

Of Apples and Ancestors: The Kenney Family

Mary Lyman Alexander was the daughter of Seth Lyman, a Revolutionary War soldier, and was a descendant of Richard Lyman, who came to America in 1630 on the *Lion*, and was a founder of Hartford, CT. Mary's husband George Alexander died in 1829 in Massachusetts, and Mary was left to raise six children ages 6 through 27. Mary was the mother of Sophronia Alexander, who married Stephen Williams Kenney at age 19 after graduating from Amherst Academy.



Sorghum Processing, late 19th century

Sophronia and her sons - the Kenney family - moved to Minnesota in the late 1850s. Although Mary died a year after joining them in 1861, the eight sons of Sophronia and Stephen flourished. They founded the Kenney Sorghum Factory in Morristown, Rice County, with two wooden rollers and two oxen, and over the years pioneered steam engine processing – increasing capacity from 32 gallons per day to 700 gallons per day. Son Seth continued to improve processing and became known as the “Sorghum King” and won medals for his Amber Cane Syrup at the 1893 World’s Columbia Exposition in Chicago and at the New Orleans and Paris Expositions.

Seth was renowned for his success in breeding apples, and was named (along with Oliver Kelley of the Kelley Farm) as a “Pioneer Leader in Agriculture” by University of Minnesota professor Andrew Boss in 1939 for his “lifelong service to the advancement of some important phase of agriculture.” One of his successes was the development of Transcendent Crabapples, as he worked to graft apples on hardy apple stock for Minnesota’s cold climate. Seth was also active in civic and community affairs: he was one of the charter members of the First

Baptist Church of Waterville and organized the first Sunday school in the community, held in a log school

house. He served as Justice of the Peace and was elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives for the 1879-80 session.



Transcendent Crabapples



Seth Kenney, his wife Olive, and their granddaughter in one of their apple orchards

Stephen and Sophronia’s son George served in the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry Regiment in the Civil War. He fought at the battles of Gettysburg and Antietam and was wounded in the face “but not dangerously” in September 1862. He was wounded again in June 1863. He was taken prisoner and while in Libby Prison, helped the Confederate doctors there – this gave him the idea to go to medical school someday. Upon his release, he returned to Minnesota and enrolled in a college of homeopathic medicine. He, his family, and his brother traveled to Salmon City, Idaho, to serve as doctor for the Lemhi Indian Reservation. His time there was fraught with danger. One obituary reported “He always had to carry a six-shooter for protection, for he rode through a lot of wild country and was almost always alone.” Another stated “At times in below zero temperatures



First MN volunteer pin

and near blizzard conditions, he would ride thirty miles to treat sick people, while suffering from his war wounds which bothered him all his life.”

George’s younger brother Dwight went to Idaho with George and his family. Inspired by his older brother, Dwight also wanted to learn medicine, particularly osteopathy, George’s specialty. In the wilds of Idaho, there was no access to training materials, so the brothers decided to acquire a skeleton. They obtained one from the local sheriff. Having left it outside to dry, the brothers were surprised to learn that an eagle had carried off the skull. Sometime later, a stagecoach driver found a skull lying beside the road, and gave it to them. There is no evidence it was from the same person, but the brothers were able to use it for their studies. Dwight returned to Minnesota and practiced medicine in Minneapolis until his death at the age of 93.



Dwight (l) and George (r) Kenney

Minnesota Dame Mary Ellis Peterson is descended from this hardy Kenney stock. Here, she (in blue, below) participated in the installation ceremony for the Daughters of the American Revolution “real daughter” marker for Mary Lyman Alexander in 2000.



Resources:

Curtiss-Wedge, Franklyn, “History of Rice and Steele Counties Minnesota” Chicago:H.C. Cooper & Co, 1910 p. 1352.

Lemhi County History Committee, Hon. Fred Snook, Chairman, “Centennial History of Lemhi County, Idaho, Volume II A-L,” 1992 p.411

Neill, Edward Duffield, “History of Rice County: Including Explorers and Pioneers of Minnesota” Cannon Falls, MN, Minnesota Historical Company, 1882: p. 589

Online resource at leg.state.mn.us legislator profile accessed 22 March 2019.

Petersen, Mary Ellis, collection of private papers.

Reed, Frances Pollard, “Are We Related? A Kenney Family Genealogy,” 1970

Rogers, Ben F., “William Gates LeDuc Commissioner of Agriculture” *Minnesota History* magazine, v 34, p. 289