

*Keeping Freedom's Time  
for 150 Years*



*Marsha Henry Goff*

The clock on the mantle in my home southeast of Lawrence marks time for me as it did for my great-great-grandmother in the rude log shelter she and her husband built on the prairie near Turkey Creek in Nemaha County, Kansas. The clock's journey to me began in 1850 when John Sly, a New York farmer and abolitionist, married Mary Hammond, a school teacher four years his senior, who was already deemed an old maid.



The couple farmed in Erie County, New York, for five years, then transported their family and possessions, including the clock, down the Ohio River via flatboat for part of the journey to their new home in northeastern Iowa. In the spring of 1857, they packed all their belongings and their young children, Cornelia and Philo, into an ox-drawn covered wagon and headed west to Kansas Territory where they sought land and breathing space.

Mary Sly wrote her sister in New York that she was "on the road to Boston," a polite euphemism for pregnancy, when they began their trek to Kansas. Their third daughter, Elizabeth, was born shortly after they arrived in Kansas, delivered by two childless women while Mary was in the throes of an ague attack.

A later letter expressed her heartbreak when Cornelia, "six years nearly," died on September 17, 1857. It was a blow from which she never recovered, as evidenced by a long, heart-rending poem entitled "Cornelia" which she wrote on her first-born daughter's 25th birthday "had she lived."

However, life moved on after Cornelia's death. Mary

had work to do, other children to tend. Politically astute, John and Mary also worried that war was in their future. Their worry was well-founded. Without formal declaration, the American Civil War began well before 1861. According to the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, Kansas residents would determine by popular vote whether it would enter the union as a free or slave state.

However, in late 1857, pro-slavers, repudiating the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Missouri Compromise of 1820, submitted the Lecompton Constitution to the state legislature recommending that Kansas be admitted as a slave state. Most Kansans disagreed and the Lecompton Constitution was soundly defeated on January 4, 1858.

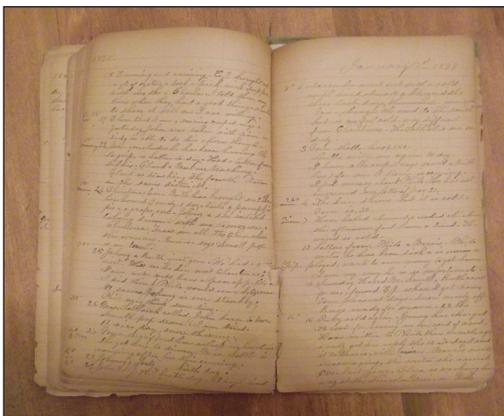
In response, Southern extremists in Congress, backed by President Buchanan, passed the English bill which stated that if Kansas was voted a free territory, Kansas homesteaders would lose four million acres of public land grants and would have to purchase their land. Understandably, Kansas residents were upset, none more so than Mary who wrote to her sister:

*Everything seems to go off right since the rejection of the Lecompton Constitution, except for the fiendish revenge manifested by Buchanan's late proclamation to sell all surveyed lands in the territory. The people are forming mob laws for their protection — in some places, not here. James Buchanan, unless he repents, will die an unenviable death, unwept, unmourned, and perhaps unhung.*

Mary's 11-year-old clock was ticking when Kansas became a free state on January 29, 1861. By December of that year, the Civil War on the frontier was raging. Kansas pioneers were caught between the anti-slavery Jayhawkers and the pro-slavery forces. The two groups used the same tactics of terror and, even though she was a staunch abolitionist, Mary had a low opinion of both. She wrote that, "The Jayhawkers are all around and we are expecting trouble from them as we have been threatened."

Mary was in her early-40s when the Civil War ended. She continued to faithfully record her feelings in journals, only one of which survived and is in my possession. She wrote of her support of presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, who supported the free coinage of silver, and her disdain for William McKinley and other "goldbugs." On the day of President McKinley's inauguration, Mary's disappointment in the election result was evident: "It is a dull, gloomy day in keeping with the times."

In her surviving journal, Mary wrote about a friend's mastectomy, a trial where a wife in the nearby town of



Mary Hammond Sly's Journal

Goff was accused of murdering her husband, the Spanish American War and her strong support of the Women's Suffrage movement. Mary's involvement in that movement occasionally caused

friction with those who were less enthusiastic about women voting. On October

31, 1894, she wrote in her journal that a church member came to her door “soliciting a chicken pie toward feeding the people election day, November 6th.”

Before the election, however, a conflict developed with the preacher of her church, causing her to pen this journal entry: “If our preacher is too conscientious to vote for Woman Suffrage, the church may furnish its own chicken pie.”

Mary’s 57-year-old clock was still ticking when she died on July 14, 1907, at the age of 85. The clock became the property of my Great-grandmother Ruth Angelica



Sly Moriarty. Ruth was her mother’s daughter in every way: strong, artistic, intelligent and politically aware. Ruth became an artist of local renown and briefly manufactured Le Bon, a face cream which — according to a large blue and white advertising poster — “Transforms, as by Magic, the Ugliest Complexion to a Beautiful One.”

When Ruth died in 1935, the 85-year-old clock became the property of her namesake, my grandmother Ruth Margaret Moriarty Henry. Grandma inherited her mother’s and grandmother’s attributes plus one more: a gift for healing. At 16, she left Seneca to train at a hospital in Horton, Kansas. She became a nurse who traveled to the homes of her patients, staying with them as long as they needed her skilled and loving care. Her courtship with Archibald Marshall Henry, known as

Marsh, was conducted through the mail on postcards, his postmarked Sabetha, hers sent from the various towns where she nursed patients. Those treasured postcards, including one which has an Indian head penny glued to the front, are mine now.

