

‘Just Trust Me On This’

By Richard L. Tolman, Ph. D.¹

The search for the *Truth* in genealogy depends upon *Proofs* and *Evidence*. *Proofs* and *Evidence* depend on *Sources* that can be checked, investigated and verified. A source that cannot be checked, investigated and verified is NOT a real source. In the words of evidence guru Elizabeth Shown Mills ‘Never, ever should we expect a reader to just ‘take our word’ for whatever we assert’ [Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence Explained*, QuickLesson 21, Citing DNA evidence, underline added]. If the genealogical publication includes redacted source names, the authors are saying ‘Trust Me on This’ with these citations that are not real sources.

A committee of genealogists and lawyers in 2015 decided that to respect their privacy, the names of DNA owners should be redacted when their DNA is listed as a source. However, a redacted source does not fit the requirements of a source. What little sense redacting made in 2015 has since evaporated. Redacting the names of DNA owners for the sake of privacy makes no sense.

- (1) A redacted source is not a source at all since it is not verifiable by the reader. Pursuant to the Elizabeth Shown Mills quote above, if you redact the names of DNA owners, you are saying ‘trust me on this’.
- (2) Today (in 2024), named Ancestry² matches cannot be examined by anyone who is not a match for the named match (only cousins can examine a match’s tree). And if one examines the match, only the individual’s tree is viewable. This is no different than a ‘person search’ that points to a Public Tree on Ancestry. This is not deemed an invasion of privacy. Even if an Ancestry member has a private tree, ‘ThruLines’ can disclose a lineage in that tree if the Ancestry computer finds a Common Ancestor. For some, this information is behind a paywall at Ancestry, but similar trees are available at FamilySearch Family Tree which are not behind a paywall. An individual’s raw DNA sequence is never available unless the owner gives permission.
- (3) There is also the unreasonable fear by some who believe this may prove the DNA owner has some horrible genetic disease. This also is nonsense. In their course of their work on the Human Genome Project around the turn of the century, Thomas Watson and Craig Venter had their entire genomes sequenced and released to the public. Although

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² Ancestry is the preferred source for DNA matching since it has over 25 million trees to match, whereas other DNA sequence vendors have less than one-tenth that number or none.

they both had 'dangerous genes' (linked to cancers or genetic disease), neither had any known genetic disorders or cancers as a result. The regulatory genes in every genome are tremendously sophisticated and are often ten times the length of the genes they regulate. Most cancers and genetic diseases have now been shown to require the simultaneous expression of multiple genes.³

- (4) It is normal to fear the unknown, but it is no longer 2015 and much more is known. It is a mistake to allow lawyers to flex their muscles and prevent the proper citation of DNA evidence.
- (5) The identity of the DNA owners of key matches (name only is available to a matching cousin) may aid the more ready identification of lawbreakers. As a teacher and pro bono researcher, I am a little tired of meeting people who believe their historical family cannot have had any 'difficulties' through the generations. Wake up! Every family has a horse thief or two and many have gone out of their way to conceal themselves from their future posterity. This is what makes genealogy a challenge. I do not think it is a bad thing to discover the truth.

The time has come for genealogists to abandon this 'dog in the manger' approach to DNA sourcing (redacting names of DNA owners) in favor of citing real DNA sources in genealogical publications.

³ Lipkin, Steven Monroe *The Age of Genomes: 'Tales from the front lines of genetic medicine'*. (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2016).