

Research

Looking For A Man Who Didn't Want to Be Found!

Diane L. Richard and Mary Ann Boyle chronicle their search for Robert Lee Chamberlain

THOUGH MANY OF us have researched ancestors who have challenged us to try and document their lives, with no intent on their part to frustrate their descendents, occasionally, you come across a person who intentionally wants to "disappear". This is the short version of the story of eventually tracking down one such person, Robert Lee Chamberlain. A particular element of this challenge was that he did this in the 20th century — he was not some long ago scofflaw, but a relatively modern one!

Hopefully, some of the "successes" we had in documenting Robert will give you some food for thought on ways to find your intentionally, or unintentionally, hard-to-find ancestor. And, no, jail or prison records never came into play. We tracked Robert using the types of documents that exist for many individuals born near the

turn of the 20th century.

Some Basic Details

Let's start with some of what was known about Robert as the project started:

1. Robert's parents were Clarence K. Chamberlain and Florence Bachelder.
2. Clarence and Florence had three children, only two of whom lived to adulthood: Mildred, born 1886 and Robert Lee Chamberlain, born 1894, both born in Nebraska.
3. Robert is thought to have stolen some money from a church in Chicago and disappeared, sometime between 1922-30.
4. Robert was married to Alice Catherine Dagg, who died in Chicago 17 June 1961. They had a daughter.

So, we know some basic details, parents, birth date/place, spouse, child and his possible motive for leaving the area.

Where to Start

We decided to start by answering the following questions, though not necessarily in this order:

1. Learn where parents were buried — is Robert and/or his sister also buried there?
2. Look for obits for father (died in 1935, after Robert left town) — any mention of Robert?
3. When and where did sister Mildred die — any mention of Robert?
4. Does any record for his abandoned wife mention a location for Robert after he disappeared?
5. Can we pinpoint when Robert left the area?
6. Did Robert end up being jailed in Illinois?
7. Did Alice divorce Robert?
8. If sister Mildred left the area, did Robert join her?
9. Did he register for the 1942 WWII Draft? Those men who were born between 28 April 1877

TREASURY DEPARTMENT INTERNAL REVENUE SERVICE (Revised July 1957)		U. S. SOCIAL SECURITY ACT APPLICATION FOR ACCOUNT NUMBER	
EACH ITEM SHOULD BE FILLED IN. IF ANY ITEM IS NOT KNOWN WRITE "UNKNOWN"			
399-01-9997			
1. Robert Lee Chamberlain		2. Camp Whitnell Park, Hales Corners, Wis.	
4. Unemployed		5. Tecumseh, Johnson, Nebraska	
6. 43		7. January 20, 1894	
9. Clarence Krum Chamberlain.		10. Florence Bachelder	
11. SEX: MALE <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> FEMALE		12. COLOR: WHITE <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NEGRO OTHER	
13. GIVE DATE YOU BECAME AN EMPLOYEE (IF YOU BEGAN EMPLOYMENT AFTER NOV. 24, 1936) XXX			
14. HAVE YOU FILLED OUT A CARD LIKE THIS BEFORE? No			
15. October 14, 1937		16. Robert L Chamberlain	
DETACH ALONG THIS LINE			

SS-5 Application for Robert Lee Chamberlain.

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and 16 February 1897 were to register — with a birth year of 1894, he would have qualified.

We did do all of these and we learned that:

1. Robert was not buried with his parents and sister.
2. The death notice for his father (it wasn't really an obituary) does mention Robert, but nothing further (there was no will or probate for Clarence).
3. We learned that Mildred died in 1935 (in Oregon), though her obituary in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* only mentions her father. Robert is mentioned in her will; he is bequeathed a rug, and said to be in Chicago.
4. We were not able to get any information from the Chicago Public School system (Alice's employer) and her obituary made no mention of Robert.
5. Using directories and the 1930 census, it appears that Robert left the area c. 1933.
6. A search was done in the archives of the *Chicago Tribune* and no mention of Robert and/or his possible theft of church money was found, nor any mention of a trial, conviction or incarceration.
7. Yes, Alice did divorce Robert! The action was filed in Cook County Superior Court in June 1938. During the divorce proceedings, it was stated that Robert left the family on 17 December 1931 and was never heard from again and no contact was made. In the summer of 1938, they posted three notices in the newspaper and sent a certified letter to the last known address, 1945 Cleveland Avenue, Chicago, Illinois (this was the address in 1930-31). It was returned as "left no address". Alice was declared to have been a good wife and that there was no reason that she should not have custody of their daughter and she was not looking for alimony. The divorce decree was entered 4 October 1938.
8. We did not find Robert in Oregon in the vicinity of where his

