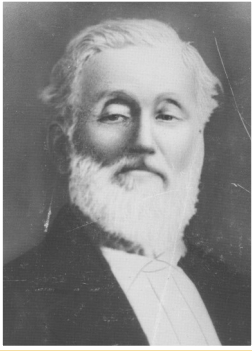


December, 2018



# EWING FAMILY NEWS

Descendants of William Alexander Ewing

*For the Ewing family and many others...*

## “Notes” Provide Clues to Family Stories

Grant Ewing moved with his family to Marshall county, Kansas, as a toddler in 1870. As he grew, he developed a special connection with his prairie home, closely observing everything in his environment... the soil, the plants, the animals, the weather, and the people. His interest in all those things would grow throughout his life, and be reflected in his writings, especially in his later years. Grant's "Notes by the Wayside" columns, published in Marshall county newspapers, provide a countless number of historical clues for anyone with family ties to Marshall county. Here's a little background on Grant Ewing.

Born September 15, 1868, in Boone county, Illinois, Grant was the eighth child of William and Rebecca Ewing. Three of their first children — three boys — had died at young ages, so Grant was the only boy in the family when they migrated from northern Illinois to Kansas with their good friends, the Sabin family. At that time, Marshall county was in the early stages of settlement... with only one or two railroads, and some of the towns had not yet been established. The old Indian trail that connected the Otoe reservation in the extreme northern part of Marshall county with the Pottawatomie reservation in eastern Pottawatomie county, wound through the hills and passed near the homestead that the Ewings had chosen in Wells township. Small bands of Indians still used the trail to visit between the tribes, often stopping at the Ewing homestead which was about halfway in the journey. The unbroken prairie and forested streams were still full of wild game... quail, pheasant, prairie chickens, water fowl of all kinds, rabbits, squirrels and deer, although the bison had already been pushed much further west. That was the world in which Grant lived as a child, but it changed rapidly as he grew.

Establishing a homestead was not easy, and took years. Once broken, the prairie soil proved to be very fertile, producing generous crops... if they were lucky enough to get rain. And it took a long time to break a few acres of prairie with a horse-drawn plow, one furrow at a time. There weren't stores nearby where settlers could buy what they couldn't grow, and they couldn't afford to buy anything if they had no crop. Anything that wasn't produced on the homestead, or on a neighbor's homestead, had to be shipped in from distant places, whether that be food, supplies or equipment. Garden crops were extremely important, and had to be preserved to sustain the family during the winter when nothing grew. Fruit trees had to be started from seeds or seedlings, taking years before they were able to produce anything of edible value.

Even in years that provided sufficient rain, homesteaders had to deal with adversity. Just three years after the Ewings established their homestead, progress was being made... buildings had been built, a young orchard had been planted and livestock were

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beginning to reproduce. The fall crops had been harvested and put in storage for the winter, looking like a successful year. But a strong November wind pushed a raging fire down from the north, feeding on unbroken prairie and anything else in its path as it sped through the heart of Marshall county. William Alexander Ewing was able to plow furrows around his house to discourage the flames, but lost nearly all of his outbuildings to the fire, as well as the orchard, much of his livestock and all of the newly harvested grain and hay. Grant was only five years old at the time, but he and his siblings survived the fire by settling down in the middle of a small acreage of green winter wheat near the house, covered with blankets, as the fire roared through the dry grass around the field.

The year following the fire was hot and dry throughout the spring and summer, as the Ewings and their neighbors struggled to recover. The crops were not doing well, but everyone was surviving. When the hot weather finally broke and the wind switched to the north, it blew in huge clouds of grasshoppers. The pesky insects were so numerous they covered almost everything, eating anything that was green and even chewing on buildings, fences and wooden handles of tools. Grasshoppers were so thick on the railroads that engines were unable to get traction, causing the trains to stop until sand could be added to the rails to provide grit. Fortunately, a scourge broke out in the huge grasshopper population and they died out in a short while, but not in time to prevent enormous losses to the homesteaders.

