

SARAH JANET WOOD BALDERSTON

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In a little brown house, on top of the hill, at the corner of Third and Vine Sts. lived "Grandma".

It seems quite fitting that she occupy a place among the pioneer women of Wisconsin—having lived for more than seventy years in this same little house.

Sarah Janet Wood was born in Seneca Falls, New York, June 24, 1834. Her mother was Hester Jane Kirtland, descended from Robert Chapman, born 1616 in Hull, England, who came to Boston in 1635.

Her father was Joseph Wood, who's ancestor, Daniel Wood lived in Boxford, Massachusetts in 1630, and was also of English descent.

When a wee little girl, Sarah Janet came with her people to Fort Hill, Illinois, Chicago then being a mere trading post. Her family lived some years on the Illinois farm, where in 1843 the mother died.

Joseph Wood, the father, was a born pioneer, and in 1846 he came ajourneying into the wilds of Wisconsin, and finding the pine lands good, he built a home, and for him Wood County was named.

Three times he made the long journey with teams, from Illinois to Grand Rapids with the little daughter, before she would stay in the Indian country. A new mother, Matilda Compton, and small brothers coming during these years, helped to make life less lonely for the little girl Janet.

My mother often told us that on one of these journeys her father brought one wagon filled with pinks, lilac and honeysuckle bushes, "York State" roses, and "pineys", Lombardy poplars and Balm of Gilead, packed by the capable hands of her step-mother, thus starting these shrubs and trees in this section of the country.

Mother told us many interesting tales of the early days. She says there is no question about whom the law-abiding feared most in those days—the red men or the river men.

The Indians were very numerous and very peaceful, but the river men were inveterate fighters and worse drinkers.

She often told us that the coming of the stage was always an event. One day it brought Thomas Scott with two barrels of merchandise. On the corner where the Wood Co. National Bank now stands, Thomas emptied the barrels, put boards across them, spread out his merchandise and went into business.

The same Thomas Scott who later became a moneyed man in Wisconsin and who founded our T. B. Scott Public Library. In those days this was Portage County, Plover being the county seat, and many a night the young people drove to Plover, sixteen miles, (horse power—not motor) to dances.

Dances and candy pulls, sleigh rides and the Ladies' Aid Society furnished entertainment for these peaceful people, and the lumber-jacks furnished the thrills.

When Sarah Janet Wood was nineteen, she was wooed and won by William Balderston from Baltimore, Maryland.

The courtship was a stormy one, and on February 12, 1853, the lovers eloped. The would-be bride went down to the "Wisconsin House", operated by George A. Neeves and his good wife Mary, to meet the other members of the bridal party. The groom had a team and sleigh ready nearby, but as the wedding party crossed the road, the irate father saw them and then trouble began.

The bridesmaid ran madly up "Pumpkin Hill", pursued by the bride's father. By the time he discovered his mistake, his daughter, in the arms of the best man, was carried over a creek, and minus one slipper, was taken down Third Street, then an Indian trail, to a mill boarding house, operated by friends.

Here the wedding party once more gathering, the bride was loaned some shoes, and after hours of driving, they reached New Buffalo, Sauk County, Wisconsin. There in the early morning they routed the Justice of the Peace out of bed, and standing by the kitchen stove the marriage vows were taken.

July 3rd the same year, 1853, mother moved into her home on what is now known as Third Street, the only other building on the street being the mill boarding house.

Pine trees, raspberry and black berry bushes filled the country round about. Father named the street High Street in memory of one in Baltimore, tho it was commonly known as "Quality Row" until a few years ago.

Gradually "the neighbors" came to the south end of town, the Sampsons, the Neeves and the Scotts' the Butterfields and the Rowes, the Wheelans, Whitneys, Purdys and Smiths. The Kromers and Fritzsingers, the Witters and Webbs, the Lunts and the Woodworths, the Naylor and Moshers, the Wordens and Comptons, the Berniers, the Sweeneys, the Robert Grace family; and a little later, the Emmons, La Breche, Belanger, Bezoir, Bell Farrish and Lyon families, the Warrens, and La Vignes, each to help make history, and all to lend a helping hand.

Trained nurses were unknown in those days, and countless are the bed-sides where these pioneer women have served.

"Auntie" Sampson, Nancy Smith, "Auntie Lem" Kromer and Janet Balderston were famous nurses in those days, and scores of Grand Rapids children were given their first bath by these willing faithful hands. Many a tooth has Grandma Balderston pulled by the good old method of tying a stout string to the offending member and giving an equally stout pull. And the ears she has pierced for "stylish" little lassies.

Mother told us her first telephone was a piece of red flannel hung on the front of the house to signal Mrs. Henry Jackson, who lived on the west bank of the Wisconsin river. This meant "I'm coming over", and there being no bridge, the row-boat journey began.

Mother saw the Indian trails become paved streets, the one story shanties grow into brick and stone structures, the ferry replaced by the toll-bridge, that by the by the steel bridge—and then the concrete—the ox-cart give place to the horse, and to see the horse fast losing his place for the automobile.

My mother was a constant reader, her mind being exceptionally keen, and her interest in politics and all present day happenings was quite remarkable.

She lived through four wars. The man who became her husband served in the Mexican war; she was one of the women who helped make the flag presented to Captain John Compton's Company serving in the Civil War. Then came our war with Spain. And her only grandson served over-seas in the World War.

Eight children were born to my mother, three of whom are living. Our house was always open, a stopping place for all our school friends, boys and girls. For the grandchildren and their school-mates.

Mother was a true exponent of the word "neighbor", her willing hands always doing and giving, her cooky-jar always open to children's hands.

She was a member of Ah-dah-wa-gam Chapter, Daughters of American Revolution.

Possessed of a wonderful memory—she was always—even to the end, a source of inspiration to those who came in contact with her.

On February 2, 1924, she slipped quietly away to the "far country". And on the 5th of February the "Neighborhood Grandma" was carried forth from the little house she entered as a bride nearly seventy-one years before.

Carried by the sons of pioneers—whose fathers and mothers helped make Wisconsin history.

"She hath done what she could."

Written by her daughter, Grace Balderston Daly, Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin.