Tracer of Missing Heirs

Vocabulary Review

an unknown bequest
the man was penurious
a contingency contract
a propensity for innovative thinking

Some days William Linhart finds work to be just sheer pleasure.

Like the day he knocked on a stranger’s door down in Las Vegas. The man on the other side of that door was down on his luck—behind in his rent, with one solitary silver dollar to his name. But the moment he opened that door, his luck was due for a change. A tall, graying man greeted him with some good news: “If your name is Williams, you’ve just inherited $6,000.”

Bill Linhart is a tracer of missing heirs, one of perhaps a dozen such sleuths in the country who find missing heirs for a price—from 30 to 50 percent of the inheritance.

Linhart had spent weeks searching for this man named Williams, flying from one end of California to the other, checking old phone books, talking to telephone operators, inspecting county records, scanning voter lists. He got his first break when he discovered a few scribbled numbers in a phone book that had been left behind by Mrs. Williams in an apartment she had once occupied. With that and a few phone calls, he was hot on the trail of giving away money.

In this case, Linhart recognized the tight squeeze Williams was in and said, “Look, this is going to take six weeks. Can I advance you $100?”

Six weeks later, Williams told him, “You don’t know what that hundred bucks meant to me. I paid half of it on the rent. I went down to the Goodwill and bought a new suit and some shoes, got a haircut and went out and got a job in the electronics industry.”

On days like that, Linhart knows he’s in the right business.

He used to be a private eye, chasing deadbeats, tailing fathers who were behind in their child-support payments, working on divorce cases. But he says he feels much better about his job now. “It’s much nicer work: now I’m the bearer of good tidings.”

He drifted into freelancing as a missing heirs sleuth almost by accident. An attorney he was working with on a divorce case said, “Bill, I’ve got a probate case here I’d like to settle; one of the heirs can’t be found. Do you suppose you could locate this woman for me? An aunt has left her $35,000.”

Linhart found her, all right. It took a while, but it was the most satisfying work he had done in twenty-six years as a private detective. “When this woman was sixteen,” he says, “her mother had shamed her and had her sterilized because of an illegitimate child. After that the daughter became a prostitute and a family disgrace. But when I found her, she was living happily with a rich husband. She didn’t need the money, but I was able to reunite her with the son she had borne twenty years before, and that made her happier than all the money I could have given her. It turned out her son was in debt, so she used the inheritance to help him.”

After that experience, Linhart gave up playing Sam Spade and took on the role of Robin Hood.

Perhaps one person out of fifteen may be up for some sort of unknown bequest, according to Linhart. He estimates that there’s more than $25 billion in unclaimed assets, scattered from coast to coast, tied up in abandoned stocks, insurance proceeds, forgotten safe deposit boxes.
he tells where the money is or who left it. He works strictly
on speculation, paying his own expenses. He finds maybe
15 percent of the people he's looking for; the other 85
percent frustrate him. "You wind up with a bunch of cases
that are only half done. The only ones that pay off are the
ones you solve."

Some come easy. One missing heir was reported to be in
Oakland, though no address was known. Linhart checked
the birth and death records and found that the man had
died in 1949, but the widow was listed on the death cer-
tificate. Within twenty-four hours Linhart had located
her, got his contract signed and collected $2,400 for him-
self.

Other cases may never be solved, though he has worked
long and hard on them. He'd like to find Robert Leopold
Forster and his sister (once a San Francisco schoolteacher)
who are entitled to $360,000 from the estate of their father,
a former Los Angeles businessman whose wife died in an
accident right after his death.

Some of the people he finds don't want the money. One
woman refused an inheritance because she always hated
the uncle who left her the money. One oldster turned down
a $5,600 bequest because she was happy on her Social
Security income and "would rather not be bothered."

Some won't step forward because they're in trouble with
the law and would rather not surface.

On the other hand, he uncovers some unsuspecting
heirs, in desperate financial straits, for whom the money is
a lifesaver.

When he found one missing heir in Phoenix, she was
living with her husband and new baby and another couple
in a one-room apartment. "I was washing diapers when I
heard about it," she said. "We had been trying to stretch
one order of liver and onions for four days." The woman
had once served a term in a California prison for forgery
and had changed her name when she got out. California
authorities were reluctant to release information, and
Linhart spent a year trying to find her. He finally traced
her through a Drug Abuse Control group. Total amount of
the inheritance, from a great aunt, was $4,300. The day
after she got the money, she and her husband moved into a
rented house.

