

Three Little Girls - Lives Cut Short *Daughters of Thomas and Sarah McNelley of Chicago, Illinois*

On a trip to Chicago in 2006, my husband and I decided to visit Rosehill Cemetery, where his great-grandparents Thomas Lawrence and Sarah Amelia (Lamb) McNelley are buried. We didn't find their gravestones. Instead we found markers for the graves of two little girls, identified as their daughters. This came as quite a surprise. Until that moment, my husband did not know of their existence. His Great-Aunt Lou McNelley had kept in touch with him over the years. She spoke of many things, but never about these little girls who were her sisters. We stopped at the office before leaving the cemetery and learned that the parents are indeed buried there; however, no one had purchased a grave marker for them. Just for the girls.

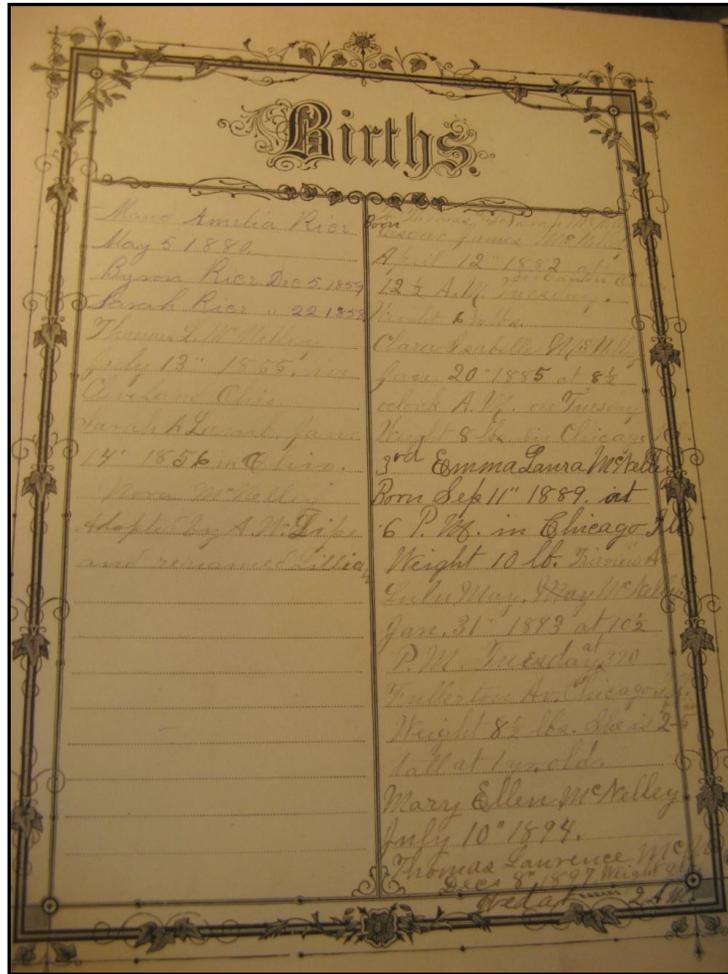


Gravestones found at Rosehill Cemetery in Chicago, IL for two of the children of Thomas and Sarah McNelley (Photo by SAM, 2006)



The McNelley Family Bible: The front cover says "Mary McNelly." Entries for births, marriages, and deaths in the handwriting of Sarah (Lamb) McNelley. Did the bible originally belong to Thomas' mother, Mary Sarah McNelley?

We learned more about them a few years later when we met for the first time a second cousin, Sharon McNelley Angelo. Sharon graciously shared with us the McNelley Family Bible, which had been passed down to her from her great-grandmother, Sarah Amelia. There was another surprise: a third daughter who had died as a small child. These little girls did not show up in census records because they were born and died in the years between the US Census records of 1880 and 1900. Oscar (18), Lulu (7), and Thomas (2), the couple's other children, show up in the U.S. census of 1900 for Chicago, along with their parents. This census also records the number of children born to the mother and the number still living. It is noted that Sarah had given birth to six children, of whom three were still living. That might have been a clue; however, many children were born prematurely and/or died at birth. So this notation, in itself, didn't raise too many questions.



