

Georgia Strand Autobiography 1980

“On Top of the Hill”

My grandfather, Michael, was an old "prospector", and had a mine in Cripple Creek, Colorado, and he also mined in Canada. He eventually travelled to Illinois, the "Land of Lincoln," where he met my grandmother, Elisa Jane Teasley, a "saint."

They lived on the top of the hill where grandfather and grandmother had a beautiful yard with lots of flowers. Also in the back yard there was a "Teeter-Totter Board." breezes blew in our faces as we went up and down on that Teeter-Totter.

In the orchard my grandfather had traps he set, but they did not hurt the animals when they got caught in them. Sometimes we would go with him to see if he had caught anything during the night. It was so much fun being there, as people came from far and near to buy Fruit from our orchard.

There was an old country safe in the kitchen that was lined across the top with bananas. Grandfather said they were the best fruit one could eat, and it was a delicacy that we were not accustomed to at home.

At their house we ate at a long dining table in the kitchen, and there was always plenty left for anyone who happened by, especially grandmother's wash woman who always was accepted.

Our county was the first to advocate Abraham Lincoln for president, and he practiced law in Springfield and Lincoln, Illinois. There is also a replica of his cabin store in Salem, Illinois.

My grandfather gave the county enough land for a schoolhouse, and it was named "Little Mound." he also gave each of his seven children land near there for farms of their own, so there were lots of cousins around. One I was especially fond of was named Goldia, and I called her "my twin cousin, Goldia." We went to that "Little Mound" school together and had great times there.

Sometimes grandfather would sing us religious songs, or love songs which grandmother didn't approve of. We had "The Family Altar" every evening my grandmother would read a chapter in the bible and, grandfather explained the chapter. We would sing songs, and then we would all kneel and pray.

We had kerosene lamps, and grandmother kept a piece of red flannel in the oil to make it colorful. The lamps had to be kept shiny clean.

My father, Fred Baldwin, and my mother, Susie Carpenter lived near my grandfather and grandmother. My father had gradually deserted us, So my mother's brother, OA, my sister, Lucille, and myself, moved to my grandfather's home.

My mother went to work as a clerk in a dry goods store for 50 cents a day we helped with the work around the house, and sometimes we were made to do it over, but were told in a kind way. I cannot recall a cross word ever spoken my "twin cousin, Goldia" was there part of the time also. We sang every song we knew, as we were doing the work such as "Oh Johnny" - Four Leaf Clover" and many more. My grandmother must have had the patience of Job!

My life was soon to be on the "Top of another Hill." My mother had met a gentleman with five children. One evening I was standing in the yard with my Aunt when we saw my mother and this gentlemen coming down the road in a shiny buggy with beautiful horses. They were married in a short time, and we moved to the top of another hill.

The two sisters, Rena and Lillie, and three brothers, George, Earl and _____ were all lined up in the dining room to welcome us when we arrived. Later on a new sister, Callie, arrived. Callie was a doll and mother had no trouble getting help from us to take care of her. My favorite step-brother was Earl.

We had to make our own entertainment after the work was done, and we never missed a day of school or Sunday school.

We had to walk two miles to school. The teacher would get there early and make the fire in a large "pot belly" stove. It was a one room schoolhouse. We had a fifteen minute recess, and played ball and various games. If the boys did something mean, the teacher would often give them a hard whipping. In those days they didn't "spare the rod." the boys would sometimes put books in the seat of their overalls so they wouldn't feel the pain! Every Friday we had a "spelling match" or a "ciphering match." at the end of the year the teacher would say, "class No. 1, you are passed." and so on to the eighth grade, and we would go to the front of the room and recite.

When the water was up over the bridge below our house, across the creek, the horses knew where the bridge was, and they went right over it however, sometimes we were in a very precarious situation. Ironically, we were now living near my paternal grandparents, grandmother and grandfather Baldwin, and would visit them also.

Sometimes I would meet my grandmother Baldwin at the foot of the hill and go with her to church, but I never saw my own father except one time and then it was at a distance.

We visited our maternal grandparents every chance we had. My grandfather Carpenter would sit on the front porch when school was out, and as the children passed, he would give them pennies and crackers, so he was loved right away.

It was about this time that the tragedy of the sinking of the "Titanic" happened. My grandfather Carpenter had a book about the ship, and it stated it was, unsinkable, but it sank in 1912. What a terrible tragedy that was.

At the new home, we had a beautiful sleigh and it had a "Surrey with the fringe on the top" once when we were riding along, my sister, Lucille, half asleep, raised up and said, "mother, I believe we have lost Rena." (The youngest) we stopped and sure enough, there she lay in the middle of the road, unhurt. She still kids us today about trying to get rid of her.

