

Anna's Story

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"Bottom-up" history is an approach that focuses on the lives and perspectives of average people. In graduate school, I studied the lives of Chilean coal miners -- hardly household names -- during the early twentieth century. Rescuing the common individual from obscurity appeals to me, both because of the challenge it presents, and the egalitarian implications of such an endeavor. I mean, one can find a wealth of information on General-turned-President Ulysses S. Grant, but one is hard-pressed to encounter much about Lorenzo Dow Tompkins, Grant's contemporary and fellow American citizen. Who was Lorenzo Tompkins, you ask? Precisely my point. The search for the anonymous is all the more interesting when the object is an ancestor (Lorenzo is one of mine), for there is an intrinsic connection between our forbears and ourselves. They interest us, because to one degree or another, they *are* us.

Genealogy has been my avocation for thirteen years. During that time, aided enormously by modern wonders such as computerized databases and the internet, I've compiled a sizeable amount of information about my ancestry. One unsolved mystery, however, relates to my great-grandaunt, Anna Bosworth. I know the "full story" of all of her siblings: where they lived, who they married, what they did for a living, when they died, and so forth. But I'm in the dark when it comes to Anna's life after age thirty-seven. Her story lies somewhere, although I haven't found it. But now I'm close. Real close.

Anna May Bosworth was born in Brooklyn, New York in March 1873. Coming between older brother Percival -- who went by Harry -- and younger sister Emma, Anna was the sixth child of William Bosworth and Emma Tompkins (the latter being Lorenzo's daughter). Like her father, Anna worked in the confectionery business, securing employment as a candy packer. And as with Harry, who played the piano, Anna was drawn to music. She sang in concerts in her early twenties under the direction of Thomas Merrill Austin, who ran a music studio in Brooklyn. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in December 1894 let readers know that "a fine programme of vocal and instrumental music was rendered by T. Merrill Austin and his pupils at his studio, 498 Monroe street, on Tuesday evening last . . . Mr. J. B. Comstock . . . and Miss Anna M. Bosworth were heard in selections from Massanet . . ." James Benedict Comstock at the time was twenty-five years old, hailing from New Canaan, Connecticut. James and Anna shared more than music in common, for less than six months after they both sang in a Christmas program at the Lewis Avenue Congregational Church -- under the direction of choirmaster Merrill Austin -- they wed in that same church, on 10 June 1896. Anna's sister Emma, and fellow Austin pupil Wilber Morris, witnessed the ceremony.

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The young couple lived with James' parents, Chester and Mary Benedict-Comstock, at 450 Quincy Street, while James worked as an assistant superintendent, clerk, and manager -- in what business I don't know -- and as an enameler. The marriage produced four children. Whether Anna and James had met through the music studio, or simply admired Mr. Austin -- or both -- they named their first-born child Merrill. Next came mother's namesake Anna, followed by twins. In the spirit of fair play, the boy was called James, and his sister, Ruth. That was a popular name among the Comstocks. Ruth was the name of James' youngest sister, and James' older sister Emily also had named one of her daughters Ruth. Thus, by the turn of the twentieth century, the family had moved into a rented dwelling, and James had transitioned to a steady job as an undertaker. His company would handle the details of departed in-laws: in 1900, Charles T. Dyckes, father-in-law to Anna's younger brother Rutherford H. Bosworth; in 1903, Philomena Bosworth, who was Anna's sister-in-law and wife of Anna's older brother David C. Bosworth; and in 1906 Jane Richardson, the grandmother of Rutherford's wife Jennie Dyckes-Bosworth.

A family, a home, and a career: the American dream. Yet James and Anna would suffer a crushing loss. Little Merrill, at age five months, succumbed to cholera on 1 October 1897. Anna's mother had lost three children to diphtheria and bronchitis -- Ida, Kate, and Addie -- all before their second birthday. Merrill had symbolized so much: the boy was their first child, and his name carried special significance for his parents. Still, the family rebounded, and the children grew up with more cousins in Brooklyn alone than they could count on one hand. But with Anna, Ruth, and James Jr. in their teens, the picture would darken once again. The last entry for James in the Brooklyn City directory is for 1912-1913: Comstock, Jas. B., undertaker, 873 Flatbush Avenue. He resurfaced in the 1917 directory of Milford, Connecticut, where three years later he and son James were factory workers. But Anna and the girls weren't with them; James and Anna had divorced.

James remarried and spent the rest of his days with his second wife, Lucia Lindner, who would live to be over one hundred years old. James died in 1935, just shy of his sixty-sixth birthday. His story ends in the middle of the Great Depression, buried in an unmarked grave in the Lindner family plot in Jersey City, New Jersey. But what of Anna? In 1920 her parents and sister Emma lived in Los Angeles, California, having left New York in 1902. Anna's oldest brother William, a bill collector, lived in Brooklyn; David lived in Landis, New Jersey; Harry (Percival) worked on the Webber farm in Prairie, Missouri; and Rutherford, a mail carrier, made his home in North Braddock, Pennsylvania. After 1910 the only reference to Anna is a passing one in a 1929 letter from brother David to sister Emma. Aside from that, Anna and her daughters seem to have vanished from the historical record.

