

David McGrath: Defying the Ancestry.com test: Eight authentic ways of knowing you're Irish

By David McGrath

Chicago Tribune

Mar 16, 2023 at 12:26 pm



The McGrath children, including author David McGrath, second from left, with mother, Gertrude, circa 1954. (Family photo)

Though it has taken nearly a year, a resolution is finally within reach after last year's shocking news that my birth family is not Irish.

Readers may recall [my op-ed a few weeks before St. Patrick's Day in 2022](#) about my sister Nancy's jarring discovery that the heritage we had been claiming, celebrating and actualizing with our beliefs and practices for the previous 50 years, was apparently a big fat lie. [Ancestry.com](#) broke the news to Sis that there wasn't a single chromosomal strand of Irish in her DNA.

Understandably, my seven siblings succumbed to various states of pique and dissension. Kevin questioned Ancestry's accuracy. James questioned our parentage. Kenneth questioned Nancy's reason for getting tested. And they all questioned my reason for blabbing it to the world.

OK, maybe not quite the world, but a whole bunch of people in places where the story was reprinted, from the St. Paul Pioneer Press to the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, among others.

Emails poured in from all over. Readers commiserated, corroborated or thought I was joking. (Would I?)

The messages fell into one of three categories: readers with stories of their own DNA test nightmares; readers venturing hypotheticals about our family's lineage, such as a secret adoption in a branch of the family tree; and readers assuring me that the Irish "spirit" is what's important, not DNA, though I could not always tell whether they were referring to culture or whiskey.

In the wake of the conflicting advice and misdirected sibling anger (toward me), the good news is that I have seized upon a solution to propose to my kin:

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In keeping with a great American tradition, let's "sue the bastards."

How better to redress our grievances than in a court of law, where we can hold somebody responsible and make them pay. "Somebody," of course, does not mean your loving baby brother, who was only the messenger.

Instead, let's hold Ancestry.com's feet to the fire. Who, after all, caused the pain and suffering you all endured? The public embarrassment. Defamation of your character.

Not to mention the collateral damage to others, such as my wingman, Ron O'Jerak, heartbroken that I can't, in good conscience, join him on St. Paddy's Day.

The thornier question, you're probably thinking, is what's the basis for the lawsuit? How, exactly, is Ancestry in the wrong? Doesn't a defendant have to have "malice of forethought" or be negligent in some way? After all, every source consulted says its DNA testing is more than 99% accurate.

Won't such an indisputable statistic daunt our legal team?

Ha! About as much as sparrows frighten eagles, or a hare intimidates a lion, to paraphrase the Bard.

That's because DNA, my sweet and kind siblings, is at the very heart of our case. Think of the historic Scopes monkey trial, in which famed attorney Clarence Darrow and evolutionary science were pitted against William Jennings Bryan and the Bible. And we all know how that turned out.

But instead of monkeys versus good Christians, it will be [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) versus the beleaguered McGraths.

I can see it all now: Ancestry's lawyers calling to the stand dozens of experts on chromosomes and recessive genes and such.

Meanwhile, we McGraths challenge the core of Ancestry's claim that deoxyribonucleic acid is the determining factor for ethnicity by calling our blood witnesses who embody ancient and universally accepted markers of Irish identity:

"If it pleases the court, your honor, plaintiffs would like to enter into evidence Exhibit A, the grand Irish tenor singing voice of brother James, frontman for a rock band that toured Europe in the 1960s; Exhibit B, the positive spirit of youngest sister Nancy, so vivacious that she'd smile and wish the devil himself a good morning if he happened by; Exhibit C, the legendary Irish talent for humor and storytelling of McGrath middle child Patrick; Exhibit D, the famed "Irish goodbye," or first son Charlie's self-assured way of vanishing from a party or happy hour, sparing everyone the prolonged farewells; Exhibit E, the gift of gab of brother Kenneth, whether at a wedding, the golf links or at graveside; Exhibit F, the personal warmth of elder sister Rose, at whose home you must always stay for dinner; Exhibit G, the unfiltered sharp wit of brother Kevin, inspiring brawls in which he delighted to engage; and Exhibit H, David's affection for Irish lagers and ales, primarily for medicinal purposes, of course."

And just as we are about to rest our case, Nancy and Rosemary promenaded up the aisle of the courtroom to the organist's strains of "Tura, Lura, Lural," while cradling a lacy pillow on which sits our late dad's green derby hat!

Just like "Miracle on 34th Street," there won't be a dry eye in the place.

Victory is assured, so long as teetotalers are excluded from the jury pool.

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