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The West Makes You, The Dust Bowl Breaks You: The Family History of Michelle Topham Sours

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The West Makes You, The Dust Bowl Breaks You:

The Family History of Michelle Topham Sours

24 April 2016

Michelle LeAnn Topham Sours authored this family history as part of the course requirements for HIST 550/700 Your Family in History offered online in Spring 2016 and was submitted to the Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. Please contact the author directly with any questions or comments: delsours@att.net.

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List of Direct Line Family Members

Generation One

- A1. Michelle LeAnn Topham Sours (1973-)**
- A2. Michael Del Sours (1974-)**

Generation Two

- A1a. Cherrie Alice Ford Topham (1947-1980)**
- A1b. Randolph Phillips Topham (1941-)**

Generation Three

- A1a1. Lela Edris Sneary Ford (1929-1980)**
- A1a2. Warren G. Ford (1928-)**
- A1b1. Edna Gertrude Phillips Topham (1912-1985)**
- A1b2. Russell James Topham, Sr. (1914-1996)**

Generation Four

- A1a1a. Lillian Eldred Martin Sneary (1908-2000)**
- A1a1b. George Harvey Sneary (1904-1972)**
- A1a2a. Ethel Carlisle Ford (1905-1991)**
- A1a2b. John Harness Ford (1897-1975)**
- A1b1a. Minnie Gertrude Doane Phillips (1879-1962)**
- A1b1b. Sylvester Simeon Phillips (1876-1963)**
- A1b2a. Mary AnnaBell Taylor Topham (1887-1963)**
- A1b2b. Thomas James Topham (1880-1939)**

Generation Five

- A1a1a1. Lula Ellen Dyer Martin (1879-1961)**
- A1a1a2. Americus Vespucci Martin (1859-1942)**
- A1a1b1. Maud Victoria Scott Sneary (1878-1938)**
- A1a1b2. Lewis Edward Sneary (1875-1962)**
- A1a2a1. Lucena Tripp Carlisle (1864-1961)**
- A1a2a2. John Henry Carlisle (1861-1949)**
- A1a2b1. Malinda Catherine Ford Ford (1866-1937)**
- A1a2b2. James Harvey Ford (1863-1938)**
- A1b1a1. Mary A. Jarvis Doane (1855-1944)**
- A1b1a2. William Samuel Doane (1852-1922)**

A1b1b1. Isabella Dennis Phillips (1856-1900)

A1b1b2. Francis Marion Phillips (1852-1915)

A1b2a1. Isabell Taylor (1859- ?)

A1b2a2. J.B. Taylor (1852- ?)

A1b2b1. Mary Howe Topham (1849-1922)

A1b2b2. John Bartlett Topham, Sr. (1843-1904)

When Michelle Topham Sours first saw the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, MO in 1994, the grand monument evoked conflicting emotions. It was undeniably impressive, with a height unimaginable until one actually sees it. The steel surface takes on an unearthly luminescence in the sunlight, making it a fitting symbol of shining hope and promises. The design symbolically captures the feelings that inspired Americans to move westward in pursuit of expanded opportunities and better fortunes. For Michelle, though, the monument also inspired feelings of dread and oppression. To her, the sheer size felt physically intolerable; her phobia of heights made her fearful of actually venturing into the building. Yet she was awed by how the apparently solid steel structure bends with the wind in order to avoid breaking. The experiences of families involved in westward expansion were similarly conflicted. While many people who settled west of the Mississippi found the opportunities they sought, events of the decades following, including the Great Depression and the drought years of the Dust Bowl, left those same families struggling to survive; the story of five generations of Michelle Topham's family illustrates how those settlers and their descendants endured through difficult times.

GENERATION FIVE

A1a1a1. Lula Ellen Dyer Martin (1879-1961)

A1a1a2. Americus Vespucci Martin (1859-1942)

A1a1b1. Maud Victoria Scott Sneary (1878-1938)

A1a1b2. Lewis Edward Sneary (1875-1962)

A1a2a1. Lucena Tripp Carlisle (1864-1961)

A1a2a2. John Henry Carlisle (1861-1949)

A1a2b1. Malinda Catherine Ford Ford (1866-1937)

A1a2b2. James Harvey Ford (1863-1938)

A1b1a1. Mary A. Jarvis Doane (1855-1944)

A1b1a2. William Samuel Doane (1852-1922)

A1b1b1. Isabella Dennis Phillips (1856-1900)

A1b1b2. Francis Marion Phillips (1852-1915)

A1b2a1. Isabell Taylor (1859- ?)

A1b2a2. J.B. Taylor (1852- ?)

A1b2b1. Mary Howe Topham (1849-1922)

A1b2b2. John Bartlett Topham, Sr. (1843-1904)

The Martins

Americus Vespucci Martin (1859-1942) was born in Mercer, OH to **Daniel Galer Martin** (1810- ?) and **Rhoda Ann Whitcomb** (1828- ?). Both of his parents were from New York. He had four siblings: **John Evan** (1846-1931), **Charles Honeywood** (1849-), **Mary Addia** (1851- ?), and **Edward Monroe** (1853-1935).¹ He married his first wife, **Della Anderson** (1859-1981) in Coleman, TX in 1883. They had four children: **Seth S.** (1884-1908), **John Elbert** (1886- ?), **Fred** (1888- ?), and **Essye B.** (1890- ?). The couple divorced soon after. He married his second wife, **Lula Ellen Dyer** (1879-1961) in Moab, UT in

¹ "United States Census, 1860", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/MCPQ-M5T> : accessed 17 April 2016), Americus Martin in entry for [illegible] Martin, 1860.

1900. Americus had many professions throughout his life including, “blacksmithing, freighting, ranching, U.S. Deputy Marshall, Texas Ranger, and Engineer on the Denver and Rio Grande.”²

Lula Ellen Dyer was born in Eureka Springs, AR to **Thomas Jefferson Dyer** (1857-1941) and **Lucrecia Burnett** (1854-1880). Her mother was from Kentucky. Her father was born in Polk County, IA, but was raised in Medicine Lodge, KS. The Dyer family moved to Medicine Lodge, KS from Des Moines, IA (by way of Carthage, MO), in 1883.³

At that time, the local newspaper, *The Barber County Index*, whose coverage area included Medicine Lodge, carried news of local and regional interest on the front page. One issue, from the year the Dyer’s arrived, contained a detailed account of the execution, carried out by a nearby Indian tribal council, of a member of the tribe convicted of murder. The Dyers, being from an area farther from the reservations, would likely not have been previously acquainted with the laws and customs of Native American tribes.⁴ Reading the account of the religious and cultural implications of murder and execution among Native Americans would probably have been an item of great interest to the Dyers, especially Thomas’ mother, **Maria Elisabetha Gilbrecht Dyer** (1823-1896), who was originally from Germany.⁵

By 1900, Americus and Lula were living in a house they owned, free of mortgage, in Ridgeway, CO. Americus’ oldest son, Seth S. Martin, lived with them. Seth was a family legend. His younger half-sisters and half-brothers told many larger-than-life tales about him. According to tales, he roamed from the Yukon to Texas, working logging camps and cattle drives. He was supposedly an ace card player and a quick-draw shooter. One story, told by his great-niece Laura Sneary, had Seth tracking down a man who had caused a logging accident that damaged Seth’s knees; after he found the man, Seth shot out both of the culprit’s knees. Sadly, he died before any of his younger half-siblings would actually have been able

² Max Easter, Genealogical Papers, private collection of Eileen Sneary Bouton.

³ Max Easter.

⁴ *Barber County Index*. (Medicine Lodge [Kans.]), 11 May 1883. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. Of Congress. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015080/1883-05-11/ed-1/seq-1/> (Links to an external site.) [Accessed 10 February 2016].

⁵ "Deutschland Geburten und Taufen, 1558-1898," database, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:MM9.1.1/ND9M-T9G> : accessed 19 April 2016), Maria Elisabetha Gilbrecht, 18 Feb 1821; citing ; FHL microfilm 193,903.

to have known him; yet they spoke about him as if they had known him personally. His father must have done a good job of keeping his memory alive. Seth is said to be buried in Ridgway, CO, but more research is needed to confirm details of his life.

