

The Stars in Your Family



A collection of stories of the favorite stars in our family trees
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Alice M. Fairhurst, President

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The Southern California Genealogical Society

Burbank, CA

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Edited by Kay Fairhurst Adkins

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Martha Hattie Gruening Nasch: Starving for Love

by Jodi Decker

Martha Hattie Gruening Nasch (b. 1890) was a woman literally starving for love. And she was my paternal grandmother.

The two photos included with this story depict “before” and “after” moments in her life. As a young bride of 23, she poses formally, determinedly, and somberly in her wedding day dress. She married my grandfather, Louis J. Nasch (b. 1884), age 29, on September 4, 1913, in St. Paul. Both were of German ancestry. Perhaps she could be described more as “handsome” than as an elegant beauty; however, her soulful eyes belied an enigmatic sadness which cloaked her demeanor. It is rare to find a photo of her smiling, formal or not. Often she appears stern, stricken. She was a tall, hardy farm girl, with a solid nose and thin lips. She met Louis at a dance.

Nine years later, she gave birth to her one and only son, Ralph L. Nasch (1921). Although she doted on her little boy, her mental health began to deteriorate. It was alleged that her husband had an affair. They fought bitterly in German, and there was verbal and physical abuse. Martha wrote heartbreakingly, “at home was never happy, we never could agree; I wished that something would occur — to set me once more free.” Martha underwent an unidentified surgery in 1927 at age 37 and just wasn’t herself, post-recovery.

Notably, Martha began to drop weight alarmingly. She told her doctor that she didn’t eat food any more. Louis verified her story, and she began to espouse some supernatural beliefs that she no longer needed to eat or drink. At times, she said the devil was out to get her. The doctor diagnosed it as a case of nerves and had her committed to

the St. Peter State Hospital in 1928, where she was to spend the next seven years of her life.

Young Ralph, just six years old, was only able to see his mother on Sundays after he and his father made the weekly bus ride down from St. Paul. She was described as detached and disinterested, even toward her young son. She spent her time writing poetry and corresponding with various strangers who shared her mystical afflictions. Ralph lost his mother during those formative years.

In the second photo, Martha is depicted as she was upon release from the mental institution. She appears lifeless, gaunt, and somewhat defiant. It is unclear if she was deemed "cured." She wrote hauntingly of her time there, "weak and helpless I was left, I never could get well; the devil came and destroyed my life, and changed the world to hell." She wrote of the physical abuse she endured by the hospital staff, including forced feedings.

Eventually her physical health was restored. She had the gumption to divorce Louis. Ralph, aged 17, remained with his father. Several years later Martha remarried, enjoying a healthier relationship. She regained weight. She began to smile, reservedly, in photos.

For a time Martha gained some local notoriety. She gave newspaper interviews and public talks, proclaiming she didn't eat for seven years. No explanation was provided for her outrageous claims, and it is pure speculation whether it was a true delusion or she was perpetrating a hoax on a gullible public. The answers remain illusory.

I'll never know all the answers that are hidden behind those eyes. I was a young child when she died. I choose to believe she was starved for love.





Sarah Jane Daglish: A Case of Mistaken Identity

by Janelle Molony

After hearing about a beautiful and talented piano teacher at a boarding school in Kalamazoo, Michigan, a male caller from Kentucky took one look at the woman and voted she was not good enough. But my g-g-g-grandmother was not who he thought. She was the *second*-born daughter of William Daglish, a Scottish tailor from New Castle Upon Tyne. The caller, Mr. Lovell Rousseau, wanted to meet the first. Fortunately, the rejection worked in her favor, and Miss Sarah Daglish (1815-1872) met her Prince Charming by mistaken identity.

Prior to immigrating to America, Sarah's father, William Daglish, ran a well-established tailoring business in England. The Daglishes were members of the "Landed Gentry" – an upper class, not by bloodline, but by land ownership and the comfortable inflow of rental income. Family legend says that both of William's daughters developed their musical talent under the tutelage of Ferdinand Reis, a protégé of Ludwig van Beethoven.

During the first Cholera epidemic, their mother, Mary, met her untimely death when the girls were still nine and twelve. Shortly after, the widower was enticed by tales of virtually free land in western America (likely a result of the Indian Removal Act of 1830). William hoped to get in on the deal.

After a six-week sail across the Atlantic, the teen sisters and their father landed in New York for a brief stay before relocating to

swampy, mosquito-riddled Saginaw in Michigan Territory. At eighteen and twenty-one, the young ladies found employment teaching music at a women's boarding school in Kalamazoo...but there was only one job opening. Undeterred, they took weekly turns at the keys and shared the paycheck.

While working in the Detroit area one summer, Mr. Rousseau and his cousin James, a medical student acting as an escort, arrived. As providence would have it, they came on Sarah's workweek. Considering both women looked quite similar, perhaps Lovell thought he had seen enough and never gave Mary another thought. But Sarah had left an unforgettable impression on his cousin.

After this chance meeting, James courted Sarah from a distance. Adhering to tradition, Mr. Daglish may have stalled their relationship until Mary was properly matched. When she agreed to wed a fabulously wealthy judge from Saginaw in 1838, two years later Sarah and James married and moved to the Rousseau's tobacco plantation in Kentucky.

Within five years Sarah was back on a boat. This time she rode a ferry along the Des Moines River to Territorial Iowa. Back then their three-hundred-plus acreage outside of Knoxville was simply named for the dense forest it was: Elm Grove. Here, Sarah continued to teach piano and raise a family in comfort, with luxuries only a doctor's wages could provide. Despite this, James could never produce a cure for her debilitating rheumatism.

In desperation, James chartered a wagon train to San Bernardino, California, guided by Nicholas Earp, father of the Wild West celebrity, Wyatt (who was also on the journey). Perhaps a warmer, drier climate was the solution. One month into the 1864 migration, the Victorian immigrant would read in the papers about the now decorated Brigadier General Lovell Rousseau, Vice-Presidential nominee running against Mr. Andrew Johnson. He lost the vote.

I wonder if this public rejection may have brought a delicate eyebrow raise or fleeting smirk to my g-g-g-grandmother's face, as she rode toward the Pacific sunset with her devoted husband, who was never second best to her. Paradoxically, if Sarah and Lovell had both been chosen by their hopefuls, they might have been the seventeenth President and First Lady of the United States of America.

The Stars in Your Family

What makes a person a star in their family? The stories told in these pages prove that it isn't always fame and fortune. Sometimes it's love, sometimes it's determination, and sometimes it's simply a matter of being the right person at the right time in a particular moment of history.



As you explore these pages you'll meet a woman responsible for the Golden Spike National Historic Park, a one-armed racecar driver, a Civil War soldier in Regiment 3 of the Colored Infantry, and a woman who allegedly didn't eat for seven years.

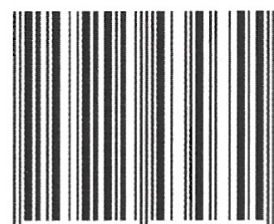
There are stories of simple folks and chance meetings written by loving family members, tales of inquiry sparked by a name or a photograph, plus a story that raises the complexities of a deadly family heirloom - is it a memorial to life or a haunting reminder of death? Immerse yourself in these stories as they take you through America's past and beyond.



Southern California Genealogical Society

The Southern California Genealogical Society is an all-volunteer group with a global reach that seeks to bring family history to life through webinars and online resources, plus a physical library. They host annual Jamboree and Genetic Genealogy conferences that consistently rank among the top genealogy conferences in the United States.

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