

# First Person

## Parallel past

### RICH WARREN, MEET RICH WARREN

by Rich Warren

I'd love to tell you what it's like to be fabulously wealthy. I can't, although I can talk to you about what it's like to be Rich.

That's who I am. Just Rich. Not Richie, a name I nearly had to beat several elderly aunts to stop calling me. And most certainly not Dick or Dickie, names I've had even more violent reactions against. Once at age four, when my sister discovered my aversion to those names, I erupted, letting fly a few words I'd heard my father use. I don't remember which ones, although I do remember the trip to the bathroom to have my mouth washed out with soap, a painful lesson in the double standards for language usage as applied to little boys and their dads. I also remember my evil sister snickering outside the bathroom door. The vixen!

This may seem an undue fixation on names, but I come from a small town in eastern Ohio where names are important. Although there are several hun-

ry and had bred like bunnies. As for us Warrens, there'd only been a pitifully few decades since my grandfather had taken a train from somewhere near Somerset, Kentucky. And that was pretty much all we knew about his family.

My mother's family was huge, with fiendishly complicated and gnarled branches on their family tree, and their lineage was well-mapped. We knew the names of the very ships they'd arrived on from the Old Country, 50 years before the Revolution, and the locations of the land they purchased in North Carolina and what's now the District of Columbia. We knew colorful stories about our forebears. We knew when they'd come to Ohio, and I'd seen the grave of my great-great grandfather, who'd made the trip.

And yet, I always have felt a gnawing gap not knowing about the family whose name I bear. I fantasize about going to my grandfather's little crossroads town some day and knocking on the door of a long lost relation who'll have me in for sausage biscuits and gravy and shoo-fly pie, assuming they don't first unleash the dogs at the appearance of a Yankee on their doorstep.

I don't remember how old I was when, flipping through the *World Book*

*Encyclopedia*, I happened upon a list of the passengers on the Mayflower. To my stupefaction, I learned there had been a Richard Warren among them. There were Warrens who originated somewhere besides Kentucky! I had no idea if there was a connection, but I could dream, couldn't I?

Some time later, I learned that this Richard had been wealthy and had helped finance the trip for the other Pilgrims. My chest swelled with pride at my could-be ancestor's generosity, although I secretly

wondered why in God's name he'd left a life of ease and comfort to freeze his buns off in New England.

Years later, I took a trip to Plymouth and found myself sitting on the porch of a grand home that was the headquarters for the Mayflower Descendants Society, waiting for a tour of the interior. The lady who was to lead the tour planted herself on the porch swing beside me and started to talk me up.

She asked me my name, and with fiendish delight I anticipated her reaction.

She didn't disappoint. Her face lit up, and her excitement was palpable. "Why that was one of the Mayflower's passengers!" she exhorted. I allowed that I already knew. "We have his bed upstairs!" she cried, as though this information would knock the wind out of me.

Later, I and about 20 other bedraggled tourists found ourselves standing in a room where the center of attention was a dark, brooding, and distinctly uncomfortable looking bed. "This was the bed of Richard Warren," our guide trilled, telling the story I already knew. "And we happen to have with us today one of his descendants!" she said triumphantly, pointing at me.

I managed to deflect such an undeserved lurch into celebrity, telling my fellow tourists we had no idea if there was a connection or not. "Well, we have reason to believe," said the guide, marching us post-haste into the next room but not before I took one last look at the bed. I remember feeling odd that many hundreds of years earlier an activity had taken place there that many generations later could have resulted in me. I mentioned this once to a friend who merely snapped her gum and said, "Not necessarily. It could have happened in a motel."

The tour guide had told me the Mayflower Descendants would gladly do a genealogical research for me for which there would be no charge if they could find a connection and I was in

fact One of Them. On the other hand, if I were not one of the Anointed Ones, there would be a hefty charge of very likely thousands of dollars. I've never been able to risk the courage to follow up on this, out of fear I'll have to take out a second mortgage only to find out I'm descended from horse thieves and draft dodgers.

Since then, wherever I go in my travels I've developed a habit of flipping through the phone books of the cities I visit trying to get a sense of what other Warrens are in the world. Laugh if you must, but browsing telephone books is something I do for entertainment—I enjoy discovering people whose peculiar names must be a real cross to bear in life's journey. Charlotte Turnipseed is the appellation of one poor soul I've encountered in our own White Pages. My heart goes out to her.

A far more important discovery awaited me in our local directory, however. There are six other Richard Warrens in Franklin County! For the longest time, I wondered who they were, what they looked like, what they did, and whether we might have common ancestors. I wondered whether we might be leading parallel lives.

And finally I wondered if I shouldn't just invite them all over for dinner.

My friends all laughed uproariously when I first broached the idea, and then they were horrified when they realized I was serious. "Have you lost your mind?" they cried. "You're going to

*Continued on next page*

The two Richard Warrens. The author is on the right.



dred Warners in New Philadelphia, we were the only Warrens, and I always took pride in our individuality. Except for when I was occasionally mistaken for Rick Warner, an oddly shaped lump of protoplasm who looked like something pulled out of the oven far too soon. I may not be Paul Newman, but please...