Although he was young, Grant Ewing learned valuable lessons from all the setbacks that his family and neighbors endured. He learned to persevere, to endure hardships, how to “make do” with what was available, and the importance of helping your neighbors. He also gained a healthy respect for the power of nature, and learned how to cope with it.

When he turned six, Grant started school with his older sisters at the newly organized Mt. Zion school located in a neighbor’s pasture. He attended classes there for three years, but being the oldest boy in the family and growing to a size that allowed him to be helpful on the farm, school was less important than getting the work done. So Grant became the main hand on the homestead, leaving the classroom to his sisters. Mt. Zion school would function in its original location for a few years, then move a short distance to a new building that was a mile north of the Ewing homestead and have the name changed to Pleasant Valley school.

Dropping school didn’t mean that Grant would stop learning. He had developed a keen interest in almost everything in his environment. He listened closely when the adults around him talked, learning all he could about their experiences and memorizing the stories they told. His three years of schooling had taught him to read and he exercised that skill whenever he could find something to read, most often a local newspaper.

Grant had been the youngest child in the family when they came to Kansas, but the nine years that followed their arrival in Marshall county saw four more children born to William and Rebecca Ewing – two more girls and two boys – making a total of nine kids still living. The family had fared pretty well since losing three boys in Illinois. But that changed in the spring of 1880, when Mertie, two years older than Grant, contracted typhoid fever. And in a very short time, Rebecca also became ill. Mertie died on May 9, and her mother died just a few days later on May 18. The official cause of Rebecca’s death was listed as “consumption,” the general name given to tuberculosis but most often applied to any bronchial infection, such as pneumonia.

The Ewing family continued to function, in spite of the loss of their mother, with the older girls caring for the younger children and sharing the household chores. Grant continued as the main “hand” on the farm until the two youngest children, Ira and John, grew enough to be of help.

By 1890 Grant had developed into a strong young man, well versed in the requirements of farming, and still very interested in all things around him. His continual reading habit and congenial nature had made him a



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well-known local figure who had developed many friendships. One of those friends was the owner of the small-town newspaper in nearby Irving, who convinced Grant to write “personal items” from the Pleasant Valley neighborhood – short blurbs about who was doing what, and who was visiting who – for the *Irving Leader*... the kind of “news” that was the lifeblood of all small-town newspapers. He also contributed items to the newspaper in Frankfort on an anonymous basis, developing a journalistic style similar to what he had been reading in the newspapers for years. In later years he would write articles to promote events sponsored by the local organizations that he joined.

In 1892, Grant traded an old threshing machine to a neighbor, Rod Weeks, for a half-interest in a well-drilling rig that Rod owned. The two men worked together for the next year, drilling water wells and giving Grant a chance to learn the trade. When Rod decided to concentrate only on his farming, Grant bought the remaining interest in the rig and continued to develop his knowledge of geology in Marshall county and most of the surrounding counties, including parts of Nebraska. Over the next 40+ years, he would drill hundreds of wells and become well-known in the trade, even helping a Nebraska manufacturer to design and test a drill that would be marketed nationally.

Grant married Carrie May Newberry, daughter of a Bigelow area family, in 1894, and they bought a farm just a mile west of the Ewing homestead. Having his own farm did not mean that Grant got out of the well-



**Grant, Lena, May and Levi**

drilling business... he just spent a little less time at it. He was a man of high energy and diverse interests. He knew people at the agricultural college in Manhattan, and often experimented with growing alternative crops, even planting a sizable orchard. Marshall county land records show that he devised a unique “crop mortgage” in 1897, in which he mortgaged 80 acres of his land to a large Missouri nursery to receive 4,000 apple, peach, cherry, pear, and plum trees. Payment for the mortgage would be in the form of crops from the trees over a specified time period. There is no word on how that worked out.

