

Olena Wright Smith Harris

“Grandma Harris”

Small history of maternal ancestors & where they came from:



Olena's Maternal Grandfather

John Fish Wright was born in Goole, York, England on October 3rd, 1841. He was the son of John Pannell Wright and Mary Hill Fish. His parents and he joined the church in England. They left England to come to the U. S. in December of 1848. They finally arrived in Salt Lake City, Utah in September of 1852. John Fish Wright made his way to Paradise, Utah where he had been called to be an Indian Interpreter and Minuteman to help protect the early saints there from the Indians. He had learned many different Indian dialects in his younger years and could tell his grandchildren many interesting Indian stories. While in Paradise, John met and married Martha Duggan Gibbs, the daughter of George Duggan Gibbs and Ellen Phillips, on February 23, 1864. John Fish Wright never had another wife, other than his own first wife, Martha Duggan Gibbs. An interesting story from Grandma's history, (Olena Smith Harris), was that in England and Wales John and Martha were used to living by the ocean. Loving the ocean so much, Grandpa Wright would rent his Logan home to the football coach at the A. C. and he and Grandma Wright would go to Newport Beach in California

with their feather bed and a wicker lunch basket filled with fried chicken and baloney. They would then buy a furnished home on the beach and live there for the winter. Each spring they would sell their beach house for more than they bought it for and go back to Logan for the summer months.



Olena's maternal grandmother:

Martha Duggan Gibbs was born in Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire, Wales, either on the 15th or the 19th day of December, 1844. Grandma's version says the 15th. Martha's mother was the first in their family to be converted to the Church in Wales. She had her window open one day and heard some missionaries preaching the gospel out on the street. She was convinced that what they were saying was true, told her family and they all joined the church. On August 10th, 1863, Martha, at the age of 18 years, was the first in her family to be able to come to the U. S. She and her Uncle, John Duggan Gibbs and his family, whom she had been traveling with from Wales, came across the plains with the Thomas E. Ricks Company after arriving in the U. S. She went directly to Paradise, Utah where she had promised to help a friend from the Old Country, on October 4, 1863. Her friend, Mrs. William Thomas, was expecting a new baby. Martha stayed with her friend until she married Thomas Fish Wright on the 23rd of February, 1865. They had ten children together.

Martha's father was a tailor in the old country. Martha's mother took care of all the household chores so her daughters could go to their father's tailoring shop and learn his trade. Martha could even make coats and suits for her

family. She was an excellent cook and homemaker and as Grandma put it:
“An ideal wife and companion” for her husband.



Olena's Mother

Mary Ellen Wright, was born on January 4th of 1865 to John Fish Wright and Martha Duggan Gibbs. She was their first child. She was the only one in her family who was married in Polygamy but her family, who were good members of the church supported her decision and her throughout her many trials of living a polygamist lifestyle during the mid-to-late 1800's. She was the third wife of Orson Smith. She was introduced to Orson through his first wife, Carrie Carpenter Smith. Mary Ellen was twelve years younger than Orson was. She was a bit reluctant at first to marry him but eventually they did get married and had ten children. Grandma (Olena) was their 6th child. Grandma said of her mother: “she was a very good speaker and writer. She was good at public work. She was County Chairman of the Republican Party” (in Logan) - so must have been Cache County? Back in 1920's?



Olena's Father

Orson Gurney Smith was born on the plains of Keokuk, Lee, Iowa on the 4th of July, in the year of 1853 to Thomas X. Smith and Margaret Gurney. They were coming to the United States by boat and then to Utah with the Mormon Pioneers from Eaton Bray, Bedfordshire, England. Thomas X and Margaret were married in Eaton Bray, Bedfordshire, England where they had joined the church. They already had eight children and were on the plains to Utah while Margaret, who was pregnant with Orson at the time, went into labor and delivered her baby boy. He was the ninth child of Thomas X. and Margaret Gurney. Margaret was Thomas X's first of three wives.



Very condensed biography of Grandma's life

Olena Wright Smith was Born on February 26, 1897 in Logan, Utah to Mary Ellen Wright and Orson Gurney Smith. Mary Ellen and Sarah Anne O Bray, (or Annie, who was Orson's second wife in Polygamy) were pregnant at the same time. Olena was born 3 days before Annie's baby girl was born so "Emma" (Annie's baby girl) was named in church and Grandma was named at home. Grandma didn't have a birth certificate because of polygamy being illegal, so years later when she wanted to go to Europe Grandma had to get some form of identification, which she was able to do by calling the Logan Temple and having them send a copy of her Baptism. Very few people, other than the immediate family, in Logan knew who grandma's mother was married to nor did they know who grandma's Dad was. Her mother used the name of "Mrs. Post".

