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(Incomplete Recording; approximately 33 minutes)
Ken Thomas
Genealogy

(Recorded in 1997. Please note that some information—institution locations, Internet accessibility, etc.—has changed. Where possible, these changes have been noted in this transcript.)

Recording opens with various still and video images of DeKalb County's history, as the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony plays in the background. As the music comes to an end, the title "DeKalb Then and Now, 'A look back at our History,'" appears on the screen, superimposed over a photograph of the Historic DeKalb County Courthouse on the Square.

The title and courthouse image fade, and Sue Ellen Owens appears, with "Sue Ellen Owens, Exec. Dir., DeKalb Historical Society" printed at the bottom of the screen.

SUE ELLEN OWENS: *DeKalb Then and Now*, a program celebrating the one hundred and seventy-five years of DeKalb County's history. One of the things we've talked about in prior programs are the families in DeKalb that have brought such a rich heritage to our community. We want to look at genealogy and tracing our family history. How do we do that? With us today is Ken Thomas. Ken, we're glad to have you here.

Mr. Thomas appears on the screen.

KEN THOMAS: Glad to be here.

MS. OWENS: Ken is a columnist with the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. He's also a member of the Board of Directors of the DeKalb Historical Society. Ken has a lot of information for us on how to trace your family history. At the DeKalb Historical Society, Ken, we've noticed a real increase in people calling us, wanting information about their families, wanting to know how to go about the business of finding their history, their family heritage. What do you think is the reason for this? Is it a sudden thing, or has it kind of always been constant that people were interested in this?

MR. THOMAS: According to one statistic I read, they think half the country is interested in genealogy. [*"Kenneth H. Thomas, Jr., Genealogy Columnist" appears on the screen below Mr. Thomas's face.*] I'm not so sure about that; but I think, in the last twenty years, since *Roots* became a public commodity and the publication of that book, a lot of people got into it and realized that they'd better start checking their own families out. I think as more people have leisure time, and a lot of people are computer-related now, with a lot more stuff becoming available, you'll see a great deal of interest across the board from people that are retired or just

have been moving around a lot. I think nowadays, with more people moving away from home, in the past, a lot of genealogy was done by the folks that had moved to Texas or California. So it wasn't the people who were sitting on the same homeplace. They knew where everybody was from. They'd married their cousins or whatever, and they sort of knew everybody. It's the people who moved away that are looking for a connection back. I think that's the big thing. I think a lot of people in DeKalb County have moved here from other places, and naturally they want to know more about their own roots.

MS. OWENS: So if I'm interested in doing that, and I've never done that before, and I've moved away from home—I'm not in Alabama, for instance, anymore—where do I start?

MR. THOMAS: Well, of course, you start off asking somebody in your family about information. If you don't have anybody left to ask, you've got to have some document to start with, be it a death certificate or an obituary, some piece of paper that gives you some place to focus on. We're lucky here in Atlanta, because we have not only the National Archives out in East Point, where they have the census records for the entire country. So no matter where anybody might be from that's living in DeKalb now, they can go out to East Point and look at any state in the country up through the 1920 census. And surely they know some name that lived as late as 1920. You've got to have something to start with.

MS. OWENS: Sure

MR. THOMAS: And that would be the best place for people to start and begin collecting what they've got at home. I know I helped certain people I worked with, and I've sent them back to their place of origin to bring back some material. Because you sort of tell people they've got to have something they may not know they've got. They've got to sit down and ask somebody or look through the baby book or something they may have recorded, something about them, or get a death certificate on a grandparent that's going to give them some information.

MS. OWENS: Somewhere to start.

MR. THOMAS: You've got to start someplace.

MS. OWENS: Somewhere to start. You mentioned the National Archives. Is this a place anybody can go to?

