

The Dennis Family History Part 2 – The O’Banyoun Jubilee Singers

Next up is John’s sister Mary Eliza, the next child of Peter and Margaret Dennis. Mary Eliza, who is also referred to as Sadie, married James Johnson Sr. James married twice. His first wife was Elizabeth Chapman and they had three daughters: Emma Amanda (July 17, 1854), Martha (1858), and Delia Charlotte (1862). Emma Amanda married William Kersey, but no information was available for Martha. Delia Charlotte married William Albert Mulder on August 27, 1884 in Colchester. William was a farmer and born in roughly 1862 to Joseph and Aliceana Mulder. William and Delia had at least two children: Earnest Mulder and Glenna May Mulder. Earnest was born in roughly 1885 and married Ethel May Clingman on December 22, 1912 in Colchester South. Ethel was born in 1896 and was the daughter of a carpenter, William Clingman, and Mateldia [Matilda] Ridout.

Delia and William’s second child, Glenna May Mulder was born on December 23, 1901 in Colchester South and in 1919, married into the Walls family. During her bridal shower, Glenna was given many “beautiful and useful presents,” while guests enjoyed an evening of music and games. According to the *Amherstburg Echo*, “A pleasing program was rendered and among those who call for special mention are Bernard Day, Mr. and Mrs. Jos. Walls, Mrs. Bertha Kersey, who rendered appropriate solos and were heartily encored. William Kersey, Sr., gave a very inspiring and instructive address to the young couple.” Guests must have had a great time considering it was in the “wee hours of the morning before they bid goodbye to the happy bride and happier groom.”

Sadly, James Sr.’s first wife (and mother of Emma, Martha and Delia), Elizabeth, passed away in 1863. It was then that James married Mary Eliza Dennis who was born on April 13, 1842. James and Mary had nine children: Minnie/Emma (1864), Cassandra (1865), James Peter

(1867), Georgia (1869 twin), Mary (1869 twin), Louise Jane (1871), Bertha Modesta (1876), Francis Ardella (1878-July 12, 1890), and Harland Ernest (1881). There is no information available on Minnie, but Cassandra is more well-known. Cassandra Elizabeth, also sometimes listed as Cassaner, was born in Colchester on January 11, 1865. She married the Reverend Josephus O'Banyoun of the A.M.E. Church on November 30, 1884 and was described as a loving and faithful wife. Josephus was born in 1839 on a farm near Brantford and was the son of Simon Peter and Sophie O'Banyoun. In Cassandra's obituary it states that "She was always a dutiful, and affectionate daughter, and a loving sister; and by her even temper, and pleasant ways, has won the love and esteem of all who knew her." Part of their marriage was spent in Amherstburg, but they later moved to the 4th concession in Colchester South.

Cassandra and the Reverend O'Banyoun were also part of the O'Banyoun Jubilee Singers. The O'Banyoun Jubilee Singers gained success with the guidance of the Reverend Josephus O'Banyoun, who formed this singing group in the 1860s in the Amherstburg and Colchester South area, although some sources say Halifax, Nova Scotia. This group became popular during the period of 1884-1900. Members included Josephus O'Banyoun, Cassandra Elizabeth, Josephus and Cassandra's daughter Rachel, Miss Sarah Hughes, Miss C. Smith, Mr. J.A. Johnson and Mr. William Brantford. The *Amherstburg Echo* also described one of their performances on November 25, 1892, reporting that "The O'Banyoun Jubilee Singers were greeted by an audience of about 200 persons at the [Amherstburg] Town Hall, on Wednesday evening, when they appeared under the auspices of the Young Ladies' Social Club, of the A.M.E. Church. The troupe under the personal direction of Rev. J. O'Banyoun, are travelling in aid of African missions. A number of jubilee songs were given by the company, which were well rendered and greatly pleased the audience; Miss Maud Young 16, years of age, sang several

solos and was heartily encored; John Hopkins, who has a splendid baritone voice, acquitted himself well in a few solos, and Miss Alice Downie sang ‘The Old Folks at Home’ in good style. Taken altogether, the concert was well given and duly appreciated by the audience.”

Following Cassandra, the next Johnson child, James Peter, was born in 1867 and married Alzora Graham who was born in roughly 1873 and was the daughter of (William) Henry Graham, a farmer, and Ruthia/Ruth Green. (William) Henry was born in Kentucky to Henri and Amanda Graham, while Ruth was born in Colchester to Joseph and Eliza Green. (William) Henry and Ruth married in Colchester. According to the 1891 Census for Colchester, in addition to Alzora, Henry and Ruth had at least three sons and another daughter: Henry, Thomas, Alvin and Francis. Each are listed as being born in Ontario, with the exception of Alzora’s father, Henry, who was born in the US.

Alzora and James Peter had three children: Marcellus Harold (b. March 11, 1906-2006), Viola Beatrice (b. November 27, 1907) and Fred (1915-April 19, 2018). Sadly, Fred was born the same year that his grandfather passed away at the age of 90. Fred’s grandfather, James Sr., was described as someone who always met “his friends with that quiet smile that meant so much for behind that smile was that glowing vital spiritual influence called Christianity. It dominated his whole life and it was this vital glowing thing that gave him such a grip on the hearts and minds and souls of the people he met.” James Johnson Sr. was also described as having a keen sense of humour “that enabled him to meet trials and the uneven places of life with calm confidence.” Although James Johnson Sr. passed away the year Fred was born, as those close to Fred knew, his grandfather lived on in the amazing stories that Fred told. Fred was a farmer on the family farm and, at the age of 72, Fred married Ivy Belle Brown (Burnette), in 1972. Fred often reflected on the “good old days” including an article in the *Amherstburg Echo* called

“Recollections of an earlier time in Colchester South.” In this article, Fred recalled “If someone was short of money to pay the mortgage, other men would come over and hold a ‘chopping bee’, chopping enough wood to sell to cover the money needed. Lunch would be brought out to the bush, and if there weren’t enough plates to go around, large wood chips, would be used for plates. After supper, dances would be held ‘after the church people went home.’”