The Martins' first five children were born in Ridgeway, CO. They were **Edward Loren** (1901-1958); **Lula Ellen** (1903-1984); **Clara Clarine** (1904-1987); **Hilda Vietta** (1906- ?); and **Lillian Eldred** (1908-2000), Michelle's great-grandmother.⁶ By 1910, the family had moved to a rented farm near Driftwood, OK.⁷ The Martins had five more children: **Elise Beatrice** (1910- ?), **Laura Francis** (1914- ?), **Mae Leota** (1917- ?), **Aubrey Vern** (1919-1996), and **Jean Alice** (1924-1999), for a total of ten. Americus retired from farming by 1940; the couple spent their last years in a home they owned in Elk City, OK.⁸

The Snearys, Part 1:

Lewis Edward Sneary (1875-1962) was born in Sugar Creek, OH to **Jacob Franklin Sneary** (1829-1887) and **Mary Gander** (1839-1937). Both of his parents were from Ohio.⁹ He had nine siblings: **Lydia Ann** (1856-1861), **George Washington** (1858-1939), **Lemuel McClellan** (1861-1940), **Elizabeth Jane** (1863-1914), **Sarah Catherine** (1866-1947), **Samuel Jefferson** (1868-1938), **John William** (1870-1872), **Anna Margaret** (1873-1876), and **Mary Alnora** (1878-1934). Lewis Edward married **Maude Victoria Scott** (1878-1938) in Sharon, KS in 1899. Maude was born in Missouri to **John Scott** and

⁶ Max Easter.

⁷"United States Census, 1910," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/MLW7-83V> : accessed 17 April 2016), A V Martin, Driftwood, Woods, Oklahoma, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) ED 271, sheet 9A, NARA microfilm publication T624 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 1,375,289.

⁸ "United States Census, 1940," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/VBJZ-KBM> : accessed 17 April 2016), A V Martin, Elk Township, Beckham, Oklahoma, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) 5-12, sheet 5A, family 86, NARA digital publication T627 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 2012), roll 3276.

⁹ "Ohio Births and Christenings, 1821-1962," database, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/XDY2-ZMG> : accessed 17 April 2016), Lewis E. Sneary, 06 Aug 1875; citing Sugar Creek, Putnam, Ohio, reference v 1 p 87; FHL microfilm 915,767.

Laura Williams.¹⁰ John Scott was from Missouri, as well, while Laura Williams was from Pennsylvania.¹¹

Lewis and Maude had three children: **Arlie Harold** (1900-1989); **George Harvey** (1904-1972), Michelle's great-grandfather; and **Halie Sneary** (1907- ?). The family lived on a rented farm near Fritzlen, OK in 1910.¹² By 1920, the family owned a farm near Jefferson, Oklahoma.¹³ In 1930, the couple lived on a farm they owned near Fritzlen, OK, growing "corn and wheat"; their son George, along with his wife and children, were also residing on the farm.¹⁴ Lewis and Maude Sneary are buried in Alva, OK.¹⁵

The Carlisles:

John Henry Carlisle (1861-1949) came from Rochester, NY, while his wife, **Lucena Tripp** (1864-1961) was from Gallia, OH. The couple met and married in Council Grove, KS. They had the means to immediately purchase their first farm, where their four oldest children, **William** (1882-1970), **John Henry, Jr.** (1886-1929), **Clarence** (1889-1965), and **Edna May** (1893-1903) were born.¹⁶ The Carlisle family later purchased a larger farm near Whitewoman, a now-defunct township in Wichita County, KS, where four more children, **Earl H.** (1884-1965); **Jennie Mae** (1896-1996); **Martin** (1900-1943); and

¹⁰ Max Easter.

¹¹ "United States Census, 1910," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/MLW7-6ZR> : accessed 17 April 2016), Louies Snarie, Fritzlen, Woods, Oklahoma, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) ED 272, sheet 12B, NARA microfilm publication T624 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 1,375,289.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "United States Census, 1920," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/MN1B-99V> : accessed 17 April 2016), Lewis E Snarey, Jefferson, Woods, Oklahoma, United States; citing sheet 3A, NARA microfilm publication T625 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 1,821,480.

¹⁴ "United States Census, 1930", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/XC4C-HMX> : accessed 17 April 2016), L E Sneary, 1930.

¹⁵ Thelma Crouch, "Lewis Edward Sneary," Find a Grave, last modified January 16, 2012, accessed March 5, 2016, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=Sneary&GSfn=Lewis&GSbyrel=all&GSdyrel=all&GSst=38&GSctry=4&GSob=n&GRid=83559629&df=all&>.

¹⁶ "John Henry Carlisle," Find a Grave, last modified July 3, 2012, accessed March 10, 2016, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=Carlisle&GSfn=John&GSmn=Henry&GSbyrel=in&GSdyrel=in&GSst=18&GSctry=4&GSob=n&GRid=49451261&df=all&>.

Ethel (1905-1991), Michelle's great-grandmother, were born.¹⁷ John and Lucena Carlisle are buried in Leoti, KS.¹⁸

The Fords, Part 1:

Only one of Michelle's great-great-grandparents, **James Harvey Ford** (1863-1938) was born in Kansas.¹⁹ His father, **Harness Ford** (1828-1914) was from Ohio. He was married- and divorced- at least three, possibly four times. Judging from census records, James' mother was probably **Minerva Shaw** (1832-1873), who was from Illinois. However, his mother might have been **Mary E. Thompson** (1842- ?), who was from Missouri. James had at least thirteen siblings, though whether they were full or a half sibling is difficult to determine. They included: **William** (1851-1928), **Zachariah** (1852-1931), **John Harness** (1853- ?), **Sarah Elizabeth** (1856-1940), **Lucretia** (1859-1873), **Emizare** (1865-1904), **Barbara A.** (1866-1952), **Frances Ellen** (1869-1930), **Isacca** (1873-1873), **Harness** (1875- ?), **Nancy Jane** (1876- ?), **Mary** (1877-1888), and **McCage** (1878-1961).²⁰ More research into the complicated life of Harness Ford is needed to clarify relationships.

James' wife, **Malinda Catherine Ford** (1866-1937), was from Illinois. Her parents were **John Ford** (1837-1912), from Indiana, and **Nancy Totten** (1846- ?), from Kansas. Malinda Catherine had ten

¹⁷ "United States Census, 1910," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M2ZZ-H89> : accessed 15 April 2016), Ethel Carlisle in household of John Carlisle, Whitewoman, Wichita, Kansas, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) ED 213, sheet 1A, NARA microfilm publication T624 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 1,374,468; "United States Census, 1920," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MFXR-84B> : accessed 15 April 2016), Ethel Carlisle in household of John Carlisle, Whitewoman, Wichita, Kansas, United States; citing sheet 2B, NARA microfilm publication T625 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 1,820,554

¹⁸ "Lucena Tripp Carlisle," Find a Grave, last modified July 3, 2012, accessed March 10, 2016, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=49451354>; "John Henry Carlisle," Find a Grave.

¹⁹ "United States Census, 1900," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MMGH-BP3> : accessed 15 April 2016), Johney Ford in household of Harvey Ford, Mustang Township, Canadian, Oklahoma Territory, United States; citing sheet 16B, family 322, NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 1,241,335.

²⁰ "United States Census, 1880," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:MM9.1.1/MF5C-2F9> : accessed 17 April 2016), Harness Ford, Osawatomie, Miami, Kansas, United States; citing enumeration district ED 140, sheet 396B, NARA microfilm publication T9 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), roll 0389; FHL microfilm 1,254,389; 1870 United States Federal Census; Harness Ford; Source Citation: Year: 1870; Census Place: Osawatomie, Miami, Kansas; Roll: M593_439; Page: 456B; Image: 150; Family History Library Film: 545938.

siblings: **Emily Jane** (1860-1932), **George Riley** (1862-1842), **Benjamin Arthur** (1864-1920), **Washington** (1868-1886), **John Harvey** (1870-1942), **James William** (1872-1921), **Cora Abigail** (1875-1945), **Clara Elizabeth** (1877-1918), **Luley Leacle** (1880-1882), and **Louis Albert** (1893-1962).

