

MY MOTHER'S HISTORY

By Eleanor Gibbs

History of Nancy Jane Meeks Avery  
Daughter of Mary Jane & Pridley Meeks  
Married Jerome Avery

## PREFACE

Space would not permit a detailed account of my Mother's life. I have attempted only to write briefly the momentous instances which tend to set her apart as an individual and preserve her pioneer background. I have tried to portray her life as I have gleaned it from her and others.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To My Mother--

Thanks for the lovely evenings together, when I gathered much of my material.

I am also indebted to the Utah Historical Society for their splendid accomplishment in filing and preserving the diaries of our pioneer ancestors.

I-- My Mother has a very interesting pioneer background.

1-- The family tree bears much fruit of human interest.

a-- Her Father was a pioneer doctor.

b-- Her Mother was a girl from Belfast.

c-- She was born into a very interesting polygamy romance.

II-- My Mother's life was perpetuated by the pioneer spirit incurring many moves.

1-- The first move was to Harrisburg.

a-- Here she met my Father.

b-- She saw Silver Reef in its boom days.

c-- An uncle committed suicide.

2-- Orderville came next, with many more experiences.

a-- Fiddlers Green was a pleasing rendezvous of square dancing.

b-- The United Order was being tested out.

3-- Asay's ranch became the next stomping ground.

a-- Here the whole Asay family lived.

b-- Asay creek was named for them.

c-- Ten children were born here.

4-- Life in Green River followed.

a-- Pioneer life was spiced with the Robber's Roost Gang.

5-- Life in Vernal had never a dull moment.

a-- The Indian Reservation was just in the making.

b-- Fort Duschene was coming into existence.

6-- Coal camp life was a new challenge.

a-- Dangers of camp life became daily routine.

b-- Life with foreigners promoted Mother's already tolerant attitude.

7-- Castle Dale was the final stopping ground.

a-- A quiet country life was enjoyed here.

III-- Mother's life is an example of faith and tolerance.

1-- Her present status is remarkable for her age.

The welcoming shadows of the dusty ochre hills devoured the blaze of the setting sun. The dust of the day was transformed into a riot of crimson, gold and purple, intermingled with the blue of departing day. To the family gathered within the brown, withering, pickett fence, it was a hallowed moment.

The boys stood with their heads bare, shoveling rock harder than was necessary, trying to banter back and forth in an effort to conceal their emotions. Mother, then in her 85th year, bowed her head and said,

"Thank's God -- for letting me live to do this thing."

We knew then as we looked at the tombstone now erected over the grave of her firstborn, that this was the scene of my Mother's gethsemana. Here, fifty years ago, was where she drank the bitter cup of sorrow that took a toll from a soul, that was never again regained.

Here underneath these old sagebrush hills, unconquerable by man and unimpeachable by time; encroached on by the weird moaning of mourning doves by day and the haunting howl of the coyotes by night, lay part of my Mother's heart.

"Yes", people had said, "Your mother was never the same after that."

This young mother, who had been among the first white children born in Farowan, had met war fainted Indians at the door and in their language sent them on their way. She had ridden the trail with her Father when he bought an Indian papoose from a hostile tribe who had stolen her from another tribe. She had been the first to rush to her Uncle John, and see the blood gushing down the corn furrows from a self-inflicted shot.

Her's had been the fate to have the ardent dreams of youth and romance stifled by intolerance and misunderstandings. She stood in the boom days of Silver Reef, where youth and gaiety and abandon churled the country into chaos. She was told not to mingle with the gentiles, and tells us in her own words she was guarded like a hawk.

Through all this she was undaunted. She "took it on the chin". When she was told by some in authority that she would be safer and saner to look to the older men in the church and contemplate polygamy, her Irish broke loose. Yes,

across the plains at the age of sixteen. Grandmother had celebrated her sixteenth birthday on the plains by gathering bull berries at every stop that day. In the evening everybody shared a bull berry dumpling. Grandmother hadn't feared the Indians or the weather. The greatest menace to girls of her age, she said, were the "white wolves". (Mostly white trash going West who preyed on the companies, if not held at bay.)

