

CHAPTER XXXI - THE SIMS FAMILY



Martha Custus (McWilliams) Sims and Thomas Jefferson Sims with their seven children.

Grandma Ragains was the next to the youngest daughter of Thomas and Martha Sims. Her father, Thomas Jefferson Sims was born in Tennessee on April 1, 1840. Grandma's mother, Martha Custus McWilliams, was born in Keytesville, Missouri on November 4, 1846. They were married in Keytesville on December 5, 1861.

Thomas Jefferson Sims' father, William Wilson Sims died in 1848 when Thomas was only eight years old. His mother, Margaret "Peggy" K. Bone Sims and his older brothers, Robert and William, raised Thomas. Robert was 24 and William 20 when their father died.

In the summer of 1860, only months before the beginning of the Civil War, the Sims were living in Sugar Creek, Barry County, Missouri. Thomas, a tall gangly twenty-year-old bachelor, had comfortable lodging at his brother Robert Sims' hotel. He enjoyed a steady income as a blacksmith at his other brother, William Leonard Sims' blacksmith shop. His mother, now 60, was also living at the Sims hotel.

These were exciting times for young Thomas. The issue of slavery was tearing the country apart. By years end, the nation had elected Abraham Lincoln by the narrowest of margins. Lincoln's election was very unpopular in southern Missouri. Even though his Yankee supporters billed him as a Union Preservationist, most Southerners viewed him as a puppet of the abolitionist and prepared for the dissolution of the Republic.

Even though Missouri was one of three Border States that didn't seceded from the Union, many Missourians were sympathetic with the Southern cause. Proud of his Southern heritage, Thomas Jefferson Sims joined the Sugar Creek Township Fugitive Slave Patrol. Later he joined Hunter's Battalion, attached to the Missouri Infantry, of the Confederate Army.

Martha Custus McWilliams, Thomas' future wife, was still a little girl. She was seven years younger than Thomas and lived on the nearby McWilliams plantation. She enjoyed a privileged life. At thirteen, she had few concerns beyond dolls, needlework and learning how to become a proper young lady.

Martha's father, Joseph A. McWilliams was a pious man. He was active in the Christian Church and welcomed the chance to do a little preaching now and then. Martha's mother, Jedidah (Perkins) McWilliams was said to be one quarter Cherokee and had one black eye and one blue eye.

The McWilliams had uprooted the family in late 1851 and moved to Oregon in search of gold. Martha's oldest sister, Peggy Ann, died on the famous Oregon Trail on January 28, 1852. A coffin was made from the wood of one of the wagons and she was buried along side of the trail. The McWilliams stayed in Oregon at least a year. They returned to Missouri sometimes after her brother, Jesse's birth on March 4, 1853.

Martha's grandparents, Robert Biggin Perkins and Sarah Norris Perkins lived on a plantation not far from the McWilliams' plantation. In addition to farming, Robert Biggin was part owner of a first class grist and flower mill near the Roaring River Spring. He and Mr. Mackinson had built and operated the mill since 1845.

The Civil War led to a lot of killing in southern Missouri. It was said that Robert and Sarah Perkin's 36 year old son, William, had killed old Mr. Antles. In retaliation, Federal troops rode out to the Perkins farm looking for William. Sarah had been forewarned. She feigned illness and took to the bed, hiding William between two feather mattresses. The soldiers left empty handed. Determined to have their revenge, the soldiers returned later. This time they caught William off guard. He was with his father and their slaves working in a nearby field. Sarah watched in horror as the soldiers massacred them all, slaves included. The Federals then buried William and his father in a common grave but left the slaves as they were. Their skeletal remains marked the area for years after.

Not long before this dreadful occurrence, Thomas Jefferson Sims and his child bride, Martha Custus McWilliams, were married. Thomas then rode off to war leaving Martha pregnant with their first child, Martha Eudora. Little Dora was born prematurely on August 13, 1862.

Dora was born so tiny that Martha made her a bed in a shoebox. Martha, still a child herself, was ill equipped for motherhood. Still playing with dolls, Martha looked upon the tiny wrinkled Dora as the ugliest thing she had ever seen. Her real live baby was an awful burden compared to the beautiful dolls her mother had given her years before. She viewed Dora with resentment that bordered on hatred.

Not long after Dora's birth, the Federal Home Guard torched a nearby farmhouse in retaliation for suspected rebel activities. Two small children were trapped in the inferno and burned to death. The charred remains of the dead children were taken to a nearby church where Martha helped prepare them for a Christian burial. As the ladies worked over the young cadavers, a pesky cat made several attempts to eat off the remains.

