

A Grandmother's tales

This story was told by Ethel Smith Smith, December 1928.

Mariah Ishmael Smith was my grandmother on the Smith side. Although she died when I was 12, I have many memories of her and a fairly clear picture of her life. In those times of conformity and specialized jobs she would have been out of place but she would be an ornament to any generation.

Mr. Mariah is a little post office near Carlisle and Mariah grew up in that community, an orphan, reared by an aunt and uncle named Trigg. When Governor Metcalf had his inaugural ball at Forest Retreat all the neighbors attended and ten-year-old Mariah went in her lime-woolsey dress. She caught the eye of the Governor and he invited her to lead the ball with him. When she demurred because of her dress the Governor said there wasn't a lady on the floor with such pretty brown eyes.

Later, Mariah was employed in Carlisle at a tailoring shop and rode horseback daily to her work. It was in Carlisle that she met and married Wesley H. Smith. They made their home near Republican in Harrison County. When her first child died Mariah was distraught. At about the same time a cousin at Ishmael's Chapel had died in childbirth, leaving an infant son, John Morgan. Wesley Smith rode horseback to the cousin's home, packed the baby in a basket and took it to Mariah who reared him. He was a fine man and a lawyer in Carlisle. Wesley and Mariah had nine children of their own in succeeding years. Wesley was never too strong and Mariah loved to manage and did much of the garden work as well as tending chickens and cows. Those who knew her best said she had much pride, was handy with the needle and kept her large family looking nice. She could look and act the part of a lady even while hoeing in the garden.

In 1864 Union soldiers arrived in the community on a raiding party. Mariah sent all the family guns to the attic and hid them there along with Molly Smith who had her instructions. When the soldiers arrived the family occupied the downstairs making as much noise as possible. Mollie, upstairs, threw the guns into high weeds and joined the party below. The soldiers left none the wiser and the family gathered up their firearms.

The family was a regular pillar in the church both in Republican and in Indian Creek where they moved. Grandpa Wesley told of the time when they were all going to church driving old Jim in the family phaeton. The harness broke and he could think of no way to repair it and prepared to wait for help. Mariah took out her shoe string, tied up the harness, and got to church on time. She also managed to walk up the aisle without her shoe falling off as Grandpa said it would have done.

One daughter, Cordelia (aunt Della to me) was the idol of the family. She was spared her share of the hard work to keep small feet and nice hands. At 21 she ran away and married the 18-year-old son of a prominent Bourbon County family. Urnise to form they did well and lived happily.

Typhoid fever struck the county in 1890. During the months of July, August and September, Mariah lost three sons, all young men in their 20s. Later two more children died, each of them leaving families. No one saw Mariah cry but she said her grief was too great for tears. I loved to visit grandmother, and being the oldest granddaughter, had a

special place. After we finished the day's kitchen work she would sit and smoke her pipe, using tobacco which had been raised at home. She kept it in a galvanized tin which hung on a post of her chair. As she smoked she told me many things. One story in particular thrilled me. It was her version of rapping spirit and how they operated. She was never called there up but knew of sessions when tables had been made to move and fearful noises were heard.

Her parlor was a delight to me, like the best I see now in magazines. There were the papered walls, the pretty carpet mired with plenty of red, the stiff lace curtains, the round center table with its soft fringed cover and the cool icicles dangling from the chandelier. The parlor's furniture with its beautifully carved arms and wavy legs made the parlor a distinguished place. When Grandpa showed me how to play "Jesu's Love of My Soul" with one finger on the pump organ, my joy was complete.

Once I was sent to grandmother's to help out when grandpa was sick. The Ishmaels came to visit and I was told to cook dinner. It was a big assignment, and I remember making apple pie for dessert. I drove all the flies out of the dining room, set the table with the good things, drove the dishes and served the meal. I overheard the company complimenting the dinner and grandmother said "Yes, Zeke (my father) has taught his children to love to work." I knew all the time it was my mother Sally who deserved the credit.

Grandmother told me my name Laura Ethel, the Laura part, was the name of a former sweetheart of my father. When I told this at home, Ma got mad and said it wasn't so. The time came when the farm was too much to manage and grandpa had an accident. True to custom, grandma cooked, baked and served the crowd who came to buy and visit. I was there and it was 1894. Before moving to Cynthiana grandpa had a family reunion. All her family was there, we had a big dinner and took pictures all around. When time came to leave the farm she and Grandpa Wesley walked through the fields where the buggy was waiting. He said, "Mariah, let's take one last look," but her answer, as she firmly mounted the buggy, was, "Wesley don't ever look back."

We all visited them in Cynthiana the following Christmas. There were fewer presents in those days and less preparation, but the season offered more in good fun, family visiting, old jokes, and homemade entertainment. There were the two horse sled rides when we headed latches for foot warmers and took buggy robes, horse blankets and patchwork quilts if necessary to keep warm. Popping corn and making molasses taffy was a good evening entertainment. If anyone got married a chivari must be arranged with no trouble at all. How the newweds stood the noise and good natured rowdiness is a tribute to their pioneer raising. Then there was Old Christmas, 12 days later, when (at sometime or other) every child stole out to the barn to see if the animals really talked on the real night of Jesus' birth.

Speaking of the chivari brings to mind the infair which Mariah gave for John Morgan when he was married a Bourbon County girl. Today it would have been a reception but then it was a big wedding supper. The centerpiece for the table was a roast pig, stuffed and standing on a large platter with a red apple in its mouth.

For this particular Christmas visit when I was 14 I was put into my first corset. Mariah did the lacing a second time so I would look more stylish. Cordelia and I went somewhere to a big Christmas dinner. The food was wonderful and I ate too much, popping it off with big slabs of "black cake." Soon the laces began inside. Too much food and too little room! I made it to the high porch and leaned over the rail. I lost my meat, cake and all. Cordelia "seasoned my stays" by pulling the corset string and all was well again with me. However, I tried to act sick all afternoon so no one would think I had made a pig of myself.

After moving to Cynthiana, Mariah did not live long. She had a heart ailment and died when I was 15. True to my age, I remember going to her funeral in a floor-length black dress and a black sailor hat.

Grandmother Ishmael may have been just a product of her times but she had the qualities which will endure for all times.



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