

Title: Not Your Usual Mother's Day Story
Date: May 14, 2017
Subject: Tribute to Mothers
Scripture: Hosea

It was only late November, but the harsh winter winds made an early appearance in 1869. They swept across the Missouri prairie where they're even more brutal as there were few trees to break their force.

Yet, there was a note of kindness in all that winter bluster. And if the winds of winter could, they would like to take credit for bringing together Lilian Evangeline Katherine McGruder and William John Tecumseh Callahan.

It happened as Lilian was trying to leave the general store. She grew up out east and decided to go west to make her fortune after graduating from the Philadelphia School of Design for Women at the ripe old age of 19. She made it this far and decided that this was a good a place as any to make her mark in the world.

She was trying to leave the store but the winds pushed so hard against it that she couldn't get it to budge. She put her back to the door and leaned with all her might. That's when the winds abruptly abated, resulting in her falling backwards through the door, losing her balance, tripping and stumbling into the street and into the arms of William. He very gentlemanly helped her stand up and gather her packages, making sure to brush the snow off before giving them to her. Though he offered to carry some, she rather tersely insisted she could carry them herself, thank you very much.

Once she got them re-situated, she looked him in the eyes, extended her gloved hand in a gesture of thanks but was only able to do so a few inches for the constriction by the packages. William smiled, more smirked and shook her hand. And kept shaking her hand as neither wanted to let go. If there is such a thing as love at first sight, or first handshake, it had struck the two of them.

William was cut from different cloth. He was ten years older, but out on the prairie, age didn't make too much difference. He had grown up on the prairie, the only child of a couple who married later in life. He was now living by himself on the homestead where he was born. Most folks thought of him as a loner. The perception arose because he rarely came to town and when he did, he was reluctant to speak to anyone. Folks put much of the fault on William fighting in the War Between the States. They'd heard stories of the horrors of battle and figured he'd seen his share in the four years he was gone. Add in that his parents died while he was gone and that he only found out when he returned. It would be a hard blow for anyone. Most people just let him be in his own world.

William and Lilian married the following spring. It was the talk of the town. Everybody turned out to the little church on the outskirts to witness the blessed event and celebrate how the Lord had brought those two together. She had brought life to William. It was as if he had been given a purpose to live.

By the next spring the couple welcomed William John Tecumseh Callahan Jr. to the family. Just like clockwork, every other year, the Lord added Simon Benjamin, Rachel Mary, Matthew Joseph, Leah Martha, Nathaniel Jesse, and Thaddeus Levi. After the first child they decided to name the boys after one of Jesus' disciples and a tribe of Israel. The girls were named for the wives of Jacob and the friends of Jesus. William and Lilian insisted their children be addressed by their full given names, not shortened versions. Which is interesting as they preferred for themselves to be called Billy and Lily.

Billy was a hard worker and had repaired the farm buildings and fought the prairie for control after his return from the war. He scramble to make a living from the dirt. Lily added lots of special touches. She used material from the shop she briefly ran to make curtains and tablecloths. Did I mention she had made her wedding dress? She also planted a little garden, not just for food to eat, but for flowers for food for the soul, to bring color to the home. And she taught her children to love and follow the Lord.

Life on the prairie was hard for everyone. The prairie fire of 75 decimated half the town and burned up most of the Callahan's crops. Diseases could spread like the winter winds. A cholera outbreak in 79 claimed Rachel when she was only four, snatched from earth way too early. People who were close to Lily thought she started to change after that. She talked more of her youthful yearnings to explore, see the world. She seemed more distant as if she were thinking of another world.

In the winter of 83 cholera came calling again. This time it hit Lily and little Nathaniel, age 2. Lily barely survived but Nathaniel didn't. She was too weak to attend the funeral.

The spring of 84 seemed to revitalize Lily. She was her old self...for a while.

One day Billy went to town with the two oldest boys to get supplies. When they got home 5 year old Leah was on the front porch tightly holding 1 year old Thaddeus. 7 year old Matthew ran out to meet them. "Mother's gone." Billy didn't grasp his son's words at first. Matthew repeated, "Mother's gone."

Billy jumped down from the wagon and ran into the house. "Lily? Lily?" He ran to the other buildings shouting her name. No response. He slowly walked back into the house. A simple note was on the table. Three words. "I am leaving." Leaving was underlined, twice. Nothing more. Nothing about why she was leaving or where she was going or how long she'd be gone.

Gossip and rumors don't need winds for them to fly. They have their own means of spreading faster than wildfire. Some said that they saw it coming. Lilian couldn't be contained forever. The saloon keeper said

he saw her jump on a stagecoach, but he didn't remember if it was going east or west. Some figured she'd headed to the big city – St. Louis or Kansas City to have some fun. Or she was going to be a dancing girl on a Mississippi steamboat. Or she was going to wicked New Orleans. Or she was bound for San Francisco.

