

MY MOTHER'S FAMILY WERE PIONEERS

By Adelia Parke

On a day in May of 1867 one might have seen a covered wagon drawn by a span of big Missouri mules crawling up the slopes toward the summit dividing Weiser from Middle Valley.

It must have been a relief to the family of emigrants, there-in, to see ahead the top at last, after a day of jolting, lurching, pounding over the rough, rocky way. They were aware, too, that their destination lay not far beyond this summit.

Topping out they must have paused to rest the weary team, and as they rested, no doubt, they looked out over a panorama of breath-taking beauty: a lovely valley in all the splendor of May, set like a jewel amid towering snow-caps, just now mauve in the late afternoon sun, and sloping into the greenness of rolling hills to the East and South to meet the higher ranges far away.

The man saw the beauty, but measured it with the eye of the farmer that he was. He like what he saw! There was water in abundance; outlying range for stock; lush meadows; good hay land. No doubt his thought was :“This looks good! Home must be here!”

Thus my maternal grandparents came to Middle Valley. They did settle there, and carved a home in Idaho's wilderness.

These were Pioneers - the kind we eulogize in song and story - who “followed a star.” They were to find what it meant to carve a home in the wilderness. It would be theirs to know the hardship and sacrifice of raising a family in an untamed land; the dangers; the self-denial (sometimes even want) and toil that would age them before their time.

What of the spirit of such people as

these? Guiterman has spoken aptly of their kind in these words:

“They will take, they will hold,
By the spade in the mold,
By the seed in the soil,
By the sweat and the toil,
By the plow and the loam,
By the School and the Home!!”

John McRoberts and his wife Ruth Sophronia, with four daughters - Malinda, Elizabeth, Katherine and Florence (ranging in age from six weeks to ten years) - had crossed the plains from Biglow, Missouri in 1875 with a party of thirteen. They settled for one year in Boise Valley, moving on to Middle Valley (as described) the next year.

Grandfather homesteaded on what is now the Midvale town site. He built a ferry across the Weiser River and operated it. In the McRoberts' home was kept the Post Office and later a subscription school was held there.

River floods in the Spring were hard to cope with, and after a few years the decision was made to move to higher ground. Selling their equity here in house, sheds, and other improvements they took up a homestead on Keithly Creek (North of Midvale). This was “home” until the girls were married and gone, and until my grandparents reached old age and could no longer farm.

It was here that two more daughters were born - Lettie, who became my mother, and Nellie, making six girls in all.

A seventh girl was raised by my grandparents. She was Ann Mackey (Pickett) whose mother had died at Anna's birth - a niece of my grandmother.

So, my mother was, in reality, raised with six sisters, there being no boys in the McRoberts' family.

THE KEITHLY CREEK SCHOOL

Along Keithly Creek, before the turn of the century, one could have visited a tiny school nestling there among the tall poplars and alder trees which for many years served the children of the farm folk of the area.

It had been built by volunteer labor - the work of many hands. A simple frame structure it was, about 30 ft. X 40 ft., with boards set upright along outer walls, then battened.

At first there were no toilets; later a girls' unit was built, and a bend in the creek with flora along the banks served as privacy for the boys.

Inside were benches made of 18 inch boards, about 12 feet long and 2 ½ inches thick; a teacher's home-made desk and chair; one chalk board; and the most essential furnishing, a large pot-bellied heater.

Cloaks and hats were hung along the wall on nails. In the corner was a shelf on which sat the water bucket with dipper therein. Water came from the creek. (I suppose creeks were not contaminated in those days.)

A hand bell was used to call the children into session.

LETTIE'S SCHOOLING

Lettie McRoberts and two of her sisters had attained their elementary schooling at the little Keithly Creek School. Then since she (Lettie) was somewhat of a book-worm with a yen for learning, she was sent to a school at Weiser, Idaho which offered secondary subjects such as Grammar, Arithmetic (both advanced), Algebra, and Physical Geography.

It is possible, that since this was a Summer term, the teacher was paid so much per child, amounting perhaps to \$25.00 per month. It operated on the same basis as subscription schools held in homes and cabins of that day.

Some families subscribing at this time (1896-1897) were John, Levi, and Griffin Keithleys; Thomas and William Mackey;

This school was conducted by Tommy Jeffreys in his own home. The tuition being \$10.00 per three-month term.

Although quite eccentric, Mr. Jeffreys was an excellent teacher. His pupils recall that his shoe-strings were usually dragging, but as he said, life was too short to be worried about such trivialities. His hobby was Grammar and essays, and his favorite saying: "Every tub must stand on its own bottom."

It was Lettie's privilege to contact two other fine teachers while here (perhaps in organized high school). They were Mr. and Mrs. Lowe. In fact, Carrie Blue Lowe was not only her teacher, but became her life-long friend.

Grades nine and ten were completed, and the fifth McRoberts daughter decided she would like to teach her home school on Keithly Creek.

At that time it was mandatory for prospective teachers to take tests in certain subjects in the office of the County Superintendent, who then issued a permit to teach.

This was done, and upon receipt of the permit, Lettie applied for the Keithly Creek School - Summer term. In those days there were Winter terms (3 to 5 months) and Summer terms (3 months). Children were needed at home to help in Fall and Spring.

The trustees, impressed with grades submitted, and with the lovely handwriting, hired her at once. (Much importance was attributed to good handwriting. In fact, it was a mark of education.)

Anderson and Milton Hopper; Charles Revis; William Wiggins; Harvey Britton; J.A. Anderson; James McCrea; the Towells and Surdams.

MY MOTHER TEACHES

Luckily, Lettie McRoberts had been reared in pioneer ways, and was a woman of courage. It must have taken a great deal of it to face 35 or 40 pupils on opening day with may "Readers" represented; no training whatsoever in the art of teaching and very meager facilities.

Texts were furnished, but often several shared one book. There were no encyclopedias. Perhaps there was a dictionary. A map and globe were of great help in geography.

Slates and slate pencils were in use principally, but on special occasions - a written examination or copy book work - lead pencils and/or pens were available.

What a challenge this, to any teacher's ingenuity and resourcefulness!

No doubt, spelling bees were routine, and I'm sure this teacher put emphasis on singing, patriotism, and memorizing good bits of poetry. Much "busy" work was put on the chalkboard for the children to do.

Physiology was taught to older students, and Latin names for the bones of the skeleton were memorized.

Readin', Writin', and 'Rithmetic, often taught to the "tune of the hickory stick" - were basic subjects. Children advanced - not by grade, but by "Reader."

I have examined an old Reader published in 1878, titled: New Normal Fifth Reader which was used in schools of that day. In it are found stories and poems by our literary greats : Whittier, Longfellow, Irving, Dickens, Holmes, Shakespeare, and many others with studies on articulation, elocution, accent, and quality of voice. (Stress was put on oral reading in those days). Much of the reading I thought too difficult for our fifth graders of today. Perhaps the book was used by more advanced pupils.

Our present day readers, however, do not contain masterpieces such as were found here. But what better way have we for teaching appreciations and morals? Did those children get something that our today do not?

As all children, these loved games.

Popular among them were Black-man, Hide and Seek, Ring Around Rosey, and Whip-cracker.