

BERTHA WIGGINS GAERTNER'S MEMOIRS

Written about 1990

These are some of my growing-up-time memories. My father's people (the Wiggins) came to the Middle Valley in 1877. My mother's (the Britains) in 1887. The Britains first settled in what is now the city of Payette.

My grandparents Wiggins took up the homestead where the barn now stands. Uncle Raz took the hot spring and my father just below his parents. Dad must have built the house we lived in. It is now the Mallory place and is now used as a chicken house. Cliff Hopper has the other half and they built there.

I can remember the happy days there. The four oldest were born there - Emma, Joe, Bertha and Earl. I remember how stupid we younger kids were. The Walter Keithleys lived just across the little creek. They had a son Brian about Emma's age and they were always up to something at our expense. Brian and sister Julia died at an early age. They told us little dummies once if we stood by the beehives we'd see something funny. We did! They stood back and threw rocks into the hive. We really got stung. They took us down to the little creek and baptized us and almost drowned Joe.

I could outrun Emma. She was short and heavy and I was longlegged. When Dad was working at the upper part of the place or at Grandpa's, we always ran to meet him. But there was a swampy place with some boards across it. Emma never tried to beat me, but she'd wait until I had to slow down for the boards. Then she came up behind and halfway across pushed me off. Of course, it never occurred to me that I could push her off, too.

I remember every fall when the Indians would come out of the mountains going South they would pass our place. Dad always had a big pile of longs and we would sit on them and watch. They were always in single file and never looked our way. We were never afraid of them. When the folks first came in 1877 they had several Indian scares.

My mother's sister, Aunt Lily Byrnes, had what was later the Ira Nelson place. They had five children and she was very sick. We were still on the homestead. I remember one time Mama just couldn't stand it any longer so she took Earl in the little wagon and walked and pulled the little wagon over to see Aunt Lily. She died not long after.

Uncle Francis (Mama's brother) had moved to Belfountain, Oregon. Grandma took Muriel to raise and moved to Belfountain. Later Uncle Dick Byrnes moved to Belfountain with the four other children. Ellen, the oldest, died not long after.

While my other was visiting Aunt Lily, Dad took Emma, Joe and I out to get some hay. He put us on top of the hayload and said to sit still. But the team got scared and ran away. He yelled to sit tight, but Emma took us by our arms and jumped off. Joe and I were pretty bruised, but Emma never had a scratch.

I can remember when Grandma died. She had spotted fever caused by a tick bite. In those days few people got over spotted fever.

I never forgot Grandma Wiggins' pickles. She would put cucumbers down in brine and take out enough for a jar or two now and then and put the vinegar and spice in.

After Uncle Raz built the house at the hot springs, they had a nice little orchard, berries and a good garden.

Below the barn above the old house, our Aunts Laura, Bertha, Ann, and I suppose Aunt Liz, (though she was quite a bit younger) had made a playhouse out of rocks. It was quite a large house. They had laid out all the walls and partitions with rock. When I came back to Midvale in 1968 I went to see if would could find it. There was enough so we could plainly find it .

Emma and Joe went to the old school house which was over close to the Jr. Keithley's. I

went with them to visit several times. Of course they walked from the Mallory place except in bad weather when Dad took us.

When Dad sold the place to the Hoppers, they divided it up and sold part to Allen Seid. He built a new house where the old one was. We lived for awhile in the house where the Walter Keithleys had lived until Dad bought the place from Uncle Tom Mackey. My goodness, the house was big after living in the two small houses. I used to get scared in the night. Homer was the first one born there.

At that time Shoepeg (or really Mt. Pleasant) was a large school. I have pictures and have tried to count the students. I did get to 97, but I think there were more.

We also had a Baptist Church which had a large attendance. We had attendance contests with Midvale Baptist Church and always beat them. There used to be a house on every corner and in between with lots of children. When we drive around Shoepeg district we remember all the houses that are gone. It doesn't seem possible there could have been so many people then.

As we grew up we had lots of riding horses. The boys were all good riders. We had a little buckskin mare - a little fat butterball but she had beautiful colts. Then there was Old Sailor. Flora was the buckskin mare. Dad used to take Old Sailor for Mama to ride when they were courting. Sailor was a problem in his older days. Dad used him for a single buggy. Two people had to go toward the last when we went to town. When we untied him he would back up and then take off. And we couldn't get in the buggy unless someone was in holding the reins. It had snowed a little the night he died. Somehow he had gotten out of the corral and had walked around and around the house. I suppose he wanted to tell us goodbye.

Then there was Babe, a tall rawboned grey. We used to go fishing up the Big Creek (we used to call it). Sometimes we'd take the team but mostly only with someone else's horse. Dad would always make us take Babe. We really had to baby her along or she balked on us. Dad knew we'd always be careful with her. I remember once the cousins from Cambridge were down and we took a hay wagon and all our neighbors' friends too. Dad saw to it we were driving Old Babe.