Education and early teaching career

Olena Wright Smith, her name before she was married, graduated from Utah State Agricultural College with a "Bachelor of Science" degree in the spring of 1918. Nutrition was Grandma's major with minors in English, Physical Education and Clothing.

Grandma was an excellent seamstress and tailor. Even though she increased her skills as a seamstress and tailor through her studies at Utah State, she, undoubtedly had learned some of her skills from her grandmother, Martha Duggan Gibbs Wright, who had worked alongside her own father in Wales to learn the tailoring trade. Grandma sewed almost all her own clothes plus overcoats and dresses for us as kids, and many others. She had been sewing for many of her family members since they were all young. She got paid for sewing for others outside of the family. Several brides in the family used one of the wedding dresses she made. She had made several wedding and prom dresses throughout her life. She also made costumes for various plays she was in. She could sew anything. Grandma also crocheted. She did a beautiful, large tablecloth the year her husband died of cancer in 1956. She said she never wanted to look at it again after "Daddy" died. She had finished it on the day he died.

Grandma had two offers to teach school after she graduated from Utah State - one in Shelley, Idaho and the other one in Burley, Idaho. She accepted the one from Shelley and gave her friend the one in Burley. She taught High School in Shelley her first three years after graduating from Utah State A. C. and still single.

Grandma taught Physical Education in Shelley. She and her students presented some music and dance festivals there. They also put on one play downtown which she said the town all seemed to enjoy, especially the students.

Grandma moved to Los Angeles after her three years of teaching experience in Shelley. She moved to Los Angeles at the request of her sister, Mary, who assured her there would be a lot of teaching opportunities in L. A. if Grandma went down there at the end of the school year. Mary, who was married to Ralph Burdette Jordan, was expecting a baby at the time. With Ralph's work Mary was alone a great deal. Grandma did land a job working as a teacher for Lincoln High School, one of the largest High Schools in the L. A. District. She lived with Mary and Ralph and taught there for two years. She enjoyed it very much. Every summer she took more classes at the local large schools.

As a teacher in Los Angeles, she taught Vocational Dressmaking. Her students were learning to do custom sewing. She taught the advanced students who were preparing to go into the stores and sew. It was their vocation. She had them make a couple of dresses for her mother. Grandma described the two dresses: "One dress was a dainty white Swiss with a small black dot in it. The other was a light blue linen with white crochet buttons." That year she also fixed up her mother's home in Logan as she was now a working woman and had the money to do that. She bought her mother a new rug for the dining room and a new washer. She fixed up her mother's clothes that she already had, adding the two new dresses made by her students.

Olena's Love Life

Grandma had several suitors before she finally accepted Grandpa Harris's several proposals. She was engaged to a man named Ed Jacobs, who lived in Rexburg, Idaho that she had met while she was teaching in Shelley. He contracted Spinal Sclerosis sometime after the engagement. It was a terminal disease. Grandma Harris always wore the ring he had given to her even though it became apparent that they were not going to be able to be married. Ed wanted Grandma to spend that first Christmas holiday after she had moved to L. A. with him in Rexburg. Just before Grandma was leaving to go to Rexburg, one of Grandma's cousins wanted her to meet a friend of his, Al Harris. He was an engineer who had **graduated from the University of Utah in Civil and Mining Engineering**, and who was then using his education in the mines of Sonora, Mexico but living in Los Angeles. Grandma's sister Mary, whom she was living with at the time, invited Al Harris to dinner the Thursday before Grandma was to leave for Rexburg to see Ed. The following day Grandma did leave to see Ed, knowing he was very sick. She wrote of that experience: "I was glad to see Ed. He looked bad. We spent two weeks together and it was hard to part. I knew he couldn't last long. I tried to make everyone as happy as I could. His father was dead. His mother did everything for him. She had taken him East to see if the doctors there could do anything for him. They couldn't.

I arrived back in Los Angeles New Year's Eve. Al Harris was at the station to meet me. I never expected to see him again. Rexburg was his hometown. He knew where I had been and why. He took me home and asked for another date. I told him that I didn't want to go out."

