

Whispers Of The Past

In this latest edition of Whispers of the Past, I thought it was time to put on my big girl pants and write about some of the pioneer families out there. Why was this decision so hard for me? Mostly because I want to do them justice. Then again, I may actually be writing about someone people know of, or the local families know a whole heck of a lot more than I do and I somehow got it all wrong. However, I might get some feedback or information finally. For my first pioneer family person, this is about Florence Emma VanVoast.

Ready?

Flora, as I've come to call her, came here when she was quite young with her parents, George and Mary McFadden, from Missouri and Kentucky. They somehow managed to cross the country three times in covered wagons trying to escape the Civil War before settling down to ranch in the Centerville area.



She was born in 1862 and had 3 siblings. She married John G. VanVoast in 1875 and together they had 5 children of which only 2 lived to adulthood. I've worked on the children's headstones which touched my heart and helped me decide to write about Flora. Her surviving children were Adah and Shirley VanVoast.

The VanVoasts lost all their livestock during the blizzard of 1888 and John went to work in the gold mines nearby, but due to health issues from his service during

the Civil War and the kind of work it was in the mountains, he was injured and became ill, eventually passing away, leaving Flora with 2 children to raise alone.

Somehow, and this is a mystery to me, she managed to get into a photography school in Illinois. I'm guessing she relied on family to help her with the kids and finances. She opened a studio during 1900, on Broadway in Townsend, taking pictures for families and also going out and taking award-winning photos of the landscapes nearby.

She passed away in 1915 and all accounts in the newspapers and her obituary described her in very favorable terms. I found it interesting that she used her initials for her business name, F.E. VanVoast.

I've read about Evelyn Cameron in eastern Montana, another famous photographer who had to guard her identity as a female at times, so I try to understand why women were not supposed to do jobs like being a photographer. It also drives me nuts reading newspaper accounts where the women are referred to as Mrs. Husband's Name. It makes it difficult to discover anything about them when I don't know who Mrs. Husband's Name is. Enough about that. Maybe. What can I say, I'm a renegade.

After Flora died, her son, Shirley, destroyed her photographs and plates. I don't know why he felt the need to do this but I personally suspect it had something to do with being named 'Shirley.' Just a guess. Some of her photos have survived this purge because they were purchased by others during her business days or hidden away so he couldn't get his hands on them. Fortunately, a suitcase of her photos was found later about 60 miles away from Townsend. How did they escape? Can you tell how mad this makes me?

I think I would have liked Flora. She was one tough woman from the time she was little to the time she passed. She had borne the loss of 3 children, a husband, and probably a lot of other things we don't know about. She was involved in the community, raised two children on her own and touched a lot of lives, including mine. Maybe I should call her 'Flo' now that I've written this.

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