the paths of my ancestors as they pushed through the frontier to their modern day locations. I studied the lives of my ancestors for similarities and characteristics which have filtered through the generations to my immediate family.
History intrigues me. Since I was a child, I have enjoyed hearing my grandparents’ stories of surviving in the “Good Old Days” as they refer to them, when a “child didn’t have it so easy.” Aside from a handful of unrelated stories, I knew little else about my ancestral background. Therefore, I decided to delve into something I have always been very curious about—the history of my family. Where did it come from? How did it become what it is today? What was it like for my grandparents growing up? What do I have in common with ancestors from more than a hundred years ago? These were all questions I was hoping to answer by the end of my research.

I began by sorting through family artifacts. To my disappointment, I found no family Bibles, diaries or even old letters—the obvious places to begin my search for clues from the past. Instead, I found two newspaper death notices and a handful of pictures, some of which accompany this paper. At this point, I realized the majority of my information would come by way of the oral tradition. I began by interviewing my grandparents and recording their stories. It was interesting to watch their faces as they traveled back many years in their minds. Often, details were sketchy or even nonexistent, but overall, I was amazed at how much detail they remembered. I also spoke to my parents and a few aunts and uncles. I began the interviews with questions concerning the names of family members and locale. The next question—what was it like to be a part of your family—focused on the character of the family and provided me with many funny stories and anecdotes. From that point on, one thought or memory led to another, evidenced by my paternal grandfather making a list of things to tell me so he would not forget or lose track of an important detail. Finally, surrounded by transcripts of the interviews, I painstakingly began to chronologically follow the life of each ancestor. Where dates and place names were sketchy, I used deductive reasoning to recreate the time frame and path of travel of each family member. The result is a narrative piece tracing each of my grandparents’ family lines. Much of the information from the transcripts has been paraphrased for the sake of clarity and brevity. However, I have attempted to use the actual words of my ancestors where deemed proper.

Throughout this process, I realized that creating a family history sketch is very difficult. Most of the stories have been passed down orally and have lost much of their detail and even accuracy. Often, there were gaps in my informants’ memories that were difficult to piece together. Much of the information preceding my great-grandparents’ generation has been lost over the years because it was never asked about nor written down. I also had difficulty in choosing which information was important and which would only be of value to my own ancestors. After leaving much of this information out, I finally realized that everything my ancestors experienced affected their lives in some way, thus affecting their history. I also realized that it is not only well-known names, outlandish adventures or harrowing events that make for a worthwhile story. Sometimes it is the happenings of day-to-day life that are most interesting.

In studying any historical period and the lives of its individuals, it is essential to start at the very beginning, recreating the frame of

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1 See appendix, p. i.
reference to which the individuals belonged. Without such a setting, it is impossible for those studying the period to have a sense of grounding or a complete understanding of experiences. Distortion takes place when people and events are taken out of the context of the situation in which they occurred. Therefore, I began by studying the state of the New World as my ancestors would have known it and the movement of people into the frontier. For the most part, the time period I am referring to is that of the mid- to late-1800s to the early 1900s. This is the era in which most of my American ancestors’ movements took place.

Political, social and economic upheaval in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries caused many people to uproot themselves and seek a different life in what is now the United States and Canada. Between 1776 and 1820, approximately 250,000 people migrated to the United States. Following 1820, immigration reached its highest levels in two distinct waves. The first, known as “Old Immigration” took place from 1840 to 1860 and brought with it 4.5 million people. The majority of these travelers came from Ireland, Germany, Great Britain, Scandinavia and Northwest Europe. The Great Famine in Ireland from 1845-1851, alone, was responsible for displacing 860,000 people. The second wave of immigration, called “New Immigration” took place beginning in the early 1880s and ending in the 1920s. This wave came from Central, Southern and Eastern Europe (Lind 9). Over the years many of these immigrants assimilated into mainstream culture to become Irish-Americans, German-Americans, etc. while others retained their heritage by developing miniature cultures within the larger society. As more people entered the country, the edges of the frontier were pushed westward as people relocated themselves and their families further inland.

Such movement was a new phenomenon and my ancestors were among the throngs of new Americans whom visitors and westerners saw as in a “constant state of migration, only tarrying now and then to clear land for others to enjoy or build houses for others to occupy” (Billington 186). On the frontier, “mobility was a way of life, expected of all energetic people, and as socially acceptable as stability in more mature societies” (Billington 187). According to Ray Allen Billington, author of America’s Frontier Heritage, by the year 1850, more than 23 percent of the population lived outside their states of birth, increasing to nearly 25 percent by 1860 (Billington 185). Such migration continued even into the twentieth century. In 1890, the national center of population had moved as far west as a point in central Indiana. By 1960, the center was located in central Illinois (Billington 227). The movement was so quick that often farms were abandoned before they could even be cleared.

Much speculation exists as to why settlers, such as my ancestors, chose mobility. Many believe the frontier sparked a desire for individual self-improvement (Billington 60). According to the letters and diaries of many pioneers, over crowding and the urge to “escape an uncongenial environment” caused settlers to pack up and move (Billington 27). This is easy to understand during a population boom. Larger and cheaper land was needed to comfortably supply and house a growing family. Still others blamed the soil’s “loss of youthful energy” and
rumors of better lands for the great movement to the west (Billington 187).

For simplicity’s sake, Billington has divided settlers’ reasons for mobility into two categories: deficiency motivation and abundancy motivation. Those people responding to a deficiency motivation pursued a human’s basic needs for survival and security, moving to escape danger and discomfort. Such possible reasons include lack of economic success, changing the means of making a living, natural disasters and the before-mentioned overcrowding and dislike of neighbors. Those settlers struck by abundancy motivation set out to find new gratifications and experiences. They were led by a quest for adventure and achievement and lured by dreams of a better, richer life. Such people did not seek just stability, but rather economic and social advancement, a desire for change, lure of the unknown and sometimes the risk of the primitive.

So where exactly do the Skerritts, Maxwells, Neuhausers and Steeles fit into this historical movement? Where did their journeys take them? Did they seek stability or adventure? Much of this I can only speculate from the stories I was told. However, I have done my best to trace each family’s background from the earliest point known through its modern day location.

