

Sarah Elizabeth Mower Alvord

by
Wilma Susan Harris Smith

Although I never met my maternal great grandmother, Sarah Elizabeth Mower Alvord, I surely carry some of her genetic matrix. Our family called Sarah, their “Little Grandma,” because she was so small--under five feet.

Sarah’s oldest daughter, my grandma Susan, described her mother this way, “Mama stood four feet eleven inches tall and wore a size two shoe. Her dark, natural curly hair was fastidiously coiled into a bun, which she anchored with hairpins above the nap of her neck. Even after her girlishly long hair turned to silver, she wore the same hairstyle.”

“When company called, Mama clipped her gold framed eye glasses on the bridge of her nose. The frames held a chain attached to an oversize brass hairpin, which she anchored in her bun. With a slight flick of her fingers, Mama lifted and dropped her spectacles. Her fancy glasses swung suspended on the chain near the top of her shoulder.”

“Her high cheek bones and smoldering, dark eyes lead some folks to speculate that Mama must have carried some native American Indian genes somewhere in her pedigree. My brother, Roy, and sisters, Amy and Florence, and I used to fantasize that Mama was surely descended from an Indian princess.”

“In spite of her tiny size, whenever Mama entered a room, her snapping black eyes and iron will, commanded a great presence. She believed in simple, unmovable principles, devotion to family, church, and school. When the chores of the day were over, and Mama settled in her rocking chair, her hands were never still. She patiently taught my sisters and me to crochet and to fashion delicate lace on a tatting spindle.”

“She taught my brother, Roy, myself and two sisters, Amy and Florence, and her grandchildren to mind our manners. Mama insisted we show proper respect for our elders. She suggested any misbehavior on the children’s part might be rewarded with a piece of thimble pie (This meant a thump on the head with the thimble she always wore on her middle finger.)”

“Mama, a talented seamstress, used a treadle sewing machine and hand stitching to craft a variety of garments for her family. She also fashioned her own stylish dresses. Papa, twenty one years older than mama, was 77 when he died on, January 9, 1908. From that day on, like the widowed Queen Victoria, Mama wore only long black dresses with jet black beads.”

“On occasion, she wore a cameo style pin that held a tiny photo of her dead father, Henry Mower Jr. In the Victorian era, it was fashionable to wear a mourning pin. This memory memento usually held a photo or a tiny painting and or a lock of hair of a loved one who had passed.”

“As a champion of Carrie Nation’s cause of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, Mama proudly wore her mother-of-pearl, hatchet-shaped membership pin. Mama told us that the

Carrie Nation Women's Movement concerned itself not only with the banning of the demon alcohol but also with issues ranging from health and Hygiene to prison reform and world peace.

Mama's father, Henry Mower Jr., embraced the Mormon principle of polygamy. Mama's mother, Susan Strong Mower, refused to accept the premise of sharing her spouse with other women. She left her husband and moved to Salt Lake City to reside with her parents, Jacob and Sarah Hill Strong. Susan asserted that Henry was controlling and abusive. When she fell gravely ill of a kidney disorder, she asked her parents not to notify her husband. Sarah Elizabeth, was five years old when her mother, Susan, age 31, died of kidney failure on July 17, 1856.

Mama's parents, Jacob and Sarah Strong, promised Susan to keep and rear her children, a son, John Albert Mower, and her daughter, Sarah Elizabeth. When Susan died, Henry journeyed from his home in Fairview, Utah and removed Sarah Elizabeth's older brother, John Albert Mower, but agreed to allow mama to remain with her grandparents.

I asked mama once why she married papa, a man much older than herself. She said years before she had fallen in love with a handsome young man. He asked her to marry him, and she agreed, however, he was looking for an opportunity to earn a proper living. They agreed he would sign on to a wagon train heading for the gold fields of California. Her young man promised to return and marry mama as soon as he made his fortune. Although she waited hopefully for several years her young love never returned.

Mama flatly refused several offers to marry into a polygamous relationship. A highly respected seamstress, mama earned her own money as well as provided care for her aging grandparents. By the standards of that era, mama was considered an old maid. Her grandfather, Jacob, died January 19, 1872. Sarah Elizabeth understood her uncles would inherit the Strong family home when her grandparents died. Sarah Hill Strong died May 9, 1884.

Mama was 23 when Joseph Bonaparte Alvord, a divorced man, 21 years older than herself, ask for her hand in marriage. Mama said she was not in love with papa, but he offered to provide Mama with a modern, comfortable home of her own and financial security. Her only other option, she said, was to reside in someone's home as a hired girl. She and papa were married in the Salt Lake City Endowment House on November 15, 1880."

I was the oldest of their five children.

Susan - August 5, 1881 , North Ogden, Utah
Joseph LeRoy -August 20,1883, West Weber, Utah
Amy- May 30, 1885 ,West weber, Utah
Florence -August 17, 1887, West Weber Utah
Baby Boy (stillborn)-April 3, 1889, West Weber, Utah

When mama was in labor with her last baby, the midwife said mama's pelvis was too small for the baby's large head. The midwife told papa the only way to save mama was to use instruments to force the baby's head. Otherwise both would die. The baby boy was stillborn.

During the last year of mama's life, bouts of asthma and other respiratory illnesses took a toll on her health. Your grandpa Barney and I cared for her in our home. The day before she died, she passed in and out of consciousness. The last words Mama whispered to me were, "Papa has come for his black eyed baby." Mama was 72 when she died, in the evening on February 26, 1923.

More than thirty years ago my grandmother, Susan, gifted me with a number of personal items once worn by "Little Grandma"- Sarah Elizabeth Mower Alvord. "Little grandma's" gold earrings were worn by Claudia, my youngest daughter, on February 29, 1996. This was the day she and Jon Keyworth were married.

Treasured items presented to me include a gold watch and chain, a sterling silver thimble, and gold framed eye glasses with chain and attached hairpin. A Carrie Nation hatchet-shaped pin and a small pin holding a tiny tintype portrait of my great, great grandfather, Henry Mower Jr.



I did not inherit great grandma's snapping black eyes or dark curly hair. I deny inheriting her spicy tongue and hot temper; however, like Sarah I am short in stature. In my stocking feet I stand five feet tall. I was born with a pale complexion and chestnut red hair like Sarah's husband, my great grandfather, Joseph Bonaparte Alvord.

My children, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, cousins and all of my extended family stand taller than myself. Great grandma, Sarah Elizabeth, was known by her family as their "Little Grandma." Now my own grandchildren address me as their "Little Grandma."

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