The rumors continued through the years, especially when folks saw a newcomer who reminded them of her. She was linked to a traveling side show, a cowboy in Texas, or even a fancy britches politician back east.

The years passed and Billy did what he could to keep the farm and family running. He diligently worked to expand the farm, acquiring more land. More importantly he loved on his kids enough for two parents and more. He taught them about God, his love for them. He took them to church and did his best to live out his faith in front of them. He wasn't perfect, but he wanted to please the Lord.

As the oldest boys hit their 20's they started telling their father about an idea. The urge became stronger when a new rumor circulated about their mother's whereabouts or birthdays or Christmas or weddings. The Pinkerton Detective Agency had great success in solving all kinds of cases all around the country. Maybe they could track down their mother. Billy would have nothing of it.

The children grew up under Billy's watchful eye. Simon, the second oldest, became an attorney and married. Mathew a doctor and married. Leah married a doctor. Thaddeus got the farming bug.

When the shiny new 20th century rolled around, Billy got sick. The doctors told him it was cancer and there was nothing they could do. The five siblings figured that it was now or never. They didn't like going behind their father's back. They knew he wouldn't approve but they decided they needed to try to find their mother, explain the situation and maybe, just maybe, she would come home, at least for a little while. Simon had made contacts in St. Louis when he was studying to be a lawyer. They connected him with the Pinkertons.

The Agency agreed to take the case. They agreed to search for Lily, find her and do all they could to persuade her to come home. They were armed with letters from the Callahan clan explaining that father was sick and didn't have much time and would she please come home. However, they weren't to force her against her will or offer monetary incentive. She would have to decide for herself.

Detectives scoured leads. The weeks, months passed but the reports were all the same. There wasn't much to report. She had been in both Kansas City and St. Louis. She had steamed down to New Orleans and been in Texas, and San Francisco, and Wyoming and Alaska. She had bounced around with a roving cowboy, a riverboat gambler, a gold prospector, a trainman. She never stayed long in any one place or with any one man. Always drifting. The Pinkertons didn't get their woman.

It was the summer of '02 when Lilian arrived back in town by the train that had recently connected it to the outside world. She had been gone for 18 years, 2 months and 5 days. The time had been good to the town. It had grown substantially but she could still see remnants of the prairie fire so many years earlier. The vivid imagery cut like a knife. The streets seemed strangely quiet for the middle of the day. She had mixed emotions as she strolled from the train station to the old farmstead, now on the edge of town.

She marveled at how well kept up it appeared. There was the little garden, but now it was all flowers. And the massive oak was still there. Lilian had begged Billy to cut it down. It was old and rotted out in places and the wood could be used for heating the house or for cutting into lumber or for furniture. He didn't want to as he had carved a heart with their names in the trunk when they first talked about marriage. "It will last for some time, my love" he had told her repeatedly, as often as she had mentioned that it needed to be cut down. One main branch was missing.

She walked onto the wide porch and instinctively turned to take in the view that stretched out toward the river. It took her breath away. She turned for the door and saw the note attached to it. It looked like Billy's strong hand. "At the church for the wedding." What wedding? Who's getting married? Well, if that's where Billy was, she'd go there. There was no indication as to the time of the wedding and some of these things could be all day affairs.

She purposefully strode to the church. It all made sense why the town was so empty. Must be the wedding of someone pretty important for most of the town folk to be there.

Lilian quietly opened the rear door and slipped into the back. No one noticed as all heads were bowed. The preacher was just finishing a prayer. "And bless them Father and make them fruitful. Amen." The voice had a familiar ring to it. She squinted to see better in the filtered light. William John Jr.? He had become the town preacher? He sounded just like Billy. Her heart swelled with pride. She looked from him to the adoring couple and noticed how the groom's smile puffed out his pudgy cheeks just like, just like when Thaddeus was 9 months old. Wait! It was him. Her baby was getting married? His oldest brother was about to confirm it.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it's my pleasure to introduce to you Mr. and Mrs. Thaddeus Levi Callahan as husband...and... and... Mom?"

Every eye that had been riveted on Rev. William now turned and bored as one into her. William John was the first to move. He parted the new bride and groom like the Red Sea and raced to the rear of the church. He was followed by his four kids and his very pregnant wife. The bride and groom made their way down to the aisle to applause, but it wasn't for them. It was for Lilian Evangeline Callahan who had come

home. The other brothers and sister and their kids gathered around. “When did you get in? We’re glad you’re home. Here are your grandkids.” They all got their chance to embrace and cry tears of joy.