The earliest mention of this familial line begins with Elizabeth Mitchell and Joseph Skerritt, my great-great-grandparents. Little is known about Joseph’s origins but, according to my grandmother, Dorothy (Acheson) Maxwell, Elizabeth was from Tullamore of Kings County, Ireland—a small city located in central Ireland, just west of Dublin. Although there is no other known information about this generation, I attempted to make a few educated guesses. Given that one of the offspring of Elizabeth and Joseph was born in the year 1879, it is probable that the couple was born in the mid-1800s. One can also deduce that they never left Ireland because their children were the first in the family to come to the United States, according to my grandmother.

One of the children of Elizabeth and Joseph was Anna Jane Skerritt, my great-grandmother. Anna was born in 1879 in Ballin Valley of Kings County, Ireland. This town is no longer located on a map of Ireland but is in the same province as Tullamore. Anna went to Canada as a missionary in 1900 at the age of 21. Dorothy did not know the reason for Anna’s migration, but according to Irish history, religious unrest prevailed around the turn of the century. At the time, Ireland was under the British empire.

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1 See appendix, p. ii for family tree.
Some people began calling for home rule, which would have allowed Ireland to have its own parliament while remaining a part of Great Britain. Many Protestants opposed this idea because they feared a Catholic parliament. This conflict became known as the Easter Rebellion (World Book Encyclopedia I 427). Perhaps religious persecution led Anna to Canada to spread the word of God.

Dorothy told me the following interesting story as a postscript to our interview:

My cousin and his wife took a trip to Ireland and they questioned my mother [Anna] before they left, asking her the name of the town she had been born in. Once they got to Ireland, they went to this one little town and it was in the right county. They were just walking around the town and they came upon this short little Irish man and my cousin asked him if he had any idea where the Skerritt house had been. The Irish man looked at him and asked why and my cousin explained he was George Skerritt’s son. The Irish man said, “Oh you mean George and Anna and Bob?” — which was my mother and her brothers— “I used to live across the street from them and play with them.” So the Irish man showed them where the little house was and they went down there. The man told them it had been completely renovated. They were taking pictures to bring home to my mother when this little lady came out and wanted to know what in the world they were doing. They explained to her what they were there for and she invited them in the house and let them look all around and served them tea and scones, which was a real thrill for them. They brought back pictures to my mother. She almost didn’t recognize the house but she saw a few things that were the same such as the old gate she used to swing on.

From Canada, Anna moved down into Fargo, North Dakota, and eventually to Scobie, Montana, where she met Samuel George Acheson. Samuel was born in 1874 in Derry Gonally, North Ireland. My grandmother does not know anything about when or why her father migrated to the United States. It is interesting that although Anna and Samuel were both from Ireland, they met and married in the United States. It is my guess that there were perhaps many Irish people living in one area and, having much in common, that was how they met. The couple had five children: Georgie (1909), Bob (1910), Hazel (1915), William (1916) and my grandmother Dorothy (1919). Samuel died in 1918 shortly before Dorothy was born. He was 34. Because of his early death, I have little information about him. Anna went on to lead a very full life. Following Sam’s death, none of the children were old enough to work, so Anna had sole financial responsibility. Dorothy remembers the family received a widow’s pension from the federal government, which was about $40 a month. The money did not go far, and to make up the difference, Anna gardened and canned foods. As soon as Bob was old
enough to begin working, he helped to support the brother and sisters still at home. In 1928, Anna remarried, but the marriage lasted only three years. According to Dorothy, Anna’s second husband was interested only in using what little money Anna did have and they quickly divorced. Dorothy does not remember the Depression having much effect on her family, perhaps because she never knew what it was like to have excess and comfort and therefore did not miss them when they were gone.

In 1936, the family moved to Fort Peck, Montana, where Bob had taken on a new job. Being the oldest male in the family, it was his responsibility to care for his mother and younger siblings—a task made much simpler with everyone under one roof. From 1937 to 1949, Anna made a living by cooking for local ranchers. At the age of 75, Anna married Daniel Samski and moved with him to Spokane, Washington. Once again, little detail is known about him. It seems the only thing Dorothy and my father remember about “Grandpa Dan” was his terrible driving. He had no regard for traffic rules, other cars or pedestrians. Such reckless driving caused serious injuries for him and Anna once. Both fully recovered, but Anna, who had never driven, refused to ride with Dan anymore. Shortly thereafter, on his way home from visiting his son in Minnesota, Dan was killed in a head-on collision when he crossed the center line of the road. Anna had not accompanied him because of her promise to never ride with him again. At the age of 84, Anna was a widow once again. She lived alone until her death in 1979, just months before her 100th birthday.

While Dorothy was still in high school, she contributed to the family’s finances by working as a soda jerk. The move to Fort Peck took place just prior to her senior year of high school. Fort Peck was the construction site of the largest earthen-filled dam in the United States, the Fort Peck Dam (Cullen 136). During the 1930s, thousands of men and women moved to this area to join the Corps of Engineers in building the dam. The Corps is a branch of the Army used in peacetime for flood control and other civil service projects (World Book Encyclopedia C 291). Members were not soldiers, but civilians employed by the Department of Defense.

According to Dorothy, almost everyone in town was somehow associated with the dam project. It was a very “rough” town because of the character of many of the workers. She said many of its inhabitants were ex-convicts looking for hard labor jobs. But, due to the great amount of workers needed for the job, most able-bodied men were given jobs, with little regard for their backgrounds or previous experience. Dorothy remembers a couple times when rumors circulated that officials were coming into town the following day to check the identification of the workers. By the time the officials got to town, half the builders had left, fearing their illegal employment would be discovered. Night life was especially rowdy as everyone frequented the bars after a hard day’s work.

