

Tracer of Missing Heirs

Vocabulary Review

an unknown *bequest*

the man was *penurious*

a *contingency* contract

a *propensity* for *innovative* thinking

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

3 Like the day he knocked on a stranger's door down in
4 Las Vegas. The man on the other side of that door was
5 down on his luck—behind in his rent, with one solitary
6 silver dollar to his name. But the moment he opened that
7 door, his luck was due for a change. A tall, graying man
8 greeted him with some good news: "If your name is Wil-
9 liams, you've just inherited \$6,000."

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

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

20 few phone calls, he was hot on the trail of giving away
21 money.

22 In this case, Linhart recognized the tight squeeze Wil-
23 liams was in and said, "Look, this is going to take six
24 weeks. Can I advance you \$100?"

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

30 On days like that, Linhart knows he's in the right busi-
31 ness.

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

37 He drifted into freelancing as a missing heirs sleuth
38 almost by accident. An attorney he was working with on a
39 divorce case said, "Bill, I've got a probate case here I'd like
40 to settle; one of the heirs can't be found. Do you suppose
41 you could locate this woman for me? An aunt has left her
42 \$35,000."

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

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

57 Perhaps one person out of fifteen may be up for some
58 sort of unknown bequest, according to Linhart. He esti-
59 mates that there's more than \$25 billion in unclaimed
60 assets, scattered from coast to coast, tied up in abandoned
61 stocks, insurance proceeds, forgotten safe deposit boxes.

62 Lost money is commonplace. Some people keep hidden
63 bank accounts, set aside for a rainy day because of a
64 husband who drinks or a wife who gambles. Or maybe a
65 husband takes a flier on a stock that goes sour; later the
66 firm recovers, the stock rises, but it's never listed in his
67 will. And money orders are frequently stashed away and
68 forgotten.

69 A bank in Grass Valley, California, lists a cashier's check
70 for \$33,000 bought in 1962 that's never been cashed. And
71 there's a bond that was purchased in 1885 for \$75 now
72 worth \$2 million to somebody—if Linhart could only find
73 the unknowingly lucky person entitled to it.

74 "Many of these unclaimed estates come from people
75 who were, in their lifetimes, highly secretive about their
76 wealth," says Linhart. "Right now I'm looking for the son
77 and daughter of a former San Francisco school janitor.
78 The man was penurious. He never ate lunch. Everyone
79 thought he was living in poverty. What he was really doing
80 with his lunch hour was calling his stockbroker."

81 Unless the missing heirs are found for these unclaimed
82 estates before the statute of limitations runs its course, the
83 state simply takes the money. Under California law, if
84 you're a named heir and the money goes to the state,
85 Linhart says, you have eleven years to claim it. If a relative
86 dies *without* a will, the next-of-kin has five years to make a
87 claim. Laws of other states are much the same, though
88 there may be a slight variation in the number of years
89 allowed in which to stake your claim.

90 The state controller publishes a list each year of un-
91 claimed money, but beyond that the government has
92 neither the time nor the inclination to search out its right-
93 ful owners. Last year Linhart's home state, California,
94 collected \$9 million in such funds. "There's \$25 million
95 right now, here in the West, that I could recover if I could
96 only find the people," Linhart says with a sigh.

97 When Linhart does find those heirs—and sometimes it
98 takes years—he immediately gets their signature on a
99 contingency contract legally binding them to pay him a
100 percentage, usually about 30 percent, sometimes up to 50
101 percent of the inheritance, depending on the work in-
102 volved. (The state of Washington puts a ceiling of 5 percent
103 on such an agreement.) He gets the contract signed *before*

104 he tells where the money is or who left it. He works strictly
105 on speculation, paying his own expenses. He finds maybe
106 15 percent of the people he's looking for; the other 85
107 percent frustrate him. "You wind up with a bunch of cases
108 that are only half done. The only ones that pay off are the
109 ones you solve."

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

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

123 Some of the people he finds don't want the money. One
124 woman refused an inheritance because she always hated
125 the uncle who left her the money. One oldster turned down
126 a \$5,600 bequest because she was happy on her Social
127 Security income and "would rather not be bothered."
128 Some won't step forward because they're in trouble with
129 the law and would rather not surface.

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

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

146 Linhart meets all kinds in his business. One of his favor-

147 ite cases was tracking down a San Francisco topless-
 148 bottomless dancer. She was entitled to \$6,000 from the
 149 estate of a distant relative back in her home state of Vir-
 150 ginia. Linhart had scouted for weeks, trying to find her
 151 under her real name, Diane Beaver.

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

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

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

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

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

189 Occasionally someone will call and say they know

190 where there's an unclaimed estate, asking for a cut. He's
 191 agreeable to that, too. "If you know of an estate with no
 192 heirs, tell me about it. If I find the heirs, I'll pay a finder's
 193 fee."

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

196 To a lady in San Bernardino who was on welfare, he
 197 handed \$8,000. To a family in Los Angeles with five chil-
 198 dren, a jobless father and a broken-down car, he handed
 199 \$7,000. He has passed out hundreds of thousands of dol-
 200 lars to people who never expected it.

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

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

208 Now, if he could just find the Kasper brothers whose
 209 uncle left them \$10,038. Or a lady whose maiden name is
 210 Azarov and who may have married a Chicago doctor and
 211 has \$47,000 coming. Or Edmund Johann Shiffer who has
 212 \$22,000 coming. Or Denise Michelle Quinn or Delia
 213 Riordan... or Edwin S. LaPierre....

214 Or, who knows? Maybe one of these days William
 215 Linhart will come looking for *you*!

216 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 former Ziegfield Follies girl
 - A famous Hollywood movie star
 - A San Francisco topless-bottomless dancer
 - A former prostitute
7. Which of the following is a person Linhart has found?
- The children of a stingy former school janitor
 - The children of a man whose wife died in an accident right after his death
 - A girl who was really a Swedish princess
 - A woman who hated the uncle who left her the money

8. Which of the following statements is true according to the selection?
- Each state tries to find the rightful heirs of unclaimed money.
 - Linhart sometimes takes years to find an heir.
 - If an heir is very poor, Linhart doesn't take any money from him.
 - 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?
- None. He works by himself.
 - 1
 - 2
 - 3
10. What did Linhart do before he became a tracer of missing heirs?
- He was a private detective.
 - He was a psychologist.
 - He was a banker.
 - He was a lawyer.