I told Midge one day that all I could remember were the stupid things I did. Of course I wasn't the only ornery one. Homer must remember, and maybe Bill, about the pig pen along the little creek under the little hill by the barn. Dad always raised lots of pigs. We always put the little one (probably Bill) on the hill to watch for Dad and we'd ride the pigs up and down that long pasture along the creek. Dad was trying to fatten them and couldn't understand why they didn't get fat.

I remember the scare we had about mad dogs. One bit Lus Adamson's horse. They had the horse tied securely in the barn. The vet threw water on him so he could tell for sure he was mad. It was a terrible sight, and they finally shot him. If anyone saw a strange dog or one acting strange, they got the guns and went hunting it.

We used to walk everywhere we went. The parties were a good many miles up the valley. One Halloween (one of the stupid things) a bunch of us went out. We stopped to visit with Mr. Seid. I can't remember his name; he lived where Kenneth does now. He was so nice to us. We played cards a little while. I think he popped some corn. I know we didn't have trick-or-treat then. When we left we took his single buggy and pulled it to the upper end of the valley. We finally started for home, some dropping off at their homes. We got in front of Mr. Seid's; he was waiting for us and made us go back and get his buggy. That was the longest walk we ever took.

I went a lot more than most girls my age. Emma was sweet on a fellow Dad didn't like. So to get to go she had to take me. We went to church one night. We had just started home when he and another couple came along and stopped for us to ride (I thought), but as soon as

Emma got in the sleigh they drove off and left me. It was dark and cold and I was scared. When I got to the little lane up to the house, they were waiting for me so I could go in with Emma. That fellow said, "Are you cold, little girl?" I flew at him like a little setting hen. I kicked his shins good. We went in the house. I was mad and crying, so of course I told Dad everything. It tickled him so, my kicking Jack's shins, that he did nothing but roar and laugh.

Another time he hurt my feelings. He had forbidden us to ride his grinding stone for a horse. He was in town one day and of course I was really making the old stone go. I turned over and really skinned up my leg. When I saw Dad coming I ran to show him my poor leg. He said, "Did you break my stone?"

Uncle Raz used to stay with us quite a bit. I think he stayed until he couldn't stand us and then went home for awhile. But it was wonderful to have him around. It was just like having two fathers, except Dad was so busy making a living and Uncle Raz had more time for us. We were very jealous of Uncle Raz. He went out several times to spend the evening with a widow we didn't approve for Uncle Raz. One night we put a fur cap Dad had down in his bed. We were waiting for him. When his feet hit that fur cap, he hit the floor and said "My God!" There was lots of snow and one night we stretched a tight rope across the gate. The next morning we could see where he wallowed all over getting out of the snow. The romance either petered out or we kids discouraged him.

When I'd stay with Uncle Raz and Aunt Laura at the Hot Springs, Aunt Laura made the best gooseberry pies. Hers were never sour and they were juicy. I never could make one like hers nor ever ate any else's like hers. And custards were wonderful. She had a large teakettle with a large opening. She had a can that just fit in the kettle. She could put custard in it and it on the back of the stove and let it cook slow. It was wonderful.

We would move our old washing machine up to the Hot Springs in the summer and take our washing once a week and wash all day. It was usually hot enough to dry everything. We might have to take a few things home to dry. I hated wash day. I had to turn the wringer and sometime push the dasher back and forth. Another job I hated was during canning season. I had long slim hands; Emma's was short and fat; so I had to wash all the jars. I was always sure Emma could get her hands in those jars if she tried.

Another was sewing. I was always glad to get a new dress, but I had to take full charge of all the kids when Mama sewed on my clothes. But I took most of the care of the little kids. Emma always said I was lazy. She helped Mama. She did, but I took care of the little ones. There were nine younger than I. Except Dorothy was born after I left home. Midge had her share of baby tending with nieces and nephews coming along.

During the summer I don't know how Mama put up with us. All the cousins were coming out to the ranch. Mama had a much harder time getting any work out of us while they were there.

The boys would set traps at night for skunks and muskrats and small animals. They would check them in the morning before going to school. One morning my brother, Razzie, kneeled down and looked over a bank to check a trap. He had caught a skunk. It sprayed and hit him right in the eyes. He really was in pain. That was when we were living in the little house down in the field after our big house burned.

I'll back up a little. Though I never lived much in the little house, but Razzie and his skunk reminded me of the trouble we had with a mole. Charles Paradis and I married in 1921. We moved to Corvallis in 1942. We had a beautiful yard but the moles were really ruining it. Charlie got the idea of putting gas in the hole and blowing it down the runway with my vacuum. He made a mistake and put the hose on the suction end instead of the blowing end. I heard a terrific bang. I went around the house. Charlie was holding the vacuum tube looking at

the hole with the most surprised look I had to laugh. He had sucked the gas and blew up the cleaner. I got a nice new vacuum out of it.