James and Malinda's family moved frequently; their two oldest children, **Rosa Emeline** (1887-1899) and **Albert Snowden** (1889-1948), were born in Kansas. The next child in the family, **Cora Elizabeth** (1890-1925) was born in Oklahoma Territory. The family returned to Kansas for a short time and **Barbara Ellen** (1893-?) was born. After yet another move, to Missouri, **John Harness** (1897-1975), Michelle's great-grandfather; and **James Otis** (1899-1984) joined the family. When John Harness, "Johne," was three, the family was living on a rented farm in Mustang Township, Oklahoma Territory, along with Malinda's brother **James William Ford** (1872-1921) and his wife **Dollie Everet Sarah Elizabeth** (1881-1962).²¹ The rest of the children in the family, **Burton Sylvester** (1902-1904), **Nora Etta** (1906-1964), and **Myrtle Effie** (1908-1993), were born in Kansas. By the time John Harness was twenty, his family had purchased a farm near Rumsey, an old township in Comanche County, KS. Malinda and James Ford are buried in Nashville, KS.²²

The Doanes:

William Samuel Doane (1852-1922) was born in Walpole, Ontario, Canada, to **Israel Doane** (1828-1868) and **Maria Byers** (1832-1911). His father was also from Walpole; his mother was from Pennsylvania. He had five siblings: **Abraham** (1854-1922), **George Henry** (1857- ?), **David** (1859-1931), **John Freeman** (1861-1900), and **Anna Bell** (1865-1917). His wife, **Mary A. Jarvis** (1855-1944), was born in Washington County, OH to **William Jarvis** (1830-1892) and **Clarissa E. Justice** (1833-1868). Both of her parents were also from Washington County, Ohio. She had three siblings: **Elizabeth Ellen** (1857-1919), **Clarissa J.** (1859- ?), and **James A.** (1858-1870). Mary grew up on a farm the

²¹ "United States Census, 1900," John Ford.

²² "John Harness Ford," Find a Grave, last modified October 17, 2011, accessed March 12, 2106, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=Ford&GSfn=James&GSmn=Harvey&GSbyrel=all&GSdyrel=all&GSst=18&GSctry=4&GSob=n&GRid=78624009&df=all&>.

family owned near Hollowell, KS.²³ William and Mary were married in 1872 at the Cherokee County Courthouse in Cherokee, KS, not far from her parents' farm.²⁴ After their marriage, William worked a rented farm in Lola, KS.²⁵ Seven of their nine children were born in Lola: **William Henry** (1874-1913); **George Washington** (1876-1926); **Minnie Gertrude** (1876-1926), Michelle's great-grandmother; **Albert Arthur** (1881-1942); **Jesse Franklin** (1883-1970); **James Conrad** (1885-1952); and **Mary Pearl** (1888-1943). Another daughter, **Sara Madora** "Sadie" (1891- ?) was born in Geneseo, KS.²⁶ Their youngest was born on the farm they later rented in McPherson, KS.²⁷ By 1910, the couple owned a farm near Pratt, KS. At that time, their youngest daughter, Sadie, still lived at home but worked as a teacher at Orellie School.²⁸ By 1920, William and Mary had been successful enough to retire; they listed their occupations on the census forms that year as "none-retired."²⁹ Mary and William Doane are buried in Pratt, KS.³⁰

²³ Ruth Brehm, Genealogical Papers, in the author's possession.

²⁴ Kansas County Marriages, 1855-1911, database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:MM9.1.1/FWLB-Z9Z> : accessed 17 April 2016), William Doan and Mary Jarvis, 12 Oct 1873; citing Marriage, , Cherokee County, Kansas, United States, district clerk, court clerk, county clerk and register offices from various counties; FHL microfilm 1,404,795.

²⁵ "United States Census, 1880," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:MM9.1.1/MFPL-499> : accessed 17 April 2016), William S Doan, Lola, Cherokee, Kansas, United States; citing enumeration district ED 42, sheet 480B, NARA microfilm publication T9 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), roll 0376; FHL microfilm 1,254,376.

²⁶ Ruth Brehm.

²⁷ "United States Census, 1900," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:MM9.1.1/MMYS-C1B> : accessed 17 April 2016), Mary A Doan in household of William S Doan, King City Township, McPherson, Kansas, United States; citing sheet 4B, family 78, NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 1,240,488.

²⁸ "United States Census, 1910," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:MM9.1.1/M2Z7-2J1> : accessed 17 April 2016), William C Doan, Iuka, Pratt, Kansas, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) ED 129, sheet 4B, NARA microfilm publication T624 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 1,374,466.

²⁹ "United States Census, 1920," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:MM9.1.1/MFXW-XDH> : accessed 17 April 2016), William S Doan, Pratt, Pratt, Kansas, United States; citing sheet 5A, NARA microfilm publication T625 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 1,820,545.

³⁰ Ruth Brehm.

The Phillipses, Part 1:

Francis Marion Phillips (1852-1915) was born in Griggsville, IL to **Nimrod Hiram Phillips** (1829-1899) and **Cambis Ann Duncan** (1827-1965).³¹ His father was from Illinois; his mother was from Virginia.³² He had four siblings: **Nancy Jane** (1850-1927), **Alice Helena** (1855-1930), **Charles Willard** (1857-1909), and **Bert** (1870-1952).³³ His wife, **Isabella Dennis** (1856-1900) was born in Adams, IL to **Simon Sylvester Dennis** (1828-1914) and **Elizabeth Short** (1831-1978).³⁴ Her father was from Tennessee; her mother was from Alabama. The couple owned a farm near Eureka, KS.³⁵ They had seven children: **Simon Sylvester** (1876-1963), Michelle's great-grandfather; **Charles Frank** (1880-1886); **Omar A.** (1882-1886); **William P.** (1884-1884); **Ollie Belle** (1886-1923); **Mazzie** (1889-1923); and **Mark Paul** (1891-1972). The couple is buried in Hoisington, KS, not far from their family farm.³⁶

The Taylors:

J.B. Taylor (1852. - ?) was born in Pennsylvania. His wife's first name was **Isabell** (1859- ?). The couple had four children: **Perla** (1874- ?); **Loring Leslie** (1876- 1964); **Mary AnnaBell** (1878-1963), Michelle's great-grandmother; and **Milan** (1884- ?). In 1885, the family was living in Lynville, IA.³⁷

The Tophams, Part 1:

In 1864, a year after John Harness Ford's father, James, was born in Kansas, another of Michelle's great-great-grandfathers was setting foot in the United States for the first time at the age of 36.³⁸ **John**

³¹ Robert Mitchel, "Francis Marion Phillips," Find A Grave, last modified May 17, 2010, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=Phillips&GSfn=Francis&GSmn=Marion&GSbyrel=all&GSdyrel=all&GSst=18&GSctry=4&GSob=n&GRid=25237649&df=all&>

³² "United States Census, 1900," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:MM9.1.1/MMT9-6V6> : accessed 17 April 2016), Francis M Phillips, Albion & Eureka Townships, Barton, Kansas, United States; citing sheet 1A, family 6, NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 1,240,471.

³³ "Francis Marion Phillips," Find a Grave.

³⁴ Ruth Brehm.

³⁵ "United States Census, 1900," Francis M. Phillips.

³⁶ "Francis Marion Phillips," Find a Grave.

³⁷ "Iowa State Census, 1885," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:MM9.1.1/H8WZ-4W2> : accessed 17 April 2016), Anna B Taylor in household of J B Taylor, Lynville, Lynn Grove, Jasper, Iowa; citing p. 21, 1885, State Historical Society, Des Moines; FHL microfilm 1,021,481.

Bartlett Topham, Sr. (1843-1904) was born in Easton Socon, Bedfordshire, England, to **John** and **Elizabeth Topham**. He had five siblings: **Mary Ann** (1845- ?), **William H.** (1847- ?), **Elizabeth** (1849- ?), **Thomas** (1851- ?), and **Harriot Lucy** (1857- ?).³⁹ He met and married **Mary Howe** (1849-1922) in 1877 in Kane, IL. Mary was born in Ireland; she came to the United States in 1870 at the age of 21, accompanied by her brother, **Simon Howe**.⁴⁰ Their first child, **Ann Marie** (1878-1947) was born in St. Louis, MO. By 1880, the family was settled on a rented farm in Emma, KS. The couple's other children, including **Thomas James** (1880-1939), Michelle's great-grandfather; **Lillie Grace** (1881-1940); **Olive** (1884-1937); **Myrtle** (1888-?), **Emma** "Emily" (1890- ?), and **John Bartlett, Jr.** (1893-1947) were all born in Emma, KS.⁴¹ Another child, **Jeanette**, appears in a photograph from around 1895. Based on the absence of that name in census record from 1880 and 1900, along with her physical size in the photograph in relation to the other children, she may have been born and died sometime between those two dates.

The family was financially well-off enough to send at least one daughter, Emily, to college; she attended the Wichita Business College.⁴² After John Bartlett Sr.'s death, Mary went to live with her son,

³⁸ "United States Census, 1880," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:MM9.1.1/MF5M-KKY> : accessed 14 April 2016), Thomas Topham in household of B J Topham, Emma, Harvey, Kansas, United States; citing enumeration district ED 235, sheet 471B, NARA microfilm publication T9 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), roll 0382; FHL microfilm 1,254,382.

