

The Lone Ranger: The Last Descendants from Judith G. Levy on Vimeo.

Learning New Lessons from Fictional American History



Thousand Islands postcard (back) sent to John Reid, *The Lone Ranger*, paper, 3-1/2 x 5-1/2".

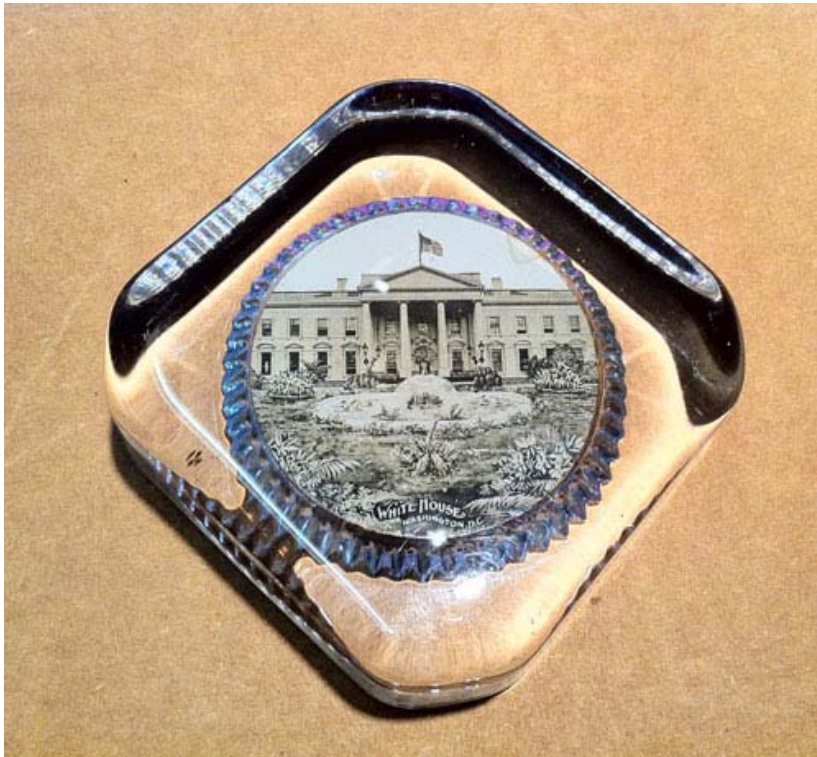
Paragraph Gallery
14 East 12th Street
Kansas City
Judith G. Levy: The Last Descendants
September 16, 2011-November 5, 2011

By BLAIR SCHULMAN

Ambitious and witty, *The Last Descendants* is like sitting around the holiday dining table with a favorite relative. The funny uncle who, after a bit too much wine, spins tales of the family history — their web so intricate, messy and wonderful, it's impossible to figure out what's true and what isn't. None of that matters anyway - you want them to go on because it's still a great story. Judith Levy tells tales that aren't necessarily true or false. They are what you choose to accept, but all have a believability that makes it pretty difficult to deny.

An interdisciplinary artist, Levy gives us the full treatment of three historical subjects with family trees and video interviews. Hansel & Gretel, *The Lone Ranger* and Huckleberry Finn are iconic fictional characters well-known to most people and Levy invokes a familiarity in their histories to make it appealing.

These figures, whether intentionally or not, address issues deeply rooted in the American mindset. These



White House paperweight (Gift to the Lone Ranger from President Theodore Roosevelt), glass with paper image, 3" tall by 3-1/2" wide x 1-1/4" deep.

include immigration, Manifest Destiny and racism. The artist gradually eases us into seriousness through her storytelling, presenting a very strong case for their existence.

Levy broaches subjects long held taboo by certain generations, while others are certainly not shy about being up front about things that are just too obvious to ignore. With her role as reporter, Levy's family trees take up entire walls, spanning centuries, nations and actual events. The videos illuminate sibling rivalries, sexism and homosexuality to subtly touch on the selective memory that often occurs when family histories are passed down through the ages.

Regardless of the pride or shame of their ancestors, viewers will see that each descendant has held onto a family item. As Levy says, "Tangible objects give meaning to most of us. Through objects, value is irrelevant." It is a source of pride to them, no matter how silly or mundane it might appear. Whether it's some pebbles, a clump of hair or singed fabric, provenance trumps all.

