

Bring My Grandchildren to Me

Mary Lydia (Gregory) Sweeton Tells Her Story

By Jackie Layne Partin (2011)

A few months ago three of my grandchildren, Annie, Catherine and William Edward Highfield, now in their eighties, came into the Grundy County Historical Society's Research Library. They were searching for information on my burial site. When they were young people, they had come to Monteagle and found Annie (Schaerer) Gregory whose husband, Oliver Gregory, was my half-brother. They asked Annie if she knew where I was buried, and if so, could she take them to my grave? They visited me and mine that day, oh so many years ago. The little group had not gone to the Monteagle Cemetery looking for me, but they had come to an area in my old yard where I had been laid to rest at a time when my grandbabies' souls were still awaiting arrival upon this earth.

That particular day at the Research Library there was a volunteer who had already been researching cemeteries for a new book that the Historical Society was preparing for publication. She just happened to have been toying with the idea that there was a long lost burial site on a certain hill to the east of Monteagle town. Questions had been asked, and the search for my burial site was on, but she still lacked substantial proof that the selected location was correct.

Around 1850 in Bledsoe County my grandmother Francis Elizabeth, (I do not know her maiden name.), married my grandfather John Gregory, who came over from "the land of heather," Scotland; I think his middle name may have been Thomas, but I am not certain of that. I know that Grandpa John & Grandma Eliza parented at least one more child, my Aunt Mary "Mollie" Elizabeth Gregory. Since I never knew who my great-grandparents were, I often wondered if my dad, John, or my Aunt Mollie may have been named after someone in either set of grandparents. That was a normal thing to do in those days. Family meant everything; passing on a family name was important even if it meant sometimes having two children with the same first name. One of those Swiss families out Gruetli named two of their sons "John." That makes for a nightmare when a researcher is trying to pull together a family genealogy.

Grandma Eliza was only sixteen and Grandpa John was twenty-four when they married. Aunt Mollie was born around 1852; then Daddy came along around 1857. If my Grandma lost any children, I wasn't told of it, but I now know that during her childbearing years, there were three little ones who didn't make it into her arms to hear her lullabies as the old rocker thumped across the uneven floors, back and forth, back and forth. When Grandma rocked me, the expected, continuous thumping made for a good naptime. Folks in those days just didn't talk about the goings on in the family. Miscarriages, stillborns, divorces, desertions—issues like those were not meant to be heard by anyone, especially my little ears.

Grandpa must have died between 1857, when Daddy was born, and September 5, 1867, when Grandma married her second husband, John Allen, a true blood Scotsman. They were married in Stewart County, Tennessee. Twenty-nine-year-old Grandma must have been powerfully lonely, or desperately hungry, for old man John Allen was sixty-two when they married. Well, that didn't stop them from having a baby in 1872, a little girl named Rosana Lee Allen. So now Daddy and Aunt Mollie had a baby sister, half-sister, to love and help watch over. For all practical purposes the Allen/Gregory family was happy and contented. Daddy was a strong teenager by the time his baby sister was born, so he could help out with the family finances by bringing in extra money.

Daddy did just like Grandma; he married at a young age. Family stories say that Mama was a young girl from Pikeville. This would have been around 1876 since I, Mary Lydia Gregory, was born May 12, 1877, in Bledsoe County, Tennessee. Daddy may have been eighteen, but I doubt it. I never knew who that young girl from Pikeville was. Whether she died giving birth to me or left my father is still a mystery, but I was a beautiful baby and in my heart, only death would have separated her from me to the point that she would have left me behind to be raised by Grandma and Daddy. I wish I could have known her. I'm not saying that Grandma wasn't a good "Mama," but I always longed to be held by the woman who gave birth to me. There is a special bond between mother and child.

Well, Grandma Eliza just wasn't going to stay single. Poor old man John Allen must have met his Maker between Aunt Rosanna's birth in 1872 and before January 18, 1880, when his wife, Frances Eliza (Gregory) Allen married Martin Shetters in Grundy County, Tennessee. Martin had previously lived in Bledsoe County, so he and Grandma may have known each other early on, or for all I know, they may have been cousins. That was common in those days. He had also been married before, so he knew what having the responsibility of a family was like. Daddy went to the Justice of the Peace and signed the bond for Grandma and Martin to wed, so this third marriage must have been okay with the family.