MR. THOMAS: The National Archives is open—in East Point—it's open five days a week, and one night it's open, on Tuesday nights, it's open till 8:00. [NOTE: This information is no longer accurate. At least some National Archives records may be accessed online at <https://catalog.archives.gov/>. Please consult <https://www.archives.gov/atlanta> for additional current information, including the location of the Archives in Morrow, Georgia, which houses physical records for eight southern states, including Georgia. The former state archives building near the

state capitol no longer exists.] The main thing they have is the—there are several records they've got for the entire country: the census, the World War I draft records--that's a good way to zero in on certain members of your family, that were recorded in World War I, just registering for the draft—they didn't actually have to be in the army. And also you have the military records for the entire country, and a lot of the immigration records are there. They don't have everything, but they've got an awful lot to get you started. And we're real lucky in the metro Atlanta area to have that source.

MS. OWENS: You know, we have the Georgia Archives—

MR. THOMAS: If you've got Georgia roots--another thing, the Georgia Archives, which is down on Capitol Avenue, very near the State Capitol [NOTE: Please see bracketed note in previous paragraph.], they have so much material from all over the country that people don't realize. And it's not just Georgia material. I'm mean, you're going to have Georgia roots, you've got to go there to get started on—to get more started. But they have a lot of other things. They have vast materials from other states that have been published. They collect a lot of published materials. And a lot of people don't realize that. Just because it has the name "Georgia" on it doesn't mean it's Georgia.

We have a lot of libraries around this city. Not only do we have the Decatur public library in downtown Decatur—we have a Georgia room there with genealogy materials, and it's, of course, mostly based on Georgia—but you've got other places around the metro area that have some great libraries where they're doing a lot of collecting. And there are other public libraries; nobody cares which county you belong to. Marietta has an excellent one and Jonesboro as well have gotten rooms devoted to genealogy and staff.

MS. OWENS: That's great. So I have my document, whatever it is, whether it's the—I don't know if a family Bible helps, or—

MR. THOMAS: It could be the family Bible.

MS. OWENS: --the baby book, as you mentioned, or a death certificate. Well, then, I've got my document, and I know something. What do I do now?

MR. THOMAS: Well, you need to put it on something. You need to put it on a chart and start asking other questions, you know, keep organized. One of the secrets of genealogy that's very important—a lot of people didn't do this early on—is you need to organize your material and continuously go back and organize and know what you're missing, so when you meet a relative or have a chance to look at a census or some other document—say, a book about a county, county history, like the one in DeKalb we're working on that'll be out later this year—you'll have a lot of information about the county. So books like that exist for most Georgia

counties, and most states have many books like that available. But you've got to be able to put your material on something, charts. They sell charts at all these various institutions, some type of chart, or you can copy it from a book. But now you can computerize your material, and there are lots of genealogy computer materials available. There are several major programs that are out there. We have a Genealogy Computer Society that can help people find the right program; and there's just a vast amount of material that needs to be organized from the very start, or else you'll lose track. And you don't want to waste your time. You don't want to keep going back and doing the same stuff again.

MS. OWENS: Where are some of the other places I might go? You mentioned the library and the archives. Are there other places I might go?

MR. THOMAS: Well, we're also lucky in Atlanta to have seven or eight Mormon branch libraries here. They're associated with the various Mormon churches around the city. We're lucky here in DeKalb to have one in Tucker, and they call it The Family History Center. It's on Brockett Road right off Lawrenceville Highway, and they're open several nights a week and several days. [NOTE: Much of this information has now been made available for online research. Other Family History Centers are located in the metropolitan Atlanta area as well. Also consult <https://www.familysearch.org/locations/saltlakecity-library> for additional information.] And they have just—the Mormons, of course, have microfilm material from all over the world. I recently researched a man who came to Georgia from Haiti in the 1700s, and I was able to get that material on microfilm from Paris from the Mormons to Tucker. I never left the city, and I gave a whole lecture about this man. We were able to get his baptismal records from Haiti, via the Mormons; they were microfilmed. They have a lot of material. People need to go out there and get an orientation of what they're doing and have them show you what they've got. And one thing they've got I know is the British Parish Records are on their computer there, and they've got several hundred thousand births and deaths in the British Parish Records in alphabetical order. And that's going to help somebody.

MS. OWENS: Does that require an appointment, or are they open—

MR. THOMAS: Most of these places prefer that you try to let them know you're coming. Most of the time it's not a problem. If you're going to go, say, on a Wednesday night, they might need an appointment.

MS. OWENS: Is there another—are there other places besides library kinds of places?

