

PUGH FAMILY IN NEZPERCE, IDAHO 1899 - 1912's

As if told by Mary James Pugh (1872-1953)
(authored by Betty Wiese, granddaughter)

Writing in an ancestor's voice.

The Bainbridge Island Genealogical Society is looking for members' stories for our 2022 newsletters. An interesting choice is to write in an ancestor's voice, as Betty Wiese does here in her story originally presented in part in January 2020.



RAY (18 MONTHS) AND EDWIN (4 YEARS) PUGH AT PLEASANT VALLEY MONTANA HOMESTEAD (NOVEMBER 1911)

We are here at the Nezperce City cemetery on a sad occasion as two of my little boys (Tommy and Edwin) are buried here. I want to tell you more about them and our family's time here on the Nez Perce Prairie.

I am Mary James Pugh, born in Oak Hill, Ohio in 1872. In 1892 I married David D. Pugh, a Welshman from Llanbrynmair, Wales, whom I met while working as a maid in Columbus, Ohio. He was working as a coachman. Our eldest son Richard was born while we lived there.

By 1894, we had moved to Benton County, Iowa and rented a house in Garrison. My husband's brother John E. Pugh and his wife Lizzie were already living in Benton County. I believe they were drawn there in part because she had family there. John and Lizzie were married in 1888 by Stephen Johnson of the German Baptist Church, which is also known as the Church of the Brethren.

In June 1894 my second child, a boy, Maurice Thomas was born while we lived in Garrison. My husband was then working as a tile ditcher, an agricultural laborer. Two of our daughters were born while we there, Mary Elizabeth in 1896 and Ruth Jane in 1898. Our son Clarence Aulding was also born there in 1900.

We made a fateful decision in 1899 when we allowed our then 5-year old Tommy to move 1500 miles away with his uncle John and aunt Lizzie to homestead the newly opened Nez Perce Reservation in Idaho. John and Lizzie established residence in December 1899 at their property about 1 1/2



THE PUGH FAMILY ABOUT 1904

BACK ROW - L TO R: RICHARD, MARY, AUNT HANNAH (MARY'S SISTER)

FRONT ROW - L TO R: RUTH, BETH, CLARENCE, RUBY

Falls, Montana to apply for homesteads. We were all fortunate to take up our life in Montana in an area called Pleasant Valley (about 12 miles north of Fort Benton). Between 1910 and 1912 when I moved there permanently, my husband went back and forth to work on our house but to also harvest crops here in Nezperce. I was able to visit our new home which was still being built in November 1911 taking my two young sons (Edwin age 4 and Ray age 18 months). I am forever grateful that our friend and neighbor Willard Barrows (who was an excellent photographer) took a marvelous picture of my two little boys in front of our unfinished home in Montana. The little boys and I returned to Nezperce in December, planning to return in the spring of 1912.

Sadly, in May 1912 I lost another child in Idaho; my 4-year old son Edwin died after a 6-week battle with spinal meningitis. His funeral was also held at the Church of the Brethren with Rev. B.J. Fike conducting the service. I was stricken with grief.

Nonetheless, we had to move on with our lives in Montana, leaving two little boys buried here. On September 9, 1912 I arrived in Ft. Benton by train with my three youngest children - Ruby age 8, Margie age 6 and Ray age 2 1/2 to take up life on our Pleasant Valley homestead. By Thanksgiving, my husband and our daughter Ruth age 14 and son Clarence age 12 joined us in Montana. Our eldest son Richard did not move to Montana but stayed on in Idaho to work as an electrician. We had two more children while we lived on the miles SE of Nezperce townsite. On their ~ 160 acres, they had a house about 16' x 16', a kitchen 11' x 16', a barn 12' x 20', a granary 11' x 20'.

If you ask me why I let my little one come west, I don't know that I have a very good answer. I have thought about that fateful decision many times. John and Lizzie had no children of their own and by then my husband and I were getting by on a laborer's wages with three other children. So, I agreed to let Tommy go west with them; perhaps it might be a grand adventure for him, and he might be of help to his uncle and aunt.

Image our shock and grief when on April 8, 1902, we received a telegram from Idaho that our almost 8-year-old son Tommy had been tragically killed the day before in an accident involving a runaway horse. He had taken the horse to the well for water. As you may recall, in those days, newspapers often told very horrifying details about such incidents. I'm not sharing the details, but you can read about it the April 10, 1902 Nezperce Herald. Neighbor Henry Billow found him, but was too late save him. Just the month before, on March 15, 1902, John had appeared before the District Court of Idaho to request a leave of absence from the homestead due to illness. Perhaps Tommy was providing more help at that time.

My husband and I of course were unable to attend our son's funeral which was held at the Nezperce Church of the Brethren on April 9, 1902. The newspaper reported his funeral was largely attended with the sermon preached by the Reverend Johnson.

My husband and I along with our four remaining children (Richard, Beth, Ruth and Clarence) traveled from Iowa to Idaho within a few months of Tommy's death. I am fortunate that my sister-in-law Lizzie Pugh had an album of photos of their days on the homestead, including some wonderful ones of my little boy Tommy. I especially love the one "Tommy and his dog". I don't recall who provided the captions for some of the pictures, but it might have been one of my children, perhaps Richard who by then was about 10.

In July 1902 my husband made application for a homestead on the reservation but by mistake it was not land upon which one could make a living and so we relinquished that claim. While I bought a lot in town, we did not own other property. John and Lizzie had moved to Santa Ana, California between 1904-1905. In April 1910 they sold their place for \$8,000 to a prominent local business man and land owner, lacking one acre upon which a schoolhouse was located. We were given a lease to the land for the year 1910.

While we lived in Idaho, we added to our family with Ruby Anne in 1903, Margaret Alise in 1906 and Willard Edwin in 1908 (named after our dear friend Willard E. Barrows, whom we met while living in Nezperce). In May 1910 our son Ray was born as Halley's Comet streaked overhead.

In June 1904 I was so very lucky to survive being gored by an angry cow. As noted in the newspaper accounts, my son Richard and I had gotten between the cow and her calf. I had to protect him. While the Lewiston Evening Teller reported my demise in their article dated June 18, 1904, I clearly did not die though I was seriously hurt. Curiously, as the Nezperce Herald reported, the cow sickened and died about 2 days after the incident.

While I was nervous about the prospect, in February 1910 my husband Dave along with some other Nezperce men went to Great Montana homestead -- Fred James in 1914 and Charles Clyde in 1916. Unfortunately, Charlie died at age 7 from diphtheria.

My husband Dave and I left our homestead to move into the town of Ft. Benton in the early 1920's where we lived until his death in December 1937 and mine in September 1953. Of our 8 children who lived to adulthood, we have 31 grandchildren.

Thank you for letting me tell our story of being on the Nez Perce prairie.

Sources include:

Camas Prairie Chronicle,

Nezperce Herald,

Lewiston Evening Teller,

Vinton Semi-weekly (Iowa), and

The River Press (Ft. Benton) newspapers; Bureau of Land Management file for Homestead

certificate 4292 (Application #7386); Homestead Days by T. Eugene Barrows (1981 Brownstone Books, Chicago);

Nez Perce County Deed record Book 4E, page 451 April 21, 1910.