Grant and May had four children, but only two lived. Their first child died at a very young age in 1896, and their daughter, Lena, was born in 1898. The third child also died as a baby and their son, Levi, was born in 1901. When Levi was still a toddler, May became very ill while Grant was away from home. She was given some

medication by the doctor, which she put in a cabinet with other bottles. Getting up in the dark to take the medicine, she grabbed the wrong bottle and drank some before realizing that what she had swallowed was some type of chemical, not medicine. That proved to be a fatal mistake. She died in 1903 and was buried in Antioch cemetery next to the two children she had lost, all in graves without markers today. After May died, Grant must have enlisted help from friends to care for the children while he worked, as both Lena and Levi are shown in the 1905 Kansas census, living with separate families in Riley county near Randolph.

Grant married again in 1905, to Margaret Fincham, daughter of another Marshall county pioneer family. They lived on Grant’s farm in Wells Township – the farm that he referred to as “Cedar Ridge,” reflecting his belief in the value and usefulness of cedar trees to wildlife. He conducted experiments to determine that on cold winter nights, in the center of the cedars next to the trunk, it was eight degrees warmer than the air outside the tree. Consequently, he planted hundreds of them on the farm and everywhere else he could.

Three children were born to Grant and Maggie while they lived on the Cedar Ridge farm: Leonard, born in 1907; Gloria, in 1913; and Clair, 1915. They sold that farm in 1919, moving to Cottage Hill township, south of Waterville, where Grant felt the soil was better for farming. Harbaugh school sat on the corner of the farm, where a former owner had donated the land. Grant named this farm “Pine Ridge.”

Grant spent a lot of time away from home. He was still drilling wells, plus he was very active in the Anti-Horse Thief Association. He had been one of the founding members of the local A.H.T.A. chapter, serving as



president of the group and traveling often to regional and national meetings of the parent organization. Formed as a deterrent to crime, A.H.T.A. became a nationwide organization of citizens who constantly communicated about criminal activity and served as a reserve force for law enforcement, helping with searches, blockades and even arrests. Grant was an active member on all levels from 1913 into the 1930s.

As the Great Depression of the 1930s progressed, prices of all commodities sank to levels that forced many farmers into foreclosure. Grant was no exception. People had stopped drilling wells and farm prices didn't pay the costs. Grant was unable to make payments and the mortgage company foreclosed on his Pine Ridge farm and his well-drilling equipment, forcing him to sell everything he could, just to survive. The family moved to an old abandoned farm house near Waterville, owned by a friend. Grant was back into the tough-living lifestyle of his pioneer childhood.

Over the years Grant wrote an occasional newspaper column titled "Notes by the Wayside," but in 1929 his writing started to appear somewhat regularly in the *Marshall County News*, published in Marysville. Each column was structured much like the "personal items" that Grant had written years earlier for newspapers—a rambling style of journalism that reflected Grant's memories of earlier times, as well as tidbits of information about people he encountered and places he visited as he went about his daily activities. It was almost like a daily diary. The column appeared in the newspaper sometimes weekly, or every-other week, or whenever Grant could conveniently get to Marysville to drop it off. Sometimes he would also give the columns to newspapers in Blue Rapids and other local towns.

Reading Grant's columns, one gets a good picture of life during the Great Depression, as he describes events and conditions of the times, often compared to earlier years or to the days of his childhood. Plus there are vivid descriptions of the weather and Grant's memories... as well as his views and opinions, allowing the reader to get to know Grant Ewing as a person. But probably the most interesting aspect of the columns, to anyone who is doing genealogy research in the Marshall county area, is the numerous family clues that Grant included as he talked about the people he knew or encountered in his daily travels.

To help the researchers, the columns have been transcribed and posted on our website, [williamalexanderewing.info](http://williamalexanderewing.info) with interactive indexes for the family names as well as some of the places and events mentioned in the writing. The nearly 200 pages of information has been divided into four volumes, for the years of 1930 through 1933. Feel free to browse the columns and to share the link with anyone who may be interested in the genealogy information.



Some of Grant's grandchildren (from Clair Ewing's family) with a sideboard from one of Grant's well-drilling trucks. (Left to right): Karen Harmison, Mike Ewing and Patty Russell. The sideboard was found at a Waterville antique shop and now resides at the Blue Rapids Historical Society Museum in Blue Rapids, Kansas.