³⁹ "England and Wales Census, 1861," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:MM9.1.1/M7RL-1PD> : accessed 15 April 2016), John Barkett Topham in household of John Topham, Great Paxton, Huntingdonshire, England; from "1861 England, Scotland and Wales census," database and images, *findmypast* (<http://www.findmypast.com> : n.d.); citing PRO RG 9, The National Archives, Kew, Surrey.

⁴⁰ "Mrs. Mary Topham," *The Evening Kansan-Republican* (Newton, KS), July 24, 1922, accessed March 30, 2016, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/95978653/?terms=Topham>.

⁴¹ "United States Census 1880," Thomas Topham; "United States Census, 1900," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:MM9.1.1/MMTL-VWG> : accessed 17 April 2016), John B Topham*, Garden Township, Harvey, Kansas, United States; citing sheet 5A, family 67, NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 1,240,482.

⁴² "Automobile Skids Wrecking Buggy: Jay Means Driving in Rain Hits Rig in Which Clarence Dent and Miss Tophan (sic) Are Riding," *Wichita Daily Eagle* (Wichita, KS), June 1, 1912, 9, Newspapers.com, accessed March 30, 2016, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/63284561/?terms=Topham>

John Barlett, Jr. and his family on their farm in Emma.⁴³ Mary and John Topham, Sr. are both buried in Halstead, KS.⁴⁴

⁴³ "Mrs. Mary Topham."

⁴⁴ "John Bartlett Topham," Find a Grave, last modified September 11, 2008, accessed March 30, 2016, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=Topham&GSfn=John&GSbyrel=all&GSdyrel=all&GSst=18&GSctry=4&GSob=n&GRid=29741396&df=all&>.

GENERATION FOUR

A1a1a. Lillian Eldred Martin Sneary (1908-2000)

A1a1b. George Harvey Sneary (1904-1972)

A1a2a. Ethel Carlisle Ford (1905-1991)

A1a2b. John Harness Ford (1897-1975)

A1b1a. Minnie Gertrude Doane Phillips (1879-1962)

A1b1b. Sylvester Simeon Phillips (1876-1963)

A1b2a. Mary AnnaBell Taylor Topham (1887-1963)

A1b2b. Thomas James Topham (1880-1939)

The Snearys, Part 2:

George Harvey Sneary married Lillian Eldred Martin in Beckham County, OK in 1925.⁴⁵ Their first three children, **Laura Eugenia** (1926-2010); **Harvey Ray** (1928-1950); and **Lela Edris** (1929-1980), Michelle's grandmother, were born while the family was living in a small house on George's parents farm. George worked at "odd jobs" for local farmers.⁴⁶

Work was difficult to find in the 1930s, especially in Oklahoma, with its severe drought conditions. George Sneary had an aptitude for mechanics, however, and found work fixing machinery. The family moved to Alva, OK where there was more work. The younger members of the family, including **Max Lewis** (1934-1992), **Maude Ellen** (1937-1937), **Ruth Mae** (1938-1989), **Roy** (1938-2004), **Eileen Dorothy** (Living), **Floyd Clinton** (1943-1997), **Lillian Marie** (Living), and **Nona Pearl** (Living), were all born in Alva.

Many branches of the Sneary family lived in Alva, OK for decades. The town was founded during the Cherokee Land Rush in 1893 as a land office. During WWII, it was the site of a POW camp, holding the most dangerous German POWs, including Gestapo and Nazi leader.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Max Easter.

⁴⁶ "United States Census, 1930", Lela Sneary.

⁴⁷ "Alva, Oklahoma," Wikipedia, accessed January 23, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alva,_Oklahoma.

George eventually saved enough money to open an auto salvage and repair shop.⁴⁸ While many people during that era had to leave Oklahoma in search of work, George's employment allowed the family to stay. The family was far from wealthy, though.

As soon as the Sneary children were able, they all worked in some capacity to contribute to the family economy. The boys worked at their father's auto salvage and repair; the girls assisted their mother Lillian, an accomplished seamstress, with mending and alteration work. Lela had a particular flair for millinery; her hats were always stylish. When Laura and Lela were pre-teens, their father acquired a broken wringer/washing machine; he repaired the machine so that the girls could "take in" laundry in order to have an extra income. Even with these measures, the large family often struggled financially. Lillian Marie, always called "Marie", remembers that the family never lived in a house quite large enough for all of them. While the older children "doubled-up" and even "tripled-up" in beds, Lillian Eldred, had to be creative with sleeping accommodations for the younger children. Babies slept in baskets; Marie recalls that her first bed was a dresser drawer pulled out and fitted with blankets and pillows.⁴⁹

The number of children in the family added greatly to the older children's responsibilities. Aside from the extra expense, the younger members required constant supervision. Lillian Eldred was so overwhelmed that Lela often stepped in as a surrogate mother to her young brothers and sisters. Marie tells of how she did not feel like she really even knew her mother, Lillian Eldred, until she was an adult. Lela was more of a mother to her. In fact, when Marie would leave college on break, she usually went to stay with Lela and her husband and family rather than visiting her own parents.⁵⁰ Due to financial constraints, the oldest Sneary children had limited opportunities for education. Ruth Mae and Roy were the first ones in the family to finish high school; the four oldest surviving siblings left school before then to work. The elder siblings were extremely proud of the younger ones' accomplishments; they did

⁴⁸ "United States Census, 1940," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/VB2M-3DP> : accessed 13 April 2016), George Sneary, Ward 2, Alva, Alva City, Woods, Oklahoma, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) 76-2, sheet 6B, family 151, NARA digital publication T627 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 2012), roll 3341.

⁴⁹ L. Marie Sneary Ruby, telephone interview with author, April 8, 2016.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

everything they could to help the younger members further their educations, including providing financial support. The six youngest surviving Sneary siblings all graduated from college.

The Fords, Part 2:

In 1920, John Harness Ford and his brother James were working on their father's farm; his brother Snowden (Albert), while still living on the farm, was hiring out as a laborer.⁵¹ John saved his wages and bought a farm in Leoti, Kansas. In 1924, he married Ethel Carlisle.⁵²

Ethel Carlisle had a more settled childhood than her husband, whose family had moved frequently. Ethel lived on the farm her parents owned in Whitewoman, Kansas from the time she born until she was married.⁵³ Later in life, when her economic circumstances were tenuous, she fondly recalled her parents' large, well-kept house, along with the beautiful clothes and the expensive toys she had as a child. These included several French and German-made dolls that her father's family brought to Kansas in a covered wagon when they emigrated from New York, one of which now belongs to her great-granddaughter, Michelle.

Ethel and John had two children on their farm near Leoti: **Reba H.** (1926-) and **Warren G.** (1928-), Michelle's grandfather.⁵⁴ The young family was not as fortunate as their parents had been; the severe drought conditions of the 1930s brought repeated crop failures and the bank repossessed their farm. John Harness found work in the gypsum mines outside Medicine Lodge, KS, where two more sons, **Wilber** (1934-) and **Kenneth** (1936-) were born.⁵⁵ The work was not steady, however, and the family was never financially stable. Moreover, the job was dangerous. In 1940, a mine cart struck John Harness, leaving

⁵¹ "United States Census, 1910," John H. Ford; "United States Census, 1920," John H. Ford.

⁵² "United States Census, 1930", database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:X77G-F3C> : accessed 15 April 2016), John H Ford, 1930.

⁵³ "United States Census, 1910," Ethel Carlisle; "United States Census, 1920," Ethel Carlisle.

⁵⁴ "United States Census," John H. Ford, 1930.

⁵⁵ "United States Census, 1940," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:VRVN-S9C> : accessed 15 April 2016), John Ford, Medicine Lodge, Medicine Lodge Township, Barber, Kansas, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) 4-14, sheet 15B, family 374, NARA digital publication T627 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 2012), roll 1219.

him paralyzed from the waist down. With the household head disabled, Reba and Warren left school to work.⁵⁶

Since moving to Medicine Lodge, Ethel had been very active in the Women's Christian Temperance Union; Carrie Nation herself had founded the Medicine Lodge chapter. In 1950, the group purchased Carrie Nation's former home in Medicine Lodge. Citing John Harness' disability and Ethel's dedication to the cause, the group appointed the couple caretakers of the property. For a number of years, the family actually lived in the Carrie Nation House. Their great-grandson, **Michael Todd Topham** (1966-), recalled family reunions at the property. John, an amateur geologist, shared his knowledge of rocks, while Ethel reminded the family of the dangers of alcohol. John's brother, James, often visited with tales of his adventures overseas. Michael described him as a "real-life Indiana Jones." James ran away at fifteen; no one in the family knew his whereabouts for over two decades. According to family lore, he bought passage on a ship to China; he eventually worked his way through many countries in Asia and Europe, finally returning to Kansas as a successful man. Michael's favorite times as a child involved looking at "Uncle Jim's" photos and souvenirs and listening to his stories.⁵⁷ John and Ethel Ford lived their quiet life in Medicine Lodge until his death in 1975. Ethel moved to Pratt, KS with her children, where she died in 1991. Their graves are in Nashville, KS.⁵⁸

The Phillipses, Part 2:

Sylvester Simeon Phillips married Minnie Gertrude Doane in 1898 in McPherson, KS.⁵⁹ In 1900, the couple was living on a rented farm outside of McPherson, KS with their nearly year old son **William**

⁵⁶ M. Todd Topham, phone interview with the author, March 28, 2016.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ "United States Social Security Death Index," database, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:JL5R-7YF> : accessed 15 April 2016), John Ford, Nov 1975; citing U.S. Social Security Administration, Death Master File, database (Alexandria, Virginia: National Technical Information Service, ongoing); Tony Mantey, "Ethel Carlisle Ford," Find a Grave, last modified July 12, 2006, accessed March 10, 2016, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=9744157>.