When there was finally a break in the lightheartedness, Lilian breathed out the words, “Where’s your father? Where’s William Sr.? I mean, Billy.” Eyes that had been so full tears of happiness now glistened with tears of another kind. The joyous voices hushed. Preacher William slowly turned to look out the window. Lilian’s eyes followed to see a fresh grave. She fainted.

Fortunately, Mrs. Hoffmeister had smelling salts. She always had smelling salts. Said it made her heart keep a good rhythm. Lilian slowly regained consciousness, but still felt woozy. Someone brought a chair. Someone else got water from the well.

“Mom, dad was buried yesterday.” Lily was too late.

The family slowly and reverently recessed to the gravesite. A four foot high by one foot wide wooden marker stood as the headstone. It was made of oak and covered with an inscription. “Here lies the body of William John Tecumseh Callahan, grandfather to 8 and counting; father to William John Jr., Simon Benjamin, Rachel Mary, Matthew Joseph, Leah Martha, Nathaniel Jesse, and Thaddeus Levi; and above all loving husband to his dearest Lily.”

Shock waves surged through Lily. It felt like the earth was shaking and would open up to swallow her. The family lingered by the grave. Eventually the silence was broken. “Have you been to the house? Did you see it?”

Lily responded as best she could. “I’ve been to the house, but didn’t go in. I was going to, but saw it, the note, and came directly here.”

“That’s not it. We’ve got to go so you can see it.”

“But what about the wedding reception, and the guests and ...?”

“They can wait.” It was the voice of the new groom. “Let them eat cake,” his bride chimed in.

They made their way back to the house. William, as the oldest, opened the door to allow his mother to enter first. As soon as the door opened her eyes fell on her wedding dress, so carefully laid across a chair just inside the door. Her heart felt like it expanded and contracted at the same time until she thought it would burst. She caressed the yellowing fabric to herself and drifted back to her own wedding and better days and . . .

“Mother, look up.”

Then she saw the “it” her children had so excitedly talked about. A banner made from the finest fabric she had purchased to make dresses for her girls stretched over the length of the sizable dining room table. It had roses, her favorite, painted on it. “Welcome home Lily, my bride forever. Love, Billy.”

Lily grew ghostly pale and needed to sit down. She did, on the chair where the wedding dress had been. He had started working on it, the banner, the night she left. “It” was amazing.

“And mother, look...” She turned to follow Leah’s outstretched arm to see boxes stacked on the floor at the end of the table where she used to sit for meals. “They’re for you, from father.”

The boxes were full of love letters. Billy had written one a day, each and every day, no matter what, no matter how busy, not matter his mood. All from his heart, if not his hand. Toward the end he didn’t have the strength to write. He slowly dictated to whichever child was available. There were now 6638 love letters in the boxes. His last missive lay on the table, incomplete. “My dearest Lily.” She would find they all started the same way. “I have always loved you and al...” The note ended where his last breath did. Matthew, who had been the scribe, didn’t think he should try to finish his father’s words. No one argued with him.

I have various scenarios of how to how end the story. They fall in between two extremes. Lily gets what’s coming to her for all the pain she’s caused and falls over with a massive coronary. Billy claws his way through the dirt because he wasn’t really dead but only had extremely weak life signs causing people to think he had expired, returns home, scoops Lily in his arms and they live happily ever after. I’ll let you chose your own adventure.

I think the Lord gave me the story as I was coming home Wednesday from Lincoln as some way for me to deal with the events of life. It’s loosely based on the biblical story of Hosea and Gomer but with a twist. There was a little bit of Gomer in Lily. Gomer was a not so good mom. She left her children, her young children, and re-engaged in prostitution which led to her enslavement. You can imagine how the kids felt after being abandoned. Gomer is an example of how not to be a mom. We can learn from negative examples.

Instead we can pattern our lives after Hosea and as represented by Billy. Yes, I know it’s a little different to speak on Mother’s Day and use guys as the prime examples. The sermon note sheet indicated this wouldn’t be the ordinary Mother’s Day story. Hosea was commanded by the Lord to marry a woman who would be repeatedly unfaithful to him. When she left he had to pick up the pieces, raise his kids, and love on them. He had to buy her. He loved his children though they were reminders of how far people will run away from the Lord as he was told to give them unusual names – “God scatters,” “not loved,” and “not my people.”

Moms, I want to tell you point blank that you exhibit love like that of Hosea in the way you act, talk, and love. As Hosea was a living representation of God's love, you are living representations of God's love.

Oh, but don't forget God's love for us. He went beyond Billy or Hosea. He pursued us when we didn't want to be found. He sent his Son to seek and to save us. He rescued us from our spiritual adultery with ourselves and the world system by presenting himself as the Lover of our souls. He wraps his arms around us and draws us to him. He cleans off the dirt and the filth and presents us to himself as his bride and says, "I have always loved you and always will love you."