

DON'T WAIT TO DISCOVER YOUR STORY

Part One – Can You Find My Brother?

Dani Crossley

I have never thought of myself as a storyteller. I am always too eager to get to the point to build the story and the suspense. When you spend hours combing records and studying tiny print and illegible handwriting, it's easy to get lost in the details. What impresses me so much during all this research is that these are real people, all with their own stories. And I want to tell their stories.

If you spend much time with genealogy researchers, you realize that everybody has a story. These family stories – sad, gratifying, joyful, poignant – combine to make us who we are. Did my ancestor's leap from Sam's Point (a craggy cliff in upstate New York later named for him, Samuel Gonsalus) to escape the pursuing Indians have anything to do with my unreasonable fear of precipitous edges? Probably not, but you know what I mean. My own "story" is pretty mundane, sprinkled here and there with characters, heroes and myths just like everybody else's.

My father-in-law's story is in a whole different realm and is what got me started in genealogy. Having known my own grandparents **and** great-grandparents, it was hard for me to fathom not having a clue about who your family was and where you came from. My husband Wally's grandfather, Elijah Grant Crossley, Sr., was born in 1868 (think about it, just three years after the end of the Civil War) and died in 1944, eight years before my husband's birth. Wally never knew his paternal grandparents. Come with me as we get to know them.

At four years old, little Elijah Grant Jr. (Wally's father, later called Grant) really didn't understand what was happening when his mother asked him if he wanted to go with her. He didn't know that he'd never see her again when he said no. He held onto his father's leg as he watched his mother Marie walk down the path, his two-year-old brother cradled in her arms.

A hard life of shuttling from one relative to another, minimal schooling and working odd jobs where they could be found had a lot to do with making Elijah Grant Jr. who he was. Elijah Grant Sr. came from a large family, fourteen in all, twelve living to adulthood. Aunt Lil and Aunt Sade played a large part in Grant's formative years as he spent some time living with both of them while he and his father helped on their farms and orchards. His happiest memories and early teen years were spent with Weldon and Dena Scheesley in Jersey Shore. Grant knew of no family connection with these loving people who cared for him.

Fast forward to a Sunday morning in the Crossley kitchen ten years ago as Grant told me his story. The image of little Elijah Grant and his father watching Marie leave slowly faded as I returned to the present to catch the astounding end of the story.

"And I never seen 'em since," my father-in-law shook his head. "What does a little boy know? How could I guess she was going away for good? They went to Massachusetts; Haverhill I hear tell. I had a couple letters from her wantin' me to come fix her man, but I wasn't going to get involved in that! She even almost came down for a visit, but those plans fell through. What I'd like more than anything is to find my brother. He'd be 73 now. Last I heard from him was when he was in the service during WWII." Grant leaned back in the kitchen chair and shook his head again.

My frustration was as keen as his disappointment. I had been searching for McCormick Crossley for over a year ever since hearing the heartbreaking story. The few clues I had picked up had all led to dead ends in my Internet people searches and bulletin postings. Where could he be? Was he still alive? I really began to doubt I'd ever find him.

Hands on knees, Elijah Grant Crossley, Jr. sighed and slowly eased up out of the chair. He reached over and thumbed through the collection of papers stuffed into the decorative file hung on the back of the stairway door.

"I was up in the attic just the other day and I came across a couple letters from Mac while he was in the service. Do you want to read them?" he asked me.

I eagerly held out my hand and smiled as I read "Dear Sonny." Sonny and Mac - nicknames bestowed while in the service. It was easy to imagine they had grown up together and had shared all those important events. But a few yellowed letters still in their original envelopes were the only ties they had. A sadness filled me as I refolded the pages and slipped them back in, turning the envelope carefully over, marveling that it still existed. My eyes strayed to the faint return A.P.O. address in the corner and almost let out an audible gasp. On the first line was very clearly written in his brother's scrawling hand: *C. W. Crosley*.

Oh my God! All this time I had been searching for someone named McCormick (believing that was where the *Mac* had come from, rather than the second syllable of his name) Crossley (with two s's). His name was actually Cormick and who would've ever imagined his brother would spell his last name differently from the way he'd always spelled his? I couldn't wait to get home and begin searching for this new name.

My heart was thumping and my fingers clacked nervously against the keys. "C. C-R-O-S-L-E-Y" I entered in the name field and held my breath as I clicked on the search button for the state of Massachusetts.

"Wal," I croaked to my husband. I could barely speak. "Wal, I found him." My voice gathered strength as I stared in disbelief at the information returned to my computer screen. "That has to be him! LOOK!"

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My hand was shaking as I copied the information onto the tablet by the printer. So many years, so many tries, so many misunderstandings. We had finally found him.

It was with some anxiety that I dialed the phone number I had found. When a man's voice answered, I asked if I was speaking to Mr. Crosley. He said yes and his tone was inviting. I tried to explain who I was and who my father-in-law was. He responded, "oh, yes, the adopted one." That put me off a little, but I didn't want to go into it over the phone. The most important thing was for the two brothers to talk. I inquired when would be a good time to reach him and a phone call was arranged. He had mentioned to me that he hadn't been well, but was feeling all right at the time.

Grant and Cormick (Mac) spoke several times that fall of 1999. A trip was even planned to go to Massachusetts to meet. Unfortunately, those plans had to be delayed and the opportunity passed us by. We received word from his family that Mac had died on 15 Jan 2000. We are sorry and saddened to never have met him, but so pleased to hear about him and share revelations and memories with his family.

