

Dear Family,

I thought I'd share a little family ancestry intrigue that came my way in the past couple days. Uncle Sandy knows some of this, but it's fun to recount the way I — and Maurine (more on her in a moment) — learned of it.

Many of you know that over the years I've spent a little bit of time researching on ancestry.com — not much time, though, in fact I've probably talked about it more at family gatherings like Thanksgiving than throughout the rest of the year. Nonetheless, I have a family tree that I assembled years ago and have added a bit to since then, and I have an account through which people can contact me on the website.

A couple days ago, I received an email from Maurine Bothman McLellan. Maurine is a distant cousin from Kansas; her great uncle was our (me, Chuck, David, Sharon, Dan) great grandfather Benjamin Bothman. My mom and Sandy knew/know Maurine, and in fact I'd been in touch with her once before about genealogy, b/c mom had shared a spiral bound Bothman family history that she had compiled in the early 2000s. Maurine has done a great deal of genealogy and in fact traced the Bothman ancestry and current relatives to Florida (via Argentina), New York, and Kiev, as well as Moscow and Israel. But none of that is why she contacted me.

She was trying to sort out a matter concerning Sam Bothman's marriage. Sam, as some or all of you know, was Jake Bothman's brother, so mom and Uncle Sandy's uncle; my great uncle. He died in 1946, at age 49 — apparently suddenly. The way I heard it— and recorded it in the family tree — was that he had always lived with his mother, but upon his death it was discovered that he was secretly married to a woman named Lettie Lee. The way I recall the story, Lettie Lee worked for (or, with?) Sam in the women's dress business. Why was their marriage secret? Perhaps because she wasn't Jewish. Maybe there was more, but that's all I knew.

There was *much* more. Maurine had established that Lettie Lee's maiden name was Thain; from Odessa, Texas. But in her genealogical research, she found another person on Ancestry.com had compiled a family tree that identified Sam Bothman as having been married to a woman named Flora Bell Thain, the older sister of Lettie Lee. Yet she couldn't find any marriage certificate or other documentation of either person marrying Sam, despite finding other certificates documenting 4(!) other marriages of Lettie Lee Thain over her life. So she was writing to me to ask for any info I had (all of which I recounted above).

Here's what we've learned in the past days with the help of ancestry.com, google, and a bit of detective work. It clearly isn't the end of the story:

- 1) Uncle Sandy surely knew this, but "Lettie Lee" was *famous!* She and Sam Bothman didn't just make dresses, but made glamorous dresses and was a costume designer for

movies. Moreover, their company was Lettie Lee, Inc., suggesting that Sam worked for “Lettie” rather than the other way around. And at some point a street in her hometown of Odessa, Texas was named Lettie Lee Avenue. (I’m putting “Lettie” in quotation marks because it’s not clear if the person born as Lettie Lee Thain was actually “Lettie Lee” the costume designer, or not... more below). Here’s an ad for a Lettie Lee dress with Ginger Rogers modeling it:



- 2) I learned more by finding and reading a 1942 National Labor Relations Board decision in which the company — Lettie Lee, Inc. — is charged with obstructing the rights of workers to organize in a union — “Lettie Lee” is described as the president of the company, while Sam Bothman is described as general manager and secretary-treasurer. The case begins on p.448 [here](#). Frankly, Sam doesn’t come across well here — he appears to be threatening the workers and lying to the board; they lost the decision. But that’s not our story...
- 3) So, to recount, “Lettie Lee” and Sam were in business together in 1942. The 1940 census confirms that Sam was living with his mother Mary in Los Angeles. And then Sam died in 1946. Upon death, it was discovered that Sam was married...

- 4) Two years later, in 1948, the Los Angeles Voter Registration records show a Mrs. Lettie Lee Bothman, registered to vote as a Democrat, residing at 5768 W. 8th St. That seems to make sense — if she was ‘outed’ as married to Sam upon his death in 1946, she wouldn’t need to hide her married name two years later. So far, except for the element of Hollywood glamour, this seems consistent with what I’d heard in the past. But...
- 5) ...who was “Lettie Lee?” And why did a Thain family tree show that Sam Bothman was married to Flora Bell Thain, Lettie’s older sister by two years? And if Lettie Lee and Sam were married, why is there no marriage certificate to be found, despite four others for Lettie Lee Thain? Are you interested yet?
- 6) Here things get a bit hazy and contradictory. Below is an article from the Odessa newspaper about Lettie Lee Bradley, née Thain, upon her death in 1986. You’ll see that her older sister “Flo” is quoted at length describing their lives and Lettie Lee’s company and then the “second husband” (Brown F. Bradley) Lettie married back in Odessa. But the real surprise here is that the sister is “Flo Thain Bothman”. Huh?



- 7) So, was Sam married to Flo — Flora Bell Thain — while working with Lettie Lee Thain, and somehow our family history got this confused? But then who was the Lettie Lee Bothman on the voter rolls?
- 8) While the above story tells Flo’s story in 1986, it’s not the story told by her tombstone after her death in 1995. Here’s a kicker: it appears that Flora and Lettie were the same person. Lettie Lee Bothman was born Flora Bell Thain!



<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/20868166>

- 9) That can't be right, though: 1910 and 1920 census records make it clear that there were two Thain sisters, two years apart, with these names. The above news story indicates that someone named Lettie Lee died in 1986, while someone else who used that name died in 1995. There's also a tombstone for Lettie Lee (Thain) Bradley, with dates that correspond to the above story. Both tombstones are in the Ector County Cemetery in Odessa Texas.



<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/46304778/lettie-lee-bradley>

But which one was a famous dress designer and businesswoman? And who was married to Sam Bothman? And why did Flora seemingly represent herself as Lettie Lee? Who was "Lettie Lee"? To be continued...