Mother was always an ardent listener to her mother's romance. It was wonderful-- Her Father, an old man of sixty-two, who had also crossed the plains, and who then had a wife his own age, was told by his first wife to bring home another one on his return trip from Salt Lake. Grandfather inquired at the proper sources. (I'm sure it was not a legalized marriage bureau as of today) If there were any girls available. As a result, on sight and on seeing, Mary Jane rode home the next morning in a covered wagon the wife of my grandfather, Fridge Weeks.

Of this union Grandfather says:

\* "People may say what they please about being mismatched in age, in marriage, but the Lord knows most about these matters, and if there was ever a match consummated by providence of God this was one. She has born me ten children, and if anything they were above the average of smartness, all well formed and intelligent. I have often said, if I had picked the territory I could not have suited myself as well as Mary Jane."

Perhaps we moderns should leave more to the Lord and less to Dorothy Dix...

Well, Mother was willing to leave it to the Lord, if he sent the right man. Certainly she had nothing less in her mind, than a Lochinvar of her own. So undaunted by pressure, she "side swiped" all advances of the would be polygamists, and was free to concentrate on the loud voiced, courageous, singing western lad, who became my Father and faced starvation and Indians to drive the cattle, over the rattlesnake infested deserts, when the white folks were forced to abandon the muddy, River Valley because of Indians.

Late in the evening he arrived in Harrisburg and stopped at the home across the street. This complicated matters for my Mother because here lived a girl her

own age. There were, I take it, premiums on boys like Dad in "them good old days". At least they didn't come with baking powder coupons.

Mother launched her campaign, not without opposition, but with plenty of strategy. History has it then, that Nancy Meeks was married to Jerome Asay, at the home of Orson Adams, the bishop of Harrisburg. The temple at Saint George was not yet completed, but two years later they were married there.

There was a "shindig"--a big one, mind you, with two kinds of cake. There were grapes and wine: and bread, butter, and radishes. There was square dancing, fiddling, singing, and laughter. The next day Mother and Dad moved into Samuel Hamilton's grainery, which was "fixed up nice". People came and brought things for house keeping. There were dishes, a waterbucket, a feather bed, and a slab of home-cured salt-side. Old Sally, the squaw, who had rocked Mother as a baby, brought an Indian basket.

Their first bed was a four-post one with a rope bottom. It was painted a dark red with faint they bought from the old squaws.

After a year in Harrisburg they moved to Long Valley where they lived at a place called Fiddler's Green because of the green meadow and a riotous indulgence of square dancing.

Mother's folks at this time lived at Orderville. Here they joined the United Order. Grandfather put his stock in the common herd and paid three dollars a month. There was a big mess hall where everybody helped and everybody ate. Dad and Mother were a long way out to join, but Mother says Dad was so fussy about his food that even religion couldn't come first. He contributed a great deal but did not join.

dy hills and several of them were named for them at that time. Dad and Mother joined them, living at the forks of the road and taking up a ranch up the canyon. Here they ran the store and the post office and were influential in establishing a school. Dad carried the mail on snow shoes from there to Panguitch for twenty-five dollars a trip. Briggs Young was a mail carrier on the route from Glendale. He failed to come in on schedule. Men went out and brought him in apparently frozen to death. Mother nursed him back to health.

It was here in a two-room log cabin that ten of Mother's eleven children were born. One that Mother remembers as the most severe winter endured was when she was "carrying her fourth child". The animals froze to death, sixty chickens froze in one night. Dad had an old pit of potatoes (about egg size) and rutabagas that he had intended to feed his pigs. They were frozen as hard as rocks, but he shoveled them out and shared them with the people. Wild ducks were an asset in surmounting this deprivation.

Mother remembers the last meal cooked at this time. She looked around the house. There was a little flour and a little salt. Dad had caught some minnows, but there was no grease to fry them. Mother knelt down and prayed that her children would not die hungry. Dad had gone with the mail, when Mother opened the door to find two men outside. They said their horses were too tired to go farther and would she mind if they came in to make a cup of coffee.