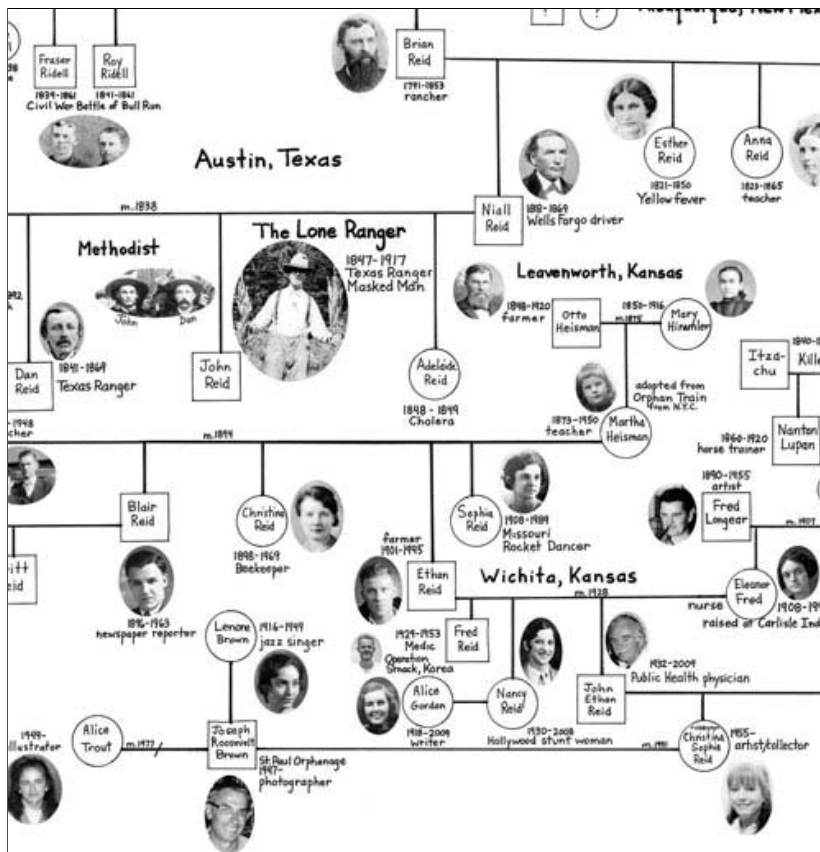
Levy is deadpan when interviewing these ancestors, allowing their stories to be laid bare. Occasionally, she will pry deeper, ensuring some well-hidden beliefs rise to the surface. This dedication gives us an understanding that one can see, feel and acknowledge these stories so strongly that it must be true.

For John Reid, aka The Lone Ranger, Levy puts carefully selected artifacts on display, including a paperweight from his good friend and former President, Theodore Roosevelt. An elaborate ring given to Reid by his longtime companion, Tonto, is a gift that strongly implies their friendship on the range went beyond just good friends. Near this display case is a book of carefully collected postcards from up until the time Reid died on the eve of World War I. In this era before telephones eventually rendered letter writing obsolete, friends and relations inquired about ones' health, discussed planting season, trips taken and the weather. These cards are the original text messages. They're also chronologically correct. We learn how and what it means to live in America during these times. Levy makes us question its fallacy with her meticulous attention to historical accuracy.

