

By EDITH REYNOLDS

People tell Ursula Kilner of Salisbury that she doesn't look like a "Colonial Dame." She rebuts, asking, "What's a Colonial Dame supposed to look like?"

While she may feign ignorance on that question, one thing Ms. Kilner—a student of genealogy—does know is the criteria required to be called a Colonial Dame. You have to be able to prove your ancestors go back 300 years, she says, and if so, you can join others in a national organization of women descended from Americans of the 17th century.

A local chapter of this group—the National Society of Colonial Dames of the XVII Century—has, in fact, been newly organized in Salisbury. As one of the founding members of this new branch, that has been named the Winthrop Fleet Chapter of the National Society of Colonial Dames of the XVII Century, Ms. Kilner serves as club president. But she's equally on call because of her training as a genealogist, since to become a member of Colonial Dames one has to trace her roots back to the 17th century—and that's where Ms. Kilner's specialty in genealogy proves to be especially helpful.

In fact, it was her interest in family roots that actually led to the formation of the Northwest Corner Colonial Dames group. Ms. Kilner discovered that she, and several other fellow members of the Daughters of the American Revolution, could trace their ancestry farther back in history than is required by the D.A.R. On that information, they decided unanimously to form a local Colonial Dames chapter. This new group, the third in Connecticut, now has 12 members and several people in the process of tracing their genealogy for admittance, says Ms. Kilner. The organization's goals, she added, is to raise funds for special causes and for the upkeep on American monuments.

Ms. Kilner's own ancestry dates back to the Winthrop Fleet of 1630, a series of 11 ships bringing Europeans to America. The Mayflower was one of these 11 ships.

It is this personal connection that gave the local organization its name. "Winthrop Fleet was our first choice. We had to send in several selections to the national organization," she said, adding the name was accepted right away. "We were lucky."

Genealogy was an interest—born of curiosity—that began in Illinois for Ms. Kilner.

"My father was a Rhodes scholar, and he left our small town in Illinois because he wanted to make a lot of money. He moved to New York with my mother," she said. "I knew I had two aunts, that my mother was an only child, that my father's middle name was a family name, and I didn't know anything else."

When her father died, Ms. Kilner searched through family records to make sense of her sketchy family history. That's when she learned her grandmother belonged to the D.A.R. Through this organization's extensive records and her grandmother's initial application, Mrs. Kilner's past was revealed.

"That really got me started," she said.



Ursula Kilner seated within her genealogical libr.

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Today, seated in the comfortable office on Bird Bottom Farm, her home, Ms. Kilner searches among her numerous tomes of genealogy that line the walls. It is within these pages that clues to people's pasts come to light.

"I do this service for the D.A.R. and the Colonial Dames," she said. For others simply wishing to learn more about their family, Ms. Kilner charges a fee.

No matter what the reason, prospective clients must come with some information to help Ms. Kilner begin. "They must come in with something," she said.

That something may be a family Bible, marriage, birth or death certificates, court records, tax rolls, or any other official document that notes a person's existence.

What documentation is offering historical societies laws set up by those organizations, she said. For example, she allows Bibles to be used. Ms. Kilner begins her search at hand. From an oral history paper, she chooses what she most promising relationships a dead end with the new with another relative. She es a picture of an entire generation over generations. My expertise is in New England. But even this narrow focus doesn't make a search if a family has a common last name, most common name," she



Judith Petrovich

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Ms. Kilner said.

Vast numbers of people sharing a last name make searches very difficult and confusing. Since genealogists are often paid by the hour, such searches can prove costly.

"The problem is that names like Johnson can be a derivative of Norwegian, Swedish, English, or French names," she said. When tracing families whose names were common among the colonies, Ms. Kilner often has to rely on her imagination to determine why someone moved or changed occupations rather than assuming she has lost the lineage.

"You have to think about where and why people go places. Even the contours of the land become important," Ms. Kilner said.

As president and resident genealogist for the Colonial Dames and the D.A.R., Ms. Kilner has had to attest to the accuracy of

those searches she's conducted. Since initiation into such groups depends on family ancestry, Ms. Kilner prides herself on performing her duties with the utmost professionalism.

She is a member of the International Genealogists Consumer Organization, a non-profit group dedicated to preserving the integrity of the profession. She is also certified within the American College of Genealogists and serves as the National Assistant Registrar for this Illinois-based group.

Ms. Kilner sometimes encounters skeptics who say genealogic searches are merely ego trips for people hoping to join exclusive clubs. Not so, she says. "It makes you realize what you are; you're a part of something big."

One of the most interesting groups she came across, Ms. Kilner said, is one made up of descendants from those on the Orphan Trains of the 19th century. This society works toward relocating lost relatives and tracing the varying histories of children who ended up in the overcrowded New York foundling homes.

These youngsters were relocated to the Midwest with the hope of being adopted within the farm communities. While the children journeyed west on packed trains, notices were hung in towns proclaiming the orphans' arrival.

Once the train arrived, children were ushered to the town hall where local families could make selections.

Ms. Kilner has a favorite story from this period.

"There was a little boy with a club foot waiting alone at the train station when a local druggist walked by. He asked the boy why he was there and the boy said, 'Because no one wanted me, sir.' The man said, 'Well, I want you.' And he adopted the boy." Mrs. Kilner said. "That boy later became a druggist."

Close to home, Ms. Kilner discovered a missing town during one of her tracings. She learned one individual was born in Little Nine Partners, Conn. Ms. Kilner could not discover the exact locale of this community and brooded over its whereabouts.

Her question was answered one afternoon in an antique shop in another state. On the wall hung a land map for Little Nine Partners.

She bought that map.

She learned her mystery town lay just outside of Canaan and Salisbury and the road leading to what was once a small community is named after the town, Little Nine Partners Road.

This story and the many others she's encountered has given her, Ms. Kilner says, many moments of satisfaction in plying her craft for the D.A.R. and the Colonial Dames of the XVII Century.

Officers for the new colonial dames chapter are: Myrtle Hayden, Virginia Busha, Anna Johnson, and Tamara Johnson of Sharon, Florence Winter of Lakeville, Dorothy Chinatti of Falls Village, Dorothy C.S. McCunn of Canaan, Barbara Barth of New Marlborough, Mass., and Ann Davis of Salisbury.