After high school, Dorothy became a telephone operator, eventually leading her to a position with the Corps of Engineers as a radio operator. During this time, she met and married Charles Lee Maxwell, a member of the Corps of Engineers.
Maxwell lineage
(paternal grandfather)

The information for this familial line came from Charles Maxwell, my grandfather. At the time of the interview, he said the history of his parents was as far back as the family could be traced. He had no knowledge of names or places prior to this time. He did say, however, that he found out a couple years ago that the name Maxwell, which he thought was English, was actually of Scottish origin. Brunner, his mother’s maiden name, is German. Therefore it is likely that earlier ancestors emigrated from these two countries but no specifics are known. Knowing this, I intended to start my research with my great-grandparents. However, as I was going through old photos, I found a picture which includes members from two generations before this. According to the photo, the oldest known ancestor was a woman by the last name of Sampson who would have been my great-great-great-grandmother. I could not find any other information about her, not even her first name. Also pictured in the photo was Sampson’s daughter, Frances Brunner, my great-great-grandmother. According to inscriptions on the back of the photo, she was born in 1870 and married to a man named John Brunner. If she was truly born in 1870, that makes her only thirteen years old when my great-grandmother Otha was born in 1883. At that time, people married and had children at a younger age because many only lived into their thirties or forties. However, looking ahead at the lineage, Otha’s husband Ira was seven years younger, making him only six when their first child was born. Obviously, this is not correct. It is my guess then that Frances was born before 1870. Until finding this photo, I did not know of these ancestors. All I know about the origins of these people is from the following caption written on the back of the photo: “Picture taken just before move from Indiana to Montana around 1915.” According to Charles, his mother, Otha (daughter of John and Frances), was from Dugger, Indiana. Dugger is a small town in southern Indiana, just south of Terre Haute. The family lived on a small farm. I know little else about Otha except that she married a man named Ira Maxwell. He was from Linton, Indiana, a small town about five miles east of Dugger.

After marrying, Otha and Ira moved to Sullivan, Indiana, just west of their birthplaces. Here they farmed and had the first of their six children, John in 1913. It is interesting to note that Otha was 30 years old when her first child was born. As stated earlier, this was unusually old for the time period. From the previously mentioned photo, I would assume that the Maxwells also lived with or nearby Otha’s parents and grandmother. Multi-generational living was not uncommon during this time, as much help was needed in farming. According to Charles, the family moved from Indiana to southern Montana in 1915. He said

1 See appendix, p. iii for family tree.
he thinks they went by train because they did not have any vehicles capable of making the long journey. Charles also said the family moved to take advantage of the Homestead Act. This act was passed by Congress in 1862 and created provisions for free public land for any person over the age of 21, who was a citizen or intended to become one and was head of a family. Such homesteaders received 160 acres of land if he or she lived on the land for five years and improved it. According to statistics, between 400,000 and 600,000 families took advantage of the provisions between 1862 and 1900. By 1976, the homesteading program had been abolished in all states except Alaska, where it ended ten years later (The Pioneers 34). It is interesting that the Maxwells made the move so late compared to other settlers. Perhaps Otha and Ira's own parents had homesteaded in Indiana in the 1860s.

The land in Montana was not what one would consider choice land. It was very dry and hilly. About the only thing growing there at the time was sage brush. Why then did the Maxwells choose this area of the country? After 1900, new stipulations in the Homestead Act made it more appealing for land speculators and individuals seeking natural resources. Perhaps much of the land west of Indiana was taken up by these people, leaving only land on the far edges of the frontier for individual homesteaders. Whatever the reason for the location, the Maxwells began farming wheat and added the rest of their family: Anita (1915), Charles (1917), Rexford (1919), James (1924) and Ruth (1926). According to Charles, in approximately 1920, Ira gave up farming because of drought and began working in the local coal mines. He remained in Montana until his death in 1947.

Charles had fond memories of growing up. He described the towns around the mines as being a melting pot of nationalities. He said his town had almost every nationality except African-American. The mines were the only industry in the town and therefore, everything revolved around mining. Few people moved into or out of the town. From first grade through high school, Charles attended school with the same group of children, about 80 percent of whom were first generation Americans.

Charles remembers his mother being a very hard worker and a good cook. She never worked outside the home, but she did work on the farm and later gardened and canned foods. He also remembers Ira and Otha being strict parents.

We had to do certain things when they told us to do it. If not, we got spanked. Dad was usually the disciplinarian. Sometimes if it was severe enough, we got spanked with a razor strap. I remember one time I had done something and Mom had told me when Dad got home from the mines I was going to get...
a spanking. When Dad got home he said, “Otha, I want you to get in the habit of spanking these kids when they do something instead of making me act like the devil when I get home.” I still got the spanking anyway and Mom started disciplining us a little more after that.

During the summer, when the demand for coal was less and Ira was not working as much in the mines, the family subsisted by camping, fishing and hunting. It is difficult to imagine that activities I consider sport were, for my grandfather and his family, a means of survival. During the Depression, Charles remembers rationing of food and more camping and hunting than before. “With that large of a family, we ate a lot of beans,” he said. Although times were tough, especially with six children, the family prided itself on always being self-sufficient. “We were never on welfare of any kind and that was something my dad was very proud of,” said Charles. According to Charles, Ira was unusual for a coal miner. He did not smoke, drink or swear and was a very honest man. He would never cheat someone out of what he or she rightfully deserved and he was extremely fair, even in raising the children. Charles said honesty is perhaps the most important quality his parents tried to instill in him and his brothers and sisters. The following is a story told by Charles which illustrates Ira’s honesty and integrity:

Our first car as I can remember it was an old touring Studebaker with two jump seats. One time, I can vaguely remember just after I had started grade school, Dad and Mom were talking about a car dealer in Red Lodge [Montana]. He had approached Dad about a brand new Dodge with roll-up windows, glass, four doors, the works. It seems the man hadn’t been able to sell it. He told Dad he would make him a deal. He would give Dad the new Dodge and Dad would give him the Studebaker. Dad could pay for the Dodge as he was able—no contract, no time limit, no anything, he just got the title. I don’t know how many years it took Dad to pay for that car with a large family on his income, but I know he did.

Another interesting thing about the Maxwell family was the nicknames of the children. Few of them went by their real names. John, the oldest was called Maxie, undoubtedly a spinoff of his last name. Anita was called by Pearl, her middle name. James was called Dick, a shortened version of his middle name, Richard. And Charles was called Chuck and later nicknamed Max by his coworkers.

