

Roots 2.0

By George Kourkouliotis

Forty-one years after I sought out my Greek roots in Greece without knowing that was exactly what I was doing, I decided to seek out the other half of my root system, my mom's side of the tree. So, what took me so long? Well it goes like this. I hadn't really gotten into genealogy until the fall of 2013. Sure, I had the Greek family tree, and sure I was in contact with extended members of that family throughout the world. But genealogy work, I'd never even *thought* about doing it and barely even knew what that even *meant*. But that all changed literally in a heartbeat, or in *this* case, the *absence* of a heartbeat. In August of 2013, my nephew, Dale, my sister's son, died of pancreatic cancer at the age of 53 (man, what a bummer!). Sometime during his celebration of life at Poplar Creek Golf Club, Victoria, his daughter, asked me about Dale's side of the family. Her mother's side was Italian through and through and she was immersed in that culture. But how about Dale's roots, specifically Dale's mom's side of the family?

Well, I had my work cut out for me. I knew a lot about my Greek heritage and was able to fill her in on all I knew up to that point in time, but my mom's side, I sort of had a handle on it, but not really. My grandmother's hand-written account of the family tree starting, if I remember correctly, in the early 1700s, had been lost in the Great Move Out when I moved my dad to Colorado in the summer of 1991. So really, all I knew was pretty much anecdotal. No real hard cold facts. I needed to know more. Well, within a year or so, my buddy Henri said she was working for some genealogical society and wanted to know if Vikki and I wanted to drop in for a visit. *Sure, why not? Maybe I can learn something!* And the rest as they say is history.

So, after joining the Society, doing a lot of genealogical work, creating my family trees on Ancestry.com and having a DNA test, I was left with as many questions as I had answers about my mom's story. Early findings gave her beginnings in Milam, Texas, but after finding nothing but dead ends, I found out that Milam was the *county* (near Austin), not the *town* of Milam which was situated near the Louisiana border. Now I was onto something. I narrowed things down to Milano, a small town about 60 miles northeast of Austin. But I still wasn't sure exactly what I was finding. The person who seemed to fit into my grandmother's family was called Maggie Lou Shelton, not the Mary Lou Shelton who I believed my mom to be. But time and again, "Maggie" showed up on the census recordings and in about everything else that I found connected with the family. Something was amiss.

I remembered that my mom had always told us that she went to Yo High School in Texas, and in fact, played halfback for the football team. *Yeah mom, I used to drum for Bruce Springsteen (though I did meet and party with the guy), but mom, really, halfback?*

*I thought I got my foot-speed from my dad's side of the family . So anyway, still not sure if my research was finding my actual mother, on a lark, I typed "Yo High School, Texas" into Google. Voila, Yoe High School came up bigger than life. She wasn't kidding me! But come on, did she really play *halfback* for these guys? I read all I could online about the school whose website even included a picture of the old building from around 1925 or so, but I needed more info. The next step was to give the place a call.*

So, one morning I decided to give it a try. I reached the school secretary and told her of my story of research to date, and, the dilemma of what my mom's first name was. Well the secretary (I wish I remembered her name) was a wealth of information. She even said that she would look into old records and see if she could find any records on my mom. Within a day or two, she called to say she had found my mom's report cards! My mom's reports cards?!?!? Can I get a copy? "Of course, I'll send you a copy." So what name is on the report card? "Maggie Lou", but it's definitely your mom. Dang, my mom's name was Maggie and I never even knew that. She certainly never mentioned it to me. So, I chatted with the secretary some more and wondered about the old school, but was told that they recently built a brand-new high school. The old one had become expendable. Bummer, I wished it was still around so that I could go to it and try to feel some of my mom's vibes from back in the day, and, to take a picture of the place. But no such luck.

Next I searched for my mom's birth certificate and I don't remember exactly all of the problems I had in finding it, but when it arrived it, confirmed that my mom was indeed named "Mary Lou" at birth, but from early on she went by Maggie. Why didn't you ever mention that, mom? The reason being I don't know, but mom never really wanted to talk about Texas or her past and it was just always a mystery to all of us. The closest I ever got to any of it was the day I asked her why she didn't have a southern accent. Her answer? "I just lost my accent as fast as I could. I didn't want to sound like a hick anymore." But that was it. No reason, no background, no answers. And apparently, "Maggie" was maybe a little too hick for her also because no one I knew ever knew her as Maggie. Too bad 'cause I sort of like the name. If I ever get another animal, it's going to be named Maggie plain and simple. Or maybe Maggie Lou.

