**Just in Time for Hart's Birthday, Let's Learn About His Siblings!**

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Richard and Ina Ito were not the only mystery cleared up this past summer. Thanks again to the tireless efforts of the Hart Museum’s Getty Multicultural Fellow Iona de la Torre, the museum also has a better picture of the Hart Family, and a stronger understanding of who was who in the chaotic mess of Bill Hart’s siblings.

According to Federal Censuses taken in 1870 and 1880, the oldest of the Hart children was Nettie. She appears to have been born in 1860 or 1861 in New York, making her between 4- and 5-years-old when her brother popped on the scene in 1864. This ties in perfectly with Hart’s somewhat ambiguous autobiography, which references “my elder sister” (p. 8) and “two foolish children” (p. 2) relatively early in his reminisces of life on the western frontier.

That also connects with the Census data, which lists Hart himself as the second child born to his parents, Nicholas and Roseanna—and oldest son.

Next up, born around 1869, was sister Frances. She was born in Illinois, according to the Census, and Hart mentions “stick[ing] pins in my new baby sister to hear her cry,” (p. 9) when the family was living in Aurora, Illinois. Hart recalls the family’s move to Aurora from Oswego, which is the town listed as the Hart Family’s place of residence in 1870 on the Federal Census. Since Frances is listed as a 1-year-old toddler on the 1870 Census… the baby sister Hart tortured with pins in Aurora was likely the circa 2-year-old Frances.

Fast forward again about two years to 1872, and another sister is born to the family. Her name is Mary Ellen. According to death records, Mary Ellen was born in Aurora, Illinois. And again, this times perfectly with Hart’s broad brush strokes in *My Life East and West* since he vaguely recalls the family’s move from Aurora to Rockford, Iowa, and then a move again to Trimbell, Wisconsin, in which, “[the move] was during the night, and we children were carried by men who wore long blue army overcoats… They made the entire journey to the depot… each with a child in his arms, while my father protected my mother and the youngest baby,” (p. 12).

Consider then: Nettie, Bill, and Frances were the three children carried by the “big stalwart men that had fought under Grant,” and Mary Ellen would have been the “youngest baby” carried by Roseanna.

Now, while in Trimbell, a baby boy was born to Nicholas and Roseanna, but as Hart himself says:

*The little baby brother that I had been standing on my head for, and tickling with a feather to see him laugh, was quiet and still. His little crib… was covered over with a blanket and an Indian woman sat beside it all night and smoked,* (p. 19).

Unfortunately, this was not the last child that Roseanna would lose.

Roseanna recovered, because it appears that while the family was still living in Trimbell, another baby boy was born. This baby appears to be Nicholas, Jr. Shortly after his birth in or around 1875, however, Roseanna became severely ill, and the family moved to Prescott, Wisconsin to get her under the care of a physician. When the ministrations of the Prescott doctor failed to bring any improvement to Roseanna’s health, Hart’s mother, sisters, and “the baby boy” went back to Newburgh. The intrepid Bill stayed with his dad.

When Roseanna and the children reunited with Nicholas and Bill, the latter were living in Minnesota. Hart mentions that his eldest sister (or as he calls her specifically, “the eldest girl”) had not returned to the frontier; she had stayed behind in New York with a grandmother to continue her schooling. But the other two sisters and the “little brother” had come back.

Where are we in the timeline? Well, Hart mentions the Battle of Little Bighorn occurring not long after the newly reunited family settled in Zumbro Falls, Minnesota. This, then, would be around 1876.

And it was from Zumbro Falls that Bill, his mother, and his siblings made the sad trip back to Newburgh when Roseanna again fell ill and required medical attention.

Nicholas joined them “some months after” the family’s return, and shortly thereafter, found himself incapacitated in a work accident.

And it was while Nicholas Sr., recovered from his catastrophic injury, that young Nicholas Jr., — listed as a few months shy of 3-years-old — passed away. He was buried in West Farms, New York.