Ota remained in Bearcreek after Ira’s death. She became a city councilperson and also served as city clerk. Pearl was a school teacher and her husband Frank was county commissioner. Ruth was the post mistress. Family lore says that the big joke back then in Bearcreek was that if the

1 It was not until my father read this paper that he realized his Aunt Pearl’s real name was Anita.
Maxwells ever left town there would be no city government. Charles said that after mining died down, many people moved out of town and his mother and sisters were some of the only long-term inhabitants still remaining in the area. Due to this decline, in the 1960s, the United States postal service decided to get rid of the Bearcreek post office and incorporate it into Red Lodge’s system. Ruth and Otha bought a large house in town and, with permission, moved the post office to the house and operated it independently from their home for several years.\footnote{I have a bank with a combination lock similar to a post office box. It was not until I did this research that I found out it was made by my grandfather from one of the post office box faces from the original Bearcreek post office.} Otha died in Bearcreek in 1975 at the age of 92.

Charles graduated from high school in 1935. Unable to afford college, he joined the Civilian Conservation Corps. The CCC, as it was known, was a group created as part of the New Deal program in 1933 to hire unemployed young men for work in public conservation. According to Franklin Roosevelt, father of the CCC, the group was to be “used in simple work . . . confining itself to forestry, the prevention of soil erosion, flood control and similar projects” (Davis 77). Between its inception and its abolishment in 1942, over two million men served. From 1935 to 1938 Charles served in the CCC as a lumberjack in Glacier National Park. He then wanted to become involved with the Corps of Engineers. In order to obtain a federal job such as this, he had to go through the Civil Service Commission. In 1938 he began work on the Fort Peck Dam as a member of the Corps of Engineers. During this time, he met Dorothy Acheson through Dorothy’s older brother Bob, who was also in the Corps. Shortly thereafter, Charles and Dorothy began dating. They were married in Fort Peck in 1940. Charles continued to work in various capacities for the Corps until enlisting in the Air Force during World War II. From 1945 until the end of the war in 1946 he served as an aviation instructor flying B-17s in Amarillo, Texas.

In 1945, Dorothy and Charles’ first child, Janet Lee, was born. Shortly after, Charles rejoined the Corps in the area of personnel. The family moved to Mandan, North Dakota, and later to nearby Riverdale. In 1947, their second child, Donald Gene, was born. The family remained in Riverdale until 1960 when Charles was transferred by the Corps to Omaha, Nebraska, where he became Chief Personnel Officer. Dorothy began working for the Omaha Draft Board and eventually became Executive Secretary. In 1968, Charles began working for the Internal Revenue Service in the capacity of Chief Personnel Officer and remained there until his retirement in 1973.

After retirement, Charles and Dorothy moved to Montrose, Colorado, a small town...
located in a valley of the Rocky Mountains in the southwestern section of the state. For the past twenty-one years they have lived there, enjoying the camping, hunting and fishing the area offers. In 1990, they celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary with a huge party. Many stories about days at Fort Peck were passed back and forth as they reminisced with friends. Many of the friends they had in North Dakota were also transferred to Omaha so they tended to have many long-term friendships.

Donald, my father, grew up in Riverdale and was 13 when the family moved to Omaha, Nebraska. He graduated from high school in 1965 and began studying music education at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. Realizing music was not his calling, he enlisted in the Air Force in 1968 to avoid the draft. He was given a six-month deferment and during this time in Omaha, he began dating Jayne Newhouser, a friend from high school, and my future mother.

Henry/Steele lineage
(maternal grandmother)

The information I gathered for this section came from my mother and her half-brother. My grandmother Opal, who died in 1990, was the last survivor of the Steele family. Therefore, most of the following comes from stories she told my mother and me as I was growing up. Compared to the other lineage analyses in this paper, I was amazed at the amount of detail I had for the Henry/Steele line. There are a couple reasons for this depth of information. First, my grandmother has lived on in the memories of my family. Therefore, since her death, we have gone over and over these stories, sharpening their images so as to not lose touch with her character and spirit. Second, my mother and I asked her many questions about her childhood days, especially as she became more and more feeble and immobile. We would often sit for hours laughing about stories from her very spirited family.

I found a family tree in my mother's baby book that my grandmother had sketchily filled in. It began with my great-great-grandparents. The other side of the tree was occupied by Christine Wetlauffer of Canada. No other information was included about the couple, but, given the information of future generations, I came up with the following conclusions. One of Daniel and Christine’s children, my great-grandmother Anna Edline, was born in 1874. This information was confirmed by an obituary. Therefore, it is likely that Daniel and Christine were born around 1850. Since only Daniel was from Germany, the two most likely met and married in Canada. However, by 1854, the couple had moved to Swanton, Nebraska, a small town in

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1 See appendix, p. iv for family tree.
the southwestern part of the state. The family’s livelihood is unknown. According to my mother, Jayne (Newhouser) Maxwell, it seems the family lived in a sod house. Such a dwelling was made of cut blocks of sod, called Nebraska marble, packed tightly together and stacked on top of each other. The roof was usually made of sod piled atop a mat of branches and grass. Sod houses were extremely suitable to living on the plains because lumber from trees was scarce and the structures were “cheap, cool in summer, warm in winter, and virtually bulletproof, fireproof, and windproof” (Great American West 310).

I do not know how many siblings Anna had. However, Jayne recalls her mother talking about her uncles, who would have been Anna’s brothers. She remembers hearing stories about the physical size of the uncles. One of them, a man named Leif, was about six feet six inches tall. Considered tall even by today’s standards, six-and-a-half feet was very tall for the 1870s. According to the story, when Leif died, he was so big they had to delay the funeral until an extra large casket could be specially made for him.

At some point, Anna married George Emory Steele. George was born in 1872 somewhere in southwestern Nebraska. According to the previously mentioned family tree, his father’s name was Philip Steele. His mother’s name is not given; however, Jayne remembers hearing that she died when the children were very young and the family split up, perhaps so the children could be cared for and raised properly. Supposedly George had a brother, but after the separation he lost track of his sibling. He knew his name, but never knew where he ended up. It was not until the 1950s that my grandmother, Opal (Steele) Newhouser, happened to stumble on a part of this unknown past. The following is Jayne’s account of the story:

Mom [George and Anna’s daughter, Opal] was talking one night with a neighbor. During the conversation, I walked up and said something about going to visit Grandma Steele. Hearing this, the neighbor asked Mom if Steele was her maiden name. Mom said yes. Then she told Mom she had a friend by the name of Dorothy Steele and wondered if there was any relation. Dorothy and Mom got together and compared stories, realizing Dorothy’s dad was my grandpa’s long-lost brother. This made Mom and Dorothy cousins. After that,
they got together frequently until Dorothy’s death a couple years later. Mom always wished Grandpa would have found out about it before he died because she knew how [not knowing his brother] bothered him.