One of my sisters, Lillie, was a beautiful seamstress. The other, Lucille, was a musician, and we would stand around the organ and sing. We had something to sing about, as we all knew Christmas gifts or anything special was hidden behind the organ. I got all the hand-me-downs from my two sisters, but I didn't mind. It made me feel grown up.

For entertainment we would jump rope, ride horseback, or whatever came to mind. We had one old horse, Old Nell that we could trust implicitly. We could ride her double, or triple. We also had a beautiful black retired race horse, La Baron Glorium, and he was mean. He was bought for breeding purposes.

We had lovely cattle and Poland China hogs, but our favorite was Old Nell, and when she died, it was a sad affair. It was very hot and my sister, Lucille, held the umbrella over her until she died.

The boys made our sleds, and when it snowed, the creek would freeze over. We took lanterns, and we could coast down the hill and clear across the creek. Sometimes dad would put the wagon bed on runners, and we would put straw and blankets in it and go to the neighbors to pop popcorn and pull molasses taffy. Our parents would visit in the living room or parlor, while we played in the kitchen.

My sister almost lost a front tooth and always carried a nick on it, as my brother, OA, who was the school teacher, accidently hit her in the mouth with a stove lid lifter. My brother begged her not to cry for fear mother would make us quit playing.

My own father remarried and I have two half brothers which I am very fond of, Ewing and Frederick Baldwin.

Sometimes dad would come in the house and ask mother if she wanted to go to town with him. She never refused once she entered a butter contest and won first prize of \$3.00. It was a contest over the County and held at the court house. We were very proud of her. She was very proud as she had made the best out of 60 lbs. When a grocer ran out of his store, pulling up his pants, and told her if she would bring him all her butter, he would give her over the regular price; she laughed and said "I've been getting that all along."

We seldom missed a celebration of any kind -fairs, Fourth of July, etc. Instead of taking fried chicken, we bought bologna, cheese, etc, and I vowed then, that when I got big, I would have all the cheese I could eat. We picked berries and sold them for our spending money at the celebrations. Also my twin cousin, Goldia, and I had several free rides on the merry-go-round "Steam Swing" from admirers, so we did quite well. If I saw my dad talking to a bunch of men, I knew he would give me a nickel.

When our parents left home, we were given our jobs to do. The boys did the outside work, and we did the upstairs and downstairs work. My job usually was cleaning the cream separator. I can vision it now, humming and running, and the cream coming out of one big spout and the milk from the other. The neighbors took turns taking the cream to town to sell. Sometimes mother and I would go along in the buggy. I recall how the mud would fall from one of the buggy wheels to the next. It seems dangerous to think of us going alone now. We would take the cream to the "Ice Cream Parlor" to sell, and then sit at a wrought iron ice cream table and have a large dish of ice cream. I haven't tasted any as good since then!

We had no radio or television, but we found plenty to do. Cars were new then, and if we heard one coming down the road, we would all run and hang on the fence, 'til it got out of sight.

The fall season was beautiful, with the leaves turning golden and the cozy fires. Sometimes we would go hickory nut hunting and Dad would show us how to lay them on a flat iron between our knees and crack them so the kernel would come out perfect.

One time our parents had gone to town so we decided to surprise them, and see how many berries we could pick while they were gone. We had an uneven number of acres not too far away we call the "Fraction" where blackberries were plentiful. The boys hitched the horse to the wagon and away we went. When our parents came home, there was five gallons of berries sitting in the center of the dining room table.

Although they were proud of us, mother must have been disgusted after a day of pleasure, to find all that work staring her in the face to be canned, to make jelly.

We were happy when "Thrashing Day" came. A long table was set across the dining room and the old engine would come puffing up the hill. Neighbors would come and assist with the big dinner.

Then came butchering time; the hogs were killed and hung in the smokehouse. Everything was separated and the lard rendered. Then there would be a big sausage fry. The large dining table was cleared and all the sausage, after being ground by hand, was put on the table. Dad would mix it well with salt, pepper, sage, etc., then we would start the frying and tasting session. When it was just right, mother would fry it and put it in quart jars. She also made a green tomato pickle which I wish I had the recipe for now!

Sometimes we would go in the woods and take a broom to make rooms and play housekeeping. I only had one doll that I remember, but we often made our own dolls. Our neighbor, being the only girl, had some china dolls which she shared with us,

The older children got married. My brother, OA, left home and was gone twelve years. Mother died while he was away, but we wrote him and sent gifts. When he returned he could speak Spanish and German fluently. He served in the U. S. Army and also the Mexican army, and was a short distance from where Poncho Villa was finally killed.

