The Roots of a Community

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By Gay Neves

Sarah knelt by the grave, facing American Fork canyon, three miles to the east. The morning sun threw splashes of salmon and gold on the pointed rock formations that rose out of the lead colored snow still shadowed in the canyon depths. It would be another hour before the sun would rise over the top of the mountain they called Timpanogos. Sarah stared in frigid hate at the canyon, with its deceptive beauty. In her mind she could still hear the roar of the avalanche that had swept over a precipice, heading for the canyon floor. She could still see the small black figures of her husband John and the other men as they climbed over the slide area for two weeks, searching with dogs and long probe poles, until at last they had discovered the body of her son, Johnny.

He had been 22, the oldest son of John and Sarah Poole. He'd worked hard since he was a child, helping his father support the family of 13 children, and carving a farm from 80 acres of rocks and sage. He'd helped his father build their home, a frame room 12 by 14 feet. There was a door on the south, a window and a chimney on the east. The north and west walls were solid, a breastwork against the raging winter blizzards that howled across Highland. At night bedrolls would blossom out across the floor, with the smaller children nearer to the stove.

Mining was booming in the canyon, and Johnny had taken a team of horses and a wagon to haul ore for one of the mine owners. His was one of 40 wagons that hauled supplies up the north fork to the mines and came down loaded with ore.

From where Sarah knelt, on a small elevation a few feet higher that the surrounding flats, the sagebrush stretched for several miles in each direction. The land dropped into the green village of Alpine on the north and the thriving town of American Fork on the south. Here, on the bench, the sage was dotted with several small cabins, a few acres cleared around each one. Stalks of last summer's corn showed their tops above the sage, and tiny trees stood stark and naked above the earth, their buds just beginning to swell.

John stood in the doorway of the house and watched the figure kneeling at the gravesite. The little knoll was nearly 200 yards south of the house. It was too great a distance to be sure who it was in the early morning light, but he knew it had to be Sarah. He stood silently, bewildered. He was completely helpless against the ravaging grief that had dried and shriveled the spirit of this woman who had nurtured the whole family with her tenderness. Just in front of where Sarah knelt the ground was bare, mounded in a rectangle seven feet long and three feet wide. A wooden marker, made from a 12-inch plank was rounded at the top and set in at the head of Johnny's grave. Four similar markers stood at the head of four tiny mounds, three to the east, and one to the north of where she knelt.

John had dug this newest grave in January, the fury of his grief smashing the pick through the frozen clay of the knoll until his hands were raw and the blood oozed through his fingers and froze on the pick handle. The Highland wind had been howling like a banshee that day. The falling snow came sideways, plastered against the sides of sage and weeds and fence posts. The wind had chilled Sarah through to the bone as she worked in a shelter at the side of the house. She washed and dressed the body of her son, her wet hands shaking in the cold. Friends had offered their help and had been rebuffed. The mother had to be alone, and work was her only comfort. She tenderly parted his hair in the middle and combed it back. She

smoothed his long, thick moustache and curled it up on the ends, the way he liked it. He was quite a dandy, her beautiful Johnny. Sarah kissed his closed eyelids, one by one, as she used to when he was a baby. "…now this little eye will close, nighty-night, now this little eye…" She opened the door into the light and warmth of the house and took the chill of death with her, as she stepped through and closed the door behind her.

Then Johnny's father, and William, who was 16, lifted the body into the coffin and nailed the lid shut. Now, four months after Johnny was buried, it seemed that Sarah had lost touch with the living. Her heart ached for her husband and the five children left at home. She couldn't seem to force herself to look at them, or speak to them. Even to remember to breathe took a conscious effort at times. Her three married daughters would take turns coming to help. At first they tried to comfort her, then had withdrawn from her blank stare, her stiff unyielding shoulders as she stood at the window where she could glimpse the edge of the gravesite. Sarah's back remained turned as John loaded the children onto the buckboard, piled layers of quilts on them, and drove the lunging team through the drifts toward the boarding school in American Fork.

