Unlocking the Past, Hollywood-Style

People have always been interested in where they came from and who their ancestors were. Perhaps it is natural curiosity that makes people want to discover the often anonymous faces from their past, but whatever the reason, studying one’s family remains a popular pursuit.

The television show “Who Do You Think You Are?” explores this trend as it chronicles the journeys of seven celebrities in search of clues to their family histories. Each show is a documentary about one of the stars’ discoveries, and each show reveals amazing facts about the past.

In one episode, film and Broadway star Matthew Broderick delves into the paternal side of his family, looking for documented information about his grandfather and great-great grandfather. Although Matthew had been close to his mother and knew a great deal about the maternal side of his family, much of his father’s history was a mystery to him.

As Matthew follows historical leads during the show, he is stunned to learn of the untold patriotic feats of his ancestors. His grandfather Joe had been a life-saving medic in the fields of WWI in France, where he risked his own life to save his fallen comrades. Joe was awarded a Purple Heart in 1918 and a Distinguished Service Cross, two of the military’s highest honors and synonymous with bravery. And before Joe, Matthew’s great-great grandfather Robert fought and died in the Civil War, surviving the bloody battle of Gettysburg only to be killed while on guard duty in 1864.

Not everyone will uncover extraordinary ancestors like Matthew’s. Even so, learning the chronology of one’s family can be very rewarding for many people.