After George and Anna married, they moved to a farm near Alvo, Nebraska, about ten miles northeast of Lincoln. There they had six kids: Mae (1894), Mabel (1900), Wilbur (1904), Dora (1905), my grandmother Opal (1908) and Gilbert (1912). Dora died in 1907 of diphtheria. Following her death, Anna had some emotional problems, not highly unusual for the mother of an infant child who died. As Opal grew up, Anna referred to her as “the one who replaced Dora.” However, Dora’s presence remained with the family. In 1908, when Opal was just six months old, a tornado tore through the area. The story, told by Jayne, is as follows:

Grandpa [George] had called Grandma [Anna] and told her to take the babies to the cave because a storm was on the way. The cave was a shelter in the side of a hill with a door that latched on the inside. Grandma told Grandpa the school bus was just letting the kids off and he told her to go get all the kids, including the neighbors, and get them to the cave. Grandma did so and she no sooner had the door shut than the storm hit. The tornado destroyed the house. Cows were found in nearby trees and debris was scattered for miles. However, the family piano remained standing. The top had been lifted and all the strings had been sucked out. But Dora’s picture sat atop the piano as it always had, unharmed. Grandma always took this as a sign that Dora was watching over them and had made sure everyone was safe before the storm hit.

Following the storm, the family lived in the cave for three or four months until it was able to rebuild the house. For many years to come, Anna would blame this period of time in the cold, damp cave as the cause of her arthritis. It is not known exactly how long the family remained in the Alvo area, but Opal graduated from Alvo High School in 1926. Sometime later, the family gave up farming and moved to Louisville, a town southwest of Omaha, located on the Platte River. It is most likely the family moved due to poor performance on the farm. Also, this was around the beginning of the Depression, another possible reason for the move. In Louisville, George began working for the local sand pits and eventually was named foreman. Anna and George remained in Louisville for a few years until George’s health began to fail and they moved to Fremont, about 40 miles away, to be closer to their grown children. George died of a heart attack in 1939. Anna remained in Fremont for many years until her death in 1962 at the age of 88.

Opal told many funny stories of her years growing up. She was from a very close-knit family and the siblings relied on one another even into their adult lives. With a family that size, many sacrifices had to be made, and it seems Opal, being one of the youngest children, was greatly affected by these sacrifices. The following story, told by Jayne is a good example:

Bill [Wilbur] had been a big football star in high school and was recruited by Hastings College to play ball. The family couldn’t really afford to send him, so Mom [Opal] and her mother raised chickens, planted a huge garden and sold butter. Once every couple weeks, they would take all their wares into town and
sell them. Their butter was especially in demand, because they had a little mold which made a maple leaf print in the top of each butter pat—quite an elegant touch back then. Bill went to school for about three years and then quit to go box in a contest on a mountain in South Dakota. He lost the match and never went back to school. I think Mom always resented that because she would have liked to have gone to school, but because of her position in the family, was never able to do so.

According to Jayne, it seems there were two parts to the family. Bill and Mabel were very boisterous and described by Jayne as somewhat “unrefined.” They had a great affinity for having a good time and drinking alcohol and often acted as ring leaders during family social occasions. Opal and Gil, on the other hand, were more subdued. They were the rational ones in the family with even temperaments and a great sense of responsibility. Mae, the oldest child, acted as a surrogate mother to the other four. As I listened to my mom describe the Steeles, I could not help but think of them as the life of the party. Most of the pictures of the Steeles were of the entire family, alcohol in hand, smiling and laughing.

Opal married right out of high school and had a son, Kenneth, in 1927. Opal’s husband left home for long periods of time and the marriage did not last long. She and Ken moved to Fremont to be near Mae. With Mae’s help, she raised Ken. Jayne also remembers a friend named Auntie (Opal called everyone she liked Auntie and Uncle) who helped her through the difficult times. According to Jayne, “Mom told me at one point she was near a nervous breakdown. Auntie told her that every time she felt overwhelmed she should go out to the garden and plant things. I think Mom probably spent a lot of hours out there collecting her thoughts and getting herself together and that’s where her love for the outdoors came from.” Opal began working in Mae’s coffee shop. In 1938, with Mae’s help, she opened her own cafe and called it Opal’s. Everything on the menu was homemade and the cafe quickly became a popular eating place. Opal worked day and night. Every day, Anna came in and baked 15 to 20 pies. I did not realize that many of my favorite meals at my grandmother’s house were recipes from her days at the cafe.
In a town near Fremont, there was a small military installation. Around the time of World War II, Opal's became widely known throughout the base and was frequented by many servicemen. It was also around this time that J.D. Newhouser, my future grandfather, became a regular at Opal's. According to him, a few problems began to develop concerning the use of liquor. Although Opal's had a license to sell liquor, many people snuck flasks into the restaurant and spiked their drinks. J.D. had been watching this go on for some time and finally brought it to the attention of Opal. J.D. had plenty of time on his hands and told her that he would work for her, confiscating illegal alcohol on weekend nights. J.D. remembers often accumulating enough alcohol to last them for weeks. One day, Mae invited J.D. to go pheasant hunting with the Steele family. He and Opal began dating and were married in 1946.

Neuhauser lineage
(maternal grandfather)

In 1992, Thomas Smith, Jr., one of my second cousins, published a Neuhauser genealogy. The publication represents 30 years of study. Information was collected from old birth, marriage and census records. Other sources of information were Mennonite heritage annals, thus tying the Neuhauser family to early Mennonites. By the year 1967, 627 descendants had been identified. Much of the information in this section comes from Smith’s research. The rest of it was provided by my grandfather.