WPA paperwork from October 1933.

sister Mildred lived and died.
9. No, Robert was not initially found in the WWII Draft Registration (see Third "Big" Clue for more).

False Avenues — Ohio

As the project progressed, another tidbit of information emerged. This was that Robert's wife, Alice, hired a Private Investigator and found Robert in Cleveland, or Cincinnati, or Columbus, Ohio.

Based on this, a lot of research was done into death indexes, cemeteries, directories and other records for the state and for the identified cities and their counties. We even found some likely "Robert Lee and Robert L. Chamberlain" individuals. Though, each, upon further research, could be eliminated based on various records.

As you can imagine, many other false leads (e.g., Milwaukee area) were pursued.

The First "Big" Clue — SS-5

Though we did not find Robert in the Social Security Death Index (SSDI), we figured that Robert was probably still alive in 1936 and since the first Social Security cards were issued in November 1936 (see <http://www.ssa.gov/history/ssn/ssnforms.html> for a brief history), it was probable that Robert might have applied.

We requested his SS-5 by providing his name, birth date and birth place and names of parents. After a six month wait, we learned that he did file an SS-5 in October 1937 in Wisconsin and we received a copy! The information on his birth date, place and parents matched known information. We learned that he had been living in Hales Corner, Wisconsin at Camp Whitnall Park and was unemployed.

With a bit of research, we learned that Camp Whitnall Park was part of the CCC/WPA programs instituted as a result of the Depression. Read more about Whitnall Park at <http://www.county.milwaukee.gov/display/router.asp?docid=10500>.

Now the search was on to see if we could confirm that Robert was part of the WPA program and what we could learn from that.

The Second "Big" Clue — WPA Paperwork

We learned that WPA paperwork is held by the National Personnel Records Center (the same entity that holds military records). We requested his WPA file; we had to provide a letter stating our legal standing to do so and also an argument that, though we could not prove his death (since we didn't have a death certificate), he would have been 112 years old at the time of our request and we would probably have read about him in the newspaper.

Eventually we received a half inch thick stack of papers telling us all about Robert's tenure from 1933 forward. We learned the fol-

lowing from his paperwork:

1. He first applied on 22 October 1933, while living in Milwaukee and continued to re-enroll until his discharge on 6 April 1942. He spent time at many different locations including Hales Corner/ Camp Whitnall Park. He claimed no dependents (a lie).
2. In 1934, he initially listed Mrs. Bonnie Williams to get his allotment, and then changed it — who was she?
3. In later paperwork, c.1938-42, it appears that his allotment was going to a “Mrs Margarette Chamberlain” who lived at various Chicago addresses — who was she? She may have been a wife, since on 1937 paperwork, he indicated “yes” to being married.
4. He worked for the IRS from 1925-28.
5. By 1936, he had mostly dentures.
6. Besides serving in the Illinois National Guard, he was a WWI veteran — he enlisted 11 May 1918 and was discharged 7 February 1919, as a corporal in an Ordnance Company.

This tells us that he was still alive in 1942, that there were at least two women that he was associated with during this time and that he was a WWI veteran. We were making progress!

The Third “Big” Clue — WWII Registration

Remember how we couldn’t initially find Chamberlain’s WWII registration? Well, with the information about his “career” with the WPA, we know that he was definitely alive c.1942.

This prompted us to take a second look at this record group. This time, though, we didn’t rely on the Ancestry WWII Registration database (upon further reading, we learned that its version did not, at the time, include Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio or many of the Midwestern states)

LOOKING FOR THESE RECORDS?