*It was now up to me to fill in the gaps. I needed to go to, gulp, Texas. In the summer of 2018, I threw caution to the wind. A friend of the band, Lisa, had moved to Austin after Scott died and had given me some pointers on how to move about the state incognito. And so, I bought a plane ticket to the place and off I went. But not before buying a new phone which promised to navigate me around the place without having to stop and ask directions. This would be a challenge but *that* little thing proved to be invaluable.*

The first order of business, once I checked into my hotel, was to jump in my rental car, type in "Milano, Texas", and follow the droid's instructions to a tee. I wouldn't have

made it out of Austin without it. The drive to Milano was uneventful and so was the *arrival* there. As Gertrude Stein said about Oakland, "There's no *there* there." The "town" at best consisted of a convenience store and a place where you could buy headstones for the local cemetery. But that was it. A lot of farmland, and lot of houses on huge lots set back from the roads at least several hundred feet. And, a lot of cows. But guess what, *this* wasn't *really* where my mom was from. According to her report card, she was from a place called *Hoyte* which was apparently halfway between Milano and Cameron, the town where Yoe H.S. was located. So, I headed north to Hoyte and in short order I was entering the outskirts of Cameron itself. How did I miss Hoyte? Lickety-splitly, I turned around and headed back from whence I came and soon came rolling back into Milano. Again, something was amiss.

I contacted a real estate office in Cameron ahead of time because I had heard they had an old map from the 1880s showing the land plots of the county and so I thought, maybe I can drop by and see if I could locate Hoyte, or what *used* to be Hoyte on the map. When I reached the office, I asked for my contact, Krystal (oh, thank you so much, Krystal!) and she promptly took me down a hallway and there it was, a map stretching from ceiling to floor along at least ten or fifteen feet of wall. Scattered before me on the map of the whole county was every landowner and parcel in the county. This was gonna take some time. So, I just dropped to my knees and thought I'd better take a load off before this quest began. Looking straight up at the map and at eye level, there it was. A parcel labeled "Dean Shelton", my grandfather. My search was over before it began. I had struck paydirt in a little less than five seconds! And that little bend in the road was now all that was left of Hoyte (if anything more really ever did exist). I remembered back a number of years when my grandmother had told me she had 30 acres in the area and didn't know what to do with it and of course I had answered, "Hey, I'll take it". But I was like 15 at the time and even though she said I could have it, it never came to pass. In fact, *that's* a long convoluted story I don't care to get into at the moment 'cause now I was looking at that little parcel right on this old map from the late 1880s. So now I knew *exactly* where my mom came from, the land of cows and grass that was mid-state Texas.

My next stop, Yoe H.S. Arriving at the school I could see it indeed was a new facility. Looked nice but boy I would have given my eye teeth to see the old school my mom had attended. I walked on in and visited the office. I was greeted by a nice secretary who offered to show me around and answer my questions. After learning of the school's history and the fact that the band had won some recent state-wide competition, I ran into a bunch of scholarly looking kids waiting for the library to open or reading poetry to each other or whatever. Seemed like a great school. Again I mentioned that I would have really loved to have seen the old building that my mom attended and the secretary said, "Oh, well you know, the old building is still *there*. We just wrapped the new school around it. The old

school is still there, it's just not being used for anything." *Are you kidding me?! It's still there?! The old school?! I can see it?!* "Oh yeah, just go around the back. So I hurried out the door and around to the back, and tucked into the inside of the new U-shaped school, there it stood. The old red brick building in all its glory. And *now* I really *did* start to feel mom's vibes from almost 90 years ago. I imagined my mom back in the day, wandering around outside between classes. Maybe flirting with the boys during lunch. Playing catch with the starting quarterback. You know, the usual high school girl stuff. "Hi, mom, how are you doing?" I took a few photos and I was happy. One last request of this very helpful secretary was that I wanted to buy a Yoe H.S. tee shirt, but this time I was out of luck- they were all out of supplies. But she *did* tell me to check the local printing office which printed their shirts to see if they had any left in stock.



The old Yoe High School Building, completed 1921.

So, I set out afoot and soon found Main Printing a few blocks away and once again found a very cooperative lady. She said they didn't have any shirts since they hadn't received an order yet from the school. But *hey, I'll just print one up for you, but it'll take a couple of days.* I told her I'd take two, one for me, one for my brother. *No problem.* But

can you send them to me 'cause I'll be back in Colorado by then and she said *sure*. "How much do I owe you?" *Oh, don't worry about that for now. I'll just send you a bill. They'll be about \$12 each.* And that was that. No money down, no paperwork, no problem. The shirts will be printed up and shipped to me and I would have my souvenir from mom's alma mater. Sure enough, about a week later after I got home, the package arrived with two brand new Yoe tee shirts and a bill for the shirts. Talk about an old-fashion way of doing business, this was as down to earth as one could get. Probably could've swapped a few chickens for the shirts if I *had* any to swap.