⁵⁹ Becky Doan, "Sylvester Simeon Phillips," Find a Grave, last modified July 2, 2014, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=Phillips&GSfn=Sylvester&GSbyrel=all&GSdyrel=all&GSst=18&GSctry=4&GSob=n&GRid=132187803&df=all&>

Francis (1874-1913).⁶⁰ By 1910, the family had moved to Iuka, outside of Pratt, KS where Sylvester was working as a stockman on a ranch that he owned. Five more children had joined the family: **Mary** (1901-1920), **Gladys E.** (1903-1997), **Herbert Merle** (1905-1970), **Ruth Beatrice** (1907-2007), and **Donald S.** (1909-1929).⁶¹ As of 1920, Simon had converted his ranch to land for “general farming,” and the family had added the four more children, for a total of eleven. The youngest members were **Carl Clayton** (1911-1911); **Edna Gertrude** (1912-1985), Michelle’s grandmother; **Harold Dean** (1914- ?); **Richard M.** (1916-1916); and **Delbert Pershing** (1918-1991).

The Tophams, Part 2:

Thomas James Topham married Anna Bell Taylor in 1905 in Sedgwick County, KS.⁶² By 1920, they owned a farm near Delano, KS, where they lived with their five children. All five, including **Cordie B.** (1911-2003); **Russell James** (1914-1996), Michelle’s grandfather; **Aqbee** (1917-1999); and **Raymond** (1920-2000) were born in Delano.⁶³ The farm was successful enough for the family to be financially able to own an automobile in 1920. An article in *The Wichita Daily Eagle* describes how thieves stole the tires and wheels from the family automobile while it was parked outside of St. Paul’s Methodist Episcopal Church during Sunday services.⁶⁴ Thomas was active in the community. He was a board member of his district Farm Bureau.⁶⁵ He was also an elected Delano Township Delegate.⁶⁶ Their children were also

⁶⁰ "United States Census, 1900," S.S Phillips.

⁶¹ "United States Census, 1910," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/M2Z7-F2H> : accessed 15 April 2016), Sylvester Phillips, Pratt Ward 3, Pratt, Kansas, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) ED 133, sheet 13B, NARA microfilm publication T624 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 1,374,466.

⁶² Kansas County Marriages, 1855-1911, database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:Q29Q-M41T> : accessed 14 April 2016), T J Topham and Anna Bell Taylor, 26 Feb 1905; citing Marriage, Sedgwick, Kansas, United States, district clerk, court clerk, county clerk and register offices from various counties; FHL microfilm 2,364,157.

⁶³ "United States Census, 1920," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/MF6Y-QFK> : accessed 14 April 2016), Thomas Topham, Delano, Sedgwick, Kansas, United States; citing sheet 2B, NARA microfilm publication T625 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 1,820,548.

⁶⁴ “Cars Are Stripped: Thieves Takes Tires, Tubes and Rims from Autos Parked in Streets,” *Wichita Daily Eagle* (Wichita, KS), July 13, 1920, 1, Newspaper.com, accessed March 30, 2016, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/63964389/>.

⁶⁵ “Sedgwick County Bureau Largest in the State,” *Wichita Daily Eagle* (Wichita, KS), September 25, 1921, 78, Newspaper.com, accessed March 30, 2016,

actively involved; a 1922 *The Wichita Daily Eagle* ran a story on a play that Russell and Aqbee participated in at Vacation Bible School.⁶⁷ In 1930, the family was still living on the same farm.⁶⁸ Records show a picture of an average, prosperous, Midwestern farm family. Yet in 1939, at the age of 60, Thomas Topham hung himself in his own barn. The family, publicly at least, was completely baffled as to why.⁶⁹ Given the time period, with farms failing due to severe drought conditions, the possibility exists that his suicide might have been related to financial stress; given his age, health problems might have been a contributing factor. Michelle's grandfather, Russell, did not discuss his parents with his grandchildren much.

Oddly, when Michelle was very young, her family lived blocks away from a subdivision that had been built in the 1950s on the site of the Tophams' former farm. The subdivision Michelle lived in was built on the site of an orchard that had been next to the farm. Michelle's brother once pointed out to her a church that he believed to have been built where the Tophams' barn had once stood.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/63967602/?terms=Topham>

⁶⁶ "Township Delegates," *Wichita Daily Eagle* (Wichita, KS), April 24, 1912, 8, Newspapers.com, accessed March 30, 2016, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/63283875/?terms=Topham>.

⁶⁷ "Bible Stories Dramatized by 'Kid' Classes," *Wichita Daily Eagle* (Wichita, KS), July 9, 1922, 2, Newspapers.com, accessed March 30, 2016, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/63995692/?terms=Topham>

⁶⁸ "United States Census, 1930", database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:X774-1GF> : accessed 17 April 2016), Thomas J Topham, 1930.

⁶⁹ "Farmer a Suicide, Wichita," *Hutchinson News* (Hutchinson, KS), July 23, 1939, 4, Newspapers.com, accessed March 30, 2016, <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/3252124/>.

GENERATION THREE

A1a1. Lela Edris Sneary Ford (1929-1980)

A1a2. Warren G. Ford (1928-)

A1b1. Edna Gertrude Phillips Topham (1912-1985)

A1b2. Russell James Topham, Sr. (1914-1996)

The Fords, Part 3:

When she was sixteen, Lela Edris Sneary became pregnant with her first child, **Cherrie Alice Ford** (1947-1980). Lela, fearing her parents' anger, at first did not tell them about her pregnancy. She did tell her boyfriend, Warren G. Ford who was only seventeen at the time.

Warren spent the first three years of his life on his parents' farm outside of Wichita, Kansas.⁷⁰ His family lost the farm, though, due to crop failures during the Dust Bowl years, so Warren understood the financial insecurity Lela had grown up with. After drifting through several jobs, Warren's father, John , found steady employment in mining, finally settling the family on the southern outskirts of Medicine Lodge, Kansas.⁷¹ The town was close to Alva, just across the border from Oklahoma. He met Lela through her brother Ray. The two men became close friends, having met through their mutual interest in drag racing. Warren was also a mechanic, like Lela's father and brothers. He even worked for her father occasionally. Warren and Ray were well-known in the Alva area for the "hot-rods" they built and raced. Both had a reputation for being a bit wild; Lela's parents would not have approved of her relationship with Warren, if they had known.

The family still tells the story of how Warren and Lela came to be married: Warren's best friend was Lela's brother, Ray. The two of them were evidently the quintessential wild hot-rodders of their day, always building and racing cars. Lela's younger sister, Ruth Mae, recalled being embarrassed when the kids at school would sing about Ray: "Hot-Rod Sneary speeds his way to the cemetery." For some time, both Warren and the local preacher's son had been "visiting" Lela. Warren definitely did not meet with

⁷⁰ "United States Census, 1930," John H. Ford.

⁷¹ "United States Census, 1940," John Ford.

her parents' approval. When he asked her father if they could marry, her father threw him out of the house. The story goes that he left in a rage and began driving his car around the house in circles, revving the engine and flinging gravel at the windows, and screaming grandma's name, until Ray came out to get him. Evidently, Lela had finally confessed to her parents that she was pregnant. At this point, the story repeated by many family members differs slightly from reality. According to the legend, Lela's parents then immediately agreed to the marriage, but told her he would never amount to anything. When their granddaughter was little she used to love watching Warren work on his house and the custom cars he built. He seemed particularly proud of the beautiful house he had built, as he always said, "for your Grandma Lela." This story speaks to the theme of **mentality**, as discussed in Claude S. Fischer's book, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*.⁷² Warren spent years improving himself and working hard to build a better life for Lela- probably to prove her father wrong!

