

Martha Gillette [61334732]

An interview 4 March 1960

Mrs. Martha (Gillette) Shepherd [61334732] will have at least one hundred and eleven wishes for happiness on her eightieth birthday, March fourth, for she has one-hundred eleven living descendants. There are eight of her twelve children, including Mrs. Roly Wilkins {Lelia Viola Shepherd [61334732(11)]} of Quesnel {Canada}, with whom she lives, forty-six grandchildren and fifty-seven great grandchildren. "Plus three to come," adds Mrs. Shepherd. "Of course I didn't count my own brothers and sisters," she said, "there are six of us left out of a family of twelve."

Mrs Shepherd is plump and motherly with eyes that twinkle as she reminisces about her busy life.

As a girl Martha lived in Illinois. Her Grandfather Gillette had been a drummer in the Northern Army during the Civil War. He had just come out of France then, but no doubt drumming and marching were the same in any language.

He married a girl of Scots descent and their only son, George, was Martha's father. Grandfather Gillette's first wife died and he married again - a French girl - who bore him nine sons. They lived in Iowa when last heard from, but that was many years ago, and the family has lost track of them since.

George Gillette grew up in Missouri. He went out to Illinois and met Eliza Marvel [6133473], but her father's sympathies were with the South and he objected to George, it seems, because he was the son of a Union army man. So the young couple went across the Missouri border and were married. Within a year, however, her father came and got them. "I want you kids to come home," he said.

So they went back to Illinois and lived in Gibson City, where George farmed. He grew corn and grain and sorgum [sic]. "We made our own molasses from the sorgum," Mrs. Shepherd remembers. "They cut the cane, cut off the seeds and hauled it to a mill where the juice was squeezed out, boiled down and stored in barrels. They took their pay in sorgum. It was a dark golden color like table syrup, In the spring it turned to sugar- something like the natural demerara sugar. We used it in all our baking.

"My father's favorite work team was a pair of mules. We had horses too but some of those mules were as tall and strongly built as any horse. At harvest he'd work four on the binder.

"We moved to Waynesville {Illinois} when I was six and lived on the farm next to Grandpa Marvel {Prettyman Marvel [613347]}. There were twelve in our family: William, myself, Ida May, Mary, Norah, Jim, Georgie, John, Juanita, Nellie, Grace, and Eliza. Being the oldest girl, I mothered a lot of the younger ones. I was more grown up at nine than many fifteen year olds.

"I remember keeping the house for three weeks when I was nine. Mama had pleurisy and papa was away on jury duty. I looked after the kids and washed and cooked for them all and two farm hands and took things to mama. My brother was eleven and he worked like a man while papa was away. Bill was six foot before he was fifteen.

"When I was a girl our fun consisted of parties and taffy pulls and "post office." I never danced in my life. The only dances were in big public halls and my folks didn't want me to go.

"We'd have literary societies at school, plays and spelling bees and pie socials. I can remember speaking lots of pieces. We'd get marks and prizes for elocution. I can in second once.

"When I was eight my father bought me an organ for my birthday. It was a big one with eight octaves and it just barely fitted into the parlor. A teacher drove out seven or eight miles from town to give music lessons to my brother and me, it that was to sissyfied for him and he quit. I still like to get where there's an organ and I can still read music.

"I joined the United Bretheren [sic] Church when I was twelve and taught Sunday School and played the organ. After I was married I joined the Methodist Church.

"When I was about fifteen I got the notion I wanted to get away for awhile and go to work. My sister, Ida May, who was three years younger than I, took over at home and I got a job cooking in a hotel. I always figured there wasn't anything I couldn't do. I earned a dollar and seventy-five cents a week and my board and spent most of it on clothes - things I couldn't make myself.

"One of the things I bought was some light brown diagonal wool for my wedding dress, and I had a dressmaker make that for three dollars. It was trimmed in silk velvet, a shade darker. My buttoned shoes cost one dollar and seventy-five cents.

"On February 12th, 1896 I married a neighbor boy a month before I was sixteen. Just my father and brother Bill came up for my wedding. The mud was awful deep and they drove in a buggy with the top and side currents buttoned down.

