

Halley's Comet And Genealogy "Do you see what I see?"
Teacher: "A star with a tail as long as a kite..."
Student: "Stars with a tail?"
Teacher: "Name one."
Student: "The two, Lewis & Rittenhouse"

(1)

By Rev. Dr. Robert E. H. Peoples

Have you ever tried to lasso a comet? A lasso is a long line

with a running noose - comes from the Latin "to snare". A comet is a "long-haired one" - comes from the Greek "komē = hair", via Latin & Anglo-Saxon "cometes". Our definition is a bit circular in that a comet is a star-like heavenly body with a coma, which is itself the nebulousity around the nucleus of a comet. All plenty "hairy" & nebulous? Not a bit.

A mere ten generations ago on our pedigree charts, a tall, ambitious, young London mathematician, Edmond Halley, inventor, engineer and, would you believe it?, a spy for King William III (that's William of "William & Mary"), was keeping track of the French fleet while he charted the coast & the tides of the English Channel. The year was 1682. Our Carolina ancestors were just getting settled, laying out streets & building brick houses, on Dyster Point between Ashley & Cooper Rivers, having lived for ten years at Old Town Landing. A comet was passing overhead. Young Halley watched it night after night from the white cliffs of Dover. And he lassoed it. How? He speculated that it was the

same comet that was recorded in 1607. (aha! the year our ancestors settled in Jamestown, Va.!) And before that in 1531, returning every 75/76 years. Of course, Halley wasn't the only one watching. That "hell-fire & brimstone" Puritan preacher, Rev. Increase Wether, awestruck by the approaching comet, thundered at his Boston congregation, "Will you continue in your wicked ways until God sends his arrows from heaven to smite you down into the grave?"

The more records Edmond Halley found, the more convinced he became. The Chinese, who claim the longest genealogies on earth, recorded comets 613 BC., describing them as celestial brooms wielded by the gods to sweep the heavens free of evil which then

fell to earth, bringing wars, floods, droughts, earthquakes and other disasters. Chinese astronomers first recorded in 240 B.C. what would later be Halley's Comet.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 Bc) noted that comets are not round & perfect, & therefore must have originated on earth. To him they were "exhalations of the sins of mankind which ignited as they rose into the fiery sphere, causing drought & high winds."

In 11 Bc the Romans interpreted the comet as a warning of the death of Agrippa. Some scientists still think this was the "star" which guided the Wise Men to Bethlehem at the Birth of Jesus. Giotto, among the earliest of the Italian Renaissance artists, was so inspired by Halley's 1301 appearance that he painted it as the Star of Bethlehem in his famous Adoration of the Magi. Halley's reputation had grown mightily.

The Jewish Historian Flavius Josephus in AD 66 saw the comet as the luminous blade of a gigantic sword held menacingly over the doomed city of Jerusalem. And Jerusalem was destroyed.

In AD 218 the comet marked the murder of the Emperor Maximus of Rome whose death had been foretold. Its appearance in AD 451 portended the defeat of Attila the Hun at Chalons by Flavius Aetius. By then the comet was so closely associated with the death of great leaders that when great king Charlemagne, from whom it is a must for every American genealogist to prove his descent, when Charlemagne died in AD 814 and no comet appeared, his court historians simply invented one.

Then in 1066 Matilda of Flanders & her courtly ladies in embroidering the famous Bayeux Tapestry, show the Anglo-Saxon soldiers cringing as the comet soars above the throne of King Harold. The embroidered words, "They are in awe of the star", attribute Harold's defeat at Hastings to the comet as a bad omen. As genealogists we know that Harold's 7,000 Anglo-Saxons were

simply exhausted from their forced march from the Battle of Stamford Bridge in Yorkshire. Our genealogists go back to these 7,000 Normans who accompanied William the Conqueror.

Again in 1456 Halley heralded the descent of Turkish armies on Belgrade. And in the late 16th century great William Shakespeare could have Calpurnia in Julius Caesar summarize the general feeling as she warns the Emperor:

"When beggars die, there are no comets seen; the heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes!"

Putting it all together, Edmond Halley in 1705 put his reputation on the line and predicted that Halley's Comet would return in 1758.

It isn't what you don't know that hurts you; it's what you know that isn't so! A recent writer of a front page story in The Island Packet confidently assured us that Edmond Halley lived to see his prediction fulfilled. He certainly did not. In fact, he died in 1742; he never had the satisfaction of knowing whether he was right or wrong. All of us have to live by faith, unable to see three days, much less three generations ahead. In fact, life would be monotonous, colorless and boring were we to cease to have to battle against uncertainties, obstacles and hazards. Adversity has the same effect on a person as rigorous training has on an athlete. It reduces us to our best performance size. Thus, difficulties, like work, are blessings in disguise. So, keep on with your basic genealogical research when you think you have run into a stone wall. It will improve your technique and keep your mind exercised.

On the other hand, when you are getting everything you want and folks are sending you all sorts of genealogical information to fill those empty spaces on your pedigree chart, beware! Watch out!

As Joel Chandler Harris (1848-1908), author of Uncle Remus, His Sayings & Sayings, puts it: "Fatterings frogs ain't in luck." Too much success can certainly spoil one's form.

Actually, it happened that a simple German farmer, George Palitzsch, first saw Halley's Comet when it returned in 1758. He reported his sighting & everyone began labelling comets. Biela's Comet was claimed in Feb. 1772 with a seven year cycle; Encke's Comet was claimed in June 1786 with a three year cycle. Donati's Comet was claimed in June 1858 with a cycle of several thousand years. As far as I know, his claim hasn't been verified.

But Edmond Halley's Comet remains the most popular. The Nansen Planetarium in Salt Lake City, a town familiar to genealogists, has organized a Halley's Comet Club with some 300 members who claim they saw it in 1910 when it came within 14 million miles of earth. ^{**} That year many Chicago residents prepared to commit suicide by cyanogen gas poisoning because some scientists predicted that planet earth would pass through the comet's tail & all would be agonizingly burned to death. Now, of course, we are told the tail is mostly ice and rocks & that each sweep around the sun melts about six feet. Not to worry, though. There's tail enough to last for 10,000 generations, some 225,000 years.

And just in case you wondered, Edmond Halley seems to have no descendants. But his second cousin has a descendant in Stockton, Cal., Edmond Paul Halley whose three grandsons: 5, 7 & 9 years old, are already planning to watch for Halley's Comet again in 2061.

I'll close with a brief poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes ^(a mayflower descendent) which was printed in nearby Charleston's News & Courier in 1835:

The Comet! He is on his way,
And singing as he flies,
The whizzing planets shrink before
The spectre of the skies.

Closest to earth on 11 Apr 86 but 37 million miles away this pass.