Grandma would work at the High School in Los Angeles during the weekdays, teaching, and then she would go to town to get something to eat and do her church calling which was on the Recreation Committee for M.I.A. that year. When she got back to her sister, Mary's home later on in the evening, she would often find Al Harris visiting with her sister Mary. Still not sold on Al Harris, Mary's husband, Ralph, who worked for a local newspaper in Los Angeles, lined her up with a Mr. Hargrave who worked

with him on the newspaper. She had a lot of fun dates with him. She said: "He was nice and took me to some fine things. He took me to the observatory on Mt. Wilson, and to Catalina on the glass bottomed boat." (He sounds so romantic!) Grandma continued writing about this experience: "He wasn't writing a story about them [these places]." (which meant that he was just enjoying being with her and these were real dates!) Grandma was not interested in Mr. Hargraves, however.

Ed Jacobs died the next spring just as school let out. I went back to his funeral and sure felt badly. I spent the rest of the summer with Mother." Grandma truly loved Ed.

Back in Los Angeles, Grandma kept on dating. Grandma finally consented to go out with Al Harris and by their third date he proposed to her. She refused him. After Ed, she didn't want to get married. Grandma wrote of that time: "After putting him off for a long time, I finally told him that he would have to go to Logan and ask my parents. He was mining in Sonora, Mexico and I thought it would be a long time before he got to Logan. After two weeks I got a call from Logan asking if he could call on the folks. I told him to go ahead. They consented." By Spring of that same year, Grandma had two other proposals. She decided to marry Al when he got back from Mexico. Grandma said of her decision to marry Alvin: "I did love and respect him. He had a good mind.I knew he would be a good father for our children. He was kind. He had a keen sense of humor. He was so unselfish and had no bad habits."



Alvin Edward Sandgren Harris

Married life

Alvin Edward Sandgren Harris and Olena Smith were married on the 21st of August, 1924 in the Salt Lake Temple. Olena and Al went back to living in Los Angeles after the wedding. Ralph Jordan, Mary's husband, needed an operation so they lived with Mary and Ralph for about a month and then they rented a house a couple of blocks away. Grandpa Harris traveled a great deal with work which left Grandma alone a lot. She missed him when he was gone but kept herself busy. By June of the next year after they married, my Dad, Alvin Edward Harris, Jr. was born in Los Angeles. That was June 19th, 1925.

Grandma went to Newport Beach with her grandparents Wright that summer with her new little baby, Alvin, Jr. Grandpa Harris was off on a construction job for a couple of months and Grandma did not want to be alone. Grandma wrote of that summer: "Al [senior] came down weekends and we played Rook with them. We always let them win. They were very good company. I made hot corn bread for them every morning and cooked all kinds of fish. Al and I enjoyed the time we spent with them.

I got them to go and see the Harold Lloyd shows on Saturdays. I enjoyed the way they both told me all about them when they came home." **Harold Clayton Lloyd Sr. was an American actor, comedian, and stunt performer who appeared in many silent comedy films [in the 1920's]. Lloyd is considered alongside Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton as one of the most influential film comedians of the silent film era. [Wikipedia](#)**

Al and Olena lived in Los Angeles until Grandma Harris found out she was pregnant with her second baby, Uncle Quinton. She wanted to stay with her mother who was back in Logan now, until Quinton was born on March 18, 1928. After his birth she and her two young boys moved a block away from her mother's home in Logan and sent for her things from Los Angeles. She did not want to raise her boys in Los Angeles. Grandpa was still gone a great deal to Mexico, so being alone so much was also a factor in her

decision to move. After Quinton was born Grandma had to have an operation which took her that spring and much of the summer before she was well again. Her mother helped with the kids. Al was still working in Mexico at the time.

