

Interview with Mary Evans Johnson, Great granddaughter of Samuel Church Smith

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Interviewers: Geoff Armour and Susan Schnebelen Gutierrez

Transcriber: Denice Sande

Geoff: I am president of the Carlsbad Historical Society and I am in the home of Mary Johnson. Mary has an interesting treasure that she is donating to the Society. Mary is the great granddaughter of Samuel Church Smith, one of Carlsbad's founders and the man that built the Magee House, the Church Smith house originally.

Mary tell us a little bit about your background and what you have here for us.

Mary: I am the daughter of Marian Reeder Evans who is the daughter of Lillian Smith Reeder, who was married the first of June 1887, on the porch of the brand new Smith house.

She was the daughter of the builder and she was my grandmother. As I understand it, her hands did most of the work on this quilt. It's called a "crazy quilt," or a quilt top. Often the young women would get together and work together on a large piece. Now I don't know how much was actually my grandmother's work and how much combined work with her friends. It is made of pieces of clothing that the seamstresses had a little snip left over and there are silk and satin and velvets in this quilt. There are also linings from my grandfather's hat, and a centennial ribbon from 1876, is also in this quilt.

You will see that the way it is put together is so individual and so remarkable. It was almost like a diary and my mother has told me that her mother would reminisce over each piece. Like, “Oh yes, that was the dress I had on when I went to such and such, oh yes, that is so and so’s, tie. There are also the seams between the pieces, they are all decorated with embroidery of quite wonderful and fantastic sorts. There are little embroidered pictures, which you will see. Look, there is a high top boot, a creature pixie looking over his shoulder telling him what to write, a horse, there is a mysterious exclamation in an embroidery saying, “Oh, you are a blond” with the day of December 14, on it. We will look at it and you can see that nobody knows who this was, who was blond, and why this was important to my mother.

Geoff: Some notices have the real threads of family history contained in it, and I can see why this is something that has been a treasure for so many years.

Mary: Let’s do it. Let’s open it up [the quilt]!

Geoff: When you say it is not finished, what does that mean Mary? The backing has not been quilted onto it. In a way, this is extra interesting because you can see what happened with the needlework on the back of this. Because this is a backing, but it is not the quilting that you would do on a regular quilt.

Geoff: Again, this was done piece meal over a long period of time? It wasn’t all done in one short burst. Was it correct that succeeding

generations worked on it, is that right?

Mary: I am not sure. 1850 that was before my grandmother was born, so it may have been her mother, Claris Boone who worked on this.

Geoff: There is so much to look at; you can find the significance of so many things, like an anchor here, bars, velvet, and painted sprigs of roses.

Mary: My grandmother was very fond of “Lilies of the Valley,” and I remember her house in Columbus was thickly planted with “Lilies of the Valley.” Here is a boat, a field worker or who knows, somebody with a rake or broom, a cow, an anchor, a fan, a rocking chair. July 8, 1884, Dakota. Did the Dakotas come into the United States at that point?

Geoff: I don't know—it could be—

Mary: Look at this. I have heard of watered silk, but this seems to be watered velvet. Is there such a thing?

Geoff: You can feel all of these different textures. I see where they got the name “crazy quilt.” What an incredible mix.

Mary: Yes, all the embroidery, the fabrics are wonderful but then what they have done is also so wonderful, putting them all together.

Geoff: Yes, being able to put them together like this. Little chicken feet, look how fancy this one is?

Mary: And, do look at the centennial ribbon, 100 years of the United States!

Geoff: What does this say here?

Mary: That says, oh you are a blond, December 22, 1884. It was 1886 when my great grandfather came out to Carlsbad and built the house, and the blizzards were just too much for him (in Nebraska). He did not want to go through that again.

Mary: This looks like an L doesn't it? My grandmother's name was Lillian.

Geoff: That appears in a couple of spots here.

Mary: As I was looking at it, I was wishing that she had actually signed it.

Geoff: There is no name.

Mary: No real claiming of it, and I really don't know.

Geoff: How much would you say that this was a tradition of the family was this from one generation to the next? Was each generation expected to add on to this, as it was so special to the family? Did your mother say, "Gee, Mary you ought to be thinking about adding on to this quilt as well?"

Mary: Not adding to it, but here my grandmother was already having problems with arthritis when she came to Carlsbad, when she was married,

and this kind of needlework became rapidly impossible for her to do. There hasn't been any work done on it and actually, I forgot I had it (laughter). It had been folded and in the shed in an old suitcase.