MR. THOMAS: Of course, we know people could come to the DeKalb Historical Society--

MS. OWENS: Right

MR. THOMAS: --to do work. We don't have everything there; but if you've got a local family, there's quite a bit there. The Atlanta History Center, with their material related to the metro Atlanta area, we have—of course, all of us benefit from, like, Franklin Garrett's Index to Death Records he's put together. A lot of that's been computerized now. The best place to look at that is the Atlanta History Center, because it covers the whole metro area with this material he's done from back in the '30s. So we're real lucky.

In every community, whatever you're working on, you need to find out who is the local historian who's done some of the work. Where are the materials—where is the material that's never been published? Because not everything is ever going in a book. It's not always going to be on the computer. So you've got to find out who's the right person to contact who's going to direct you to something.

MS. OWENS: What of the significance of cemeteries? Often I'll get a call about somebody trying to locate a cemetery.

MR. THOMAS: Well, as we've all progressed with development, we've lost a lot of the contact with our family graveyards; and so you've got the big public ones like Oakland or the Decatur City Cemetery, where people know they're buried. But so many times you have family graveyards. Unless the county's done a book or like Mr. Garrett's work on all the local cemeteries and recording things back in the '30s—I helped a man the other day from Las Vegas, and we can't find that cemetery anymore. Mr. Garrett recorded it and right after his uncle—this man's uncle—died, but it's vanished somewhere down near Grant Park, and it can't be found.

MS. OWENS: It can't be found.

MR. THOMAS: So we need to record these. It would be good if we could work toward, say, a book on DeKalb County cemeteries; because several of the metro counties, Cobb and Gwinnett, have published their cemeteries. And it's very important that we record these, because that's a resource that's going to be lost in many cases.

MS. OWENS: All right. I notice so often when I'm driving in DeKalb, I try to make a note of where cemeteries are that I pass that are very small and in off—out-of-the-way places that are not marked very clearly, for this very reason.

MR. THOMAS: Well, we fight a battle every day with cemeteries, because they are a very fragile resource; and we—there's just no way to save them all, like we wish we could. Families need to take an interest. They need to learn where their family cemeteries are, and we really need to go back to the old custom of going on a pilgrimage every year back to the cemetery, sort of a homecoming. That used to happen a lot in the South around Memorial Day,

where they would have an event where they would clean off the graves. They would have an event. They would have a lunch or something and let the next generation know where it is, so they'll take on the responsibility of looking after it. And that's what's got to be done. These traditions have got to be continued by people.

MS. OWENS: That's one of the significances of the "then and now" parts of history. That's one of my greatest memories, really, was going with my parents to the Zion Baptist Church, which was about this big [*Gestures with hands to indicate very small size.*], and the cemetery was not much bigger, where my great-grandparents were buried. And we went once a year and did exactly what you said, and cleaned the graves and decorated them.

MR. THOMAS: And in conjunction with that a really important thing would be to have some kind of family reunion, whether it's at the cemetery or not. I belong to a group in North Carolina, where my dad's family was from; because my mother's people are from Columbus, Georgia. But when I was growing up, I didn't know a lot of the people [in North Carolina], and I'm sort of the stranger going back. There's a big family reunion we hold every year around the historic homeplace they've been preserving. And the younger generation's coming along—the ten-, eleven-, and twelve-year-olds—and they realize that this is something they've got to do, that this is part of—one little kid that was ten years old said, "I guess I'll be in charge of this when I grow up." And I said, "Well, I guess you will." And he's already expecting to do that. And that's going to be great to see people in the local area here emphasize more of the family reunions. We ought to be able to publicize them more so that the families that may have lost track will know that some groups say, some well-known family, who's sort of forgotten who's who, could go back and reach them and know where things are going on.

MS. OWENS: I guess that's the significance perhaps, and occasionally I'll see in a newspaper where they've published they're having a big so-and-so family reunion at this place and date and time, I guess to seek out perhaps family members.

MR. THOMAS: Exactly. And [inaudible] you never know who's going to read the local paper, because it could be somebody who's moved away and takes the local paper. They may want to get back in touch. There's always just getting together and having food and good times, but there's always somebody that's interested in research, and maybe they [inaudible phrase, which contains the word "computer" or "computerized"?] in the family and bringing in the details they share and find the missing cousins, things like that.