They brought in beans, bacon, rice, sardines, and soap. Mother hadn't seen soap for weeks. This winter they were short on milk as they were trying to save it for the calves to keep them alive.

When the snow thawed they skinned the dead animals and sold the hides. Spring found seventeen teams taking wool to Nephi. There were four horses to a wagon. The Sevier River was swollen so they could not cross and they had to go around by Grass Valley. Sumner found them making butter and cheese, and salting down fish.

Interlaced with all this deprivation were the "shindigs". The life savers of their emotional capacities. Dad could call like a professional. "Swing that

It was following one of the lean winters that May came again. With it the thrill of having weathered another winter, and the joy of knowing God still lived throbbed in their hearts. To show their gratitude the people banded together to have the greatest spring festival in history.

Mother's oldest daughter, then eleven years old, was chosen the queen of the May. Nothing was spared to make the costume the most beautiful to obtain-- white muslins with yards of crocheted lace, ribbons and new shoes were all gathered together. May Day dawned. The beautiful little queen, instead of dancing on the turf, lay cold and stiff. Her lovely clothes became her shroud.

Mother and Dad never knew for sure what happened. It was called heart failure.

They do know that to them too, it was heart failure. The flowers never bloomed for them in May as they had previously. Dad couldn't put the vim into his calling.

Mother ceased to swing her partner with the same zest. Two more graves were added to this one before Dad decided the weather was too tough to conquer. With this common bond of hidden grief between them, they were finally picking up the old threads in new places.

Dad had heard of the mild climate in Green River and decided to give it a trial. This was at that time a wild typical frontier town, a railroad within and the famous Robbers Roost Gang without. That Mother and Dad had what it takes for getting along with people is evident from several incidents. Some of the blood and thunder could crash Hollywood.

For instance how would this look on the screen? In the middle of the night a masked man knocked at the door. Dad opens it-- a voice says "Don't light the lamp. I have a pal that's shot and needs help. You know who I am, don't you?" The fellow points a gun at Dad who replies,

"What difference does it make to me who you are, if you need help come in."



Reimbursement for this service was administered later. One of my brothers was called to deliver a telegram to an outlying ranch. Darkness overtook him. He was lost. Seeing a dim light he rode till he found it. To his dismay he found it to be a den of the Robbers Roost Gang. He doesn't recall all the pros and cons of the conversation that evening. He does remember how his hair stood on ends and how he all but died of joy when the rough and ready leader arrived and said,

"Your the son of who did you say?"

Then turning around he explained,

"That's the people who saved your life. Deliver this kid home before daylight."

Dad decided the children needed all the good schooling they could get. He didn't plan on his kids learning their A.B.Cs. In the sand as he had done. It must have been influential sand in which Dad had figured, because he had a calculating discernment of an engineer.

We moved to Vernal where I started in the first grade. Incidentally, I am that one of the eleven who didn't arrive on the ranch. I sort of came enroute at the little town of Wellington. Vernal, too, was a cold country. Lots of sickness and few doctors. Mother now put into practice all the combined knowledge she had acquired from Grandfather, who was a first class pioneer herb doctor, and Grandmother, who was an excellent mid-wife. I'll touch that when it came to medicine, Mother knew all the answers. What she didn't "swill" down us kids wasn't funny. We were "doped" from the first snowfall to the last thaw. Then after the that had receded, we were "doused" for several weeks with the spring tonic of sulphur and molasses. We always thanked heaven though that we survived without the assofoetida bags around our necks.

She went into houses where diphtheria, scarlet fever, lagrippe, (modern flu) were rampant, with no thought of fear. But boy when she got home we got the works. We were fumigated by a thick layer of sulphur being put on the stove. Over this she scattered a covering of coffee. Try these fumes if you think modern science has potency. It must have been successful-- because about the only contagious thing I have ever had was freckles.

Meantime, Dad wasn't letting the grass grow under his feet. The Uintah Indian reservation was opening up. He handled contracts for cord wood. Later he peddled produce out there to whites and Indians. The latter held him up in great hero worship sending beautiful blankets to Mother.

My brother tells of attending an Indian dance where all the guests had to dance to the finish. He says he incurred a "hitch in the get-a-long" which lasted through life.

