

Another Family Story

By Jim LaValle

A few years ago, one of my many third cousins had placed an old newspaper article on her kitchen table. Her plan for the day included stopping by the Historical Society and getting a fresh copy from their archives. Living next door was a good friend of hers and the two frequently visited for morning coffee. Her neighbor stopped by this morning, and noticed the aged and crumbling newspaper article on the table and started to read it. She suddenly realized the elderly woman in the article was one of her ancestors and that she and her neighbor were actually cousins.

As a person interested in genealogy, I have to add, "Nathan Keith was a third cousin to William Frederick "Buffalo Bill" Cody" and is my first cousin three times removed. The following is a transcription of that article.

Transcribed from the Spokesman – Review, a Spokane area newspaper from 1908.

Demise of Nathan Keith

Ends Romance of
Early Days

Waitsburg, Wash., Aug 29 – With the death of Nathan Keith, aged 86 years, which occurred at the home of his granddaughter, Mrs. Richard Abraham, near this place a few days ago, the last character in one of the most unique stories ever enacted in real life passed to the great beyond, and the details of the 54 years of the latter end of Mr. Keith's life will never be told.

For 47 years Mr. Keith and his wife were separated, and during that time he never remarried. His early opportunities were poor, and he never learned to read or write until after middle life had been reached. With the western fever burning in his veins young Keith left a wife of a few months in Michigan and started to California during the exciting days after gold had first been discovered. Forty-seven years afterward he met his wife in Dayton, 10 miles from here.

Leaves Bride Forever

In 1853 Nathan Keith married at his old home in Michigan. It was early in the year, and a large party of neighbors were planning to make the long trip to the Golden State. With the opening of spring Keith bade his bride goodby and left, never to return, although neither of them dreamed of such an occurrence.

Keith landed in the gold fields at once began to gather a stake. Luck was with him, and he planned to have his family, for a little girl had arrived at his home a few months after his departure, join him and make their home in the west. About that time Keith fell into a strange community, and for a time did not confide in his new found friends his inability to correspond with his wife, and by a peculiar coincident, his wife's parents removed from Michigan to Nebraska. In a few months each lost entire trace of the other, and Mrs. Keith concluded that her husband had met his death in the mines of Sutter Creek. For 10 years Mrs. Keith remained single, then remarried, and a few years later her husband died. Remaining a widow for 12 years, she again married and came to Starbuck, where her husband died about 10 years ago.

Sold Dust to Levi Ankeny

With the luck that has always followed prospecting, Keith finally lost his fortune, which had grown to about \$300,000, and rich men took charge of his properties. Disgusted with the country, he started north, and finally landed in Orofino, Idaho, when that camp was wild and wooly, when pack trains went to the Idaho mining sections from Walla Walla. Levi Ankeny was then operating a store at Orofino, and to him Keith often sold gold dust as he gathered it

in the hills. Keith lost his rabbit's foot, however, for he never regained his lost fortune, and finally gave up prospecting altogether. About 30 years ago he appeared in this section and took up his abode with Winnett brother, on Whiskey creek where he made his home for 27 years, seldom even going to town or spending any time away from the farm.

During his lifetime Keith had one friend that never deserted him, to which he clung as to life itself. That friend was a faithful old fiddle, which through fortune and and through adversity he always carried with him. All the early dancers of this community remember distinctly the picture of the man as he drew the old bow across the worn strings with the air of a master and with the pride of a schoolboy. That old violin had won him his wife in his youth, and it was to reunite him with his wife in his old age.

Plays in Circus Orchestra

Eight years ago the Norris & Rowe show exhibited at Dayton. It was a small affair then, and the orchestra was poorly made up. In it were two violinists, and when the show arrived at Dayton one of the men was too ill to occupy his place in the bandstand. The manager of the show cast about for a local man to play during the two performances. It was not easy to secure a man for one day, and finally somebody suggested "Old Man" Keith, who lived in the country six or seven miles. The manager sent for the old man, then 79 years of age. He came, he played in the orchestra, and many of those in attendance at the show wondered that a man so white and aged should be in such peculiar position.

Mrs. R. O. Eaton of Starbuck, with her four sons, all quite small, were among those who witnessed the performance during the afternoon. One of Mrs. Eaton's children noticed the elderly man in the orchestra and made inquiries of his mother how a man so old could be traveling with a circus. The inquiry brought up the question of the identity of the aged musician, and to satisfy the curiosity of the lad Mrs. Eaton made her way toward the orchestra after the performance.

"Keith, Nathan Keith! My name was Keith once." Said Mrs. Eaton, "But my father died in California a long time ago. Mother lost track of him when I was a small child, and we always counted him dead."

Tears Dampen His Face

"For 47 years I have waited for you, and now you have come to see me!" And the tears streamed down the wrinkled face as Nathan Keith beheld for the first time, the face of his of daughter. Never was the curtain rung down on a more curious crowd which gathered about, nor upon a more dramatic scene that closed the little circus performance in Dayton. Hundreds of people were given a lump in their throats who had come to the show to laugh.

Mrs. Keith, aged 78 years, had remained at the home of her daughter, when Mrs. Eaton had gone to the circus with the children. The news of the discovery of her long-lost husband was carried to her, and the following day such a reunion as was held in Dayton! Bent and broken with age and hardship, the two old lovers were young again as they made the old acquaintance all over and began to realize that all was not a dream.

From that day until the death of Mrs. Keith the old couple were never separated, and a kindly providence soon called the husband after the wife had passed on to a sweet reward, so well deserved. Those who knew Nathan Keith best unite in saying, "He was a diamond in the rough."