In reality, the couple did not marry immediately. After much discussion about the youth of both parties, her parents decided not to allow her to leave home or marry until she was seventeen. Lela had the unusual experience of living in the same house as her mother while both of them were pregnant! She and Warren were married after her seventeenth birthday. Her daughter Cherrie's birth certificate reads as if they had been married all along, however. Lela was sensitive her entire life about having had a child so young. She often listed her birth date as a year or two before the actual date, in order to give the impression that she was older.

After their marriage, Warren continued to work as a mechanic, but the young couple loved to travel on Warren's motorcycle, when they could find the time. They often strapped Cherrie in a pack on Lela's back for these trips. When Cherrie was two, the family rode all the way to Mexico. Once there, they had portraits taken. Lela was small and pale, with clouds of wavy dark hair. Her daughter had similar hair, but white-blond like her father's hair, and very large eyes. In one photo, Warren stands behind them, his hair in a perfect blond pompadour.

⁷² Claude S. Fischer. *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 195-240.

When Lela was pregnant with their second child, **Georgia Gaye** (Living), Warren found a permanent position working as a mechanic at a livestock yard in Pratt, Kansas, and the young family finally settled in one place. They had a third daughter, **Helen Joann** (Living), a few years later. During the next few years, Lela suffered a series of miscarriages; in 1952, she managed to carry a child to term, but her daughter, **Marsha Lynn** (1952-1952), did not live long. The next year, another daughter, **Randi Kaye** (1953-1953), also died in the first year of her life.

While Warren continued to pursue his interest in cars, the couple found new interests they could share together. With Warren's promotion to head mechanic, they could afford many things they had not had as children. Lela and Warren designed, and he built, their home. Everyone had their own room. Lela had a space at the back of the house where she could work on her painting and ceramics.

The kitchen was spacious, with a big dining area off of the living room, a grand stone fireplace, and a large two-car garage with a shop where Warren could build cars. The garage had its own separate bathroom with a separate laundry hamper. Lela sent Warren's greasy mechanic's uniforms straight to a cleaning service. After having spent years laundering her father's and brother's grease-covered work clothes, she was quite happy never to have those uniforms in her house. The Fords were also now able to afford to keep horses. As an alternative to riding motorcycles, the couple joined the Pratt Saddle Club. Every family member could ride; they bought Cherrie her first pony when she was four. Eventually all of them had at least one horse boarded in the Pratt Stables. Members of the Pratt Saddle Club elected Warren president for decades. Michelle recalls the large silver and gold belt buckle with the dates of his service engraved on it that the club presented him when he finally retired. Warren spent years building a grand motor home so the family could travel, with horses in tow by trailer. Through the Saddle Club, they also found another hobby they could share: square dancing. Lela made all of her own square dance costumes, along with matching western shirts for Warren. Their grand-daughter, **Deirdre JoAnn Perry** (1972-), remembers how detailed and colorful they were, much fancier than any for sale locally. She

also vividly remembers Lela's dozens of pairs of tiny jewel-toned dancing shoes. Lela's feet were so small that her granddaughters outgrew her shoes when they were in grade school.⁷³

Lela was very close to her grandchildren. All of her daughters had troubled marriages; all three returned home with their children more than once, sometimes for weeks, sometimes for years. After her daughter Georgia's divorce, Georgia and her children moved into a house across the back alley from Lela. Lela and Warren's house became a second home for Deirdre Perry, her brother **Robert Warren Perry** (1967 -) and her twin sister **Billie Jo Perry** (1972-). In 1979, with all three daughters single and living in town, Lela gave up her job as receptionist at a veterinary office in order to help with their children.

Lela's death was sudden and completely unexpected; her family never quite recovered from the shock. In 1980, Warren came home for lunch one day to find her dead. She is buried in Pratt, Kansas, near the two daughters she lost in the 1950s. Warren sold their home, motor home, and all of their horses over the next two years. He remarried several years later; he and his wife, **Juanita**, have lived in Wichita, KS since then.

The Tophams, Part 3:

Edna Gertrude Phillips, once she was old enough, worked as a school teacher when she was young. Russell James Topham, Sr., was stationed in Hawaii during the Korean War. He played baseball for the Navy, as well as having played some minor league baseball prior to his enlistment. Family lore holds that Russell James was an impressive switch-hitter and switch-pitcher; he could use both hands equally well, a skill his grandson Todd Topham inherited. According to family stories, Russell James struck out baseball legend Ted Williams during a game in Hawaii. While the story has proved difficult to verify, further research might be able to determine if the two were every in the same place or not. Ted Williams was known for a weakness against lefty pitchers, though.⁷⁴ After Edna and Russell married, they both gave up

⁷³ Deirdre Joann Perry Hoeme, telephone interview with author, April 7, 2016.

⁷⁴ M. Todd Topham.

their former professions. The two settled on a farm outside of Pratt, KS. They had three children: **Nancy** (Living); **Russell James, Jr.** (1940-2007); and **Randolph Phillips** (1941-), Michelle's father.

By the time Michelle was old enough to remember, Russell James, Sr. and Edna Gertrude, they were already in their late 60s. Michelle remembers that when she visited, Russell James, Sr. would come in from the fields, put his Co-Op cap on the table next to the bowl of wheat kernels that was always on it, and make a big show of fishing around in the pocket of his overalls. He would tell her that he was sure something always magically appeared there for her; it was usually candy. When the Whatchamacallit candy bar first came out, Russell. asked the local Co-Op feed store to keep them in stock because his small granddaughter, Michelle said they were her new favorite. Edna Gertrude was not very active; she had developed diabetes. She always made sure the freezer had fudgsicles for the grandchildren, though, and never minded when Michelle played with their piano, even though she did not really know how to play.

Michelle remembers their farm as if it were part of them. It was nothing special; just an average Midwestern farm, a little run down as the owners aged. Her first clear memory, though, is from a visit to that farm. She had been sleeping in her playpen, next to a low-silled window in her father's old bedroom. Waking up in the bright moonlight, she turned to look out the window, and came nose to nose with a raccoon looking in. She remembers staring at the funny, furry face until her mother woke up and scared it away. Michelle also remembers lying on her father's old pole-vault practice mat, half-rotted with age, outside of their biggest barn at dusk. If she and her brother lay perfectly still, a huge white owl would fly out closely over them a sunset.

After Michelle's mother died and she was sent to live with maternal relatives when she was seven, she did not see her paternal grandparents again. Edna Gertrude passed away in 1985; Russell James, Sr. died in 1996. Both are buried in Wichita, KS.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Robert Mitchel, "Russell James Topham, Sr.," Find a Grave, last updated May 17, 2010, accessed March 30, 2016. <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=51509763>.

GENERATION TWO

A1a. Cherrie Alice Ford Topham (1947-1980)

A1b. Randolph Phillips Topham (1941-)

The Tophams, Part 4

Cherrie Alice Ford Topham grew up in Pratt, KS. Her family liked horses and western music; Cherrie was more interested in Elvis Presley and places outside of Pratt. School was difficult for her; she would discover, as an adult, that she had probably been struggling as an unidentified dyslexic. In spite of her academic difficulties, she was very popular. Her younger sister, Georgia, had a story she liked to tell about Cherrie:

When Cherrie learned how to drive, her parents decided to buy her a car, something that most girls her age would have envied. When Warren came home with a Ford Edsel, though, Cherrie declared she “wouldn’t be caught dead driving that ugly thing.” Warren then gave the car to Georgia, telling Cherrie that she was welcome to walk instead. Georgia always noted, with laugh, that “Cherrie never walked anywhere.”

Cherrie met Randolph Topham when she was a freshman in high school; he was visiting his parents on break from classes and The University of Kansas. Randolph “Randy” Topham was born in Mulvane, KS. He, like Cherrie, had grown up in Pratt, KS. Randy, unlike Cherrie, did not have any difficulty in school. He was valedictorian of his class. He was also athletic. He set the Kansas State record for pole vault when he was in high school; the record was not broken until the 1990s. After high school, his parents sent him to The University of Kansas. He did not finish his degree, however.

Both the Topham and Ford parents were concerned about their age difference, as well as some difference in their socio-economic statuses. Randy’s parents, Russell James and Edna Gertrude Phillips Topham, were reasonably well to do; they owned a successful farm outside of Pratt. Cherrie’s parents, Warren G. and Lela Edris Sneary Ford, were comfortable, but not wealthy; Warren was a mechanic. Their parents’ misgivings may have been correct, as they divorced in 1966, shortly before their son, Michael was born.