MS. OWENS: What are some of the stumbling blocks that people run into when they begin this pilgrimage to find their family?

MR. THOMAS: A lot of people don't actually know how to evaluate the information. They take everything at face value and may be on a wild-goose chase. One of my friends said his grandfather was from Scotland. And he had this family tradition from his grandmother, who was 104; and she said that they were from Scotland and shared this quote. And I said, "Where's your proof?" And it turned out that he didn't have any proof, that he was looking for that. But it may be way back; it may not be as recent as she made it sound, just because she was 104. That's not that far back, and she probably never knew anybody that had been from Scotland; she was just repeating something. And you don't know whether that's true or false. You've got to take that information, you've got to evaluate it. In my early work, when I was in high school, I listened to a lot of people. And because they're older, you assume they know what they're talking about. And nowadays, with so many sources available to cross-check and verify, you've got to do that first.

A lot of people—there were a lot of things in the past that were a dead end, such as a divorce. In the past if someone had a divorce, the family may never even have gone back and ever talked about those people at all. So you've got to go back and realize what the times were like and why certain things may be unknown. It may not be as big a tragedy today as it was then, looking back. But you've got to realize that may be why nobody wants to talk about it. And I traced a family of a lady in Savannah who was from Columbus, and we thought she had no children, because the lady had written her off. And she'd been married to the mayor of Savannah. But because she'd separated from the man and moved away and left him with the children, her relatives in Columbus totally disowned her; and she was never mentioned again. We thought she just died a single old maid. And it turned out she had a whole bunch of descendants.

MS. OWNES: A whole family.

MR. THOMAS: Exactly.

MS. OWENS: Anything else you can think about that causes people stumbling? You've got to check out your sources.

MR. THOMAS: You've got to verify things, not be hung up on spelling and names. A lot of people think a name is only spelled one way, and that's never true. In the past nobody knew how to spell. It didn't make any difference how you spelled certain names, and sometimes people would change their names to get it to match the local name or to make it easier for pronunciation, things like that. And a lot of nicknames—you've got to be real careful that you record exactly what people say. The other day I was talking about a family; and the man was named Boss, and his wife's—I said, "Well, what's his wife's name?" And they said, "Well, they

called her Aunt Pink.” Well, obviously, she wasn’t named Pink, but you need to find out what her real name was and record that. And when you look at the records, the census taker is not going to write “Pink.” She’s going to write down “Sara” or something like that. So you’ve got to be able to judge all this other stuff [inaudible] things like that and not be deterred by the fact that it’s going to take some energy. You’ve got to go someplace—I mean, a lot of the stuff you can do at home, a lot of times you can call people up and record; but at some point you’ve got to do some further work or hire somebody. A lot can be checked out on the computer, but you’re still going to have to go to the archives or the historical society or the local library and do this work or have somebody do it for you.

MS. OWENS: Average time it takes somebody? Do they ever finish? *[Laughs]*

MR. THOMAS: Well, you never finish till you get back to Adam and Eve, and some people have traced back to Adam and Eve. I do have a few charts on file where people have traced to Adam and Eve, believe it or not. At some point, everybody’s genealogy will run out; even the Queen of England can’t go back past the Dark Ages and early times. So everybody will run out of people; but it never does end, and many times—there’s no telling how long it’s going to take you. If you’re a prominent family, and somebody’s written a book, and you think the book is a valid book, you can go back rather quickly in certain families. On others, where nobody’s done any work, depending on how smart you are and how well you can get yourself organized, and if you’re willing to follow through—a lot of people will do it, and they’ll put it down, and they won’t pick it up for ten more years. Well, it didn’t take them ten years to do that; they didn’t do anything. I’ve worked on certain people’s families, relatives of mine who just came in with a question, and got them back 150 years in two or three hours. It just depends on the name and how unusual it is, whether they’re in counties where we have books, whether or not the names are really their names and it’s factual.

MS. OWENS: Is this something that the continuity of just keeping at it is really important, or can you take a break from it and then come back?

