

# Maud May (Morgan) Bemiss - 1884-1975

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When considering sharing an ancestor's story, the usual inclination is to find someone who had an extraordinary or remarkable life or incident; or, someone who was found through a lengthy and difficult research path. My ancestor, Maud May (Morgan) Bemiss, has none of these; though I would consider her a remarkable woman for her diligence, tenacity, perseverance, and kindness. Like many of our ancestors, hers was a life she herself considered 'every day.'

Maud was born on September 16, 1884, in the small town of Blanchard, Iowa, which straddles the Iowa-Missouri border. She was the second of five children, the only daughter. Her Grandmother Topping, the daughter of Irish immigrants, also lived in Blanchard. Maud remembered her Irish brogue throughout her life.

In 1893, Grandmother Topping died. Maud's father, Charlie Morgan, and his mother, Mary Jane (Clark) Morgan, went to Gove County, Kansas, by wagon. There, they claimed adjacent homesteads southeast of Grinnell. They lived in a sod house on Mary's claim until Charlie's family joined them.

Maud's mother, Virginia Caroline (Topping) Morgan (who IS one whose life was unusual), gathered her children in 1894 and traveled by train to join her husband and mother-in-law. What an adventure that must have been for the children! They would have seen the terrain change from the lush environment of their home near the Nodaway River to the harsh, dry climate of western Kansas.

Once they arrived in Kansas, the family lived in a frame house on their father's homestead. Maud recalled many years later that "the roof needing new shingles badly, we often had to shake snow from our clothes before dressing and maybe leap over a small snow bank to make our entry below." This made me think of Little House on the Prairie!

Maud attended the country school near her home, one room, of course. She attended church in the same building. For entertainment, her community attended 'literaries,' which included debates, lectures, recitations, songs, and plays. They were held in schools throughout the area, and she remembered bundling up cozily in a sleigh to make the journeys.

Ultimately, in 1905, Maud married Freddie Bemiss. They settled at first in the nearby

town of Grinnell. They also rented a farm in the 'country,' which is where their nine children were born and mostly raised. They had five boys, first, then four girls. My grandma was their oldest daughter. At one point, they lived in the back of a local hotel.

My grandfather tried his hand at a variety of occupations, moving the family at least a few times in pursuit of one or the other. The family tradition is that he owned a pool room. The records call it a saloon! He also had a restaurant and a shoe shop. Though there is no record of Maud's involvement in these endeavors, she was there, and supportive. We know she raised chickens and sold eggs to help with the care of the family.

Maud also sewed. My great aunt Edna was one of two girls in Grinnell to have a felt skirt when they were all the rage, because Maud used the felt from one of the pool tables to make the skirt! The other girl was the banker's daughter. I'm sure my aunt felt pretty special.

In 1964, a couple years after the death of her husband, Maud dictated some of the family history to her daughter, Virginia. Her desire to share dates and stories about her own family, her husband's, as well as some of the ancestors, created a priceless heirloom of information that has inspired and entertained four generations of children and grandchildren. Her influence on her descendants is incalculable.

One of those influences, though it may seem insignificant, is that we had always been told that Grandma Bemiss had a rule that if you complained about the food at a meal, you would have to do the dishes. So, her children learned to tell her that the food was 'just the way I like it.' This is a still familiar phrase among her descendants!

Two of Maud's sons, Elmer and Bob, preceded her in death. After returning from Bob's funeral, just a few weeks before her own passing, she commented to the effect that it wasn't right to see your children buried. On March 11, 1975, she sat down in her chair at the end of the day, as was her custom. She drifted peacefully into the hereafter.

I met Grandma Bemiss when I was just 10 years old. Her countenance was kind and calm. A sense of peace enveloped her. This is how I remember her. Her life was not remarkable in the sense that she did anything out of the ordinary by the day's standard, but she left a legacy of 'making do' and finding joy that has an immeasurable feeling of extraordinary.

*This poem was written in tribute to Maud by her daughter, Luella, Joleen's grandma.*

*Mother Dear*

*Your hands may be wrinkled,  
And calloused and hard,  
As you smooth out the cares of the day,  
But your touch is tender and loving and kind,  
As I kneel by my bedside to pray.  
Your dress may be faded,  
And soiled a wee bit,  
And a hole's covered up with a patch  
of some other color, or some other kind;  
You don't seem to mind they don't even match.  
Your shoes are run over;  
The soles are worn thru,  
But your step falters not thru the day  
As you walk and you work for  
the ones that you love,  
And only "more work" is your pay.  
But your hair is so lovely,  
Your smile is so sweet,  
Your eyes beam with light  
that's divine;  
So I don't ever think of your  
hands, dress and shoes;  
I'm so proud, mother dear, you  
are mine!  
Mother*