According to the genealogy, Peter Neuhauser, my great-great-grandfather, was born in 1796, near Basel, Switzerland. An old family Bible names him the son of Jacob and Catherine Somer or Sommers; the correct spelling is unknown. In 1833, he arrived in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, with his mother, sisters and brothers. He married Mary Peterschmidt in 1835. Mary was born in 1807 in Altkirch, France. She was the daughter of Jacob Peterschmidt and Barbara Lauber. In 1837 Peter and Mary moved to Butler County, Ohio. According to the genealogy, at the time of the 1850 census, the couple was living in Milford Township, Butler County, Ohio. They had seven children: Simon (1835—died shortly after birth), Peter (1838), Barbara (1840), Jacob (1843), Christian (1844), Mary (1847) and John (1850). In early 1853, the family arrived in Tazewell County, Illinois, near present-day Peoria. Mary died in 1884 at the age of 77. Peter died in 1889.

Little is known about the life of Jacob Neuhauser, my great-great-grandfather. He married Anna Myers in 1869. Anna was born in 1851 in Nancy, a city in northeastern France. It is not known exactly when she immigrated to the United States but it would have been between the years 1851 and 1869. At this time, France was experiencing political turmoil as many men were seeking the imperial throne. However, it is difficult to pinpoint the reason for her emigration, given the broad time period. Jacob died near Peoria, Illinois, in 1872 as a result of a logging accident. Anna remarried a man named Jacob Sann in 1875.

Anna and her first husband had two children: Mary (1870) and Emanuel (1872). In 1888, Anna and her family moved to Box Butte, Nebraska, in the northwest corner of the state. During the trip, it seems they had a little problem with the horses. The family was traveling by covered wagon, ferrying across rivers because

1 See appendix, p. v for family tree.
there were no bridges. At one point, during the ferrying, the horses got spooked and almost tipped over the boat. According to stories told by Emanuel, they arrived just in time for the "great blizzard." The blizzard he referred to was known as the Blizzard of '88. It struck on Monday, March 12, and dumped 40 to 50 inches of snow on much of the east coast and Midwest. Hardest hit were eastern cities such as Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, New York City and Boston, where drifts reached higher than three stories. Over 400 people died during the two-day storm (Hughes 60-67).

In 1897, Emanuel married Mary Elizabeth Bates in Alliance, Nebraska. She, too, was from Illinois and, according to my mother's baby book, was born in 1880, the daughter of James Bates and Mary Black. Emanuel was employed by the Burlington Railroad at the time of his marriage. Around 1900, Emanuel and Mary moved to the Holdredge-Wilcox area of Nebraska, some 275 miles southeast of Alliance. It was at this same time that Emanuel changed the spelling of the family's last name from Neuhauser to Newhouser, a more American version. According to my grandfather, his father never gave any explanation for the change, saying only, "Spell it like it sounds." To the best of my grandfather's knowledge, the name was never changed legally. However, the couple’s seven children, Anna (1902), Lillie (1904-1908), MyraId (1906), Fern (1909), Mary (1910), Irene (1912) and my grandfather J.D. (1916) were all born under the changed name.

The following is a story told by my grandfather about his and his siblings' names.

Mom and Dad had six kids, as you know. Seven, actually, because Lillie died when she was only four. Up until Irene, all the kids had nice names—first name, middle name, the works. But when Mom got to naming Irene and I, it seems she just plain ran out of ideas. Irene didn’t get a middle name. Just Irene New-houser. I didn’t get any name at all. Just two initials—J and D. When I was in grade school I used to get in worlds of trouble when the teacher told us to write our full name and I just used two initials. Finally I started spelling it J-A-Y just to make teachers happy. We used to kid Mom and Dad that if they had any more kids after me they would have probably just given them numbers.

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1 American surnames have undergone many changes. "When an immigrant arriving in America with little knowledge of English gave his name verbally to the officials ... it was written down by them as they heard it, and being thereby 'official,' it was often accepted by the immigrant himself as a correct American rendering of his name" (Elsdon Smith 5). Sometimes, second generations choose to alter the spelling of their unpronounceable names in order to acquire a better job (Elsdon Smith 26).
While the children were growing up, Emanuel drove an oil truck for Willard Petty's oil company and later a school bus. Mary Elizabeth worked at home, raising children. My grandfather remembers being very close to his brothers and sisters. His oldest sister, Anna, acted as a surrogate mother to him. She gave him the nickname Buddy. My grandfather thinks this was a spinoff of the nickname given to GIs around World War I, the time of his birth. My grandfather also used to tell stories of going to school the first day and never going back. According to him, he ran straight out the door never looking back. His older sister, Mary, says although she remembers chasing after him a few times and dragging him back, he did attend school regularly and graduated in 1934. While in high school, J.D. was a star basketball player. He would have liked to go on to college, but was unable to afford it. Upon graduation, he began working at the local newspaper, where his older brother Myrald was working. In a short time, J.D. was working as head of the composing room. He married around 1936 and had one child. The marriage did not last long and around 1942, his wife and daughter left. He has not seen or heard from either of them since they left. For a while, he knew of their whereabouts through a friend of his older sister's. He received a high school graduation photo of his daughter through this friend, but that was the last information he received about her and her mother. Following his divorce, he began frequenting Opal's cafe in Fremont, where he met Opal, my grandmother.

In 1947, J.D. and Opal had a daughter, Jayne Dea, my mother. According to Jayne, before she was born, her parents had only chosen a boy's name. She would be named James Daniel, the name J.D. would have liked to use instead of initials. When J.D. and Opal found out she was a girl, they chose Jane Dea. Upon hearing the spelling of the name, Opal's oldest sister, Mae, decided Jane had to be spelled J-A-Y-N-E, after her father (Jay). Without consulting J.D. and Opal, Mae had the birth certificate changed and Jayne's legal name became Jayne Dea.

Jayne grew up essentially an only child. Her only siblings were a half-brother, Ken, who was twenty years her senior, and a half-sister she never met. Ken was serving in the Korean War at the time Jayne was born. He
and Jayne never had a very close relationship due to their difference in ages. J.D. traveled much of Jayne's childhood. He was a salesman for Mergenthaler, a company that produced movable type for newspaper presses. This job kept him on the road, allowing him to come home only on weekends. Despite J.D.'s traveling, Jayne still remembers the sense of family her mother instilled in her.