MR. THOMAS: Well, if you take a break, more books are coming out; and as time goes on—some of the things I couldn’t figure out back in high school could be done in literally a matter of hours. I could go to the Decatur Public Library and look at the census and find a lot of things today that in high school would have taken years, because the things weren’t indexed, they weren’t microfilmed, they were not easily available. So anybody starting out right now with a Georgia source could come into the Georgia records right around us and could probably do something, if they knew what they were doing or maybe had a little guidance, and could really

do a lot in just a few hours. And certainly, if they worked on it over several weekends, they could do quite a bit.

MS. OWENS: All right, well, research skills are very important, though, I would think, in doing this.

MR. THOMAS: You need to talk to somebody, take a class. The classes are offered quite a bit all over the metro area. We, of course, have had some at the DeKalb Historical Society [now DeKalb history Center]. The Atlanta History Center told me today they're going to be having a class for Cub Scouts soon. They haven't scheduled it yet; but they said if anyone's interested, call the Atlanta History Center, and they will be scheduling that. There are classes offered at the National Archives in East Point [since relocated to Morrow] about how to use their records. But primarily most of the schools—I know Emory University, the Evening at Emory program, has classes every quarter in the night program. Georgia State University, Clayton State—they all offer genealogy classes. You might as well take something, because you can't know it all. And I've had people take—I used to teach at the Evening at Emory program, and I've had people take my class there three times; because every time they came back or took another class, they would understand, they'd have some more questions, or they would find somebody else who had a problem that needed to be solved.

MS. OWENS: I was curious when we offered—at the Historical Society we offered beginning, intermediate, and advanced. And I was curious about why it would be that way. I mean, it seems to me like you get your--

MR. THOMAS: Well, the beginners—I've had people in my classes at Emory that never had been in a library. So when you tell them there are books, it's inconceivable to people who are not real research- or literary-oriented to realize that somebody's published, like, *The Marriages of Coweta County*. [Beginning of sentence inaudible] on Talbot County down there near Columbus has a five-volume series—four books in one series and another book—so there's a lots on that county. Whereas, here at DeKalb, we're doing our first county history this year. But we have the history of Decatur, and so many other communities have done histories in the metro area. So you just never know, and you've got to tell people that there are books to be looked at. People just don't realize if you're not in this field that so much is published, and Georgia has about six different just journals that are published on Georgia, on different areas. Like there's one for central Georgia, there's one for north Georgia, there's a newsletter coming out for southwest Georgia. So these people publish books and records in their journal about that part of Georgia. So you get into it. You really could be overwhelmed rather quickly if you didn't know it was out there.

MS. OWENS: Right. But if I'm—I'm thinking sort of toward the future now; we're celebrating the 175 years of history, and when we're two hundred years old in twenty-five years, there's going to be more history added. In terms of genealogy, of family history, what are the things people ought to be keeping for future generations within their families?

MR. THOMAS: Well, they ought to be asking so many questions. They ought to be documenting their photographs and putting names on the back of the pictures, seeking out pictures, having them copied so they can have that collection if there's more than one—if you only have one copy of a picture, and you've got six children, you might as well get a copy for everybody; because you never know who's going to be the one to keep it. A good way to do it would be to videotape family members, to videotape some reminiscence, and get them to talk about their childhood. I think the lifestyle—we'll always be able to figure out who was born and where they were born and where they died and what the census taker said and what the draft records said and what the [family] Bible said. But it's the lifespan of somebody—what they did while they were alive. Whether you liked them or not is not the issue. What did they do? Where did they work? Where did they live? Why did they move? How did they meet? I just talked to a friend of mine about his wife's grandparents, and they met up in northwest Georgia when she came up from New Orleans to her family home. Who would have thought that anybody from New Orleans had a home in northwest Georgia, considering New Orleans? But that's how they met. It's a real unusual way they met, because it would have been—there's no reason they ever would have met except that. And that's a real nice little nugget of history to have. So people need to be asking that kind of thing. They need to be--if they do nothing right now but ask some questions, write it down, go to the family cemetery and at least make a note where it is, so when the next generation comes along, they can take them back there. But you've got to keep at it and keep emphasizing the necessity of keeping up with stuff.