I loved school and when I graduated from the eighth grade, my announcement said: "The elevator to success is not running, use the stairs," I had always done that.

My parents decided to move to town so I could go to high school. We moved but Dad stayed on two weeks longer to see about things, and we left a few things to move later. One morning he came in to our place in town and he was crying. Our house had burned during the night, and he just got out five minutes before the big brick flue fell across his bed. Mother was crying also. Now as I am older, I realize that there was evidently arson in the neighborhood, as it was very phenomenal that almost every house in the neighborhood had burned and even our silo, but in those days no one thought of arson,

My teacher told my mother I would soon have my Teacher's Certificate, as I was two grades higher than my regular class, but I made a big mistake and quit high school before graduating,

I was sixteen and my husband, George, was seventeen when we were married our parents had to go with us to get the license. We would board with my parents during the winter, and had the house to ourselves in the summer while my parents, James and Susie Cravens, went to the farm. We both worked. We wanted a baby so much, but I could not get pregnant. We had my husband's sisters living with us part of the time. We also were good to all our neighbor's children,

My sister, Callie, made her home partly with my sister, Rena, and me. She was nine when our mother passed away in 1923 and my stepfather remarried.

George and I eventually moved away and bought a sixteen room house. We rented out a part of it, but it was during the depression and some could not pay their rent. At times we even donated a few groceries to a family who had three children and his mother, but we still counted our blessings.

My sister, Lucille, married George Creighton and had two sons. She developed tuberculosis and was bedfast two and one half years. She stayed partly at the T. B. Sanitarium in Jacksonville, Illinois, and partly at our home.

She was a comedienne both at home and at the Sanitarium. The only one in the institution who masked on Halloween was Lucille. The nurse invited everyone to her room and some of them thought she was dying, but there she lay in a Halloween costume. Her doctor wrote me that she was the most cooperative patient they ever had. Lucille's oldest son, Thomas, went to live with the paternal grandparents, and we took the youngest, George Milton, in with us to help out until she got well.

I would take him to see her as often as I could, as it was 218 miles to the sanitarium from our hometown of Fairfield, Illinois. I would pull her bed to the window so they could see each other and throw kisses, etc. He was not allowed in, with the exception of the last time I took him. They had moved her in a private room now, and knew she could not get well.

She said she was glad that we loved him so much, and if she did not get well, he was ours, as we hadn't seen or heard from his father. She kept fighting to get well, and would send me jokes to "cheer" me up. I was called many times when they didn't expect her to live, but she would laugh and tell me "they think I'm going to die, but I'm not," and she wouldn't. Finally the last time came.

Her son doesn't remember her. Her other son, Thomas, passed away seventeen months later with T.B. and diabetes, in the same sanitarium and in the same room as his mother. I made many trips and took him gifts to cheer him during his stay at the sanitarium.

After seventeen years, I finally became pregnant and had a beautiful and intelligent boy whom we named Leon. Leon and George were like brothers. We were very concerned about George Milton as he was not well, due to the fact that his mother had T. B. When she was pregnant, so we did everything and gave him nutritious food and medicine and he began to be strong. We had the same love for him as we did our own Leon, but my brother-in-law married a woman with two children, and then he took our boy away from us. He was nine year old then. There was his sled we had bought him for Christmas and many heartaches. We worried that they might not feed him the proper things and medicine that had strengthened him. I became ill. My doctor said i would just have to battle it out myself. We were trying, and very thankful we had one son left, and made the best of it.

We were so homesick to see him that we decided to go see him. We went to the home and his father was at work. We had gone in a truck, and he grabbed his toys and said he was going home with us. I was afraid to take him, but my husband said, he brought him up this far, and he was going to take him. We had driven awhile when we were stopped by two sheriffs and arrested for kidnapping. After we told our story the sheriff said, had they known the facts, they never would have stopped us. We were taken to court and the judge gave him to his father. We had lots of difficulty getting home, stopping and grieving.

It was Halloween now, 1937. Our son Leon was almost four years old. We both taught a Sunday school class and had a party for the boys and girls in our classes. The house was fully decorated with corn stalks, pumpkins and the usual decor. Our son helped me cut pumpkin faces and was in the midst of everything.

He could sing and spell and understand the Bible. If it was Sunday, he would say that he had better put his tools away and not work on his wagon until Monday.