The Warners had been residents of our rural county for more than a centu-

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# Parallel past

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invite complete strangers into your home? They'll steal your silverware! They'll break in during the night and kill you in your sleep!"

"You have to learn to trust people," I told my friends. "The world is too much filled with suspicion." But then I decided it might be prudent to also invite all those paranoid friends for use as human shields should any of the other Richard Warrens arrive packing a pistol.

I had fun planning the party. I thought about making all the other Richard Warrens wear name tags. I giggled about the photo IDs I'd make for my scrapbook: "From left to right: Richard Warren, Richard Warren and Richard Warren."

I prepared cutesypoo invitations. "It's a party OF Richard Warrens, BY Richard Warren, FOR Richard Warrens," my invitations trumpeted. I used color ink on a laser printer, adding fancy graphics. I said a quiet prayer, then gave away the potentially dangerous information of my phone number and the location of my home. And then I waited. And waited.

For nothing. The phone didn't ring. None of my namesakes troubled themselves to respond. Neither did my friends. People of Columbus, didn't your mothers teach you anything? When you get an invitation, it's rude not to RSVP! How are your hosts going

to know how much spinach dip to purchase at Big Bear?

Finally one of my friends told me that if he received such a strange invitation in the mail from someone bearing the same name he'd never consider going. "Maybe you should follow up with a phone call to let them know you're on the up and up," he said.

And so the day before my party I started dialing the phone numbers of the other Richard Warrens of Columbus. In four of the six calls, I thankfully got answering machines into which I left long rambling salutations. Boiled down to its essence, my messages were something like, "I am not a madman. Please come to my party."

On the fifth phone call, one of the Mrs. Warrens answered, much to my horror—and to hers. Her tense voice betrayed her belief that this was just too weird for words.

"We're not going to make it," she snapped, acting as though the telephone were burning a hole in her hand and she couldn't drop it fast enough.

On the sixth call, another Mrs. Warren answered, an elderly lady who was obviously thrilled anyone had taken the trouble to call her. "Well, I don't get around much anymore," she confided. "I walk with a walker." I thought of the 14 steep and slippery steps into my home, but did not offer to hand carry Mrs. Warren up them.

Finally I concluded there were no other Richard Warrens in the world with a sense of adventure, and that most likely I'd be the only one present

at my party. I thought maybe we could do role plays, acting out what other glamorous activities the other Richards were doing on this summer Saturday, perhaps sipping aperitifs on the *Cote d'Azur* or, more likely, plying a fishing boat across the placid waters of Buckeye Lake. Perhaps we'd all get a little tipsy and call up the other Richards and berate them for not coming, like giggly teenage girls at a slumber party calling up boys and hanging up.


The afternoon of my party I arrived home from the grocery to find a message saying, "Hello luka Richard. This is Granite Richard. We'd like to come to your party. What time does it start?" Before I could call back, Granite Richard called again, asking what he could bring. We talked as if it were the most natural thing in the world, like we were old friends. I felt confident he didn't plan to stab me in my sleep.

Appropriately, they were the first to arrive—Rick Warren and his very pregnant wife, Laura, both infectiously friendly and downright fun. They had been charmed by my earnest protestations on their answering machine that I was not a crackpot. I warmed to them at once, as did my friends when they started trickling in. We joked, we laughed, and Laura regaled us with stories of their unborn daughter who, when hungry, tends to yank on the umbilical cord like an uppercrust dowager calling the servants. The other Warrens didn't blink an eye when the conversation turned towards the truly tasteless, as it so often does when I'm around. They were just all around good

sports. There were 14 of us that evening, and we just sat in a circle and guffawed.

When they took their leave, there were no insincere insistences of "Let's do this again real soon," but I felt as though I could call them and make such an invitation. Little did they know how quickly that next call would come. Just a few days later, I left another long rambling message telling them of *Columbus Alive's* interest in this article, asking their permission and assuring them I'd give away no details about them.

When they didn't return the phone call, I panicked. I figured they were now seeing me as a lunatic who would never stop calling. They probably feared they would come home some day and find their pet rabbit boiling on the stove. I was so relieved when they did call back and said "Fine. Go ahead." See? I told you they were good sports.

When I was in college, there was a rock group in town—all lesbians and all named Betty. They were known as (what else?) the Bettys. Just a couple years ago there was a convention here in town entirely of women named Linda. I propose a national convention of the Richard Warrens of America, who I'm sure are just as much fun as me and Rick. Certainly it would be a far merrier gathering than, say, a meeting of Bob Smiths. It would be a national brotherhood of sorts, a bonding among any number of potential doppelgangers. And for the world, we could offer a far more comprehensive overview of what it's like to be Rich. 

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Photo: David Shiner

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