But I *still* needed more info about my mom and her school days. I next headed to the local museum hoping to maybe discover something of interest. Walking through the door, I immediately turned right to work my way through the place. In the museum case straight in front of me, there were a number of photos labeled "Yoe High School, Class of ____". And you guessed it, right before me was the class of 1933, and lo and behold, there was my mom's graduation class photo, the earliest photo of her that I had ever seen (and unfortunately, *still* the earliest photo I have ever found. I was never able to figure out where she went to grade school, but it may have been some sort of a one room schoolhouse around Hoyte that is long lost in the dust of times.)

Next stop was the Cameron Herald to see if I could peruse the local newspaper's old editions. The catch though was that they didn't have any old copies, but they *did* have them on microfilm. But of course, there *had* to be a catch. There's always a catch. It seems they didn't have a microfilm *reader*! Now wasn't *that* special? After I got back to Colorado I picked up a bit of info from one of our *General Meeting* speakers I believe, who said that when newspapers were put onto microfilm by newspaper companies around the country, somehow the state historical office would also end up with a copy. So I recently called up the historical office of the state of Texas and I was able to have several years' worth of papers on microfilm delivered to Lakewood Library. Though I haven't to date found anything of interest in the editions I have seen thus far, I am hoping that when I get hold of the editions from the time mom was in high school there might be some little bit of info that I can *gleam* onto. Like maybe her stats from the latest football game.

During the several days I spent in Texas I also scoured through the various graveyards in the area looking for my ancestors. This effort proved to be somewhat successful. In Milano I found the graves of my grandmother and several of her brothers, plus my great-grand mother. Bingo! Next, I traveled overland, up and down a number of dirt roads (man, that new phone of mine worked wonders because I *never* would have been able to locate these places without it) and found an old cemetery spread out over several acres with gravestones scattered hap-hazardly throughout the place. The search was tedious as I threaded my way through the tall grass and rocks, hoping to find my

grandfather's tombstone before I found the local rattlesnake den. As luck would have it, I found the gravestone first and it was in pretty good condition considering the fact that it looked like I might have been the first person to visit this little sanctuary in the last 25 years. But the rest of my graveyard exploits were not as productive. For instance, a little cemetery called the "Shelton" cemetery could *not* be located. The best my GPS could do was to get me in the general locale and I had heard that it may be on private land, but I was somewhat reluctant to go around knocking on farmer's doors asking if they happened to have a graveyard on their land. Too bad because this was supposedly the place where my great grandfather was buried, the guy who was in the Civil War, the guy who told his family that he couldn't tell them what he did during the war. Was he a spy? Was he part of the plot to assassinate Lincoln? Did he defect to the other side? Those deep, dark secrets that will forever remain buried.

And the mysteries continue to this day. My mom left Texas right after she graduated Yoe in the summer of 1933 and moved to San Francisco to live with her uncle. She purportedly moved there to go to nursing school and though I have yet to find the physical evidence of this, she *did* tell us that she *did* go to nursing school. But why the hurry to get out of Texas? And why San Francisco? Talk about a culture shock! She left a land of farms and cows for life in the big city. The one question that comes to mind is, *could she have been pregnant?* I mean, that's what they *did* to girls in those days when young women got pregnant, shipped them off to some uncle out of state to hide their sins. I certainly have no evidence for this, only conjecture, but if it *were* true, I could possibly have a half-brother or sister who if still living, would be around 86 or 87. Discovering *that* person would be a major rush, but I would have no idea how to even *begin* the search on that one.

So once in The City, mom apparently went to nursing school, and within the first year or two of living there, encountered my dad and married him in September 1935. Dad one time pointed out where she lived on Van Ness Street when he met her, but I neglected to ask how and where they met. Van Ness is a long way from Potrero Hill where dad lived though he *did* work somewhere downtown at Western Union. Maybe he delivered a telegram to her. Maybe she bopped into a bar where he was playing with his band. Maybe a friend of a friend of a friend introduced them. To my dismay I never asked the question.

So my search for my mom's past proved very fruitful. Just like my papou, she came from a very rural area where farming and ranching/herding were the major drivers of the economy. They both left their very secluded societies for the promise of something greater and more enlightening and they found it in San Francisco, the eventual place of my birth. Thank you, guys, so much for your efforts. I never could have done it without you!

As a side note, when I changed the spelling of my last name to honor by Greek past, I added "Shelton" as my middle name to honor my mom and her memory. Besides, it was sort of neat having a middle name- never had one before. I might have used "Maggie" had I known about *that* back when I made the changes.



My mom, Mary (Maggie) Lou Shelton circa 1934