- **SS-5**
<http://www.ssa.gov/online/ssa-711.pdf>
- **WWI Draft Registration**
www.genealogybranches.com/worldwaronedraftcards.html
- **WWII Draft Registration**
www.Ancestry.com
- **Civilian Personnel Records from a Federal Agency (e.g., WPA/CCC records)**
<http://www.archives.gov/st-louis/civilian-personnel/public-services.html>

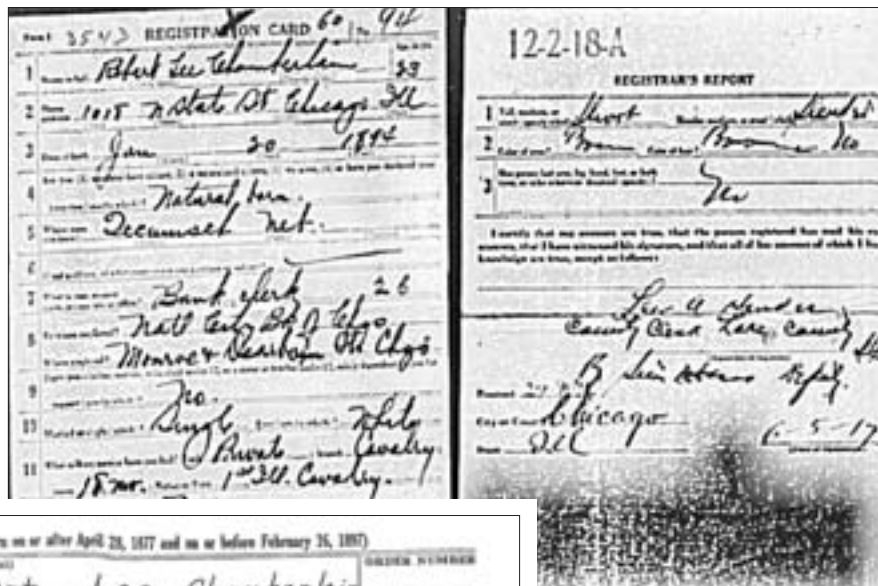
- **Military Service Records**
<http://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/get-service-records.html>
- **IL Historical Military Records**
www.il.ngb.army.mil/History/History%20Military%20Records.htm
- **For NARA, an overview of military records can be found at <http://www.archives.gov/genealogy/military/>**

and we had someone visit the Great Lakes NARA regional office and look at the WWII “Old Mans Draft” records for the Midwestern states (part of Record Group 147, Records of the Selective Service System, 1940+). Robert Lee’s registration card was located and it had him back in Illinois, now Winnebago County.

The Fourth “Big” Clue — IL National Guard Letter

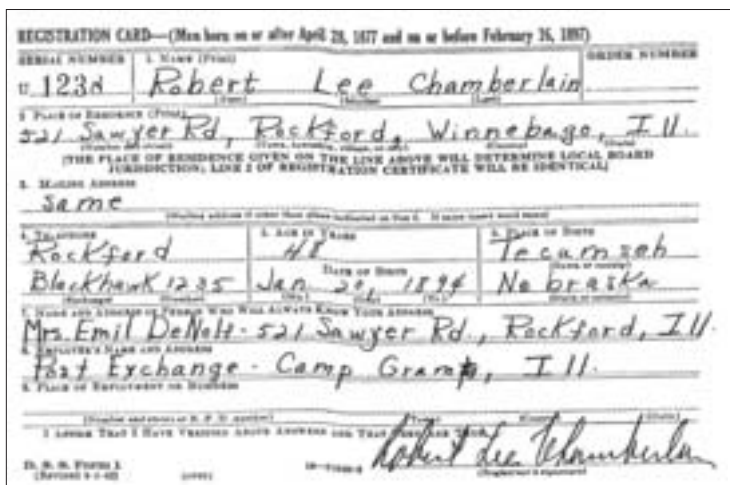
Revisiting the records we had on Robert, we were reminded that we did find his WWI Draft Registration Card and that his WPA paperwork stated that he was a veteran of WWI.

Our research revealed that the 1st IL Calvary was a National



Above: WWI draft registration card for one Robert Lee Chamberlain.

Left: WWII draft registration card for Robert Lee Chamberlain.



