

Unlocking the Mystery of Genealogy Through yDNA

by Sharon Shea Bossard

The idea of utilizing DNA to help unravel who is connected to whom sounds very CSI – a simple cheek swab and the mystery is revealed. It seems way too easy, doesn't it? Crime scene investigations are one thing, but trying to unearth information that has been buried for a hundred years or more, well, that's another matter altogether. And how do you convince strangers of your desperate need for their participation – their cheek swab – to help put the family puzzle together?

The science of DNA was never a consideration when I began my search for family in 2002. I had enough to do: reading microfilm, gathering documents, and following the paper trail I was creating. But I hit a brick wall when it came to my grandfather from Cahersiveen, County Kerry, Ireland. I couldn't locate his townland, nor could I identify any relatives still living in the Cahersiveen area. All four of my grandparents had immigrated to America in the late 1800s, and I had successfully located the townlands of three of them. My grandfather, Michael Shea, born in 1859, remained a mystery as Irish civil birth records are not available prior to 1864. Numerous visits to Ireland, sifting through records, visiting churches and libraries, brought no new information to light. It seemed this mystery would remain so until another family member chose to pick up the torch, long after my demise.

Then, on one of our fact finding missions through Ireland in 2006, my husband and I happened to pick up a copy of *Irish Roots* magazine; inside was an article asking for those with

the Shea/O'Shea surname to join their yDNA project, administered through Family Tree DNA in Austin, Texas. I couldn't believe my luck in finding this, and tucked it away knowing I would work on it the minute I returned home. I learned that the project administrators live in County Cork, Ireland, and that they work diligently to put the results of the yDNA test into a readable and understandable context for its members. Most importantly, it's possible they can match you with someone who shares your surname (if they are already in the yDNA surname project and testing at the 37 marker). This seemed to be the solution to my dead-end search.

On my most recent journey to Ireland in September 2008, in another attempt to solve the whereabouts of my grandfather's birth, I was prepared. My brother had agreed to do the yDNA swab and those results were in the Shea/O'Shea project data base. Now that we had a place in the data bank, I needed to find a Shea male in the Cahersiveen area willing to join the project. Still a difficult task, but this time I felt it had more purpose.

During this visit I met with the genealogist at the National Archives in Dublin. I had reached the conclusion that the only way to get close to securing a Shea birth cert would be to check if my grandfather's mother, Julia Shea, maiden name of Falvey, gave birth to other children after the year 1864, for these records survived the 1922 Irish Civil War. After a quick search through her data base, the genealogist located a birth cert for a James Shea, born in 1869, mother's maiden name Julia

Falvey, townland of Rathkerin in the Cahersiveen area. This was an amazing find; this James could be a brother of my grandfather Michael. It took the expertise of a qualified genealogist to know exactly where to locate this material, saving me the time-consuming task of searching for documents at the General Records Office in Dublin.

My husband and I drove to County Kerry that very afternoon, located the parish of Rathkerin townland, and met with the priest. Unfortunately, the church records for the time that Julia Shea had lived in that parish showed extreme mildew damage and were unreadable. The priest reviewed what little information he had and informed me of the one remaining O'Shea family living in the area where Julia (Falvey) Shea had lived in the late 1800s. I wasn't convinced this lead would render information, for I hadn't considered the O'Shea name vital in my search. But the priest suggested I speak with the family. Since I had traveled to Ireland to locate the area where my grandfather was born, even though I thought this to be a shot in the dark, I thought it best to meet with them. We drove to the O'Shea cottage, knocked on the door, and were welcomed in. Patsy told me that his O'Shea family had been in that area for generations and that any Sheas living in the townland of Rathkerin in the late 1800s would definitely be related to them. I explained my mission and asked if he would participate in the project. I would pay for the test. He agreed. Since his wife is a practicing nurse in Cahersiveen, she understood what I was asking for and why I needed it. There was no hesitation to my request for a

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cheek swab. When I returned home, I contacted Family Tree; they sent the swab kit to Patsy. I alerted our project administrators in County Cork of the new participant; the project coordinator, James O'Shea, assured me that when he received the results from Family Tree, he would contact me. After six weeks, the results came in stating that Patsy O'Shea in the Glen and our Shea family are definitely related.

My journey to collect more data continues, but, this time, it's with the help and support of the project administrators: Margaret O'Shea Jordan, James O'Shea, and Brian O'Shea (<http://www.osheaclan.org>). The O'Sheas have been undaunted in their quest to put together the Shea/O'Shea puzzle for all counties of Ireland

and other places throughout the world; I am the fortunate benefactor of their hard work. I could never have known that the one O'Shea family left in the Glen would be related to me, if not for the Shea/O'Shea yDNA project and the continuing follow-up work of Margaret Jordan O'Shea. Locating elusive ancestors is a difficult task and one that doesn't often yield results. Now we have the help of experts, such as the project administrators, who work tirelessly to interpret the results of yDNA.

If you've hit a brick wall in your search for ancestors, log on to *Family Tree DNA* at <http://www.familytreedna.com>. Check to see if your Irish surname is part of a yDNA project. If so, get on board; you may unlock the mystery of your genealogy.

For those interested in joining the Shea/O'Shea project, contact one of the project administrators at <http://www.osheaclan.org> and discover how you can rev up your search through DNA.

Sharon Shea Bossard is the author of the book Finding My Irish, an inspiring memoir of her relentless quest to unlock her Irish heritage. In her most recent book, Finding Your Chicago Irish, she steers readers beyond the shamrocks and green beer and into the heart and soul of Irish Chicago with her entertaining and comprehensive guide. Visit <http://www.findingmyirish.com> for additional information.