MS. OWENS: Labeling pictures, I think, would be very important.

MR. THOMAS: I have several scrapbooks that belonged to my great-grandmother's sisters, and they were none of them labeled at all. And even when my grandfather—when I had this twenty years ago—he couldn't recognize them all. So we've already lost that. These are from the 1890s; and we've already lost a number of identifications, unless somebody has the same picture and says, "That's Grandmother's sister." Then we can know.

MS. OWENS: If they can remember. Well, it looks like you brought some resources here. Perhaps we can share with—[inaudible]

MR. THOMAS: Well, I did.

MS. OWENS: --a little bit of what's out there.

MR. THOMAS, *holding up a book*: One of the best and one of the cheapest sources to buy—to use for genealogy is *The Genealogy Merit Badge* handbook that the Boy Scouts put out. It's done by some of the national experts on genealogy; it's been revised a couple of times. It sells for about two dollars from the Boy Scouts shop, and there's also a branch at Toco Hill Shopping Center here in DeKalb that has the same book. [PLEASE NOTE: The shop no longer exists.] And it's really good, because it has a lot of the how-to-dos and how to write letters and how to interview people. And, of course, the Boy Scout motto, "Be prepared," is always good in any kind of project and especially in genealogy. That's one of the things I have always tried to give out to the students in the classes I've taught.

[*Sets book down; picks up another.*] Another book that came out recently, *To Our Children's Children*, by Bob Greene, is a real good book about researching questions. It has—it's chock-full; it must have five hundred questions in it. If you were interviewing a relative, especially if you were doing a video and have a chance to be reading while you're talking to them, you could ask them questions and get them on tape about this, or even on audio tape. But that's a new book that's just been around a while.

[*Sets book down; picks up another.*] There's lots of books about names. This is just one I like, *American Given Names*. If you're trying to figure out what a name means or how to spell a name or the origin of a name, you ought to go to your public library. There'll be plenty of books like this. Whether or not they have a genealogy room is not important; there will be plenty of books about where names come from. And even the books at the how-to-name-your-baby store telling you the origin of names are important.

[*Sets book down; picks up another.*] If you need to know more about a name, you may be looking for a Civil War ancestor. This is a book done by one of our local residents, *In Search of Your—let's see the title—In Search of Confederate Ancestors: The Guide*. If you're going to do Georgia Confederate research—Civil War research, you need to go to the Georgia Archives and see what they've got. They've got a lot of things from other states as well, but they do have one of the best collections. This book just gives you an idea of how to do the research.

[*Sets book down; picks up another.*] If you're going to use the Georgia Archives, this book has been out about twenty years now: *Research in Georgia*. It is a guide to the State Archives, and it gives you some ideas of all the material they have on microfilm, because they do have all the Georgia county records up to 1900. That's very important to have a source to go to.

[*Sets book down; picks up another.*] And the last thing that's come out lately is the annual update of historical societies. The DeKalb Historical Society is in here. The State

Archives has done this as part of the Historical Records Advisory Board. They send questionnaires out to all the historical societies and genealogical societies and everything around the state to get their information, and now they've included websites and email addresses, so you have a way to research that kind of material. This will be coming out every year, I believe, from the State Archives. It sells for, like, fifteen dollars; and you can actually get it on diskette [no longer available], and I believe it's also on their website. They do have a website there.

That's just some of the good things. There's plenty of books out there. I could fill you up with books here.

MS. OWENS: I'm sure there are. Those are helpful, though. I'm always interested in the one about names. I'm really curious about where names came from, because so often they were related to the occupation of the person.

MR. THOMAS: Surnames were given out—when people had to take surnames—and that was for our ancestry probably about five hundred years ago in the 1400s; but you got a surname from the physical description—you know, there was, like, Charles the Bald, Louis the Fat; and eventually those became surnames. You had—so you had physical characteristics, you had occupations, and you had “son of,” like Johnson, Thomas; they both mean son of somebody. A lot of countries, like Iceland, they say in Iceland there are only about three surnames; because everybody is Johansson or something like that, some name that's the very same name for everybody; and those countries never did come up with different names. That's about three or four names. You can have names that are the same occupation. I know that when I did Jimmy Carter's genealogy, Jimmy Carter's name, Carter, and Mick Jagger's name, Jagger, both mean someone who pushed a cart back in the old days. Of course, who knows how far back? And lot of names have been changed, and a lot of names have just been made up; so not everybody can prove that their name really was an ancient name.

