

The Blood of an American by Dale Slongwhite

I am from a father who did not know his father, but knew his Father and spent 89 ½ years modeling what it means to live a spiritual, ethical, kind, practical life—always with humor. With only 3.5 years of high school behind him, he started a successful screw machine company, employing over 30 people. He made parts for submarines, sailboats, hospital beds, and a space shuttle.

I am from a mother who raised four children who excelled at public speaking (“You’re so quiet,” people said. “How did you raise them?” they asked. “I listened,” she said.) Every evening at 5:00 p.m. on the dot, we gathered around the dinner table—potatoes and casseroles and vegetables and dessert all made from scratch—and we enthusiastically recited the adventures of our day. Each of us listened to each other, modeled by our mother’s actions. In her seventies, my mother taught herself to use a computer and kept up dialogues with her grandchildren on Instant Messenger long before I did.

I am from a maternal grandfather who emigrated to the United States in 1900 from Ashton-Under-Lyne, England. At the age of six, he journeyed with his father and brothers to the United States to make a home for his mother and sisters who followed over the next couple of years. At the age of nine, he began working in a lace mill in Rhode Island, a profession he would engage in for nearly half a century.

I am from a maternal grandmother whose parents emigrated to Rhode Island from Quebec. She had 12 brothers and sisters, all of the girls with names ending in A. She was supposed to be named Eva, but when her aunt brought her to the church to be baptized (new mothers stayed in bed for weeks in that generation and Catholic families wanted their babies baptized early, lest they die and wind up in Limbo), she named her Exina instead. She alone was sent to a French-speaking school.

I am from a paternal grandmother who lied. She told my father he had one lung. She said his father owned a plantation in South America—a story she changed again and again. Another time she said she had conjoined twins that now traveled with the circus.

David’s ancestors were one of the German families who founded Lunenburg, Nova Scotia while the other side of his family were Polish.

From the genes of people who came before us—Quebec, England, parts unknown, Germany, Nova Scotia, and Poland—David and I created two daughters. One is a medical doctor, one attended law school and is now a professional fiber artist. The blood of a machinist, a listener, a British lace maker, a French-speaking Canadian, a liar, a mystery man, a founder of a country, and a Polish immigrant—blood collected from around the world—flow in the veins of my American children.