DNA testing: 'Roots' author Haley rooted in Scotland, too

By Rita Rubin, USA TODAY
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— -- When Alex Haley's your uncle, people assume you know everything there is to know about your roots. But Roots, the Pulitzer Prize-winning book whose veracity has been challenged over the years, deals mainly with Alex Haley's mother's family.

Thanks to technology that became available after the author's death in 1992, nephew Chris Haley recently uncovered a new branch of his family tree that extends not from Africa but from Scotland, through Alex Haley's father's family. And it appears to confirm part of the Haley family history recounted in the novel Queen.

Chris Haley, 46, the son of Alex Haley's brother, Julius, directs research for the study of the legacy of slavery for the state of Maryland. "When I was very young, my grandmother gave me a copy of A Pictorial History of the Negro in America," says Haley, a native of Washington, D.C., who's also an actor, singer, writer and radio show host. "That cemented in me a passion for black history."

Sometimes, that history is personal. Haley has tracked down several generations of his mother's family through paper records. So he was game when his friend Megan Smolenyak, chief family historian at Ancestry.com, suggested he see where DNA genealogy might lead him.

A line to the Baff family

In 2007, Haley swabbed cells from inside his cheek and sent them off to see whether DNA on his Y chromosome, which, like last names, is passed from father to son, matched any of the more than 50,000 people in the Ancestry.com DNA database. A different test checks mitochondrial DNA, which is passed from mother to son or daughter.

Almost at once, Ancestry.com found a perfect match. Unfortunately, that person was anonymous and has not responded to an e-mail Haley sent through Ancestry.com. In February, though, Haley learned that all but one of 46 markers, or locations, on his Y chromosome matched that of a 78-year-old man in Scotland named Thomas Baff, who took the DNA test to help his daughter, a genealogy newbie.

"We really thought it would just give us an indication of where the Baffs came from," says June Baff Black, 49, an environmental health officer for her local government in Wales.

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