

Sarah Ellen (Paulsel) Howver (1842-1936): Matriarch of a Family with the Wanderlust Gene

© Susan McNelley



Portrait of Sarah E. (Paulsel) Howver in her later years (undated)

Sarah Ellen Paulsel was born in Singers Glen, VA in the mid-nineteenth century, as were her future husband George Howver and three of their six children. The birthplace of the Howvers, is a small town near Harrisonburg in Rockingham County. Originally called Mountain Valley, Singers Glen was founded by George Howver's illustrious Mennonite grandfather, Joseph Funk. Maybe hamlet is a better word for this rather remote community, located just a few miles from the West Virginia border. It is in the shadow of the Shenandoah Mountains, which are a part of the Appalachian Mountain chain.

Some families stay put; others have the itch to travel. This family was in the latter category. From Virginia, the family moved to Illinois. As the children became adults, they spread out across the country and beyond. Russia, China, Europe, Mexico, and Western Canada were all places where one or another of the Howver children established themselves, if only for a short time, in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

To begin at the beginning, Sarah was born on September 27, 1842 in Singers Glen, Rockingham County, VA to David Paulsel and Elizabeth A. Tarflinger. Her father died when

Sarah was five and her maternal grandfather, Henry Tarflinger served as her guardian. George Howver was born on August 13, 1845 in Singers Glen to John Howver (Houver) and Barbara Funk. George also lost a parent at an early age. His mother died when he was five. George, who had served as a Confederate soldier in the Civil War, married Sarah on November 26, 1866, a year after the end of the war. He was 21 and she was 24. According to family lore, Sarah intended to marry another man, but he was killed in the war. The Howvers had three children (Laura, James, and Lula) in Singers Glen before moving to Mansfield, Illinois sometime between 1871 and 1874. There George found work as a carpenter building houses. The youngest three children (Marshall, Nell, and Hal) were born in Mansfield, Illinois.

Apparently George Howver was unhappy in his marriage or perhaps just homesick for Virginia. He left his wife and children in Mansfield, IL sometime in the late 1880s and returned to Virginia. Sarah, along with her son Hal and daughter Ella Lillian (Nell), moved to Gibson City, to be close to Sarah's oldest daughter Laura Ellen and her husband, a dentist in that town. After her daughter Laura died in 1928, her son Marshall returned and drove his mother to Okanogan Center, British Columbia, where her youngest daughter Nell then lived. George continued to work as a carpenter after returning to Virginia. He died in Newport News, VA on January 1, 1916, at the age of 70 and was buried



Sarah E. Howver with her great-granddaughter Laura Ann Middleton, c 1921.

in Singers Glen, VA.

Most of Sarah and George's children had the wanderlust. Laura Ellen traveled extensively in the United States. In 1907, she took her two daughters to Germany for a year abroad. In 1923, Laura Ellen and her husband went to China for the better part of a year. Laura had convinced Doc Hoover to substitute for a dentist on sabbatical from the Presbyterian Mission Hospital in Nanking, China.

Also in 1907, Nell got bored with Gibson City and went to Torreon, Mexico to work as a piano teacher. It was there that she met her future husband, an Englishman named Percy Walter Pixton. After their marriage circa 1908, the couple moved to British Columbia, Canada where they established an apple farm.

Marshall, James, and Hal, the sons of George and Sarah, never married. Laura's husband, William A. Hoover, paid for a dental education for Marshall and Hal. Hal stayed in Illinois, working as a dentist, although he never made a successful career of it. Marshall traveled all around the country. In 1914, he went to England and then Russia where he got caught in the Russian Revolution and was unable to return home until some four years later. He practiced dentistry in Iowa, Massachusetts, Illinois, Arizona, and Washington, working with the Veterans Administration in his later years. By 1901, James was living in the Yukon Territory in Western Canada, working as a miner. He had caught the gold fever. Later he moved to Alaska where he established a land claim. He died in 1927 in a hospital in Seattle, Washington. No one in the family knew where his land was located. It was later sold by a court-appointed executor, because no family members had shown up.

Sarah died on February 23, 1936 in Okanogan Center, British Columbia at the age of 93. She had outlived five of her six children. Her daughter Lula died before she was thirty. Laura died at the age of sixty. Sarah's sons all died in their forties and fifties. Only Nell survived her mother and she, too, lived to be 93.



A family gathering in Gibson City, IL following the wedding of Nell Howver and Percy Walter Pixton, c 1908. Shown in photo from L to R: Presumably Walter's parents, Andrew Pixton and Annie Maunders; Sarah E. Howver, Walter, Nell, Laura, Laura's daughter Sibyl, her niece Josephine Dixon (young girl in front, later adopted by Laura and Doc Hoover), Doc Hoover.

The Six Children of George and Sarah (Paulsel) Howver

Laura Ellen Howver

Birth: August 28, 1867 in Singers Glen, VA
Marriage: August 29, 1988 in Mansfield, Piatt County, IL to William A. (Doc) Hoover
Death: March 26, 1928 in Gibson City, Ford Co. IL at the age of 60.

James Paulsel Howver

Birth: February 5, 1869 in Singers Glen, VA
Death: April 13, 1927 in Seattle, WA at the age of 58.

Lula Josephine Howver

Birth: April 20, 1871 in Singers Glen, VA
Marriage: October 31, 1894 in Mansfield, Piatt County, IL to Charles A. Dixon
Death: Before 1900; location unknown. She was in her late 20s when she died. The only thing that is known about Lula is that she had two young children when she died. A son stayed with his father. Her daughter Josephine went to live with Lula's sister Laura and her husband, William (Doc) Hoover. She was eventually adopted by them.

Marshall Luther Howver (He also used the surname Hoover)

Birth: August 10, 1874 in Mansfield, IL
Death: April 14, 1931 in Spokane, Spokane Co. WA at the age of 56.

Ella Lillian (Nell) Howver

Birth: November 3, 1876 in Mansfield, IL
Marriage: 1907 in Gibson City, IL to Walter Pixton
Death: October 19, 1969 in Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada at the age of 93.

Harry Lee (Hal) Howver

Birth: September 9, 1879 in Mansfield, IL
Death: September 30, 1928 in Hamburg Village, Calhoun, IL at the age of 49.

Sources of information include:

Guardianship Records for Sarah E. Paulsel, located in the Rockingham County Courthouse, VA
George and Sarah's marriage record is listed in the index of "Virginia, Marriages, 1785-1940, available at FamilySearch and downloaded on January 11, 2012. The record was difficult to find because the names of the couple are listed as Geo. Houver and Sallie E. Panlsel. Other information extracted from the marriage record is correct. George's parents are listed as John and Barbara. Sarah's parents are given as David and Elizabeth.)

US Census of 1880 for Mansfield, Piatt, IL

US Census of 1900 for Gibson City, IL. This record lists "Mrs. S. E. Howver as head of household, married for 33 years . Also in the home are Ella L., born in November, 1876, a music teacher, and Harry L. born in Sept, 1879, a student. (This record was downloaded from Ancestry.com; the name in the index was listed as Mrs. S. E. Stowver.) By this time, George had moved to Newport News, VA.

Passport applications for Laura Ellen Hoover and Marshall Howver (He went by the name of Hoover on some of his passport applications.)

WWI Draft Registration for James Howver

Death records in Illinois, Washington, British Columbia.

Family letters in the possession of Susan McNelley, great-great granddaughter of the Howvers.