*(Incidentally, Hart mentions in his autobiography, and this is corroborated by the death records we have on file, that he had young Nicholas Jr., re-interred in the family plot in Greenwood Cemetery in 1895 shortly after his father’s death)*.

Nicholas recovered enough from his injury to return to work, and he continued to pursue his dream of the flour mill, even though the family was firmly back on the East coast. He moved the Hart’s to New York City, and made several trips out west pursuing his dream. As we all know, however, he always came back heartbroken. While the family was in the Big Apple—the teenaged Bill working as a messenger boy and competing in his foot races—“another baby came… He was normal in every way, but the heroic measures used by the doctors in his delivery caused his death in a few hours,” (p. 86).

And then, the “baby girl to whom I was later to be father as well as brother,” (p. 92) was born. Her name was Lotta. And she was born in 1882.

Bill is mum on any further siblings, and the Census records we have accessed don’t mention Lotta (although she is mentioned in the death records), so it is probably safe to assume that Lotta was the youngest child born to the couple. An interesting note, however, is Hart’s recollection of his father’s death in 1895, and the knowledge that Nicholas would soon “see [Lotta’s] little brothers and sisters [in heaven],” (p. 124). Although, we can glean that Nicholas and Roseanna lost three baby boys in infancy and childhood, there is no mention or record of a lost baby girl…

Taking all of this into consideration, we can glean the following about the birth order of the Hart children:

Nettie

- Born in 1860 or 1861

Bill

- Born in 1864

Frances

- Born in 1869

Mary Ellen

- Born in 1872

Unnamed Baby Brother

- Born around 1873—1874

Nicholas Jr.,

- Born in 1875

Unnamed Baby Brother

- Born around 1880

Lotta

- Born in 1882

What happened to the surviving siblings? We know that Lotta passed away young from typhoid fever (and according to her death record, it was in 1901 when she was 19-years-old). But Nettie? And Frances?

Again, Bill’s autobiography is not much help on the details. He mentions that “one of my sisters had secured employment in a dressmaking establishment; another had finished a course of instruction at Cooper Institute, where she learned telegraph operating, and had gone to work at the main office of a railroad company,” (p. 98). Considering there is no indication Mary Ellen ever worked in either of these capacities, chances are Hart is referring to Nettie and Frances.

Hart also mentions—in almost the same breath—that one of his sisters got married and his mother was soon scrambling to cover for the loss of income from that sister’s employment (p. 99).

Whether it is the same sister’s husband Hart mentions a few pages later — when the family moved west to Washington state so Nicholas could have one last shot at his flour mill (Bill was well into his stage career and working in Chicago at the time) and stayed with the young couple for a short time — is conjecture, (p. 107). What is known is by the time of Nicholas’ death in 1895, the only two girls living “at home” were Mary Ellen and Lotta. It is assumed then that both older girls were married.

And they were married; that is for sure. Nettie married Charles Rudd and the two lived at times in New York and New Jersey. If the couple ever had children, they were not reported on the Census forms in 1905, 1920, or 1930. Nettie passed away in 1935 at the age of 74.

Frances married Albert Bierck and had two daughters. Their names were Tulip and Mary Ellen… guess who the one was named for??

And interestingly enough, Bill and Mary Ellen (as in the namesake) seem to have been closer to Frances than Nettie. We have pictures of Mary Ellen with another woman and two young girls. We have pictures signed “To Mary Ellen, with love, Frankie [Frances’ nickname].” And letters from Bill stating that “Mrs. Bierck” helped her siblings move into their new mansion in 1927. And confirmation from Tulip’s son that his mom and aunt spent time with the Harts in California.

We don’t have much more information on Frances beyond that. She died in 1957 in Westport, Connecticut from cancer, and she is buried in Lyndhurst, New Jersey. She was 88 when she passed. The last of the Bill Hart generation to go.

So, we may never know the full story of Hart’s siblings. We may never find a true counting of all the children born to Nicholas and Roseanna Hart. But each new piece of evidence does bring the picture into sharper focus. And that is what counts.