And I searched. City directories and vital records are great, *if* you know where to look. Powerful tools though they are, census databases don't indicate where to find a woman who has changed her name through marriage. Sometimes I found a lead that looked promising, but turned out to be unrelated to my search. Remarkably, for example, a different Lucia and Merrell Comstock rest together in L. A.'s Hollywood Forever

Cemetery. Other times you make inquiries, and get no response. Consequently, after trying all I could think of doing on my own, I left the issue alone for months, and months.

Twice a week I work on Fort Hood in Texas, an hour and twenty minute door-to-door drive from my home in Austin. In September 2008, entertaining myself during the long haul, I thought about Anna. What can I do short of waiting for the 1940 census to come out, three-and-a-half years from now, and hoping for a stroke of luck with *that* decennial enumeration? Answer: recreate the family tree of Anna's erstwhile in-laws, and hope to find descendants who would know of her. I had considered this approach before, but for some reason, probably because it seemed too a daunting task, I abandoned the idea. Now, it looked like my sole alternative, so I resolved to give it a try.

First, I looked online for published genealogies on this Comstock clan, but they provided no information on generations more recent than Anna's parents-in-law, Chester and Mary. Then I turned to federal censuses. The descendants of Chester and Mary's five children -- Emily, James, Mary, Jessie, and Ruth -- were the people I needed to find. Emily had three daughters. Some probing demonstrated that I could not proceed beyond those three girls. Mary had one son, Chester Nickerson, and he had two daughters, who I couldn't locate either. Ruth married Clarence Sprowl, but they had no children. Jessie, however, produced results for me. One of her grandsons, Mr. F., had passed away in New Mexico earlier in the year, and his obituary was online in the *Albuquerque Journal*. I found an e-mail address for his son's wife. E-mails are fast and free, so I always try that route first. That message got bounced back as undeliverable, so I sent a letter to Mr. F.'s son. One week, two weeks, three weeks, a month: no reply of any kind. Lacking the patience to wait any longer, I called another relative named in Mr. F.'s obit. He was very pleasant, and told me that my letter had been making the rounds among the family. He gave me the name of yet another relation who could help, and added that this relative had acquired some photographs from an older member of the clan, digitized the images, and returned the originals. Photos? Could Anna be in those pictures? I called and left a message. No response. I sent an e-mail the next day, 17 October. No response. Well, they have their own lives, and I shouldn't expect them to drop everything and cater to my desire. *But my goal is just out of reach, and they may have the missing evidence!*

The next approach was to find the final resting place of some of the Comstocks. A volunteer I've relied on many times looked up Merrill Comstock's death certificate in the Municipal Archives of New York City, but he couldn't make out the place of burial. His best guess was "New Caucan Cove." There is no New Caucan Cove. However, I knew that James Comstock was born in New Canaan, Conn., so I reasoned that this was what was written on the certificate. An internet search returned the probable candidate: Lakeview Cemetery in New Canaan. The woman in the office gave me some information over the phone, verified that Merrill rests there, and said I'd have to come in person to get any other information. But, I live in *Texas*. Ok, she's not a free genealogy service, I understand that. Random Acts of Genealogical Kindness, however, *is* a free service, and a volunteer cheerfully went to Lakeview and copied down the information for me. Her efforts yielded the first concrete results. Anna's son James is interred there in a single grave. He died in 1925, at the age of twenty-five. I had found James and his

father living in Milford, Connecticut in the 1920 census; James Sr. divorced by now from Anna, and James Jr. single. James Jr., then, by all accounts, died a single man. Also interred at Lakeview are Chester and Mary Comstock, their daughter Ruth and her husband Clarence Sprowl, and the cremains of eldest child Emily Comstock-Rowland, who died in Hawaii in 1937.

We're in business, thought I. Mr. F.'s obituary was lengthy, detailing the names of his grandchildren and even his ex-wife and step-children. Find Mary Comstock's obit, and you just might find clues to solve the mystery. The older Comstocks and some of their children had moved to Ridgewood, New Jersey, as shown by the 1910, 1920, and 1930 censuses. The cards in the Lakeview Cemetery office revealed that Chester passed in July 1915, and Mary died in January 1929. So, now I knew where and when to look. For a five dollar donation, the Ridgewood Public Library sent me their obituaries out of the local newspaper. Among the revelations: ". . . one son, James B. Comstock of Bergenfield, eight grandchildren and twelve great grandchildren." No names of the grandchildren; perhaps that was too much to hope for. Yet unless the three Rowland girls had seven children among them, that meant that Anna's daughters had married and had children, and thus one could find them or their descendants. What is more, our quarry for the moment had resided in Bergenfield, Bergen County, New Jersey. I knew that James had died in November 1935, and even had his burial location, but I never knew *where* he died. Now, I had another door to open.