Now I must talk of myself a little here; after all, this is my story. I grew up with a loving Grandma and a caring Daddy. Daddy made chairs to sell to support me and help around home. By the time I was three-years-old, we had moved over into neighboring Grundy County near Monteagle. Aunt Mollie had already married and started her own family in Missouri, so she didn't make the move with us. My step-grandfather's mother, Elizabeth Shetters, was living with us. She could now help Grandma take care of me. She was a stranger, but at the age of seventy-seven, she had mellowed in life, so as to make me feel comfortable being near her.

There we were in 1880, one big happy family: Martin and his mother, Grandma, Rosanna, Daddy and me. Grandma seemed to be happy with Martin who was only about ten years her senior. I soon learned that there was no shortage of Shetters in Grundy and Franklin Counties. There was always someone visiting from the valley or here on the mountain.

Daddy got lonely and a young lady around the busy, little, new village of Mont Eagle caught his eye. Her name was Mary Adeline Long, the daughter of Cornelius "Neles" and Lourany (Skillen) Long. On October 12, 1882, in Marion County, Sam Gregory and Mary

Adeline Long were united in marriage. I stayed with Grandma and Martin. After all, Grandma was the only mother figure I had ever known. Besides, Daddy wasted no time in fathering a large family of children: Emma, Silas, Maggie, Overton Lee, Oliver, James, David, Lucy and Virginia Adeline. Wow, counting me that made him ten children in all! But as I recall, I was Daddy's past, and they were his present and future. However, he did come to visit me from time to time, but for the most part he was quite busy with his new family. He worked as a carpenter and later had a blacksmith shop on the corner of College and King Streets. He taught his children to work and even Mary Adeline helped with the finances working as a seamstress. They became an important family in the growing village.

In 1893, I married John Carroll Sweeton, son of Thomas Britton and Oney Caroline (Davis) Sweeton. Together we brought five children into this world. Now, Daddy had grandchildren; wouldn't he be so happy? Their names were Horace (1894), Ralph (1896), Susie Mae (1899), Nora Lee and Ora Lee (1903). My last babies were a beautiful set of twin girls born in January 1903, but baby Ora Lee did not live. My half-brother Silas Gregory had two sets of twins. Bluie and Brownie were the girls' nicknames, and Robert and Roberta were the other set. Roberta was called "Bert," for short. It seemed that twins ran in the Gregory line.

Little Nora grew and did fine, but sadness came to our door when my husband John passed away that same year in November. Not wanting to bury my baby Ora so far away from me, I had gently placed her in our yard on a small hill near a leaf-barren tree. At John's passing, I wanted to put him beside our daughter, so the special tree now looked down on two of my family members, giving them shade in the summer and showering them with colorful leaves in the fall and soft white snow as the wind blew it from the branches following a winter storm. I set fieldstones at their heads and feet, so others would always know where they lay.

I found myself alone; well, I had my two sons and two daughters with me, but I was still alone. My adult family was basically gone. If it had not been for Daddy checking in on us and forcing me to look to the future for my children's sake, I don't think I could have handled the loneliness. Sadness filled my heart, but I stayed the course. Nora Lee was growing up so fast; she was now nearly school age, but soon my life took a drastic turn for the worst, especially for my children. It was now my turn to be placed beneath that beckoning tree. Death had knocked at my door, and down that Valley I walked to meet my Maker and loved ones. Thus, I had done what I could on this earth; my race was over. I felt that I had run it well.

My living children were all alone. Grandma Eliza, too, had passed away earlier and had taken her place in the row of fieldstones that marched right along under that tree in my yard. The children were in constant mourning. Daddy did what he could; he saw that my children were moved to his old home town, Pikeville, to Aunt Mollie Elizabeth (Gregory) McGarr, where they found welcoming arms. When Aunt Mollie became a widow, she moved back to Pikeville. Daddy often made trips to visit his sister and my precious ones. He wanted to be certain that his grandchildren were cared for properly. Some people thought that Daddy had a second family over in Pikeville, but he was just visiting Aunt Mollie and checking to be certain that his firstborn's children were safe and had what they needed to

survive in a world without a mother or father. I have come to believe that he really never put me in his past. He did the best he could for a man who had such a large second family depending on him.