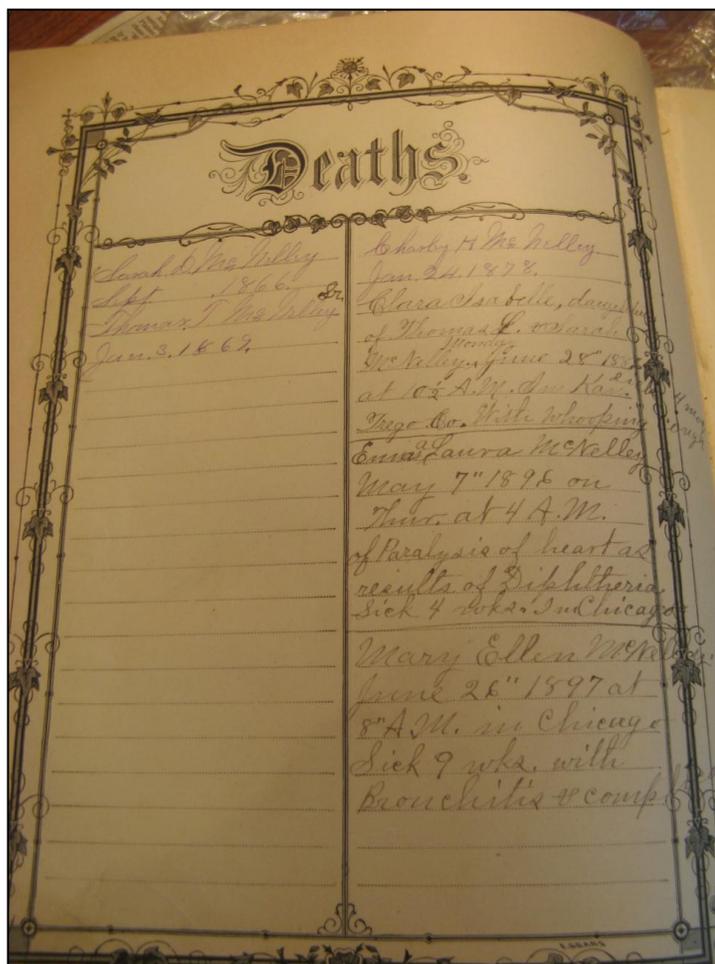
It wasn't violence. It wasn't an accident. These little girls lost their lives from childhood diseases. This was in the late nineteenth century, before antibiotics, before vaccines, and before effective treatment.

From the family birth record in the bible, in Sarah's own writing, we learned that:

"Clara Isabelle McNelley, [was born on] Jan 20, 1885 at 8 ½ o'clock [8:30] A.M. on Tuesday. Weighed 8 lbs. in Chicago."

"3rd [Child] Emma Laura McNelley, [was born on] Sept 11, 1889 at 6 PM in Chicago. Weight 10 lb."

"Mary Ellen McNelley, [was born on] July 10, 1894"



From the family death record in the bible, again in Sarah's writing, we have the following:

"Clara Isabelle, daughter of Thomas L. and Sarah McNelley, died on Monday, June 28, 1886, at 10:30 AM in Kansas, Trego Co. [where Sarah's sister lived] with whooping cough." (In the margin is written "4 mon." Could it be that she was sick for four months?)

"Emma Laura McNelley [died] on May 7, 1896 on Thur. at 4 A.M. of paralysis of heart as result of diphtheria. Sick 4 wks. in Chicago."

"Mary Ellen McNelley [died] June 26, 1897 at 8 A.M. in Chicago. Sick 9 wks with Bronchitis w. comp [complications]." (Thomas L. the youngest child of Thomas and Sarah, was born less than six months after the death of his sister.)

Clara died when she was eighteen months old. Emma died at the age of six. Mary died a month before she turned three. Thomas and Sarah had lost three of their six children. Infant and child mortality was high in the late nineteenth century. This fact didn't make it easier to bear. Certainly Thomas and Sarah must have grieved deeply over the deaths of their daughters. After some period of time, mention of the girls ceased. Some family stories are not discussed. Heartaches are kept inside – a private matter, too painful to discuss.

Susan McNelley/ www.tracingsbysam/ Feb 2014 R