MS. OWENS: All right. When you say you research, how is it that you come to research a family name or—you mention several little studies that you've done. How do you come to do that?

MR. THOMAS: Some things are interesting to me. I've done, of course, my own family history on different angles; and sometimes I work with certain cousins who want to enhance their part of the family. I may not be blood-related to the ancestors they're working on. I've worked in New York City—I've got a relative up there who came to Georgia during World War I, was stationed out here at Camp Gordon, came to Columbus on a weekend pass, and met my

great-aunt. That's been a really hard story to crack, because he didn't tell anybody anything. His story's very difficult.

It challenges me to get into other records. My own ancestry is pretty standard: came right through the middle of Georgia, pretty much farming plantation folks, and up in North Carolina pretty much kind of the same way. So to get a better expertise I helped other people. I helped one of my friends at work; his grandfather is from Greece. I helped him find the roots of that person. And I'm getting into some Jewish research now with some of my friends who have Jewish ancestors, something I've never had any reason to get into because of my own family.

MS. OWENS: Is there some difficulty associated with—

MR. THOMAS: In Jewish research you've got a lot of different things, but right now in Georgia we have the Jewish Genealogical Society based here in Atlanta [<https://www.jewishgen.org/jgsg/>]. They meet in one of the Jewish places here in town in the fall. They meet for nine months during the regular year. And there's a lot of sources. There are people who do a lot of work on that. There's a lot of research going on with the Holocaust and trying to document all the families that were lost in the Holocaust. I went to a lecture recently at the National Genealogical Society about that. Some fascinating stuff is available, and anybody that's got Jewish ancestry really ought to meet with these people at the Jewish Genealogical Society and get involved in what's available to work on that. Because those are the kind of stories and traditions that they have a lot of recent—fairly recent immigration history, and they need to tack that down before that material is forgotten. And they can, of course, research that through a lot of the records of the National Archives related to immigration.

MS. OWENS: You mentioned doing your own history and adding to it. One of the things we talked about in earlier shows about churches and the Sacred Harp singing, and that's somehow a part of your family history, is it not?

MR. THOMAS: When I was doing genealogy back in high school, I came across the estate of a man named Elisha J. King, who was my grandfather's great-uncle. And it turned out that he died in 1844, and I didn't know anything about him. He died as a single man; but in the sale of his estate in 1844, down in Talbot County, Georgia, they sold one-half of the copyright to *The Sacred Harp*. I had no idea what that was. It wasn't until I was in college here at Emory that I started looking up "Sacred Harp" and realized that it was a major singing movement based on shape-note singing; and this man turned out to be one of the two men that actually wrote this book, along with B. F. White, who has descendants here in DeKalb as well. And whereas Mr. White lived to be a very old man and got the movement where it is today—I think he died in 1879—my relative, E. J. King, died when he was a young man in his twenties in 1844. But it

was something that had been lost in the family, and now we're doing a history book on the King family, all the thirteen—he had twelve brothers and sisters. We're doing research on all of them; we will be including a chapter about E. J. King. But had I not known that, I would have just put down some blurb about *The Sacred Harp* and never realize what it was. It was quite an eye-opener to me, because the family had lost that tradition. And a number of the songs in the *Sacred Harp* songbook are written by his relatives, the King brothers and brothers-in-law. But that was something I discovered that was totally lost to me.

MS. OWENS: When counties are writing histories, how should this be part of the histories? We're trying to publish a history of DeKalb. How significant are these family histories to DeKalb?