Fred’s older brother Marcellus married Giovanna Brooks, the daughter of Earl Chester Brooks and Amanda Leona Anderson Brooks. Marcellus operated a farm, but also Johnson Auto Wreckers in Harrow which was in business until the 1990s. Marcellus’ sister Viola “Wren” helped manage the Johnson family farm and loved to play the piano at the Central Grove African Methodist Episcopal Church in Colchester South. She was also the treasurer of an organization named after her aunt, the Hattie Johnson Missionary Society.

James Sr. and Mary had several more children including Georgia and Mary, who were twins born on March 9, 1869. Sadly, Georgia passed away at the age of 13, in 1882, while Mary married Thomas Brydges. Their younger sister, Louise Jane, was born on January 14, 1871, while Bertha Modesta was born on August 6, 1876 in Colchester. The *Amherstburg Echo* also records some of Bertha’s organizational activities with Amherstburg-based youth groups such as the Buisy Gleanors [sic] which met every Friday and the Frederic [sic] Douglass Self Improvement Club which met every Tuesday. During a masquerade concert hosted by the Buisy Gleanors, which was an organization from the First Baptist Church, Bertha Johnson is listed as giving two solos.

The next child of James Sr. and Mary Eliza is Francis Ardella Johnson who was born in 1878, but sadly passed away on July 27, 1890 at the age of 12 due to consumption followed by dropsy. Her brother, Harland Ernest, was born in 1881 in Colchester and spent his entire life in

the township. He later married Harriet “Hattie” Ruth Holland, who was born in Hamilton and was the daughter of William Holland and Margaret Felson. In the *Amherstburg Echo* Harriet is described as a “shinning example.” She was strongly connected to the A.M.E. Church and “her greatest delight was in spreading the gospel, which she did in both word and song.” According to the *Amherstburg Echo* she had a “contralto voice of exceptionally fine quality and in her long career delighted audiences in many parts of Ontario with her vocal solos.” Interestingly, it was while singing at a concert that Harriet met Harland. Harriet and Harland were married in Windsor but took up residence on the Gore Road in Colchester South.

Harriet was a member of the Central Grove A.M.E. Church, but also President of their Missionary Society, Superintendent of the Sunday School and also corresponding secretary of the Ontario Conference of the A.M.E. Church. Harriet also took an active interest in missionary work and loved to teach children about the Bible. Additionally, Harriet enjoyed writing and provided weekly contributions to the *Amherstburg Echo*, discussing things going on in the Black community. Her dedication to this newspaper was appreciated as the *Echo* wrote, “As sure as the week rolled around the budget of news came from her and even in the last few months when she was partly paralyzed, she still felt it her duty to send in the items about her people.” The newspaper also describes her contributions as “among the most valued to come to this desk.” Sadly, a weeks after Harriet passed away, on March 10, 1941, Harland followed on April 3, 1941.

The couple also had several children: Enda Warner (1910), Margaret Elizabeth (August 30, 1915-June 6, 2004), Lloyd (1918), Harland “Zip” (1920-July 7, 2017) and Betty (May 11, 1925-April 4, 2014). Enda married Virgil Grayer, who was the son of Wiley Grayer and Maude Mulder. Virgil also operated Virgil Grayer Trucking Company in Harrow. Edna’s sister,

Margaret, married Orville Taylor, the son of James Taylor and Jessie Walls. Margaret was also previously married to Russell Hurst who passed away in 1984. Margaret, along with her sister Edna were members of the Hattie Johnson Missionary Society and both worked in various jobs like farming, canning and as letter carriers. Edna was also a volunteer midwife. Lloyd married Ruth Anderson, while Harland “Zip” was a farmer and married Dorothy Scott, who was the president of the Hattie Johnson Missionary Society. Harland was also the proud owner of H.W. Johnson & Sons Trucking, a local trucking company that later changed to J&A Johnson Brothers. Harland and Dorothy had five children: Jerry, Tony, Denise, Philip and Ralph.

Harland’s sister Betty Ruth Beatrice Simpson, the co-founder of the Amherstburg Freedom Museum, was born on May 11, 1925 and married twice. Her first marriage was to Burnie Hurst and her second marriage was to Melvin “Mac” Simpson, who founded the museum with Betty. Betty worked at Hotel Dieu Hospital (Windsor Regional Hospital) for 25 years. She began her career as part of the hospital’s kitchen staff, later becoming an electro-diagnosis (EEG) technician. Sadly, she passed away on April 4, 2014. Betty’s daughter Joan Patricia Bray continues Betty’s legacy as a Board Director for the Museum.

We’ll end this section about Mary Eliza (Sadie) Dennis Johnson with details from her April 16, 1897 obituary from the *Amherstburg Echo* which says “Mrs. James Johnson died at her home in this township on Wednesday morning of consumption after a lengthy illness, aged 55 years and 1 day. The funeral took place yesterday (Thursday) to Central Grove cemetery, Rev. J.H. Williams officiating. Deceased’s maiden name was Mary Eliza Dennis, and she was Mr. Johnson’s second wife. Two sons and two daughters, all at home, survive, besides four brothers - Robert M., Enoch, Walter and John, and one sister, Mrs. John Crosby, of Detroit, Michi. The second wife of Rev. J. O’Banyoun was daughter of deceased.”

What we publish is not a complete history of any family and is based on the documents that are available. We welcome photos and information to fill in the gaps. See you next week for part 3.