Guard unit until WWI, at which time it was conscripted into the Federal Military for WWI. Do any records survive for National Guard units? Did he remain with the unit when it was

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conscripted into the Federal Military? We decided to look into records for both.

For his federal paperwork, we filed a Freedom of Information Act Request (FOIA) for his service file, aware that as a result of the 1972 fire, we would likely receive little information. The paperwork we received confirmed when he served (as supplied in his WPA file), gave us his service number 00 450 806, said that he was discharged and that he received a WWI Victory Medal and a WWI Victory Button (bronze).

We also learned that the Illinois National Guard (Springfield, Illinois) does maintain historic records and that a letter of legal standing, along with Robert Lee's details of service, would be adequate to acquire his file. This was then put in motion.

We Find Robert Lee!

Eventually we received a few documents from Robert Lee's Illinois National Guard file. The most important, for our purposes, was that Robert Lee wrote a letter dated 3 February 1956 to them to get proof of his military service, as he was seeking a pension. The address he used was: Robert L. Chamberlain, 320 S. Avenue H, Portales, NM. So, we now have him alive in 1956 and in New Mexico!

With this information, and some research in Portales, we learn that Robert Lee lived there with his wife, Ruth, until his death on 4 March 1964. His obituary tells us that he lived in Portales for eight years, he was an accountant and married Mrs. Ruth Grant Clark in Vancouver, Washington (yet another locale!) on 19 September 1947.

Robert Lee's Many Wives

Though learning about Robert Lee's wives and/or apparent love interests weren't how we eventually located him, they did have us constantly searching for marriage, divorce and other records trying to find him and they certainly filled in some of the pieces of his life. Additionally, since Robert Lee was an heir in an estate matter, we

had to determine whether he had any children other than the one daughter — basically any other heirs-at-law besides his last wife, Ruth. As the project finished, we created a "wife-line", showing at least what we learned about his marital life, in an attempt to answer that question!

Obviously,



Above: Obituary for Robert Lee Chamberlain.
Below: Chart detailing the many wives of Robert Lee!

Date	Event	Source
9-3-1921	First Marriage of Robert Chamberlain and Alice Dagg, Cook County, IL	Divorce, Cook County, 36S 5367
12-17-1931	Divorce, Robert Chamberlain deserts Alice (Dagg) Chamberlain	Divorce
10-4-1938	Divorce of Robert Chamberlain (in absentia) and Alice (Dagg) Chamberlain granted	Divorce
Unknown Date, c. 1936/1937	Second Marriage (not considered valid) of Robert Chamberlain to Margaret/Margarette, unknown	WPA File
10-14-1937	Robert Chamberlain marks "Married" YES on form	WPA File
1938 - 1942	Benefits sent to Mrs. Margarette Chamberlain	WPA File
4-25-1943	Third Marriage (not considered valid) of Robert Chamberlain to Mrs. Gladys Wass, Dixon, IL	Marriage Certificate, Lee County, IL, No. 23270
7-6-1944	Gladys discovers that Robert had not gotten a divorce from Margaret (he essentially admits the prior marriage in the divorce filing)	Divorce File, Winnebago County, IL, No. 52436
4-20-1945	Divorce of Robert and Gladys, Winnebago County, IL - "find that the defendant has been guilty of bigamy, and that the defendant did have a lawful, existing wife at the time he entered into the marriage"	Divorce
9-19-1947	Fourth Marriage (could be valid) of Robert Chamberlain to Mrs. Ruth Clark, Vancouver, WA	Marriage Certificate, State of WA, #B1874
3-4-1964	Robert Chamberlain dies, wife is Ruth (Clark) Chamberlain	Obituary, Portales News Tribune, 3-5-1964

Robert Lee had a complicated personal life!

Conclusion

Though Robert Lee Chamberlain abandoned his original wife and child, subsequently lived in many different places and married several times, making it hard to track him, it was documents that could be available for many that ultimately led to success. We looked at WWI and WWII registration documents and what information we could on his military service, we obtained his SS-5 and his WPA file. As we identified "spouses", we looked at marriage and divorce records, directories, newspapers (marriage notices, obituaries, etc.) and other records to learn as much as we could about

Robert Lee. And, it paid off.

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