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Capell stands to succeed the current Earl of Essex, Frederick Paul de Vere Capell, a 61-year-old retired elementary school assistant principal, who lives near Lancaster (the one in England, not the one in the southern California desert).

"I'm excited about it," said Capell, who has never met or corresponded with his British kin and has never visited England. "I'm planning a trip to meet the earl, to say hi, and let him show me around."

She would become Lady Essex, a countess. Her husband's full title, at least for correspondence, would be the Right Honorable Earl of Essex.

Capell believes his great-grandfather emigrated from England to Canada and then to Idaho. He doesn't recall what the patriarch did for living, but he did know his grandfather, an Idaho cattle rancher and potato farmer.

"I met him once," said Capell, who used to check and stock shelves and do managerial duties at a local supermarket. "He died when I was 7 years old."

Capell, whose father was an Army clerk, was born in Spokane, Wash. The family moved to Yuba City when he was an infant.

Capell's father rarely spoke about his noble family tree.

Until recently, peers of hereditary titles, like that of earl, were entitled to a seat in Britain's House of Lords, the second chamber of the British Parliament, which normally has to consent before Acts of Parliament can be passed.

But the House of Lords Act of 1999 removed the right of most hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House. Other reforms are still being considered.

It is unclear whether Capell would be entitled to sit in the House of Lords, now with 731 members, but he said he would seriously consider moving to England to fulfill his role of representing the County of Essex.

Since the news of his prospective earldom broke, Capell said he has been inundated with media interview requests from both sides of the Atlantic.

"I usually get one or two phone calls a day," Capell said. "Now I get 15 or 20. The phone doesn't stop." ■

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