MR. THOMAS: Well, a lot of counties when they're doing a county history--because it's always done by a private group; it's never done officially by the counties, as far as publishing and writing it. And we, as [inaudible], are a private group—sometimes counties will solicit history to be put in the book. We've chosen not to do that this year, but we may do another book along that line at some point. But it's important to get as many of them in the book and to try to make sure all the major families are in there, because if people are researching the history, they want to look up and find out how did a street get its name. Or like, in Decatur we have, of course--the Decatur history did include families. We know from reading that that Pierre Howard's family relates to the Clairemont Road name, and that was the name of their home. And you look at some of the roads in the city, and you want to find how did that road come around, how did that name—what does that name mean to the county? So I think that it's important in writing a county history to try to get, when you do have a family section, try to get the major families to contribute. And, of course, anybody that can contribute at all ought to be included in the book.

MS. OWENS: Right. Any other stories to share of interesting genealogical research that you've done? You've told us several.

MR. THOMAS: There's so much that goes on that I've found it fascinating over the years how many things that I've just had happen to me. I know one time--I was thinking about this on the way over here—I was at a cemetery one time, writing down a grave; and I used to always stand on top of the tombstones so that the snakes wouldn't get to me. Well, at least you assume the snakes are going to get you. At that time I was traveling around with my grandmother, and she was always real wary of things like that. And I was standing on a tombstone, and this lady drove up. Now, I didn't know where this man's descendants were; and this lady drove up, and she said, "What are you doing, standing on my father's grave?" And

that's how I met these cousins, because she happened to be driving up at the very moment I was writing down that tombstone, standing on the grave to avoid the snakes or whatever else was out there.

MS. OWENS: Have there ever been any instances where there's been research done, by you particularly, and people just didn't want to be found? [Inaudible]

MR. THOMAS: A lot of people don't understand what you're doing it for. Somehow some people in their minds, they've never enjoyed the past. I think we have that trouble in historic preservation, which is my regular job. A lot of people just don't enjoy the past, they don't want to talk about it, and they don't—they've never enjoyed history. So you do have a lot of people that literally don't want to talk about it. Or they don't find you worthy of their information. I think nowadays, when more people are involved, and it's gotten to be sort of everybody's hobby, it's not quite as restricted in the way that they think. But I've talked to relatives who didn't want to talk to me because somehow they thought you were after their money. I said, "Well, I don't think you've got any money, do you?" I just had to tell them that, because I didn't think they did. And I said, "That's not what I'm after." But some people are doing it, thinking they're going to find an oil well or something like that. And I just do it because it's fun. I mean, to me it's fun, it's a challenge, and it's a great mystery story. It's like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, because you're always after something; and there's always something else that has to be found. And no matter how hard you work, you'll never find everything; because you'll always have another ancestor on back until you reach Adam and Eve, and then you can stop.

MS. OWENS: For the most part, do you find people have a lot of pride as they get further and further into what their histories are?

MR. THOMAS: I think nowadays people can be proud of anything they find. I think in the past people thought unless your ancestor was a major plantation owner or was governor or something, you didn't do it. And that's why the earlier things that were published were published and written by all these people that were into prominent people. And nowadays I think everybody'll research anything. And if they come across whatever it might have been in the past, or an ancestor you may have thought was unsavory, you didn't talk about it, like somebody being in prison. But if somebody's in prison, there are records about them in the prison; and documentation like that is one more source. People run away; you find in old newspapers where the man might announce that he was not paying his wife's debts because she had run away. And that's a major source if she left. And I'm sure the family was deeply troubled. Things like that nowadays, everybody'll talk about them, they'll write them, they'll put them up, put them in their records, and it's just part of the story.

MS. OWENS: It's always interesting to me, and I think painful sometimes, the people who come to us looking for parentage—through adoptions, where there's not an identity for them, and they're having so much difficulty trying to trace. We've had several people recently who have gone through old high school and college annuals, or we've tried to pull up other kinds of records for them in the last two—in the last couple of months in particular for that. Is there any special advice for folks like that?

MR. THOMAS: The adoption records—if somebody's records are open, and the Georgia records were changed in 1990, you can have your adoption record opened in Georgia if you were adopted in Georgia. And you can have them try to research their birth mother, and you can have a special consultant hired to research your birth mother for an extra charge. You could be given information—if you saw the movie *Secrets and Lies*; it was nominated for an Academy Award—that [inaudible], and she was just given her mother's name. *Recording ends abruptly.*

END OF RECORDING

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