



ASBURY PARK PRESS
THE JERSEY SHORE'S
LARGEST NEWS
SOURCE

Published in the Asbury Park Press 01/24/04

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As a youngster growing up in Bolivar, Tenn., Martinette Mitchell would regularly pepper family members with questions about her roots.

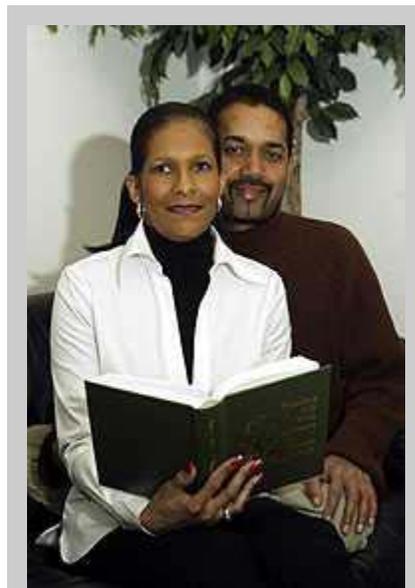
"I wanted to know about my family, where I came from," the Lakewood resident said. "It was just something that always intrigued me."

It would be years later, long after Mitchell married, moved to New Jersey and started raising a family of her own, that the 43-year-old would learn that the answers to many of her questions had been at her fingertips growing up.

"I grew up in my grandmother's house in Bolivar," Mitchell explained. "And there was one room in the house that was used for storage. I never went in there because there was just too much stuff."

In 1996, though, a part of that "stuff" made its way into Mitchell's home. When Martin Bills Jr. was cleaning out the space, he came across a trunk filled with old postcards, letters and pictures. Knowing of his niece's interest in family history, he sent the trunk to Mitchell.

The trunk's contents would spur Mitchell into action, leading her on a seven-year journey to explore where she came from and who she was. What Mitchell found along the way about the maternal side of her family is chronicled in "Finding My Way Home" (Anundsen Publishing Co., \$54.95).



MIKE MCLAUGHLIN photo

Martinette Mitchell and her husband, Preston Mitchell, Lakewood, are shown with Mrs. Mitchell's book about her family's history, "Finding My Way Home." Many family documents are cataloged in the book.

"I never intended to write a book at the start," said Mitchell, who is a home-based state-certified child-care provider. "But along the way, I realized that it was important to record the information not only for myself, but for my children and my children's children."

As she starting sorting the information in the trunk, Mitchell was amazed at what she found: there were letters written to her great-great-grandfather from his brothers; there were military records; postcards provided a snapshot of where family members had lived and visited.

"It was a great gift. . .but I wanted to know more," Mitchell said. "With every bit of information I learned, I wanted more. Once one question was answered, another came up. I was hooked."

"Finding My Way Home," Mitchell is quick to point out, concentrates only on her mother's side of her family. For years, Mitchell worried that she would never be able to complete her family tree because her biological father never acknowledged her as his own.

"But I realized that I had a history that deserved recognition," Mitchell said, during an interview at her home. "I am part of the Bills and Harkins, Martin and Brown, Moore and Oswald and Rivers and Napier families. For that, I am very proud."

Early on in her quest, Mitchell became Internet savvy. She posted queries on genealogy Web sites. She discovered the Federal Population Census Schedules that provided an abundance of information. She learned how to find marriage and death records. And, of course, she relied on her grandmother Ophelia Bills.

"Over the years, I was learning more and more, putting together a better picture of who I was, where I came from," Mitchell recalled. "But I still wasn't planning a book."

That changed the day Mitchell received information in the mail from author Katie Brown Bennett, who was working on a book about the Brown family and plantation owner John H. Bills.

In her book, Mitchell describes the information she received:

"Katie sent a copy of my Great Great Grandmother Emiline and her son Mitchell's original Bill of Sale as slaves. So many emotions flooded my mind and body.

For me to actually hold a copy of this transaction, which had transpired between two slave owners, was an awakening in me.

A tangible item that represented the humiliation, the pain and the suffering of my ancestors was right in my hands!

This single piece of paper intrigued me and encouraged me to search further.

I just had to know about them."

By 2000, Mitchell began writing in earnest. For nearly three years, Mitchell wrote and rewrote the book that chronicles the family from 1861 to 2003. Included in the 473-page book are genealogy charts, a chapter devoted to Bolivar during slavery and the Civil war, the unions of various parts of the family, photos and copies of various documents, including the bill of sale of Emiline and Mitchell.

"It was a long and sometimes hard journey," Mitchell acknowledged. "Sometimes I hit dead ends. But my family encouraged me to go on. It was my journey, but, in a sense, it was all of our journey."

She credits her husband, Preston, and children Khalis, 22, and Ashley, 16, with supporting her through the hours invested in the project.

"They were my strength," Mitchell said.

"And her biggest fans," Preston Mitchell added. "What she has accomplished is amazing. For the first time, there is a written family history, due to her work and tireless efforts."

Last October, Mitchell finally completed the book.

"It was a feeling of joy and relief," Mitchell said. "It was a very long journey filled with highs and lows, but it was over and I felt very satisfied and proud."

Since her journey began, Mitchell has been asked on various occasions on what drove her interest in her ancestors.

Her answer, she said, is simple.

"They are a part of me, they are a part of my inner being," she explained. "After all, I do carry their genetic makeup. The true and unchangeable fact remains: From the very moment of conception, we are who we are and will be forever."

Copies of the "Finding My Way Home" are available for purchase by calling (732) 961-6175 or going to www.spiritsgifts.com/findingmyway-home.htm.