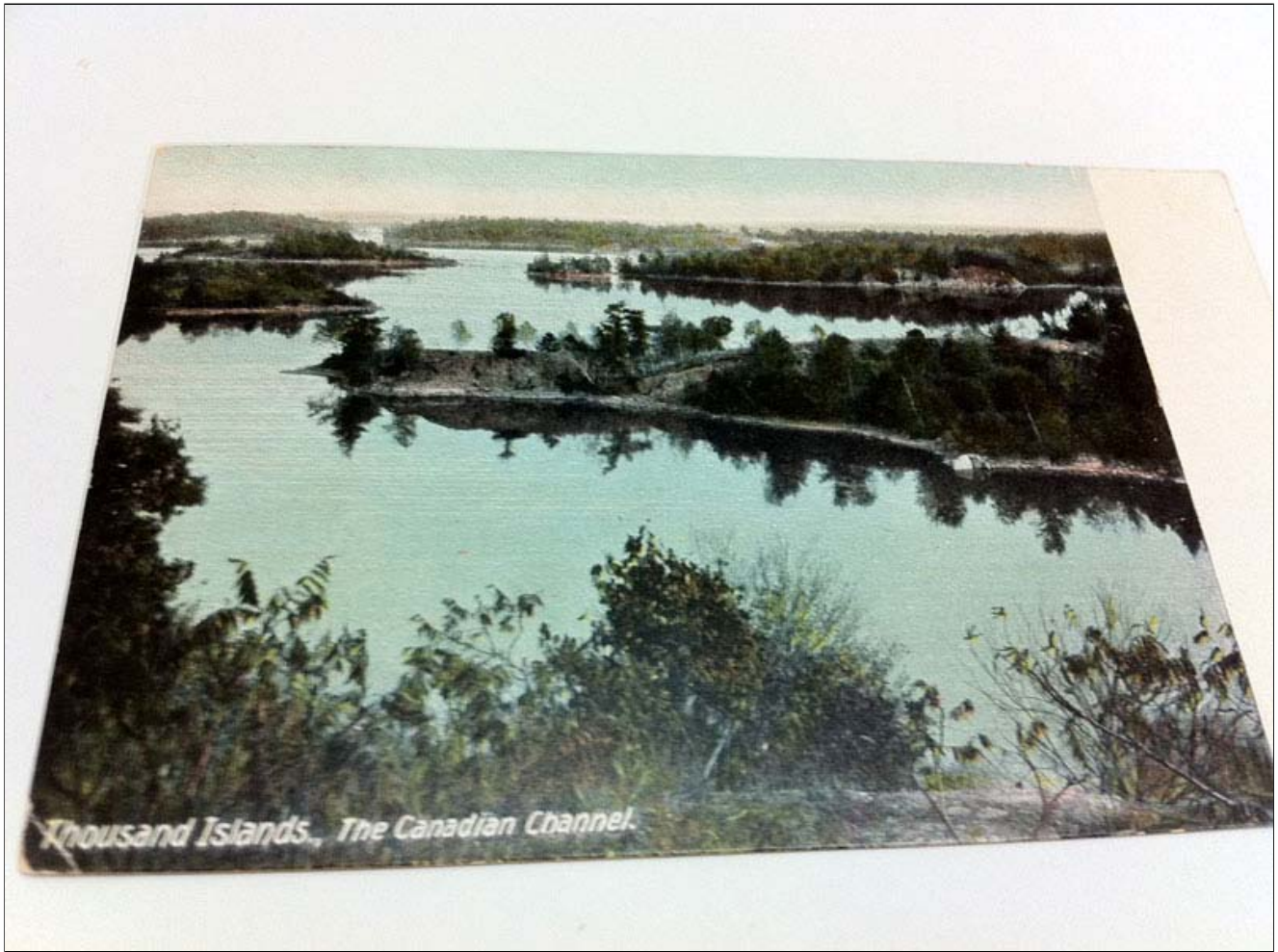
The real melting pot of this country is brought to life when you take the time to examine the family trees. Political posturing aside, no one is of pure stock. Carefully plotted, Levy takes us from Turkey, Rotterdam, Frankfurt, Mexico and China, all the way to New York, San Francisco, Kansas, Arizona and California. The genesis of a patriarchy cannot be denied. It is something every visitor to the Paraglyph Gallery can grasp and relate to.

Levy's affinity for family history began with Hansel and Gretel in Indianapolis (talk about melting pot!). Levy was asked to contribute to an exhibition on the German brother and sister several years back and decided to expand from there. Her *Girls Brigade* series from 2007 takes the idea even further. A group of orphan English girls in what we now know as Great Britain, during the first Roman Invasion of 55 B.C. responded to attacks near the British Coast. About a dozen of these girls had been in the service of a local Celtic clan and established themselves into a children's army. Levy created banners and flags attributed to these brave children- some serious, others cheeky and installed them in Chicago alleys and on walls, all in the context of blurred reality.

For this exhibition, it's difficult to say whether or not these characters of the Brothers Grimm, Mark Twain, Fran Striker and George W. Trendle are true, composites or completely fictional. Levy shows us, no matter what one might think or believe, they provide a thread in the fabric of our nation spanning time, geography and a healthy suspension of disbelief.



Judith G. Levy, Lone Ranger Family Tree.



Thousand Islands postcard (front) sent to John Reid, The Lone Ranger, paper, 3-1/2 x 5-1/2".

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