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RECONSIDERATION

Our First Black President?

By BEVERLY GAGE

Will Americans vote for a black president? If the notorious historian William Estabrook Chancellor was right, we already did. In the early 1920s, Chancellor helped assemble a controversial biographical portrait accusing President Warren Harding of covering up his family's "colored" past. According to the family tree Chancellor created, Harding was actually the great-grandson of a black woman. Under the one-drop rule of American race relations, Chancellor claimed, the country had inadvertently elected its "first Negro president."

In today's presidential landscape, many Americans view the prospect of a black man in the Oval Office as a sign of progress — evidence of a "postracial" national consciousness. In the white-supremacist heyday of the 1920s (the [Ku Klux Klan](#) had a major revival during the Harding years), the taint of "Negro blood" was political death. The Harding forces hit back hard against Chancellor, driving him out of his job and destroying all but a handful of published copies of his book.

In the decades since, many biographers have dismissed the rumors of Harding's mixed-race family as little more than a political scandal and Chancellor himself as a Democratic mudslinger and racist ideologue. But as with the long-denied and now all-but-proved allegations of [Thomas Jefferson's](#) affair with his slave [Sally Hemings](#), there is reason to question the denials. From the perspective of 2008, when interracial sex is seen as a historical fact of life instead of an abomination, the circumstantial case for Harding's mixed-race ancestry is intriguing though not definitive.

To anyone who tracks it down today, Chancellor's book comes across as a laughable partisan screed, an amalgam of bizarre racial theories, outlandish stereotypes and cheap political insults. But it also contains a remarkable trove of social knowledge — the kind of community gossip and oral tradition that rarely appears in official records but often provides clues to richer truths. When he toured Ohio in 1920, Chancellor claimed to find dozens of acquaintances and neighbors willing to swear that the Hardings had been considered black for generations. Among the persuaded, according to rumor, was Harding's father-in-law, Amos Kling, one of the richest men in Harding's adopted hometown of Marion. When Harding married his daughter, Florence, in 1891, Kling supposedly denounced her for polluting the family line.

There were rumors of other family scandals as well: the 1849 case in which "one David Butler killed Amos Smith" after Smith claimed that Butler's wife, a Harding, was black; the suggestion that Harding's father's second wife divorced him because he was too much Negro "for her to endure." In Chancellor's book, such stories are relayed with a bitter, racist glee — ample reason not to accept them out of hand. But if none of this had any resemblance to the truth, how did all of these rumors get started?

In 1968, the Harding biographer Francis Russell offered an explanation: Harding's great-great-grandfather Amos told his descendants that he once caught a man killing his neighbor's apple trees and that the man started the rumor in retaliation — a rather weak story that Russell declined to endorse and that did not silence the mixed-blood rumors. Well into the 1930s, African-Americans claiming a family link continued to pop up in the press. (One decidedly dark-skinned Oliver Harding, supposedly the president's great-uncle, appeared in *Abbott's Monthly*, a black-owned Chicago magazine, in 1932.) As recently as 2005, a Michigan schoolteacher named Marsha Stewart issued her own claim to Harding ancestry. "While growing up," she wrote, "we were never allowed to talk about the relationship to a U.S. president outside family gatherings because we were 'colored' and Warren was 'passing.'"

Genetic testing and genealogical research may one day prove the truth or falsity of such claims. In the meantime, as the campaign season plunges us headlong into a "national conversation" about race, it's worth thinking about why that truth has been so hard to come by for so long — about what makes it into our official history and what we choose to excise along the way.

Harding's hometown, Marion, Ohio, provides a case in point. The town gained national fame in 1920 as the site of Harding's "front-porch campaign"; for weeks, he delivered stump speeches from his well-tended home. Far less well known, as the historian Phillip Payne has noted, is what happened the year before, when a mob of armed white Marion residents drove more than 200 black families out of town, one of a wave of postwar race riots that served to segregate the industrialized north.

As he campaigns to become the nation's first (openly) black president, [Barack Obama](#) likes to say that we've begun to put that divisive history behind us. The truth may be that we don't yet know the half of it.

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