But to go back to the house. We had an apple orchard. Aunts came every summer to dry apples. All of us kids and cousins worked gathering, peeling and quartering them, then spreading them on cheesecloth and turning them everyday. We also had a cider mill. Everyone came to make cider. We also made our own vinegar. We had to have what was called "mother" for the vinegar to make properly. Sometimes the "mother" died. Then we had to go to a neighbor and get a little piece of "mother". It was the same way with our sourdough jar. We had a two quart jar always in a window. As it was used it was built up. Potato water was never thrown away. We put it in the sourdough jar.

About the cider mill. Dad was in the mountains getting our winter supply of wood. He was on the way home. We were making cider and Homer got his fingers caught in it. It cut the end off one. Mama tried to get to him and finally after quite awhile put it back and bound it up. He had danced all over the yard holding his finger. We really had a time catching him. I can still see him dancing and suffering.

Archie was quite a character. He never ran out of something to talk about. One day I asked him if he was sure the big story he was telling was the truth. He said he never told anything that didn't have a little bit of truth to it. We had two boards put together for a trough to carry the water from the pump. Arch told how they once had a big frog at the end of the trough. They gathered peas and rolled them down to him. He'd get so full they would take him by the legs and shake them out and then roll the peas to him again.

Arch also told about Dad sending him to skin a cow that had died. He cut the hide loose and tied the cow to the fencepost and tied a rope to the hide and got on his horse. Dorothy wanted to come. He put her on the horse behind him. He started the horse up and Dorothy looked back just as the hide came off the cow. And she threw up over Arch's back.

We used to have a wonderful last day of school programs, picnics and ball games. After I was married, I went up to one of them. Joe was in the mountains with the cattle but he was coming down for it. He was a little late. The older ones were getting about the same size as Dad. The last ones dressed were lucky to have anything left to wear. Joe's shirt he intended to wear was gone. He came to school all mad and bothered and Dad had his shirt on.

There was the year Bill was sick for months. They finally had to get a nurse. Dr. Marshall gave him up and said to try another doctor which Dad did. He got worse so they decided to get Dr. Marshall back. I was getting nice and warm in the spring by then. The doctor said he didn't know what to do for him - just wrap him up warm and lay him in the sun for awhile every day. He gradually began to get better. If I remember right he had measles, whooping cough and pneumonia later.

We used to have large picnics and celebrations on the 4th of July in Midvale. All of Cambridge came down. They were on the north edge of town along the river. Now I can't see any nice shady large groves of trees as I remember them.

Uncle Raz finally decided to buy a car. That was after I was married. He had never driven. He just drove it between the two places and never got it out of low. One day he was going home. He ran into a fence corner. He got out of the car and walked home and sent word to Razzie that he could have the car if he'd come get it. A brand new Durante - it was a neat little car. All the corner posts had a crib on the inside of the post filled with rock.

The boys were all good riders. Probably Joe, Earl, Homer, Bill and Tom were tops. Bill broke a lot of horses and he has the broken bones to prove it. Tom was a very good rider and broke lots of horses. Midge grew up with the boys and put in her time proving she could do anything they could and ever do it better.

We used to play on the hills back of the Boyd place. Warren Allen had a place west of the Boyds. It was really there where we played. There was a sand ledge we used to dig in and we would find a lot of Indian beads. We thought it must have been a grave, but never found any bones, just pretty beads.

For awhile a couple lived a short way in the hills - Slim Teamster. He had a stepdaughter about my age. We used to ride a lot. In those days we never thought about rattlesnakes. Now in my old age I wouldn't wander around in a dry, hot rocky place.

About the big house - it had a big farm kitchen, dining space, then a huge room we'd call a family room now, a nice parlor and one bedroom. Upstairs were four bedrooms - one was a big bedroom I had always heard was Uncle Tom Mackay's. We had four double beds in it and that the boys slept in. When I was growing up there was just Emma and I most of the time. Midge is twelve years younger than me. On the third floor there was just one big room. It was really a nice room but we used it mostly for storage. There was a closet under the stairs. One time when the cousins were there, I and one of them were sleeping in that room. The boys had gone up earlier. After we were in bed they slipped out of the closet and shook our bed just a little. Scared us to death. Next time we locked the closet on the outside and they couldn't get out. We were awful hard of hearing that night.

I remember the older boys and the neighbor boys riding the calves, but Dad caught them. They didn't do that anymore. I think they were trying to put saddles on some of the bigger calves.