Mother's brother was the sheriff. There were drunken Indians, deserting soldiers, (Fort Duschene was established then) cattle thieves, and murdering white trash.

There wasn't too much income and the land was poor. When Dad heard the coal camps were opening up we arrived in Mohrland, the first camp to open Emery County. Hence to Blackhawk in Carbon County. Here Mother went about in all the accidents and sickness, administering alike the Greeks, Japanese, Italian and Turk.

I remember one night one of the older boys (there were six of them mostly grown when I arrived) came shouting:

"Dad, you better get up there's a big brawl outside."

Mother said, "Now do be careful, Jerome" and turning to us kids added:

"Be quiet-----nothings going to happen."

Nothing happened except a mob of twenty drunken men staggered in and by request placed their knives (and what knives they were) on our best table.

"Come back and get them boys, after you're sobered up," said Dad. A few days later, with apologies to Dad, and chocolates for the ladies each of them filed in to retrieve his knife.

Oh, Mother had her hectic moments with her Lockinver-- who never carried a gun but faced everything in his shirt sleeves--- but they made it. They saw their 65th wedding anniversary together. When Dad passed on, six stalwart sons served as pall bearers. Within two years, three of those sons had followed Dad.

Mother, at the age of ninety, divides her time between my sister and me. She never tires of telling how after the death of her first girl she waited twenty-one years for another.

Her philosophy of "the prayers of the faithful availeth much", bore fruit and she had my sister and me, two years apart.

One of my keenest enjoyments has been Mother's zest for the modern food. To me God certainly made up to her for those long, lean years of cornbread and molasses by preserving her digestive powers, to the extent that at ninety she can be indulgent. Often at midnight, Mother would enjoy an after-party snack with the family and suffer no ill effects. She is a veteran at eating cake, pie and puddings. Especially does she love the carrot pudding, a replica of the old fashioned "suet" pudding she used to sew up in a flour sack and cook in boiling water.

She still has the Irish wit to laugh at a joke, and the faith to meet death smiling when it comes. She stands a living monument to the old pioneer spirit now facing its last frontier.

was named for them at that time. Dad and Mother joined ~~them~~, living in the canyon. Here they ran the store and of the road and taking up a ranch up the canyon. Dad carried the post office and were influential in establishing a school. Dad carried the mail on snow shoes from there to Pangutich for twenty-five dollars a trip. Briggs Young was a mail carrier on the route from Glendale. He failed to come in on schedule. Men went out and brought him in apparently frozen to death. Mother nursed him back to health.

It was here in a two-room log cabin that ten of Mother's eleven children were born. One that Mother remembers as the most severe winter endured was when she was "carrying her fourth child". The animals froze to death, sixty chickens froze in one night. Dad had an old pit of potatoes (about egg size) and rutabagas that he had intended to feed his pigs. They were frozen as hard as rocks, but he shoveled them out and shared them with the people. Wild ducks were an asset in surmounting this deprivation.

Mother remembers the last meal cooked at this time. She looked around the house. There was a little flour and a little salt. Dad had caught some minnows, but there was no grease to fry them. Mother knelt down and prayed that her children would not die hungry. Dad had gone with the mail, when Mother opened the door to find two men outside. They said their horses were too tired to go farther and would she mind if they came in to make a cup of coffee.

They brought in beans, bacon, rice, sardines, and soap. Mother hadn't seen soap for weeks. This winter they were short on milk as they were trying to save it for the calves to keep them alive.

When the snow thawed they skinned the dead animals and sold the hides. Spring found seventeen teams taking wool to Nepht. There were four horses to a wagon. The Sevier River was swollen so they could not cross and they had to go around by Grass Valley. Summer found them making butter and cheese, and salting down fish.

Interlaced with all this deprivation were the "shindigs". The life savers of their emotional capacities. Dad could call like a professional. "Swing that gal! That pretty little gal! The gal you left behind you!" was his favorite.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Utah State Historical Quarterly

Volume 10--- 1942

Journal of Priddy Meeks

Pages 145--223

Journal of Mary Jane McCleave Meeks

Pages 125--127