The American History Center at the University of Texas at Austin has the *Bergen Evening Record*. It has a curious call number: 1 October 1935. After waiting ten minutes for the attendant to bring it down from the stacks, I found out why: 1 October 1935 was the only edition of the *Record* that they had! So, with a sigh and fingers crossed, I made the cyberspace acquaintance of half the librarians who work in the state of New Jersey. Ms. W. at Bergen Community College informed me that their series of *The Record* is incomplete, and they don't have 1935. At Rutgers University, Mr. K. in Special Collections said the college's Alexander Library had the full run of the *Record*, and I might be able to get the microfilm reel for November 1935 through interlibrary loan. A third library never responded to my inquiry. Then, a break in the case: Mr. A. of one of the public libraries, sounding a bit like a kidnapper sending a ransom note, wrote "we have the information you are looking for. We do however charge a \$10 fee" It sounded like an old gangster movie: fork over the dough, and you'll get the dope you're after, see? The alternative was to wait perhaps a month to get the obit via interlibrary loan, and there was no guarantee that would be free, so I wrote the ten dollar check.

One week later, James Comstock's obituary arrived. It is three paragraphs long. The first two paragraphs, which I read quickly, discuss items such as funeral arrangements, when he died, and where he was born. I read the last paragraph by covering it with a piece of paper and revealing one line at a time, slowly soaking it all in, like I used to read my report cards from school. At long last, the hay had been brushed away, leaving a pair of gleaming needles: Anna's two daughters, each bearing the surname of their husband. I immediately found one of the couples in the 1920 census. They had a ten-month old son.

That lad now is eighty-nine years old, and he answered the telephone in a clear voice. He -- Mr. P. -- is my second cousin once removed, and Anna's grandson. Mr. P. had been on the other side of that enormous haystack -- or stone wall as he put it -- searching for the Bosworth side of his kin. Each reveled in making the other's acquaintance, and we began a fruitful correspondence. Anna had remarried to one James Cox, and they lived in Quincy, Massachusetts. Her grown girls had established households in Chicago, Illinois and Milford, Connecticut; the latter, ironically, just three census pages away from her father and brother in 1920. I sent for Anna's death certificate, and it arrived from Quincy in mid-December, one week to the day after I had mailed the request form. She died in August 1939, at the age of sixty-six. And, last but not least, Mr. P. sent me a photograph of Anna.

It's hard to be more anonymous than someone whose life lasted for a mere five months, one hundred eleven years ago. What influence could such an individual have on others outside of his immediate family? Infant Merrill Comstock reached through time and handed me a clue to solve a genealogical puzzle. Merrill's death certificate pointed me toward the Connecticut cemetery where his relatives were interred decades ago. His paternal grandmother's date of death, inscribed on a card in the cemetery office, led to her obituary in the *Ridgewood Herald*, and that provided Bergenfield, New Jersey as the home of her son -- Merrill's father -- James Comstock. James' obituary in the *Bergen Evening Record* yielded the information that helped to finish Anna's story.

A toast of recognition to Anna, Merrill, and the host of others who few remember: bottoms up.

Notes on Sources

For a representative census entry showing Chester Comstock & family, see the 1880 United States census of Scottsdale, Westmoreland County, PA, roll 1204, p. 326D; for a similar sample of the William Bosworth family, see the 1880 census of Brooklyn, Kings County, NY, roll 852, p. 364C. Also on the Bosworths, see the New York state census of 1892, Brooklyn, Kings County, NY, roll 42, p. 9. James & Anna Comstock and family are found in the 1910 census of Brooklyn, Kings County, NY, roll 982, p. 141B. The Municipal Archives in New York City has vital records on microfilm, organized by the borough in which the event took place. For instance, the marriage certificate of James Comstock and Anna Bosworth, married 10 June 1896, comes from Kings County (Brooklyn), certificate #2880. Pages from the family bible of William and Emma Bosworth record the names and years of birth -- and sometimes death -- of their children. The death certificates of their three infant daughters are in the same Municipal Archives in New York City. For newspaper articles mentioning Anna Bosworth, see the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, on 23 Dec. 1894, p. 21, col. 4, and 21 Dec. 1895, p. 5, col. 1. *The Ridgewood Herald* (New Jersey) printed Mary Comstock's obituary on 8 Jan. 1929. Cemetery records of Lakeview Cemetery in New Canaan, CT, and Bayview-New York Bay Cemetery in Jersey City, NJ also proved invaluable. See Brooklyn city directories covering 1896-1912 for James Comstock's occupations. I would like to acknowledge the

kindness of volunteers who consulted some of these records for me; their findings I corroborated with other sources.