Getting started in Genealogy

Now in Logan, Grandma, along with her mother, was on the Stake Genealogical Board in Logan. They were both life members of the church Genealogical Society in Salt Lake. "I wanted to get all I could from Mother while I was near her. She was the oldest grandchild and knew all her grandparents. She wrote their histories for me." Grandma writes in her history: "I did a great deal of genealogical work. When I went to Washington [state] (by this time Grandpa Harris was working up there and in Oregon and around Rexburg, Montana and Wyoming) I couldn't do temple work for the names I had, so I sent them to Uncle Warren Wright to do. He enjoyed it so much that he wanted more names when they were finished. I wrote to Brother David Gardner for more and he told me to organize my families. His letter came while I was with Aunt Drue, one of Orson's sisters. I called in other members of our Smith family and proceeded to organize the Smith and Gurney side. I used the outline found in the Genealogical Handbook for the constitution. Bartley Cardon accepted the Presidency of the organization. Then I met my mother's people at Aunt Evelyn's home, and we organized the Wrights with Uncle Fred Wright as President. The John-George Duggan Gibbs organization was presided over by Golden Gibbs of Pocatello. I never could have done it if I hadn't been in Logan. I proceeded to get the names and addresses of all the descendants of the pioneer ancestors and we held reunions every year. I acted as secretary of them all. I got out letters once a year to them. We hired David Gardner at first and then Frank Smith and John Andregg to be our researchers. We raised a lot of money. It was most satisfying to get to know all the members. I am sure we will meet again and work together.

When the Church adopted the Extraction Program I quit doing any more. I have made available all the histories and pictures and genealogy we had

gathered to each member, and some of the last work we got we had been searching for over forty years when Mother and I were working together. We accomplished a great deal. I made memory books for each of my grandchildren.” (I have mine on display with Grandma’s memorabilia so you can appreciate all the work she did during this time.)

The Move to Rexburg and Family Trips

Because Grandpa Harris was working in Rexburg, Washington State Oregon, Montana, and Wyoming by 1933, the family had moved to Rexburg, Idaho a few years prior. Grandpa was still traveling a lot but now the boys were a little older. Grandma and the boys were able to join Grandpa on some of his work projects in the summer months. Grandma describes many of those trips as wonderful family times. The boys even started helping their Dad do some surveying and various other jobs associated with his jobs as they both got older. In the fall Grandma and the boys would return to school in Rexburg.

Grandma had many church callings, as well as many other interests, during her lifetime. She also traveled to Europe with her sister Harriet after the two of them were widowed. Grandma was definitely a people person. She was always going to visit various relatives or they were visiting her. People loved her. She did not like being alone. When she moved to Salt Lake, she, as many of you who knew her, devoted much of her time between working at the Salt Lake Temple for 22 years, working on writing her own history (from which most of this presentation is from), painting beautiful oil paintings, sewing, quilting, and tatting hankies that she would sell at Mormon Handicraft.

She leaves behind a legacy of two sons, thirteen grandchildren and 26 great-grandchildren, whom she loved with all her heart. She was always a part of our lives. Grandma had a big heart. Like Ed Jacobs, she was loyal to those she loved whether they had problems or not. Jenny Foulger, one of her great-granddaughters who is here today, said of Grandma: “Even this long

after Grandma is gone, the grands and great-grands still have “Grandma Harris stories” to tell.

Susan remembers burying her first child – a stillborn son – in the baby quilt grandma had made for him. Sue told me that Grandma would not leave Sue’s side as Sue and Redge went through losing their first little sweetheart.

I would love to tell more of those great stories, but time is too short. I reluctantly cut them from this presentation or we would be here far too long. They are fun for us to remember. I have put some of them in a “Memory” section of her display for you to read if you would like to.

Summary and ending

Grandma died a month after her 97th birthday on the 20th day of March, 1994 of Pancreatic Cancer. Grandma was a wonderful woman. She was like so many of her ancestors and family. She enjoyed her life by keeping busy and accomplishing great things. Her work in family history is phenomenal. Because of her, as well as those, like Brent and Kim Smith, and many of you who keep our ancestors’ legacies going, I know many of my ancestors and so do my children and grandchildren.

Grandma was very healthy until just a few months before she died. When she couldn’t drive anymore, she would walk everywhere. She always ate healthy foods. She lived the “Word of Wisdom”.

Some day we will all meet again. She is already “home” with those she loved so much on this earth. She has left a wonderful legacy of hard work, life-long learning, and staying engaged in life for all of us to benefit from and emulate. Her mind was sharp to the end.

She was creative, inventive, intelligent, frugal - but still stylish and elegant. She was resourceful, kind and active in living. I always felt she could do anything. She was a wonderful grandmother to me, and I think my siblings, children and cousins would agree she was a wonderful grand/great-grandmother to all of us. She was a great lady!

I hope you all enjoy the small display of some of her work.