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Searching for African-American Roots

05.21.2007 | Faculty, Culture and Society As a child, Henderson spent a lot of time while her hair was braided, listening to her great-grandmother and great-aunts "talking about family business," telling stories of family, faith, love and survival, and, in the process, creating the love for genealogy that led Henderson to submit her family for the research project.

Producers for the PBS series African American Lives recently notified her that her family was one of 10 finalists out of 2,000 applicants for the next series. The series, hosted by Henry Louis Gates Jr., debuted in 2006 and was rebroadcast earlier this year.

"My siblings and I grew up so close to so many relatives that we heard many of the family stories over the years," Henderson said. "Some of those stories came to life when we would go to Middletown, Ohio, to decorate family graves each Memorial Day – a tradition that continues today. Those experiences helped connect us with family who had gone before us."

Henderson said the series previously has featured well-known African-Americans including Oprah Winfrey, Whoopi Goldberg and Quincy Jones. She responded to a "casting call" for the second season, which will select a not-so-well-known family.

Gates, W.E.B. Du Bois professor of the humanities and chair of African and African-American studies at Harvard University, and his team of researchers interview family members, pore over written records and even take DNA samples to trace family origins and place a family's journey into the context of American history. Tracing the ancestry of African-Americans is particularly challenging because often records were not kept or were destroyed over the years.

Henderson, who will be notified around June 1 if her family is selected, is particularly interested in finding out whether one family story is true.

"My mother's family name is Woodbridge. For years we were told that 'when Poppa was freed, he left the plantation determined to leave everything of the master's behind—including his name. As he struck out from the plantation he came across a wooden bridge and decided that Woodbridge would be his—our—new name,'" Henderson related.

"It's a nice tale. However, as I became an adult, I learned of Woodbridge, Virginia, and suspect that this might be our American roots," she said. "Now that I don't have to worry about a spanking from the elders, I'd like help to either confirm or refute my thinking."

For interviews, contact Kathleen Henderson at henderson@udayton.edu or 937-229-3774.