Cherrie eventually married a local farmer, **Dan Hilt**. Their daughter, **Lisa Marie Hilt** (1968-1968), did not survive her first year. The Hilt's divorced in 1970 Cherrie quickly gained her CNA certification in order to support her and Michael. She and her son lived in a small apartment in Pratt with her sister, Georgia, who was separated from her husband, and her son Robert for the next two years. In 1972, Cherrie and Randy reconciled and remarried. Their daughter, **Michelle LeAnn Topham** (1973-) was born a year later. She was premature, and had to spend months in the hospital before she could come home with them. Michelle and Michael, when they were older, liked to confuse people by joking that they were from different marriages: same parents, but different marriages. Cherrie and Randy's marriage was always rocky; they often separated. Michelle remembers frequently returning to her maternal grandparents' house in Pratt, KS for weeks at a time.

The economic difficulties the couple experienced probably contributed a great deal to their conflicts. In the 1970s, due to the poor economy and high unemployment, people without college degrees often had difficulty finding good paying jobs. Randy's low-wage factory jobs and Cherrie's home day care income left the family with tight finances. To add to the stress, the couple had enormous medical bills from their daughters' birth and subsequent hospital stay. Once both of their children were in school, Cherrie returned to work as a CNA; the couple often worked opposite shifts, barely seeing each other for weeks at a time.

The couple tried to make time for their children, in spite of the stress. Randy would take Michael to play tennis on weekends; they were both highly competitive. They were also huge rivals at chess. Both children would accompany him to coin shows; he had collected them since he was a child. Cherrie was always willing to play. At family reunions, she avoided sitting with the adults; she was always in the middle of whatever rowdy game the children were playing. An accomplished artist, she would draw fabulous pictures for her children to color. Michelle still has some of her drawings. She loved taking them to James Bond movies, or any movie with Clint Eastwood. Sometimes they could talk her into taking them to Chuck Norris karate movies.

Michelle remembers that her parents did not always argue. Some of her favorite memories are of them dancing. They would move all of the furniture to the edges of the living room and put on records of '50s music. Those were evenings of laughter and fun; the Tophams were pretty impressive swing dancers.

GENERATION ONE

The Tophams, Part 5

Michelle LeAnn Topham Sours was born at Wesley Medical Center in Wichita, Kansas to Randolph Phillips and Cherrie Alice Ford Topham. Cherrie was a very small woman, only about 4' 11" tall, so all three of her pregnancies had been difficult and short. Michelle was the most premature, weighing only 3 lbs. at birth. The family was fortunate to live so close to Wesley Medical Center which had one of the most advanced neo-natal intensive care units in the country at the time. Without the medical expertise available there, Michelle probably would not have survived. As it was, she was almost 3 months old before she was able to return home with her parents and older brother Michael. Michelle's first home was a small apartment in a triplex on San Pablo Drive in Wichita, Kansas; her brother Michael remembers it as cramped and noisy. Randy and Cherrie had moved to Wichita, the largest city in Kansas, a year before Michelle was born.

The Tophams moved to a small ranch-style house on Sheridan Street in the heart of Wichita when Michelle was two; this was the first house she remembers. Michelle's parents did not encourage her or Todd to explore their neighborhood. While Randy was comfortable in the city (his grandparents had lived on a farm in old Delano, now part of Wichita), Cherrie was used to a smaller town and fearful of the urban area. She was also uncomfortable with Randy's friends, all native Wichitans who she felt looked down on her as uneducated and provincial, so the family did not socialize much. Work was difficult for many people to find in the 1970s, especially for those, like Michelle's parents, without college degrees. Both Randy and Cherrie worked long hours, often on different shifts, so Michelle was frequently home alone with her brother. The children were always under strict orders not to leave their house and yard.

Michelle remembers Wichita of the 1970s as a dangerous place. A serial killer, the BTK, stalked and murdered women, many who fit the same description as Cherrie; Michelle was terrified of losing her mother. Randy brought home stories of knife fights and racial gang wars at the meat-packing plant where he worked. His brother, Russell, visited the house with tales of union strikes and the violent conflicts

surrounding them. Michelle listened intently to every story her father and uncle told. Adding to the atmosphere of worry, the local news was constantly filled with reports of crime. A wave of race riots swept over the area around the campus of Wichita State University, near their house, year after year. Every Halloween, numerous reports surfaced of razor-blades in popcorn balls and poison in candy given to trick-or-treaters. Several Girl Scouts were killed at a local camp; a serial rapist targeted paperboys. Michelle's older brother had her ride on the handlebars of his bicycle with him every morning when she was in kindergarten so he did not have to ride his paper route alone.

Michelle's fears were also heightened by the superstitions handed down by her Irish and Scottish ancestors. Her childhood was filled with tales of hauntings and curses. Randy retold stories from his great-grandmother, Mary Howe Topham, about witches' circles and ghosts she had supposedly seen in Ireland. Her brother Michael loved to retell these stories; one story that particularly impressed Michelle was that her great-grandfather had hung himself in a Delano barn, not far from their house's location. Michelle's brother, Michael, was her main influence in childhood. He encouraged her love of music and learning. He knew she always wished she could have a piano, but the family could not afford one. When Michelle was 6, he used the lawnmower his grandfather had given him for Christmas to earn enough money to buy her a toy piano. It was her most treasured possession. He, with help from Cherrie, also taught her reading and math at a very early age. Cherrie and Randy did all they could to encourage Michelle to love learning. Cherrie made as many trips to the local library as she could find time for; Randy brought home as many children's books as he could manage to buy.

Unfortunately for Michelle, O.K. Elementary in Wichita, where she started, was run-down, over-full, and under-staffed. The extra-large class of kindergarteners overwhelmed her teacher, a new college-graduate. The teacher was ill-prepared for a five-year old who knew how to read and whose twelve-year-old brother was teaching her multiplication. Being forced to sit through rote recitation of ABCs and tracing numbers certainly did not make Michelle enthusiastic about school; the opportunity to make friends her own age for the first time did. After some false starts, Michelle became much more social. She also discovered that by picking up some of the Spanish and Vietnamese language many of her classmates

were speaking, she and her new friends could converse without the teachers knowing what they were saying! When Michelle was invited to her very first birthday party, Cherrie worried about not being able to afford a gift. Michelle remembers watching her mother create a wonderful rabbit doll with an embroidered face from men's tube socks and a dress hand-made from scrap fabric; it was her friend's favorite gift.

Cherrie continued to worry, though, about her family's safety in Wichita. Older kids harassed both of the children when they had to walk home from school. When Randy lost his job, Cherrie was adamant that it was time to move back to Pratt. The move was a difficult one, as in the more rural area, none of the jobs for which Randy was qualified paid nearly as much as the one he had lost in Wichita. The family was unable to afford the cost of renting a house. Instead, they moved into a single-wide trailer in a park. Cherrie now had a new worry. She feared that the trailer park was not a good environment for her children to grow up in.

As it turned out, that particular trailer park was the nicest ones in the area, with plenty of yard space and a large playground in the center. Feeling that the children were at least secure from crime in Pratt, Cherrie allowed them to roam the neighborhood. For the first time, Michelle was able to wander and play with whomever she liked. She and Michael were also allowed to ride their bicycles to the bowling alley, the candy store, and the nearby creek for fishing. They often rode further down the road and visited Randy at the Kansas State Fish and Game Headquarters, where he had gotten a job as a night warehouse security guard. They were allowed to explore the museum, with its elaborate displays of stuffed wildlife, and the fish hatchery. Michelle read everything she saw.

Cherrie's sister Georgia and her three children also still lived in Pratt. Michelle absolutely loved being able to play weekly, if not daily, with her twin cousins Deirdre and Billie, who were just one year older than her. Michael also liked being reunited with his year-younger cousin, Robbie, who he had lived with as a small child. The cousins lived in a house directly behind their grandparents. All five children were allowed to roam that neighborhood as well. Michelle also, to her absolute delight, got to ride horses on trail rides with her grandparents, as Warren Ford was president of The Pratt Saddle Club.

The elementary school was even better; all of her new friends from her home neighborhood went to school there as well. In Wichita, with the busing programs set up to de-segregate the schools, not all of the neighborhood kids had gone to the same school. Michelle did have one disappointment; the librarian refused to let her check out any of the *Black Beauty* series she had been reading in Wichita. Furthermore, she embarrassed her by claiming, in front of everyone, that someone her age was just “showing off” picking a book like that, since she could not possibly read it. When Cherrie discovered why Michelle was upset, she visited the school to complain. The principal explained that the district was starting a new program for advanced or “gifted” students, and suggested that Michelle should be tested for it. Her mother was extremely proud of Michelle’s academic abilities, especially in light of her own struggles. The family began to look for a reasonably priced house they could buy.