Geoff: Fortunately, it has not been eaten away by moths or anything. It is in pretty good condition.

Mary: The colors are so bright.

Geoff: The colors are really incredible.

Mary: Now there is another crazy quilt in the family, my cousin, Molly, in Redlands has it. It is a smaller one and it is finished. It is the same style.

Geoff: This is wonderful. It really is.

Mary: It would be better to have it in the Smith Magee House with that connection.

Geoff: We certainly think so.

Mary: More people could see it and you have, I trust, ways of preserving it.

Geoff: That is definitely something that I need to get advice on. We will do whatever we have to do to make sure that it does not deteriorate. It seems to have held up pretty good so far.

Mary: Yes, but it has just been folded away.

Geoff: It has not been in a climatic controlled environment.

Mary: Not at all. I it has been here along the coast in a suitcase just folded away from the light.

Geoff: Well, are we ready to fold it up?

Mary: What we do, we tuck the edges of the sheet around the edges.

Susan: I understand your grandmother was married in that house?

Mary: Yes, in 1887.

Susan: What do you know about that?

Mary: That she and her husband rode horses along the beach. She was trying to persuade him to bring his law practice to California. She wanted him to see what a beautiful spot this was.

Susan: So, he was not from California?

Mary: No, he was a lawyer. He was practicing law in Columbus, Nebraska, and although he admitted that California was wonderful, he did not want to be setting up a law practice out here. He was already a hearing-impaired person and he knew the community in Columbus. They moved and their

four children were born in Nebraska, but my grandmother, as often as she could, brought the kids out here. It was good for her arthritis. So they spent summer after summer and some winters in the La Jolla area, after the family was not in Carlsbad anymore.

Geoff: Did I read correctly that when he built the house in 1887, his children were already somewhat grown and that he did not have his wife there?

Mary: She had died.

Geoff: There was a housekeeper that he married later on—

Mary: Yes, and I cannot figure out how there was room for all of them, in that little house. I understand that the grown children left right away. Lillian married and left and Nellie left right away, and I have forgotten the son's name. None of the children really lived in the house.

Geoff: As I recall, there were difficult financial times that came in the early nineties?

Mary: Water problems and drilling. These things did not come through as expected.

Geoff: Financial reversals of fortune caused them to sell their house and move to San Diego.

Mary: His wife ran a boarding house, 10th and Cedar, is the one that I remember, because when my mother was five years old she was brought out here with her mother and she was a very headstrong child. She would just wander and wander and her mother taught her to say, I'am Marilyn Reader, 10th and Cedar!

I knew the housekeeper that my great grandfather married. In my childhood, she was called "Aunt Louise," she was never given a family name, like a grandmother sort of name. She was very old.

Susan: Was she from Carlsbad?

Mary: She was from Nebraska and when my family (mother and father) moved back to Nebraska from the Los Angeles area in the 1930's, she was still alive and living in a residential hotel. She spent all her days "tatting."

Susan: Why was your grandmother married in the house, was there no church in Carlsbad or was that the custom at that time?

Mary: I don't know, I don't know.

Susan: Where did the minister come from?

Mary: I haven't the slightest idea. I do know that my grandmother's wedding bonnet and cape were preserved and I have a photograph of me in these things. From the 1950's, the garments were owned by a store in Columbus, Nebraska, and she wanted me to put them on for a photograph.

Now my grandmother who made this was considered a tall woman, but the cape, it did not really have sleeves, but like pockets, you could put your elbows back into it. If I got my shoulders into the cape and then my elbows back into the sleeves, I was all scrunched up tight!

Geoff: Are the garments someplace in the family?

Susan: Do you know what color they were?

Mary: Yes, moleskin brown, but the bonnet was silk flowers. It tied underneath the chin with ribbons. It was basically brown but it had marvelous flowers on top.

Geoff: Well, on behalf of the Carlsbad Historical Society, I want to thank you very much for this historical discussion. This has been conducted in Mary's home in Del Mar, California. Again, I am, Geoff Armour, also interviewer, Susan Gutierrez, and Mary Johnson. We are so very grateful for this donation to the Carlsbad Historical Society.

Mary: Say Mary Evans Johnson because in history you see this connects.

Geoff: Mary Evans Johnson. Thank you very much Mary.

Mary: Well thank you and I'm pleased that this will have an appreciative place.

Geoff: Absolutely.