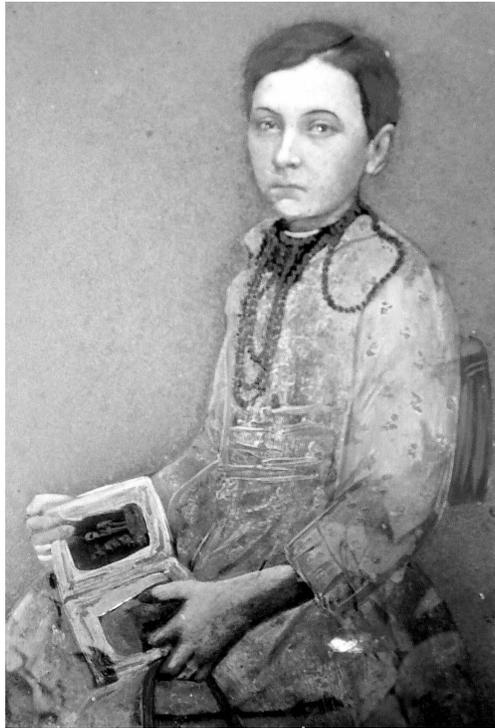
My daughter Nora Lee, the twin who survived, had babies of her own, but she died young with complications of child birth leaving several small children in her house. When they were young, a member of the family had brought my grandchildren to visit my grave in Monteagle. I believe Annie Gregory, wife of my half-brother, Oliver Gregory, brought them right to the spot where I lay. Annie told them that I was buried in my own yard. I am buried on the hill where Edward Elson and Ivy (Brown) Eldridge raised a family and at one time had a little store across Highway 41 from the house. Ivy Brown was an adopted daughter of William L. and Rosanna (Gregory) Brown. That one little hill where I lay was tied to the Browns, Gregorys, Sweetons, Shettters and Eldridges. We were all related in one way or another. My niece Brownie, who lives in California, remembers that her family was connected to the Eldridge family in some manner.

Today in 2011, my grandchildren want to come back to me. They have grown old feeling a need to stand under that huge tree one more time. In the early 1960's, a young girl and her father came from the Valley to our little hill to talk with Ed Eldridge about buying the house and land which he then owned. They noticed our row of stones curving with the lay of the hill near our special guardian tree between the highway and the house. The father told Ed that he couldn't buy the place because the cemetery would frighten his children. Immediately, Ed did an outrageous, hurtful thing when he began to pick up our fieldstone markers and throw them in a pile over into tall grasses, and then he said to the father, "Your children will never know there is a cemetery here." I felt sad, hurt, angry, betrayed and lost. I understand that no stone in a cemetery should be touched if it has any semblance of being a marker for a grave. My family's stones were free and came straight from God's creation making them more precious than granite or marble. Now my grandbabies will never find me. But that young girl saw the whole act and has never forgotten it. The good news is that she is alive (2011) and still remembers; she will witness to my descendants. Maybe she will remind Monteagleans that we lie here in dignity and want to be remembered.

Thankfully, the family bought the home; it was during the period when Grundy County schools were consolidating. The father felt his children could go to the Monteagle School and possibly have more opportunities than in the small Pelham School. He had been taught respect for the dead, (as all people should have been), because in order to keep foot traffic from desecrating our graves, he never mowed where my loved ones and I were buried. His children put their swing in another large tree, but not the one under which we lay. Final resting places for the dead are sacred ground and are meant to be protected. The new owner showed me and mine respect. Now the land where our remains have gone back to dust on that little hill belongs to another man. He keeps our little spot mowed nicely even though he knew nothing about us being under his feet. Kindly, he told the researcher that he would welcome my grandchildren for possibly their final visit as they, too, are growing older.

On Sunday Oct. 16, 2011, they, Annie, Catherine, William Edward and one of my great-grandchildren, Linda, came to me. They gathered on the little hill under the huge tree

in remembrance of their heritage and were thankful to have found me again. Some of those beautiful autumn leaves rained upon us all.



Mary Lydia Gregory

Notes: According to those who remember, there were approximately six to eight graves in the Eldridge yard. Research leads me to believe that baby Ora Lee Sweeton, her father John Carroll Sweeton, her grandmother Frances Elizabeth (Gregory, Allen) Shetters, her mother Mary Lydia (Gregory) Sweeton and possible Martin Shetters are all buried there. If anyone has information concerning these burials, or corrections on the story, please contact me. jackiepartin@blomand.net.