As she was starting 2nd grade, plans changed. Michelle’s parents’ marriage fell apart again. Cherrie filed for divorce and Randy moved to his parents’ farm. Cherrie planned to move the children to a smaller trailer she could afford alone. Overall, Randy’s absence only meant that there was less arguing in the house; Michelle still saw him just as often. Other than Cherrie switching to night shift, life continued as normal, until one day when Michelle was called to the office at school because her mother had died suddenly.

After their mother’s death, Michelle and her brother went to live with a great-aunt and great-uncle, Ruth Mae Sneary and Franklin John Barnett (1937-2009) in Haysville, KS. The Barnetts had three children of their own: **Donna Marie** (1960-), **John Franklin** (1962-), and **Charles Raymond** (1965-). Donna was already away at college when the Topham siblings moved in with the Barnetts. John was in his last year of high school; Charles, like Michael, was in his first year of high school.

Life at the Barnett house was quite different than life had been in the Topham house. The Barnetts were deeply devout Evangelical Christians. Michelle’s parents, while both baptized in Protestant churches, did not provide her with any religious instruction as a small child. Her parents had moved from the Christian and Episcopalian groups of their youths into the group claiming no religion. They were not atheists or agnostics; they simply paid very little attention to religions. This change was extremely

confusing for Michelle; and her Ruth and Franklin were quite upset that she had not received any religious instruction previously. As a result, they placed a large amount of emphasis on instruction in Christianity.

Claude S. Fischer and Michael Hout explore the changing demographics in regard to religion in the United States in their book *Century of Difference; How America Changed in the Last One Hundred Years*. In Figure 8.1 "Current Religious Preferences of American Adults Age Twenty-Five to Seventy-Four," Fischer and Hout break down the religious preferences claimed by Americans around the year 2000. The chart shows more than 50% of Americans claimed to be Protestant, while a little over 25% claimed to be Catholic. Those who claimed no religion made up almost 15% of the population (though the authors stipulate that this does not mean all of these people were atheists or agnostics; the category is for all who claim no affiliation with an organized religion. All other categories, including Orthodox Christian, "Christian," Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and "other" accounted for less than 5% of the population each.⁷⁶

Further complicating the situation, Michelle spent summers with other relatives. One uncle she stayed with had been raised Orthodox Jewish, but was no longer practicing. He and his wife had a great deal of interest in Buddhism and other eastern religions. Another aunt was Roman Catholic; her older brother converted to Eastern Orthodox Catholic while serving overseas in the military. Discussion of religion with various relatives of different beliefs, coupled with her lack of religious identification at a young age, led Michelle to question her conservative aunt and uncle's beliefs. This led to quite a bit of tension between her and the relatives she lived with for most of her childhood. As an adult, Michelle has tried to make sure her children have some religious instruction, especially since her husband's family has a long history of Roman Catholicism, while allowing them the freedom to explore their own faith independently.

The year of upheaval left Michelle shy and quiet; much of her childhood was spent reading. Her new guardians introduced her to the local librarian, who was always a friend to her. While somewhat strict

⁷⁶Claude S. Fischer and Michael Hout, *Century of Difference; How America Changed in the Last One Hundred Years* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), 188-9.

about material purchases, they were nearly always willing to buy her books. Ruth and Franklin, learning of her fascination with the piano, also signed her up for piano lessons. The piano saved her, in a way; music was the perfect way to combat sadness. Michelle spent countless hours practicing the piano; she eventually would do very well in concert piano competitions in middle school and high school.

The school district in Haysville finished the academic testing that the Pratt schools had started with Michelle. The school decided to place her in the gifted program; she has always wished her mother could have lived to see it. Her experiences in the program were somewhat mixed, though, as her children's would be later. Her elementary gifted teacher loved worksheets. Michelle would finish them quickly; the teacher would tell her to sit quietly. It was not a great deal different than the classroom. Her junior high school gifted teacher actually told her and another student that he "didn't know why girls were in the gifted program anyway, since most of them just went on to be housewives." Her high school advisor in Haysville, Damon Weber, was amazing, though. He believed that all students were gifted in some area; he asked teachers in each subject area to send him students that they thought would benefit from specific activities within the program and included those other students, as well as those who were identified as gifted. He opened a world of opportunities and ideas for Michelle and every student he encountered.

The Barnetts were very strict about the activities of their children, including Michelle. None of the children were allowed to watch television and dancing was forbidden. Rock and roll music was also not allowed. Ruth was extremely nervous about the idea of the girls going anywhere unaccompanied; her oldest daughter did not get a drivers' license until she was eighteen. After the relative freedom of her parents' household, Michelle found these old-fashioned restrictions difficult to accept, especially as she neared her teenage years.

Michelle's favorite times during her years with the Barnetts were the times she spent with her great-grandmother, Lillian Sneary. Lillian would often spend a week at the Barnett's house. She and Michelle were good friends. Michelle loved to read aloud to her and listen to the stories she told about her childhood in Colorado and Oklahoma before the Great Depression. During the summers, Michelle was allowed to spend months at a time at Lillian's house in Attica, KS. Lillian let Michelle help with her huge

garden; she grew and canned a good deal of her own food. She also grew the most amazing varieties of iris; her flowerbeds were legendary in the small town. Her house was peaceful and relaxing. Attica was such a small town, Lillian did not worry as much about safety as the Barnetts did in their suburb of Wichita. Michelle was allowed a great deal more freedom at Lillian's house.

Two conversations Michelle had with Lillian stood out in her mind for the rest of her life. One summer in the 1980s a cousin of Michelle's left an old 1970s vintage Maverick in the garage. The cousins all joked and wondered if their great-grandmother would get bored and learn how to drive, as she had never driven an automobile. Michelle had always wondered how Lillian, the wife and mother of mechanics and car enthusiasts, could have avoided learning how to drive. Lillian confessed that she had thought about doing so over the years. She explained that marriage was sometimes difficult. During her marriage to George, she had been afraid that if she learned how to drive she would leave him sometime when she was angry. She decided that if she had resisted learning to drive through their tough times that she had no need to learn in her old age. Another time Michelle, noticing a row of old work boots near the back door, asked her grandmother why she did not throw them out. Lillian explained that she could not bear to do so. They made her feel like her husband George, who had died the year Michelle was born, was still coming home.

When Michelle was sixteen she went to live with her mother's younger sister, Georgia Ford Perry, and her children in the small town of Cunningham, near Pratt, KS. Her great-aunt, Ruth Barnett, died of cancer later that year. Life in Cunningham was a bit of a culture shock after having attended a large urban high school outside of Wichita, but Michelle was happy to be living with the cousins who had been her childhood playmates. The opportunity to participate in social activities again with less restriction was wonderful, though. Some of the activities, like rodeos and community dances were certainly outside the norm for a city girl, but fun nevertheless!

The summer before her senior year of high school, Michelle took an internship with *The Pratt Tribune*, an award-winning newspaper in Pratt, KS. With the paper short-staffed, she took on the duties of a general reporter. Her senior year she was recognized as a National Merit Finalist. She received several

scholarships, including the Kansas County Clerks' Association Scholarship for Journalism. Her National Merit Scholarship allowed her to attend The University of Kansas, even without any parental support. She lived in Sellards Scholarship Hall for her first two years at the college.

Michelle loved Lawrence, with its liberal atmosphere and storied history; however, after three years at KU, Michelle made an impulsive decision. She withdrew from KU and moved in with her with her boyfriend of six months, Michael Del Sours (1974-), in Pittsburg, KS. She was twenty and he was nineteen. Two decades later, Michelle would tell her children that it was the most ill-advised thing that two people who were that young could do; but it turned out to be the best decision she ever made.

The Sours

The Sours family story is still being written, and for now it is theirs. Michelle sees her children as a culmination of the lives that have led up to theirs, from her family and from her husband's family. She can see, in them, the same tough fiber that ancestors going through the difficult Depression years in the plains of the Midwest, the tenacity that made them refuse to give up and leave. She saw it when her oldest son, smaller than most of the boys his age, spent hours every day practicing pitching when he was ten. He threw the baseball at a metal bucket nailed to the barn until he knocked a hole through it; he was insistent that nothing would stop him from playing baseball. She sees it every time her middle son sets his mind to learning yet another musical instrument; she sees it when he pushes himself to run harder and farther than he thought he could. She even sees it when the baby sets his determined little jaw, picks himself up, and climbs back up on the chair he just fell off of head first. As Michelle decided when her oldest was young, this family trait is not stubbornness, in the negative sense; what has kept everyone going is sheer determination.