As the April sun rose over the mountains, Sarah knelt by the marker at the head of Johnny's grave, her hands cradling a small shoot of lilac, its still brown buds swelling with a touch of green. In January, 1880, exactly a year before Johnny died, she had sat huddled by the kitchen stove, the body of her six day old son, Earnest, cradled in her arms. She thought her heart would break when the baby died. He lay in her arms for two days and two nights, his breath rasping through the diphtheritic membrane in his throat. His arms hung limp, his tiny fingers and toes and lips were blue. He was too weak to whimper, too weak to nurse. His little eyes were sunken and dark, and he looked like a frail old man as the fever raged through his body. Sarah never knew just when he died. His pulse grew faint, his life just seemed to dim and disappear. So she continued rocking and singing the same little lullaby she had sung to 12 babies before him until John tenderly took the tiny form from her arms and laid it in the little wooden coffin he had been building on the kitchen table.

Now Sarah arranged the roots of the lilac shoot in a hole at the foot of Johnny's grave and scooped the soil into the hole with her hands, and then pressed it down. Each little movement was like a caress. All her pain and longing was compressed into the tenderness she now showered on this little plant. It would be 20 years before Dr. Noyes would come to Highland and slow down the ever-rising death toll. In the diphtheria epidemic, Jacob Beck's family had lost two little girls. Robert Jones and his wife lost three children, and Edward Winn lost three of his. George Myers lost his wife and three children and was left to raise seven children alone. Ten and a half months before the baby died, John and Sarah lost four-year-old Myron. Three days later little Arthur, Sarah's seven-year-old darling, struggled for breath in her arms. She could still see his panic stricken eyes fastened on her face, silently pleading for help. Finally, as his pulse weakened, he grew calm. His last rasping breath gave way to suffocation as the membrane separated. His chest heaved futilely several times, and then he was released from his suffering. A week later, Clarence died. He would have been two in June. He had rosy little cheeks, with a dimple on one side. Oh, how Johnny had loved that baby. He'd throw him in the air and catch him and the laughter and squeals could be heard clear out to the barn. Steven Beck was making coffins in Alpine and couldn't keep up with the demand.

George Munns, the constable, went around to the homes with his wagon collecting the

bodies to take to the cemetery. No funerals or other assemblies were allowed. John and Sarah wanted more than a quick disposal for their precious babies, so John built the coffins, with all the skill and artistry his love could put into the work and Sarah washed and dressed the bodies. Together they carried the tiny coffins through the snow and buried them in a row on the knoll, together in death as they had tumbled and played together in life.

Now, by Johnny's grave, Sarah lifted a crock of water and poured in around the roots of the lilac shoot. She had carried the water from the Lehi ditch, which ran west across the bench just 35 yards north of the house. Six years ago, in 1875, John had taken a homestead on 80 acres of the uninhabited bench land. He'd built the house close to the ditch so his family could have culinary water. Their little home stood isolated in the middle of miles of sagebrush. It was here that she gave birth to Myron, the first baby to be born in Highland. After clearing and planting a small crop that first year, John had defied the territorial legislature, which had given the water from the American Fork River to Lehi, Pleasant Grove and American Fork in 1852.

In 1853 Bishop David Evans had led a group of men from Lehi, and they had dug a ditch seven miles through the rocks of Highland. John Poole cut in the Lehi ditch letting out a rush of water that brought life to his wilting crops and began a lawsuit that reached the courts in Provo. John was considered a scoundrel and a reprobate, but he won his case, and life flowed onto Highland through the Lehi ditch. This opened the way for other settlers. The Meyers filed on a homestead in 1876, and at last Sarah had a neighbor. The Sawyers came in 1877 and Becks in '78. Land was $1.25 an acre.

Sarah was stiff with age and cold and sorrow as she knelt by the little lilac bush. She longed for the touch of Sister Myers' arm around her shoulder. She had been her confidant —a comfort through childbirth and sickness, and a friend to share her joy. Now Sister Myers and her own three babes lay in the cemetery in American Fork, and for an instant Sarah longed to be at peace in the ground on this quiet knoll. At last the tears came. Tears she had not been able to shed when she had lost her son, she now shed for the anguish of her friend. From where he stood at the house door, John saw Sarah's kneeling figure bend and begin rocking with her face buried in the apron on her knees.

By the time John reached Sarah's side she had regained contact with the world of the living. "Good morning, Mr. Poole," she smiled as she wiped her tear streaked face with her apron. I planted a lilac for the children."

Ed. note: The Poole family moved to California in 1888. The first three family deaths were in the 1879 diphtheria epidemic and the fourth, in 1880, was from childbirth complications. The Beck, Jones and Winn family members died in the 1893-94 diphtheria epidemic.