"My husband, Richard Shepherd, was a guard at the Southern Illinois Penitentiary for quite awhile. But he got double pneumonia one winter and the doctor said if he stayed on there he wouldn't live another year.

"Meanwhile my parents had moved up to Edmonton and they wrote that it was wonderful country. So we decided to go there. We came in May 1903 on an immigrant train. We only brought bedding and dishes. You slept and ate in your seats. We took a huge basket of grub, which had to be refilled at Winnipeg. We had six children then - the second six were born in Canada. Two died in infancy, but the ten who lived to marry were: Gladys, Lily, Lindell, Malcolm (Mac), Richard, Jim, Vivian, Guy, Viola, and Ted. Lindell's name came from a book her father was reading when she was born. He liked the name and insisted the baby be named Lindell.

"On the train one man took a shine to my kids and told my oldest boy, Mac, that he would trade him a Shetland pony for his sister, Lil. She was a pudgy, shy little girl.

"Well - we got to Edmonton at one in the morning and had to spend the night in the immigration shed. Next morning my father came and got us - he had team of oxen and a covered wagon. It took us a week to travel the ninety or so miles to my folks place, northeast of Edmonton. The town of Waskatenau is there now but at that time there was nothing.

"It rained for three days of the trip. Some nights we stayed at "half-way" houses - but others we had to sleep in the wagon. I had a feather bed which I spread over the freight - but we thought we were going to freeze to death. When we left Illinois our garden was six inches, but here there were still patches of snow on the ground.

"We stayed with my folks till my husband got us a log house built. Then we had to fence and plow and get stock. All of our land was broke with oxen. At seeding and harvest time my husband would go out to work in order to get by. I felt I was a hundred miles from nowhere - but the people were very friendly. And one thing I never bothered about - what was liable to happen. I just wait 'till it comes. I was always to busy with my family.

"When we were first there a stage coach ran from Fort Saskatchewan to Pine Creek, two or three miles beyond us, where there was a store, post office and land office. Later the C.N.R. built a branch line through there.

"In 1926 we all got the 'flu. My husband had it and his turned to pneumonia. He died the day before he was sixty.

"A few years afterwards I sold the ranch. My boys either had their own homesteads or didn't want to farm. I lived on one of my son's homesteads for three years till it was proved up. Then I went to Wainwright where I kept house and nursed a cancer case - a young woman with three small children. I'd done a lot of practical nursing in my day - guess I've helped deliver fifty babies or more - I stayed with this family for two years after the mother died. Then I went to Calgary and took care of papa and mama til she passed away.

"I visited around between my children and my brothers and sisters. I nursed two of my daughters who had cancer - Gladys, who died in 1950 - and Lindell, who died a year later. Then I came out here to Vi and Roly in 1952 and I guess you could say I've been sort of retired since then."

Those of Martha Shepherd's brothers and sisters who are still living are: Bill and Juanita (Townsend) {Jessie Juanita Gillette [613347329]} and Jim {James I. Gillette [61334737]} at Edmonton; John {John Gillette [61334738]} at Calgary and Ida May (Gardner) {Ida May Gillette [61334734]} at Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Bill {her brother William Gillette [61334731]} had an accident as a young man. He was working at a mill in Arkansas and had to stand in water. He worked a twelve hour shift and wore leather boots. The first night he had to pull and pull to get them off. The next night his feet had swollen so much he couldn't get the shoes off so went to sleep with them on. It killed the circulation, blood poison set in and both feet had to be amputated. But he had artificial feet and got along quite well. He used to go to a blacksmith and say "I want you to do some work for me" and then take his feet off. The blacksmith would get an awful shock. Later on he drove a cat and worked on road construction through the Rockies near Edmonton.

To mark Mrs. Shepherd's eightieth birthday, her youngest daughter, Violet Wilkins {Lelia Viola Shepherd [61334732(11)]}, has planed a big family reunion with more than sixty relatives expected. All of her eight children will be there plus many grandchildren and great grandchildren. The banquet will be held in the Anglican Church Hall at seven-thirty PM, March 4th, 1960.

{Martha (Gillette) Shepherd [61334732] died in 1964}