- A report from the future

THE VIRTUAL DINNER PARTY, PART 1

If you have ever seen an episode of Star Trek from a series other than the original series, you might have seen the Holodeck. It's a room where a computer creates a virtual reality that is a convincing looking scene. Of course, in television, they pretend that it is real and we pretend to believe it. Imagine having dinner with your ancestors, and seeing them appear just as they do in old photos, only in vivid colors, wearing the clothes from the pictures you've saved. Imagine their voices, sounding like a mixture of your grandfather's and some stranger from the period, uttering odd phrases while making familiar gestures. Imagine your surprise when they utter a phrase your parents always used, crowing "You bet your bottom dollar" instead of "Certainly."

Imagine asking them what life was like and hearing a history lesson from the period, personalized with your own family information. Imagine attending this dinner in your own home, and showing them your heirlooms and pictures of your children. It sounds like a great bonding experience, and a night to celebrate your heritage. One to remember all your life.

HOW COULD THEY DO THAT?
A friend of mine has a Yamaha Diskclavier. It looks and sounds like a very nice baby grand piano. There is one important difference, though. If you play something, it can record it and play it back exactly the same. Over and over. Yamaha markets a supply of disks of great performances, rendered right in his living room, as if Harry Connick, Jr were sitting right there. When I saw it, I wondered what they'd have to do to make an image of Harry playing the same song, and project it as a hologram on the piano bench. I imagined old Harry cracking jokes and playing the song and my friend enjoying it a great deal.

I realized that if "They" had enough computer power, and enough information, they could make a person that you knew. It's already possible to scan an image, mark a few points on the face, and then morph it into someone else, or make a 3D image from a 2D image.

In police work, they have learned that if they take six face parts, and give six values to each of the parts, they can not only create a combination that looks like just about anybody, but that they can figure out what kinds of faces you like.

It's easy enough, knowing that, to create a digital model of your ancestors, of a prepared population of a given time and place, and then to modify it with some random factors to make it interesting.

Computers are already generating digitized speech, and graphic animations to match the articulation of lips to match it. By 2020, digitizing everything will be so simple and so convincing that you will spend more time proving that you're the real you than you'll spend getting from one place to another.

If you also assume that by 2020 the following are also true:
YOUR PEDIGREE IS ALREADY ON LINE.
THE SOURCES ARE ALREADY LINKED TO THE PEDIGREE.
- YOU CAN FIND ALMOST ALL OF YOUR LIVING RELATIVES ONLINE.
- THUMBNAILS OF THEIR COLLECTIONS OF FAMILY PHOTOS ARE ONLINE.
- YOUR ONLINE BILL JUST EXCEEDED YOUR CURRENT ANNUAL INCOME.

Then it becomes a matter of computation to create images to pretend to be your family, and to make them act convincingly.

I should add that the need to put actors in front of cameras and have them act will be greatly reduced. They'll keep using actors for the talking parts for years to come, but we'll only use human actors in films in 2020 for the same reasons that we have live theater today - we enjoy watching people do it the old way sometimes.

VITAL STATISTICS AREN'T ENOUGH

- WE CAN MAKE THE WHOLE PERSON FROM PHOTOS.
- YOU'LL NEED TO CHOOSE A VOICE FOR THEM.
- YOU'LL NEED TO CHOOSE A DIALECT FOR THEM.
- WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THEM?
- WHO DO YOU KNOW THAT THEY KNOW?
- STAY AWAY FROM RELIGION AND POLITICS.

When you bring up the Family Reunion 2020 screen, you'll go through a configuration menu like the one above. After choosing from the options available, you will "roll" or "spin" your dinner. It's a fine idea, but when I think about it more, I wonder. I wonder for the same reasons that I wonder how they can tell us what a dinosaur looked like when they only find a jawbone. It's a grand game of "connect the dots." Claims that you can get more information out of a database than you put into it are like perpetual motion claims - that you can get something for nothing. Call me skeptical, but I'm not going to accept such claims quickly.

One of the challenges is reasoning from General knowledge to Specific knowledge. I might know that there are 75 blue balls in a box and 25 red ones. The balls are predominantly blue. But if I reach into the box without looking, and grasp one of the balls, I can't reasonable conclude that I'm holding a blue ball. I can't reasonably conclude that I know what curse words my great grandfather used unless I have some specific information.

Now that we realize how limited the efforts of people in the future to speculate about our lives will be, ask yourself if you're not doing just that with the information about your relatives. If they are in the same house ten years apart, do you assume that they lived there throughout the intervening years? There's a good chance that most of what we think we know about our ancestors is wrong.

WHAT DO THEY KNOW ABOUT YOU?

⇕ THEY HAVE THE VITAL STATISTICS, TOO.

⇕ WILL THEY HAVE ACCESS TO ANY STORIES ABOUT YOU?

⇕ **WILL THEY KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT YOUR IMMEDIATE FAMILY?**

If you can gather up specifics, as many as possible, the resulting story is a lot more likely to resemble the truth than if you only use the historic statistical measures of Everyman.

My name is James Bryan Sharbrough. My older sister couldn't say "boy," so I was called "Bo" and later "Beau" all my life. No one has called me James since the fourth grade, except for policemen and my parents when I'm in trouble. When I was 14, I went with my father to downtown Houston and got my social security card. I filled out the forms as Beau and that's what my social security card says.

Now I have to get paid as Beau Sharbrough so my social security card will match. My taxes are filed as Beau. I may have to sue myself to get my social security benefits someday!

Anyone finding records might have a difficult time making that connection.

Some people might assume that since I was a teenager in the 60s that I like the Rolling Stones. I always hated the Rolling Stones.
Be careful connecting the dots with straight lines!

GETTING TO THE POINT

✎ CHOOSE THREE QUESTIONS YOU KNOW THE COMPUTER WON'T KNOW.

✎ ASK YOURSELF WHY YOU WANT TO KNOW.

Genealogy in 2020 will be fundamentally the same process as it is today - gathering evidence about specific truths of our ancestor's lives. Displaying it and playing with it with be another experience, and one that I think will help us appreciate our families better than we do today.