When they married in 1912, Ruth and Marsh settled in Sabetha. Their only son, my father L. Lew Henry, was born in 1917. Together, Ruth and Marsh built a business, a large scrap metal yard which helped Sabetha through the Depression and World War II. In spite of her business and household duties, Grandma Ruth found time to volunteer in her church and community, to serve as precinct committeewoman and work on election boards. She took her right to vote very seriously and never missed an election.



As a young teen, I took a bus to visit Grandma and Grandpa and changed buses in Hiawatha where I struck up a conversation with a pharmacist who owned the drug store where I waited. When I gave him the name of my grandparents in answer to his question, he told me he had once lived in Sabetha and that Grandma had nursed his entire family suffering from typhoid during an epidemic. "No one else would come near us," he said, "but she came every day. We wouldn't have made it without her."

When my father marched off to war in 1942, the clock was 92. It marked the time as he joined Darby's Rangers in Africa, invaded Sicily and Italy and was badly wounded on Anzio beachhead



where he had written his parents on April 9, 1944:

War cannot be described, only those who have experienced combat, can have any conception of the term; many soldiers who are overseas, many of whom are in jobs in such cities as Algiers, Oran, Naples, or others, do not know what it is; they are only in jobs that have taken them away from home and entail none of conflict's unpleasantness. To the combat soldier who lives in holes like animals, whose existence is characterized only by the barest minimum of the necessities of life, and who has for almost a year and a half suffered day after day from heat or cold, in desert or in icy, muddy mountains, going without sleep, or bathing, or changing clothes for days, weeks and months, life has been crystallized into the expression of one desire - to return home!

The clock ticked on when he joined the 83rd Chemical Mortar Battalion after the Rangers were disbanded following their decimation at Cisterna. It was ticking on a shelf in my grandparent's dining room when a telegram from the War Department, addressed to my mother, was delivered to their door. Mother, who lived across town, was speaking with Grandma on the telephone when the messenger rang the doorbell. He refused to allow Grandma to open the telegram and set off on foot to Mother's apartment, causing

an agonizing 30-minute wait for both women.

Once opened, the telegram reported that the Secretary of War regretted to inform Mother that her husband had been seriously wounded in action, but gave no details. She and Grandma knew that he was alive when the telegram was sent, but did not know if he had succumbed to his injury, lost a limb, his sight or any of the other tragic events they imagined. They were greatly relieved when a post-injury letter, in my father's handwriting, arrived three weeks later.

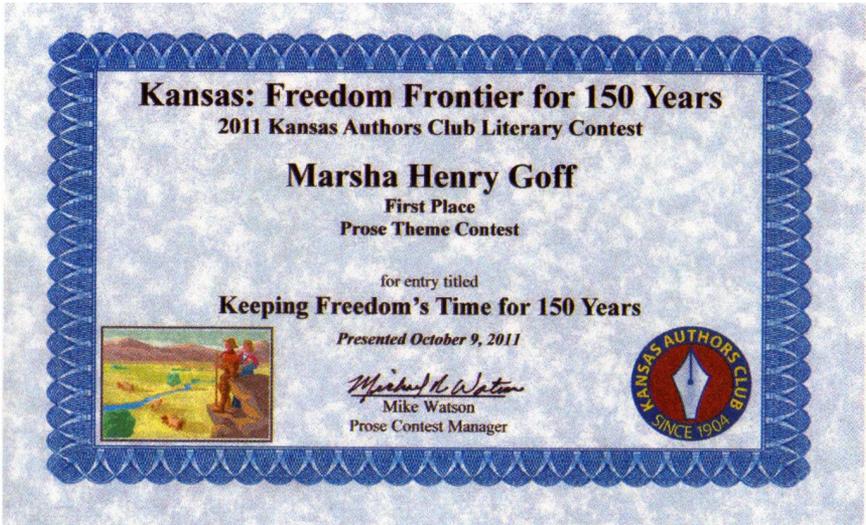


June and Lew Henry

The clock kept the time as Dad returned home at the conclusion of the war, continued his interrupted college education, served Lawrence as councilman and commissioner and Kansas as state representative. It ticked on after Grandpa Marsh died in 1956, but, at some point later, the clock stopped and was relegated to the attic over my grandparents' freestanding garage.

It wasn't ticking when my father died in 1973, while the entire family, including his 83-year-old mother, kept vigil at the hospital. A few years later, Grandma Ruth gave the clock to me. I had it cleaned and it has been keeping time for me ever since.

Mary Hammond Sly's clock is now 161 years old. Seeing and hearing it mark the time is a reminder of the people before me who played a part in the 150 years of freedom that Kansans enjoy today.



I am not a member of Kansas Authors Club, but my sister Vicki is and encouraged me to enter the contest. When I saw the theme was Kansas: Freedom Frontier for 150 Years, I could not resist. I am blessed that my forebears valued history and saved tangible items: journals, letters, newspapers. photographs, advertising posters and, happily, Mary Hammond Sly's clock. This award is theirs as much as mine (but it is I who cashed the check).

*Marsha Henry Goff*

©2011  
Marsha Henry Goff  
**MHG Ink Communications**  
Willow Run Publishing