

Shame or Courage

By Frances Harrington

As genealogists, sooner or later, chances are we will come across an ancestor who may have what is referred to as “dirty little secrets”. Perhaps it’s a female ancestor that found themselves in circumstances over which they had little or no control. While doing research for others, I found out about two stories I want to share with you. These women, who I think should be looked upon, not with the shame that others may think they should have felt because of what happened in their lives, but with respect for the courage they found within themselves to make it through.

Story #1: (I have chosen not to use the true names of the people in this story because what I want to do now, is give them more respect than they were given at the time this all happened.) In the late 1883, Martin and Maria VanDyke came to Muskegon from the Netherlands with their two children Jennie and Gary. Martin got a job in a factory and worked long hours. Maria worked hard taking care of the home and their growing family. This young immigrant family had only lived in the United States for seven years when Jennie turned 13 in 1890. Every day, on her way home from school, she had to pass the train switching tower which was not far from where she lived. John Thompson, a middle-aged man, operated the tower. He seemed like a nice man. He even had children around Jennie’s age. At first, he’d say hello, or wave as she passed by. Sometimes he’d talk to her. Then one day, when no one else was around, he raped Jennie. She was so scared and confused she didn’t know what to do. She was too ashamed to tell her parents or anyone else what happened because she didn’t think anyone would believe her over Mr. Thompson, who was an adult. Every day, she would pray there would be others around or that Mr. Thompson would be busy doing his job and wouldn’t notice her as she hurried by. But then it happened again...and again. Finally, she broke down and told her parents. They called the doctor and he examined her. They wanted justice for their daughter and they wanted Mr. Thompson punished for what he had done.

The newspaper reported that John Thompson was arrested for raping a young girl, Jennie VanDyke. That’s right, they printed her name in the paper for the whole world to see. Can you imagine being a 13-year-old girl and having the whole town know that you had been raped? Not to mention going back to school and having all your classmates know what happened to you. Back then, regardless of how it happened, if you were known to have had sex before marriage, you were considered “a fallen woman”, “ruined” and “not suitable for marriage”. It took several months before the case went to trial and when it did, the courtroom was packed. The news article stated that every time the trial was in session, 100 to 200 men, who had nothing to do with the case, showed up in court. These sorry excuses for human beings wanted nothing more than to hear the “juicy details” as if it was some form of entertainment for them! Mr. Thompson, of course, claimed to be totally innocent and brought witnesses to testify to his “good character”. The jury in the case consisted of 12 men (no women). Jennie had to tell what happened, and be cross examined by his lawyer in front of all these strangers. Then her mother, and the doctor who treated her, all testified on her behalf. In the end, the jurors couldn’t reach a unanimous decision. You want to know why? During the trial, the defense

brought up the fact that Martin and Maria were not married until after Jennie was born. Therefore, they felt that neither Maria's or Jennie's testimony could be trusted. SERIOUSLY???

What does that have to do with anything? Apparently, there was a time when a woman who had an illegitimate child was considered simple minded or of low character. Also, illegitimate children were considered, out of societal ignorance and with no basis of fact, to be less intelligent than a child born to a married couple. These children were ridiculed and made to feel shame for just being born. The prosecutor in the case decided not to go through another trial because he felt the verdict would just turn out the same. Even though Mr. Thompson wasn't found innocent, he wasn't found guilty either, which in many people's minds added up to Jennie being a liar. Now not only was Jennie looked at as a liar, but now it was common knowledge that she was born illegitimate. So, Jennie and her family went through all this humiliation for nothing! With courage, Jennie went on. She worked for a time as a domestic servant. She met a good man, another Dutch immigrant. They were married when she was 21. They moved away from Muskegon and had 4 children. She died at 73, still married to the same man.

Story #2: I was doing research and had to tell a gentleman that the man who was thought to be his great great-grandfather couldn't possibly be that. It turns out, the great great-grandmother had married this man at 17 and was divorced by 18. The ex-husband moved out of Muskegon within months and married someone else and raise a family with the new wife. The great great-grandmother continued to use her married name, which was the custom at the time. She never remarried and years later had three children while still living in Muskegon. Each child was born with her ex-husbands surname (because legally, that was still her name) but she didn't use his first name, she made one up. It was the same for all her children. Some people might be embarrassed and ashamed at the actions of this woman, and of the fact that their ancestor had been born illegitimate. What they need to do is think of what it must have been like for an 18-year-old to be left in a city where she had no family. She wasn't from Muskegon, neither was her ex-husband. I don't know how or why they ended up here. She wasn't born in the United States and was not educated. Would her family let her go back home if she wanted to? Or did they look upon divorce as something that would shame the family name? Did she have any money? How was she going to make a living with no education? Where was she going to get food to eat or a place to live? Women didn't have the same opportunities that men had at the time, far from it. Then, in steps "prince charming", (or maybe not so charming) but a man who offers to take care of her. If you had no-one to turn to and you were hungry, and scared, and let's not forget - it gets mighty cold in Michigan, would it really matter that you weren't married as long as you didn't starve or freeze to death? She did what she had to do at the time. And after the babies came, what was she going to do then? Give them up for adoption? How would she explain that the name on their birth records was a name she made up? She would have to admit they were illegitimate. There was a time when illegitimate children were considered less desirable than those who were born to a married couple, and often spent most of their lives in orphanages. At least she didn't just drop them off on someone's door step and hope they'd be taken care of. No, she tried to take care of them for as long as she could, and that took courage. Were all her children fathered by the same man?

Did she end up in prostitution? We will never know, not even with DNA. Only one of her three children was known to have lived to adulthood.

When looking at the lives of our ancestors, especially our female ones, we have to remember not to be judgmental or be ashamed of them. We need to put ourselves in their situation, with their circumstances, and with what options that may or may not have been available to them at that time. After all, we owe them a debt of gratitude because we wouldn't be here if it were not for them.

Sources: Genealogybank.com (Muskegon Chronicle), Ancestry.com, FamilySearch.org., *Illegitimacy & Sex* (Susan Frelich Appleton), previous research.