Mom and I ate together every night. The table would be set with placemats and we would sit down and eat and talk about the day's events. I [Jayne] always had a sense of family even though it was often just the two of us. We also did a lot with Mom's family. They were very close-knit and loved Dad. We would all get together on holidays, even after some of her sisters and brothers had moved away.

One of the things Jayne remembers most about her childhood was being treated like an adult. Her parents rarely took her to children's events. She seldom had playmates, but was surrounded by adult relatives and friends of her parents. Christmas Eve, her parents and aunts and uncles played cards as she entertained herself. It was not until her family moved to Omaha, Nebraska, and Jayne began school that she had friends her own age.

Jayne graduated from high school in Omaha on her eighteenth birthday. She entered the University of Nebraska-Lincoln the following fall to study education. Between her junior and senior year of college, she began spending time with Don Maxwell, an old friend, and my future father. According to Jayne:

We had known each other all through high school, but we never dated. We double-dated a lot, but that was it. [Don] dated Julie, a good friend of mine. From eighth grade until his second year in college, I was engaged once to a man named Hank, but we broke it off. It's funny to think [Don] and I started hanging out together that summer because we were both home bored with nothing to do.

In Fall 1968, Jayne returned to the university and Don entered basic training and was stationed in Biloxi, Mississippi. After a somewhat rocky courtship, the couple got engaged Christmas Eve, 1969. They were married just six weeks later, because Don was leaving shortly thereafter for a three-year stay in Japan. He left in March and Jayne went overseas in June and taught English to Japanese students. Don and Jayne regard this three-year stay in Japan as the single experience that solidified their marriage. For three years, the only communication they had with their parents or friends was through letters. They only had each other to rely on and had to work through any disagreements together.
In 1970, J.D. got a job with the Champaign News-Gazette in Champaign, Illinois, and he and Opal relocated. Opal, who had been working in a school cafeteria since Jayne started college, began working as a hostess at a restaurant. They remained in Champaign until Opal's deteriorating health forced them to move to Rockford, Illinois, to be near Jayne and her family. In March 1990, Opal died after a short battle with cancer. Throughout her life she had been known for always seeming to take care of those close to her, often sacrificing her own wants or needs. Even upon her deathbed, this was the case. From December until March, there are many days special to my family—Christmas, my two sisters' birthdays and my parents' anniversary. My grandma and I had birthdays just nine days apart in March and for as long as I can remember, we celebrated them together. In 1990, she died six days before her own birthday, but she had made it through mine.

In 1972, I was born, just outside Tokyo. Ten months later, we left Japan and moved to Texas, where my dad got his associate's degree in electronics. From there we moved to Rockford, Illinois, where my dad became involved with biomedical electronics and eventually health care management. In 1977 my sister Amy was born, and in 1981, Amber was born. This year, Amy will be a senior in high school and Amber is entering seventh grade. My mom teaches kindergarten at the local elementary school, and my dad went back to school full time studying elementary education. He will graduate in 1996.

I began this paper with the conception that I am from a very "normal" American family. I thought I knew a fair share of my family's history. What I soon realized was that I knew many of the facts surrounding my ancestors' lives, but I had never taken into consideration such things as time and setting. I had never thought of my relatives as individuals with the same feelings I experience now—joy, pain, pride. Rather they were these historical "textbook" characters, moving from place to place in covered wagons.

It is difficult to tie together such diverse information. However, upon reading this paper, I made a few observations. First, it seems it is
the women in my family who have carried on
the stories and traditions of past generations.
Often, in my interviews, the women knew as
much or even more about their husbands’ and
fathers’ pasts than did the men themselves. This
is evident in studying my maternal
grandmother’s lineage. Because she is deceased,
I was unable to get information from a primary
informant. Therefore, I went to a secondary
source, my grandfather. He offered little
information about her life. Whether this is
because he chose not to or because he could not
remember, I am not sure. Whatever the reason,
it was my mother who provided information
about her mother. The same was true of my
paternal grandmother and my maternal
grandfather’s sister.

Second, in all four lineages, there was a
sense of self-sufficiency. None of my ancestors
seem to have been born into “easy” or even
comfortable lives. Often they made sacrifices
for each other. They worked hard for all they
accomplished. In doing so, they developed a
sense of pride in the family name that has
carried on for generations. It is interesting that
in three to four generations there is no mention
of a proverbial “black sheep of the family.” To
this day, at least once a year, my paternal
grandmother will look around at everyone at a
family gathering and say, with a large smile,
“And to think we started all this.”

Third, given the information I now know
about my ancestors, there are clear characteristics
that have filtered through the generations. For
example, the Maxwell family has long been
known for its honesty and integrity as illustrated
by the car story told by my grandfather. These
traits remain true of my grandfather himself. I
have never met a more honest and law-abiding
citizen in my life. Even on the golf course, he
painstakingly keeps track of every stroke so as
to not cheat, even accidentally. Even my dad
has developed these traits. After making a
career change and entering sales, he did not do
well because he often told his would-be
customers the truth—they would be better off
delaying their purchase or taking their business
somewhere else—instead of lying to get a
commission. I also see traits of my grandmother
in my mother. Having been born into a poor
family, my grandmother was extremely frugal.
When my mother was a child, my grandmother
would let the hem out of her pants and add wide
seam binding to the bottom so the pants could be
worn yet another year. According to my mother,
one could never tell the difference. My mother’s
favorite motto is “Waste not, want not.” In the
age of a disposable society, my mother raised us
in cloth diapers and washes and reuses Ziploc
bags and aluminum foil.

Fourth, after looking over my entire family
tree, it would seem there is a historical naming
pattern associated with my name, Ann Elizabeth.
I counted seven women, not including myself,
with either name, or a form of it. Upon realizing
this, I asked my mom if I was purposely named
after these women. She told me I was actually
named after a little girl she babysat for. My
middle name was chosen because it went well
with Ann. It was not until we sat down and
analyzed the family trees that we realized the
significance of the name.

Fifth, I was somewhat surprised by the
closeness of my ancestors’ families. Each
informant mentioned this as a quality he or she
most treasures about the family. Even into adult
life, the families made an effort to gather at least once a year. Such reunions have become increasingly difficult as my parents' generation and my generation tend to move beyond their childhood locale. Grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins are now spread from Arizona to North Carolina, and we do not see each other as often as we would like. Just as my ancestors migrated to the West to find a better living for themselves, today, my family has been forced to migrate away from one another in the search for security in our own lives. Because of family scattering, my immediate family and I have no real sense of home as would be typical of people who raise families in a specific area for many generations.

Finally, I discovered my family has been relatively unaffected by major social and historical events within the United States. None of my grandparents had extremely vivid memories from the Depression. They remembered money being tight, but that was not unusual for any of their families. Neither of my parents took part in anti-war protests or the flower child movement of the 1960s. When I asked them why they had not taken an active role, they said they were growing up in conservative midwestern areas, somewhat sheltered from the upheaval found on the coasts and in major cities. They also said they did not want to lose the respect of their parents by participating in such activities. Even the Vietnam War did not take any of my ancestors, although my dad and his brother-in-law were both on military standby for a few weeks.

During my research I had hoped to come across family stories full of adventure and famous people. I did not do so. What I did gather, however, was a collection of information about how they lived their lives from day to day. Perhaps these are the best stories of all. These 20 pages are my family as I know it. Although I have met very few of them, I now feel as though I know what it must have been like to live as they did. As I wrote this paper, it was difficult to choose which information to include. I realized after very little research that I could probably investigate this topic for the rest of my life and make it into a book, not just a paper. Perhaps I will.
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Appendix
Opal F. Newhouser

Funeral services for Opal F. Newhouser, 81, of Rockford, Ill., will be 1 p.m. Thursday at Lattin-Dugan-Chambers Chapel in Fremont. Mrs. Newhouser died Sunday, March 18, 1990, in Rockford. She was a retired cafe owner.

Opal Steele was born March 25, 1908, in Louisville. She attended school in Alvo and graduated from high school there. She owned Opal's cafe in Fremont and was its dining hostess. She retired in 1976 and had lived in Rockford for the past nine years.

She was a member of the Third Presbyterian Church of Rockford, St. Paul Methodist Church and First United Methodist Church of Fremont.

She married Jay Newhouser Sept. 14, 1946, in Fremont. He survives.

Other survivors include a son, Ken Headrick of Omaha; a daughter, Mrs. Don (Jayne) Maxwell of Rockton, Ill.; seven grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

The Rev. Dr. Thomas Martin will officiate Thursday's services. Visitation will be 10 a.m. to noon Thursday at Lattin-Dugan-Chambers Funeral Home. Burial will be in Memorial Cemetery.

A memorial has been established to Fairhaven Christian Home, third floor, 3470 N. Alpine Rd., Rockford, Ill.

Anna E. Steele

Of Fremont Dies

Services are tentatively set for 2 p.m. Monday at the Lattin, Dugan, Chambers Funeral Home for Mrs. Anna E. Steele, 85, of Fremont, who died Thursday at a Norfolk hospital. Mrs. Steele had been ill for several months.

Mrs. Steele was born May 26, 1874 in Swanton and had lived in Fremont about 35 years. Prior to that time, she was a resident of Louisville. She was preceded in death by her husband George, who died September 13, 1939 in Fremont.

Survivors include daughters, Mrs. Soren (Mable) Peterson of Fremont and Mrs. J. D. (Opal) Newhouser of Omaha; sons, Wilbur P. of Southgate, California, and Gilbert E. of Fort Wayne, Indiana; seven grandchildren, nine great-grandchildren, and two great-great-grandchildren. Two daughters, Mrs. Mae Woodman of Fremont and Dora Steele also preceded her in death.

Burial will be in Louisville. A memorial fund has been established for the Methodist Church, of which Mrs. Steele was a member.
Paternal Lineage—Skerritt/Acheson

Joseph Skerritt m. Elizabeth Mitchell
Tullamore,
Kings County, Ireland

Anna Jane Skerritt m. Samuel George Acheson
Ballin Valley,
Kings County,
Ireland
b. 1879

Georgie Bob Hazel William Dorothy m. Charles Lee Maxwell
b. 1919 b. 1917

Janet Lee Donald Gene m. Jayne Dea Newhouser
b. 1947 b. 1947

Ann Elizabeth Amy Jo Amber Lynn
Paternal Lineage—Maxwell

XX (male) m. ? Sampson

John Brunner m. Frances Sampson

Ira Maxwell m. Otha Brunner
  b. 1890  b. 1883
  
  John  Anita  Rexford  James  Ruth  Charles m. Dorothy Ann Acheson
  b. 1917  b. 1919

  Janet Lee  Donald Gene m. Jayne Dea Newhouser
  b. 1947  b. 1947

  Ann Elizabeth  Amy Jo  Amber Lynn
Maternal Lineage—Henry/Steele

Daniel Henry m. Christine Wetlauffer
  Germany                     Canada
  Anna m. George Emory Steele
    b. 1874                  b. 1872

Mae  Mabel  Wilbur  Dora  Gilbert  Opal Frances m. J.D. Newhouser
    b. 1908                  b. 1916

Jayne Dea Newhouser m. Donald G. Maxwell
  b. 1947                  b. 1947

  Ann Elizabeth  Amy Jo  Amber Lynn
Maternal Lineage—Neuhauser

Jacob Somer (Sommers) m. Catherine ?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peter Neuhauser</th>
<th>m. Mary Peterschmidt</th>
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<tr>
<td>Switzerland b. 1796</td>
<td>Altkirch, France b. 1807</td>
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| Simon Peter Barbara Christian Mary John Jacob m. Anna Myers m. Jacob Sann |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------|
| b. 1843 | Nancy, France b. 1851 |

| Mary Emmanuel Neuhauser m. Mary Elizabeth Bates |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| b. 1872 | b. 1880 |

| Anna Lillie Myrald Fern Mary Irene J.D. Newhouser m. Opal Steele |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------|
| b. 1916 | b. 1908 |

| Jayne Dea Newhouser m. Donald G. Maxwell |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| b. 1947 | b. 1947 |

| Ann Elizabeth Amy Jo Amber Lynn |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------|