Linhart meets all kinds of his business. One of his favor-
Not everyone wants to sign a contract to pay Linhart for all his work, even on the threshold of a windfall. They figure if he found them, they ought to be able to find out who left the money and thus circumvent his fee. "Usually after spending a lot of money on fruitless phone calls, they call me and tell me I'm a phony, I tell them if they sign the agreement I'll produce the money."

The success of a "probate investigator" depends on having a network of contacts, plenty of experience in locating and reading public records, a dogged determination and—the vital ingredient—a propensity for innovative thinking. "The formula for finding people is 90 percent drudgery and 10 percent inspiration," the ex-detective explains. He's a positive thinker. Deep down inside he believes he can accomplish the unlikely and sometimes even the impossible.

Many of the heirs Linhart finds are skeptical. He found one of them, a former Ziegfeld Follies girl, in a skid row hotel, "The first thing she said to me was, 'How much do you want?' She was already giving $10 to some guy who claimed he could prove she was a real Swedish princess. When I gave her the inheritance check she went right down to the local saloon and ordered 'drinks for the house.' Within a month she had gone through everything she got and called me up to ask if I could find some more for her."

But Linhart believes a certain amount of skepticism is healthy. There are crooks in the business, too. "If anyone offers to find inherited money for you but demands up-front money, beware." An honest man, he says, gets paid when he gets the money for you. Until then he works purely on speculation.

Linhart makes it a practice to find the cash, then the inheritor. He finds out about uncollected funds through court records, which are open to the public. Attorneys sometimes ask him for help. And he has friends and contacts in banks and insurance companies.

Occasionally someone will call and say they know where there's an unclaimed estate, asking for a cut. He's agreeable to that, too. "If you know of an estate with no heirs, tell me about it. If I find the heirs, I'll pay a finder's fee."

The past nine years have been satisfying times for Linhart. He's made a lot of people happy.

To a lady in San Bernardino who was on welfare, he handed $8,000. To a family in Los Angeles with five children, a jobless father and a broken-down car, he handed $7,000. He has passed out hundreds of thousands of dollars to people who never expected it.

In the process, he's made a few bucks for himself. He says a probate investigator, pressing hard and with a touch of good luck, could make from $10,000 to $25,000 working four months out of the year.

But for Bill Linhart, the important thing is that at the age of sixty-three, he's able to say he's working at something he enjoys.

Now, if he could just find the Kasper brothers' uncle left them $10,038. Or a lady whose maiden name is Azarov and who may have married a Chicago doctor and has $47,000 coming. Or Edmund Johann Shiffer who has $22,000 coming. Or Denise Michelle Quinn... or Delia Riorian... or Edwin S. LaPiere... Or, who knows? Maybe one of these days William Linhart will come looking for you!

But be prepared. He'll want a little for his trouble.
Selection 8  Comprehension Questions

Decide whether each of the following statements is true or false according to the selection. Then mark T or F in the appropriate place.

1. If missing heirs can't be found, the money eventually goes to the state.
2. Linhart manages to find most of the people that he looks for.
3. Linhart gets paid a standard 30 percent of the inheritance.
4. Linhart's home state is New York.
5. Some people Linhart finds don't want the money.

Choose the correct answer for each of the following questions and circle the letter before it.

6. Which of the following is not one of the people Linhart has found?
   a. A former Ziegfield Follies girl
   b. A famous Hollywood movie star
   c. A San Francisco topless-bottomless dancer
   d. A former prostitute

7. Which of the following is a person Linhart has found?
   a. The children of a stingy former school janitor
   b. The children of a man whose wife died in an accident right after his death
   c. A girl who was really a Swedish princess
   d. A woman who hated the uncle who left her the money

8. Which of the following statements is true according to the selection?
   a. Each state tries to find the rightful heirs of unclaimed money.
   b. Linhart sometimes takes years to find an heir.
   c. If an heir is very poor, Linhart doesn't take any money from him.
   d. Under California law, if a person dies without a will, the next of kin must file a claim within three months or the state gets the money.

9. How many partners does Linhart have?
   a. None. He works by himself.
   b. 1
   c. 2
   d. 3

10. What did Linhart do before he became a tracer of missing heirs?
    a. He was a private detective.
    b. He was a psychologist.
    c. He was a banker.
    d. He was a lawyer.