One thing we always had in the big house was lots of hot water. Of course we always cooked on a wood and coal stove. It had coils to a water tank behind it. While we had a sink the water wasn't connected. We took it out with buckets. The tank had a spigot at the bottom. Every evening we older ones were lined up with a bucket at the pump. We pumped, carried and emptied water in the tank. It was a big tank but low. It set on a heavy square platform. On cold mornings we used to sit on the edge around that tank. I always tried to get there first and get a corner to sit on.

After I was married, Dad bought a Dodge car, also a Ford for the boys. He got a starter in the Dodge but the boys had to crank the Ford. He thought for the difference in price they would be making money cranking.

As I said, I was the babysitter. Usually had one on each hip. Arch was the problem. Grace was down so much in the summer time and we used to like to walk down through the fields. I'd tell Arch he couldn't go unless he walked - that he was too big to carry. But when we got away from the house he'd want to be carried so we'd brag on what a big boy he was. "Just look at him walk like a little man." The only trouble we couldn't talk about anything else. When we stopped bragging on him he'd sit down.

Before I was married and working Weiser, Charlie and I and Grace and Homer used to take fishing trips on the Pin. The Pin train on Sunday went from Weiser to New Meadows. They would stop anywhere along the Weiser River and passengers could get off. In the evening they came back and picked everyone up. It was a wonderful way to spend a Sunday. As everyone knows, it is still a beautiful drive up there.

And I remember the party line telephone with amusement and guilt for all the times I listened in when I shouldn't have.

Years ago there was an old pegleg man in the district. He was called Pegleg. He also pegged shoes. Uncle Raz called me Pegleg when I started walking. He said I walked just like old pegleg. It was shortened to Peg which Emma always called me. And Homer and Elsie mostly do.

When I went to school the two creeks on each side of the school were called Big Creek

and Little Creek. I don't know when it was changed to Keithley Creek but i was after I left.

We always had a dog and quite a few cats. Most, I think, were dropped on us. One day a relative passed going to town. In a short time a whole family of sore-eyed sickly kittens came up to the house. We knew where they belonged. Mama had us gather them up and take them home. I suppose he wondered how those little kittens beat him home.

I must mention Luz and Zelda Adamson. They were so good to us kids. We older kids would never have gotten to go to all the church and school programs if it wasn't for them and Fred and Carrie Tinsely. Emma and I and girl friends hung out there. They were awfully good and patient with us. Luz Adamson was Mama's nephew and Fred Tinsely was Dad's.

In April, 1911, Earl jumped down a bank at school after school and ruptured his appendix. We had to wait until morning to catch the train to Weiser. He was suffering so. We never thought we'd see him again. I remember Dad carrying him around to all of us to kiss before he took him away.

I can see Joe and Earl driving and plowing, etc. They must have started at 8 or 9. Earl drove a team; Joe 4 horses. I did have a picture of them. They looked so small. But now Midge has a grandson (Casey) 12 or 13 who drives the big farm machinery. Some of it is really big. He looks like a fly up there. I believe a farm is the place to raise children. Casey works in the field all summer.

And there was Dad's watermelon patch. It was below the orchard then later in a corner of the field where the two roads met. Once after I was married and Tish and Bud were very small, we were eating watermelon in the orchard. Tish up and kicked the watermelon out of Dad's hand. We all looked at her in horror. When she could talk (her mouth full of watermelon) she said Dad was about to take a bite that had a yellowjacket on it. Everyone helped themselves to melons after the patch was moved. Very few passed without stopping and getting a melon or two. We never ate anything but the heart. The pigs got the rest.

We used to go into town almost every Saturday. Mama didn't always go. There were too many babies. Dad would buy cheese and crackers and we'd sit in the shade of the wagon and eat. That was the best cheese I ever ate. One Saturday all of us were there. We each had a nickel. I hadn't spent mine. I just couldn't make up my mind. And the main store (only one, I think) caught fire and burned down. I felt so bad I hadn't got anything with my nickel. Then they carried out all the candy and told everyone to help themselves. And I still had my nickel.

We used to have large Literary and programs. All the schools out on Crane Creek, Sand Hill, Shoeppeg and Midvale took turns putting on the program. Emma did a lot of reciting and readings. She was always on our programs. If she attended any of the others, she was always asked to do something. She always could. After she joined the Senior Citizens she gave a lot of readings and a few after she went to the nursing home.

From the time I can remember in the winter we would sit around the big heating stove. Dad would scrape apples for the little kids. We'd be gathered around him with our mouths opened up like a bunch of little birds. That's the best way to eat apples.

This doesn't mention the younger children much. From Midge on down, I wasn't around the rest much. Dorothy was 2 years younger than Tish and 4 months older than Bud.

There are just 6 of the 12 left now. I'm the oldest. Arch and Earl died of cancer. Tom choked to death. Razzie was killed. Joe had a heart attack. Emma really died from old age.