One of our tenants had a boy his age. They had great times playing. One morning they both had on their cowboy suits. The parents went to the grandfather's farm every Saturday a.m. and they always begged for our son to go with them. We always watched Leon so carefully, as we lived on a busy corner and were afraid of cars, so we said he couldn't go to the farm. They assured me they would watch him carefully, and the thought came to me that maybe I was a little selfish, and he was crying to go, so I finally said he could. They did not watch him, and he was kicked in the side of the head by a horse. They rushed him to the doctor and then came for me. I got in the ambulance with him. It was around noon then, and he was gone by 1:30 p.m. I got in touch with my husband, George, who now was a car salesman. All we had left now was our dog "Rex". Our other son, George Milton, was permitted to come to the funeral. I tried to be strong, but had to give up my Sunday School Class. My own father sent me a telegram of sympathy and visited me also later.

I had always loved fall with its beautiful foliage, but now everything was black.

We loafed a long time, as we had good credit, but finally decided to rent a restaurant just around the corner from our home. We worked hard keeping the business open twenty-four hours it expanded rapidly, so we bought the building and made improvements with a "Bob-Tail Basting-blessing Fountain" and other things.

George and I separated just three months before our 25th Wedding anniversary, and he married the woman who cooked for us in the restaurant.

In the meantime, George Milton had left his parents home and hitch-hiked 218 miles back to our home just as we were about to separate. He loved us both and visited his dad, but lived with me. In later years, his own father came to see him and George Milton forgave him and they enjoyed visits also.

Our son, George Milton, is married now and has three lovely children who are a great comfort to me.

My own father re-married years later, and I have two half brothers who I am fond of. One, Ewing, is a mail clerk, the other, Fred, is a C.P.A. and motel owner. He won his scholarship in music on the bass violin. My youngest sister, Callie, married Walter Pool, and was in Chicago now, so my son and I went to Chicago also and went to work. I had worked all through my first marriage, but I didn't mind so much, and I had the restaurant experience. After awhile I went to work for "Precision Equipment Co." After awhile I

then went to work for "Ziff-Davis Publishing Co." I was made supervisor over the flex-o-writer and graphotype and had to check mailing and try to meet the dead lines.

I met my lovely husband, Earl Strand, in Chicago, and we were married 32 years. He was a park supervisor for the City of Chicago for Mayor Richard Daley. He held tournaments of different sports and gave trophies for their accomplishments. Trees are now growing which he planted on "Arbor Day." he held an annual Easter bash and the "Battle of the Bands" was under his chairmanship. He held skating parties and one girl he instructed is now in the "Ice Capades." I assisted him many times, and we had many wonderful times together. We went to various activities of the city in the beautiful hotels and restaurants. He was a beautiful dancer. He eventually decided to retire, and we bought a small home in Fox Lake, fifty miles from Chicago. We thoroughly enjoyed the lake.

I developed asthma and, after extensive suffering, we decided to change climates. I went to Phoenix, Arizona alone, and he joined me after six months, obtaining a leave of absence from the city of Chicago. It was a happy reunion. Due to prayer and climate, I improved and went to work for an insurance company. My husband worked as supervisor over the Juvenile Department of Phoenix.

After two years, we returned to Fox Lake, but later the asthma started again, so we spent two winters in St. Petersburg, Florida, then decided to make it our home. We bought a condominium and thought that would be our last move. He had diabetes, so we had to watch his diet, etc., and take medication. Later he had to have a cataract operation on one eye. Then he developed heart trouble. After a "pacemaker" was put in, we felt that everything would be all right, but his toes and feet became infected and he finally, after three years, lost both his legs. He now had artificial legs and a wheel chair and was doing fine.

We were happy and had bought tickets to fly to California to see his only brother and family, when he suddenly became worse, and the doctor found he had cancer of the colon. I went every day to the hospital. The last time he was there three months. He and I had a wonderful visit on Sunday before he passed away on Tuesday. it is two years thanksgiving and I have the following poem being put in the "Chicago Tribune" and "West Side Times" in memory of him.

"Your hands once touched this table and this silver,
and I have seen your fingers hold this glass.
These things do not remember you darling, but I do
and your touch upon them will not pass from me.
Your loving wife, Georgia"

Now I am alone and very lonely at this Holiday Season, but I am thankful for those I have left. My foster son, George Milton Creighton and wife, Vera, and family will come as often as they can, and I am slowly trying to get back to the "Top of the Hill" (with malice toward none and charity for all) and with god's help, I'll make it.

It is 1995 now, and I am 94 years of age. The last of the family of nine; I lost my dear sister, Callie, in June of last year. I have many good memories and I miss her greatly.

From the paternal side of my family, I have two brothers, Frederick and Ewing Baldwin left that I hear from often and I am grateful and very fond of them. I am also thankful for all my many friends and a special friend and companion, Tommy, who lives in the Masonic home, and always, of course, my foster son, George Milton and family and four "greats."

God bless all.