Finding Cormick was only one mystery among many. Why did father and son Crossley bunk with the Scheesleys? Were they family? Elijah Sr. was 56 when son Grant was born. He was married in 1892 to his first wife, Minnie Agnes Lyons. They had two daughters, Nora and Florence, born in 1893 and 1895 respectively. Minnie died in May 1897 shortly after giving birth to their son, Stephen Elbert. He followed her to heaven nine months later.

Elijah married Marie in 1922 in Lock Haven. Where was Elijah Sr. between 1898 and 1922? His daughters lived with their grandparents, so he wasn't with them. What was he doing in Lock Haven, two counties away from the Pine Township area in Columbia County from which his family originated? Some of these questions still trouble me. Some have been answered.

Elijah's been dead for 65 years. We can no longer ask him these questions. His oldest daughter, Nora, lived to be 101. But she's gone now and we can't ask her either. What an opportunity we miss when we procrastinate in following the urge to learn our own story. Although it's no substitute for talking to family members while they are still with us, research can fill in some of the holes. Join me next newsletter for Part Two and the rest of Elijah Grant's story.

Part Two – The Lost Decades

His wife and son recently deceased and his two young daughters living with their grandparents, Elijah Grant Crossley, Sr. must have felt lost and adrift in 1900. After ten years of searching, I am still unable to locate him in the 1900 census. That's one of the questions that remains unanswered. In 1930 he was living with Wellman (Weldon) and Dena Scheesley on their farm in Jersey Shore with his 5-year-old son, Elijah Grant, Jr. Also living with them at the Scheesley farm is a young man named Wallace Rinehart, after whom my husband is named. The enumerator lists Wallace as the Scheesleys' nephew.

This is where we started. We knew Elijah Sr.'s wife Marie had left by 1930 and taken young Cormick with her. Over twenty years were missing from Elijah's life and I was determined to ferret out the answers to this puzzle since there was no one left to talk to. Expanding my horizons, I found an Elijah G. Crossley in 1920 in Watson Township, Lycoming County as the widowed son-in-law of Mrs. Jonas (Lovina) Rineheart.

Now wait just a minute! I knew Elijah was widowed, but his in-laws, Minnie Agnes' parents, were William Hampton and Sarah Sanders Lyons. I was certainly having trouble wrapping my brain around this one! Since searching Lycoming County had born such interesting fruit, perhaps a peek into Clinton County, the county where Elijah married Marie, might uncover some additional clues to Elijah's missing decades.

I am much more intimate with census records now after several years of researching and employ many "tricks" to persuade the indexes at Ancestry.com to reveal their secrets. After several permutations, I was stunned to discover Ellis G. Crosley, 36, in Colebrook Township, Clinton County in 1910 with his wife of eight years, Laura E., 33 – no children. A third wife for Elijah Sr. that his own son didn't even know about.

I embarked on an unbelievable journey of discovery that day and nothing was going to keep me from finding all the answers. A request for the death certificate of Laura Crossley revealed that Laura Emma Rinehart Crossley died in January 1918, 39 plus years old, of a cerebral hemorrhage. You wouldn't have wanted to be in my way the day I headed to the Clinton County courthouse. A few marriage licenses surfaced that shed more light on this incredible development. Elijah and Laura had been married for 16 years when she died. She was buried in Jersey Shore Cemetery where her parents would eventually join her.

I was gawping unbelievably at this revelation as my own great-grandparents rest in the same cemetery. For those of you who don't know my background, I'm from Buffalo. How ironic that both my husband's and my ancestors lie in the same cemetery in Lycoming County. Back to Elijah's story.

Rinehart, Rinehart. Hmm. I could sense that another mystery was soon going to be unraveled. I went back to the 1930 census that claimed Wallace Rinehart was the nephew of the Scheesleys. I had determined that Dena's maiden name was Siegel, so that

didn't track. How about if we come at it from another angle? Laura had a brother, Floyd Alphas Rinehart. From a tiny entry in the Williamsport Gazette and Bulletin, I discovered he was married to Kathryn Bardo. They had three children at the time of her death in 1923. One of them was Wallace and he was with the Scheesleys in 1930 because his mother had died.

A little digging... no, I lie. A lot of digging later I found that Kathryn's parents were Clinton and Annie Siegel Bardo. Annie Siegel Bardo was Dena Siegel Scheesley's sister. Kathryn Bardo Rinehart was Dena Scheesley's niece. Wallace Rinehart was Dena's great-nephew and Laura Emma Rinehart Crossley's nephew. The Scheesleys were indeed family and it all made sense now why Elijah Jr. and Sr. spent so much of their lives at the Scheesley farm.

I don't know for sure how Elijah ended up in Clinton County in 1922, but I imagine he followed the work. He was a lumberman even though the logging industry was declining in Clinton County by that time early in the twentieth century. I also don't know what drew Elijah to Watson Township in Lycoming County in 1902. Laura Emma was among the missing as well in the 1900 census. Her family was still in Watson Township, but she wasn't with them. Music played a big part in the Crossleys' lives – did Elijah and Laura meet at a square dance? I guess we'll never know. While some questions remain, there is now at least a sketchy outline of Elijah's missing decades.

All of the players listed in the program for the story of Elijah's life have passed except for his son Grant. My father-in-law turned 85 in July. His is one story that didn't get away.