

Photo Epiphany

When John Olson sent the picture of his great grandmother Marion “Minnie” McLaren, he generated a search through all the pictures of Minnie’s younger brother, my grandfather Peter, looking for similarities. A previous message showed the comparison of Minnie and the selected image, “Peter at 24.”

The search also uncovered an unexpected treasure.

About a year ago I visited my cousin Phyllis Goold, daughter of my aunt Marjorie, to collect family stories and digitally copy dozens of family photographs she had inherited from her mom. The process took days and I was a little loopy from cataloging and shuffling photos in and out of the scanner. One of the images, a young man in his late twenties or early thirties, was taken in a studio in Watertown, South Dakota. Penciled on the back was the caption: “John McLaren.” Watertown is about twenty miles northeast of Vienna. Since my father, John McLaren, left South Dakota at age five, I assumed the label was in error. So I captioned the image “Probably Peter,” since it looked like my grandfather (though not exactly).

Diane was looking over my shoulder as we plowed through all the photos of grandfather Peter McLaren, looking for images that resembled Minnie, and the caption on “Probably Peter” struck her. (Diane has endured my genealogy fixation with astounding tolerance, and acquired knowledge of my family tree that probably exceeds my own.) “That’s not Peter, that’s John Walker McLaren,” she cried. She was undoubtedly correct. Now we have pictures of Peter’s older sister, Minnie, and his younger brother, John Walker.

On the next page, in the picture Diane uncovered, meet John Walker McLaren.



John Walker McLaren, youngest son of Peter McLaren Sr. and Elizabeth Walker. He was born March 16, 1868 in Ontario, Canada; and moved with the family to South Dakota in 1884. From my father's baby book: "John Dixon McLaren was named 'John' after his father's only brother, John Walker McLaren, who died suddenly in Minneapolis where he was a medical student at Hamline University, in the year 1897." Phyllis Gould recalled that his death was the result of a "wrestling accident." John Walker died on October 28, 1897 at age 29. He preceded his mother by eleven years and his father by sixteen. The three of them are buried side by side in the Dixon cemetery, near Vienna.

John Olson also mentioned his picture of Peter McLaren Sr., our common ancestor; John's great great grandfather and my great grandfather. The print was a small oval, in poor condition. His description jogged my memory, and I sent him a copy of the picture below, that my mother had saved with the caption:

"This picture saddens me, I simply do not remember where it came from but feel certain that it was with Marion's pictures. It does look some like Grandpa McLaren and I wonder if this might have been his Father. We will never know - but I simply couldn't destroy it."



Peter McLaren Sr.
June 9, 1839 to
December 19, 1913

John Olson's response:

"For the second time in the last 5 years, I got goosebumps when reading email. Your photo of Peter Sr. is much better than the one I have. Mine is water spotted and has some ink on it. It is the same picture."

My response was similar; to know that we each had a picture of our common ancestor, and to have mine positively identified.

Here is Peter Jr., Peter Sr.'s oldest son and John Walker's older brother. Peter Jr. was born May 27, 1866 in Lanark, Ontario, Canada. This picture was taken in Ogden City, Utah on May 27, 1890; so it is Peter's 24th birthday. Why Ogden? No idea. Ogden is just north of Salt Lake City, and 1,100 miles from Vienna.

Peter is a bachelor, he will not marry until 1896, and we can assume he made the trip by rail.



Now we have most of the Dakota McLarens. On top is father, Peter Sr. Below him is the picture of his daughter Marion/“Minnie” from John Olson. The oldest of Peter Sr.’s children, she was born in September 1864. Then her brothers, Peter Jr. and John Walker.



The quest continues.