That night, Martha revisited this gory scene in her dreams. In her dream, she grabbed the cat and went over to the window to toss it out. In reality, she had grabbed poor tiny Dora and was about to fling her out into the darkness. Her nightmare ended just in time to save Dora. The horror she experienced because of her dream led to an outpouring of love for her baby. From that moment on, Martha saw Dora in a new light. Martha now saw her tiny daughter as her beautiful little Dora.

In her early years, Martha struggled a great deal with the conflicting desires of youth and adulthood. It is said that Dora's premature birth was brought about because Martha had been out dancing all night. Martha continued to play with her dolls long after Dora was born. Thomas arrived home unexpected one day and caught Martha busily playing with her dolls instead of taking care of her household chores. Martha was embarrassed and vowed to put all of her child-like activities behind her. From that moment on, Martha never played with dolls or went dancing again. Martha went on to impose her no-dolls-no-dancing ban upon her children. In some ways,

Martha never outgrew the child-man relationship that existed in the beginning of her marriage. She always referred to her husband as “Mr. Sims.”

Dora was almost 3 years old when Robert E. Lee surrendered on April 9, 1865. Even though Lee surrendered, the war wasn't really over. There were still many pockets of resistance throughout the South. Yankee patrols, looking for die-hard Rebels and Rebel sympathizers, stopped by Martha's place fairly often. Martha knew that these same soldiers could have been the ones who had massacred her grandfather. They would give her place a quick once-over and demand that they be fed. Martha grudgingly fed the hated Yankees, but toddler Dora thought it was great fun and joined the soldiers at the table.

In the years following the Civil War, the Sims moved to Fulton, Missouri where Thomas served as City Constable. From there, they migrated to Fannin County, Texas, where Thomas tried his hand at farming. Next, he moved his family to Justice, Hunt County, Texas, where he worked the Star Route as a Mail Carrier. In 1902, the Sims settled in Elk City, Oklahoma where Thomas sold insurance for a living. Thomas is remembered as one of the founding fathers of Elk City. The tall, well-dressed pioneer loved riding around town in his fringed buggy drawn by his favorite horse, “Prince.” In his later years, Thomas kept his head shaved. He liked the convenience of being able to comb his hair with a washcloth. Thomas died on November 14, 1915 and was buried in Fairlawn Cemetery in Elk City. Martha, with failing eyesight, lived on for another eight years. Martha died on December 16, 1923 and was buried next to her husband.

It is said that if you look hard enough you will find scandal hidden away in every family tree. To be successful in your search, you must be willing to search for skeletons hidden away in the darkest corners of the family closet. In the Sims closet I accidentally stumbled across a dark and shameful secret. William Wilson Sims, the youngest son of Thomas and Martha Sims, was called Uncle Wilson by my mother and her siblings. He and Cora Stover were married in 1902. They settled in Poteau, Oklahoma, where he worked at the train depot as an agent for the railroad. He and Aunt Cora also enjoyed income from a small cobbler shop that they owned. Uncle Wilson enjoyed a snort of corn liquor now and then. Unfortunately he had a habit of keeping a bottle of moonshine in his desk drawer at work. This practice turned out to be his undoing. A railroad inspector discovered Uncle Wilson's bottle and fired him on the spot.

It turned out that losing his job as depot agent was the least of Uncle Wilson's' problems. Uncle Wilson and Aunt Cora had four daughters. They were Cora, Louise, Lyda and Pauline, or “Polly,” as they called her. Polly was a wild one. She ran away from home and wound up in Fort Smith, Arkansas, where she earned her keep as a prostitute. World War II added a new twist to those working in the world's oldest profession. She discovered that military wives were entitled to receive a monthly allotment check from Uncle Sam. By the time the government caught up with her, Polly had five separate husbands. She spent the next few years in a federal prison in Georgia. Apparently Polly's conviction for bigamy nullified all of her previous marriages because she and her one true love, Del Seay, were remarried not long after Polly's release from prison. Her marriage to Del just wasn't meant to be. It was dissolved by divorce in 1966.

On a lighter note, Thomas and Martha Sims youngest daughter, Emma Zazelle Sims, lived her life as a dignified school teacher. It is said that at one time Emma had a torrid romance with Thomas Jewell Mabry the Governor of New Mexico (1947-1951). Emma turned down the governor's proposal of marriage because she didn't want to give up teaching school. In her later years Emma decided to avoid possible scandal by burning all the letters that she received from the Governor, over the years. My mother, Emma Louise, was named after her aunt, Emma Zazelle. My Mother was very close to Aunt Emma and told this story as the truth.

By the way Governor Thomas Jewell Mabry did find himself a wife. Over the years he was married to three different ladies. They were Winifred White, Katherine Burns and Clara A. Berchtold.