

## Mary Louisa Black Lange Writes her Memories

Later included in the Family Cookbook in her honor.

On November 15, 1899 Frank Montague Van Syckle, only son of Edgar Van Syckle and Mary Louise Montague Van Syckle, was married to Ada N. Gauss, daughter of Godfrey Gauss and Mary Elizabeth Brooks. They went to live with John Van Syckle, an Uncle whose wife had died several years before. It was a farm home northeast of the little village of **Plainfield** in **Unadilla Township of Livingston County, Michigan**. Frank was to do the farm work and Ada to keep the house.

On October 7th, 1900, a daughter was born to them, who they named **Mary Louisa**. She, Now 83 years of age, writes these words, recollections of events experienced and remembered or of circumstances as told to her. During the winter after Louisa's birth it was decided that grandparents, **Edgar and Louise**, would buy a house in the little village and **Frank and Ada** would take over the farming on Grandfather's large farm southeast of **Plainfield**. This moving was done in spring of **1901**. On **May 18th, 1903** another daughter whom they named **Eugenia** arrived. My earliest recollections are of life in the farmhouse, and time spent outside in the barns and fields.

Methods of farming were very different from now. Work was accomplished by either manpower and, or horsepower. There were always at least two teams of heavy, strong, workhorses and one buggy horse, who drew the buggy or cutter [wintertime], which took the family to the store or Church. Grandfather also had a horse and buggy in which he came to the farm almost every day for several years to help with the farming.

Generally at least one of the workhorses was a mare so there were young colts as well as calves, lambs and pigs for us to watch-perhaps feed, as we grew older. Also, there were always chickens to be fed and eggs to be gathered-jobs we soon learned to do. In thinking of the young horses I particularly remember a pair of bays whom we named Flora and Fan. We thought they were beautiful. Then one day as they were running about in their enclosure, Fan ran into a broken wire jutting out of the fence. It pierced her shoulder and resulted in a serious infection and death. I still recall how sad we all felt.

There were none of the modern conveniences to lighten the work for my mother and we girls learned to do many things to help. For instance, foods that needed to be kept cool had to be carried to the cool cellar immediately after meals and only brought up again when needed. So that meant many trips up and down the cellar stairs. We were expected to make those trips



when the items were not too large or bulky for us to carry. In the later summer or fall there was always large barrel filled with sliced cabbage and salt. After being allowed to ferment, we had delicious Sauer-kraut. I can recall going to the cellar after returning from school for a "snack" of sauerkraut.

My mother made her own bread, churned the cream which she had dipped from the flat pans of milk left standing until the cream rose to the surface. Of course, there was lots of other cooking and baking-pies, cakes, cookies, puddings.

Then there was the laundry to do. My earliest recollections are of a large copper boiler, which was put on top of the huge kitchen range. Partly filled with soft water-pumped from a cistern. Into which the rainwater, which fell on the house roof, was channeled-. To this copper boiler the water was reinforced with soft soap, also made by mother from waste fats and lye. The light colored clothes were immersed in the boiler and were boiled for as long as she felt necessary. Then they were lifted out into a bucket or tub of fresh clean water, rubbed by hand and hung outdoors to dry. The colored clothes, which could not be boiled, were allowed to soak in the boiler off the stove, then rubbed and rinsed also. Then, of course, on another day almost everything had to be ironed. That meant heating the "sad-irons" on the range and when the days were hot it made the kitchen very uncomfortable. Mother always planned to bake bread at the same time the ironing was done. We girls learned early to move the hot irons quickly across the house linens but Mother always did the dresses and shirts herself.

Another task we learned was to trim the wicks of the kerosene lamps and lanterns and wash and dry the chimney of glass. We also carried the split wood for the cook stove from the woodshed and filled the wood-box.

I started school in September, before I was seven in October of 1907. There was a **one-room school in Plainfield**. I walked to and from school with some older cousins who also lived on **Van Syckle Road**. Their names were **Orvin, Ruth, and Lester**. Their father **Bert**, was a first cousin of my father. Their mother's name was **Minnie**. The farm they lived on was adjacent to ours on the south. There was an interesting little story told about the first owners of this farm, **Samuel and Sarah Van Syckle**. It seems they were traveling in a covered wagon from New York State to Michigan. They had a boy **David**, about two years of age. One afternoon **David** had been put into the back of the wagon for a nap. Later his mother checked and discovered her little boy was not in the wagon. Terrified, they turned the wagon around thinking of the wild animals they had seen along the trail. Their fears were soon dispelled- when they found little **David** play in the sandy road a mile or



so back. **David** grew up and was the **grandfather of the cousins** I went to school with. Later they had a little sister named **Mary**.

Another little girl was born to the family in November after I was thirteen. My father was rather disappointed that she wasn't a boy to carry on the family name and though she was named **Marjorie**, he always called her **Mike**. As she grew up she loved the outdoors and spent a lot of time with him.

In **September 1941** I went to **Howell High School**. That was a distance of twenty miles from our home and while we depended on horse and buggy for transportation I could not get home every weekend. The first year I lived in the home of **Mr. and Mrs. Bector Hartford** who had two daughters, **Blanche** who was married, and **Ethel** who lived at home but was working. She did help to make the weekends less lonely. The following two school years, I lived in the home of **Mr. and Mrs. Charles Adams**. They had two young sons and also furnished room to two other students the first year and three the second. They were a brother and sister **Frank and Mary Howlett** and an older girl **Lillian Buhl**, all from the small village of **Gregory**. They went home almost every weekend, riding the **train** to Gregory. Occasionally I would also ride the train and my father would meet me in Gregory.

**Mr. Adams** was a salesman, who traveled for a shoe company and was usually gone from Monday through Friday. When he stayed in **Howell** on the weekends he allowed me to help with his pile of bookwork and accounts. The whole family was very loving and caring and made us feel very much at home. The home was only a few blocks from what was then called **Thompson Lake** and we did quite a lot of **ice skating** there in the winter months. I also played **basketball**. Incidentally the rules were not the same as now, we girls wore full black bloomers and middie blouses. After ice-skating I enjoyed **roller-skating** rink.

I believe it was during my junior year at High school that my father bought a **Buick car**, one the dealer had been using as a demonstrator. That was a great occasion and he drove it for several years, then bought a new **Essex**.

The year I was a Senior I stayed in the home of a widow, **Mrs. Rittie Gregory**. She had three children, **Helen**, a month older than I, and two younger sons, **Payson and Leo**. I remember that year with a great deal of pleasure. [A few years later, **Helen** married a **William White** and I [married a] **William Black**] I took **first place that year in the Oratorical Contest** and also was named **Valedictorian of my class of 32**.

In the summer, I attended the six weeks term at **Ypsilanti Normal School- now Eastern Michigan College-** and obtained my **teaching Certificate**. In, **September 1918**, I began teaching at **Crittenton School**; a one room school about one mile north of the city limits of **Howell**. My sister, **Eugenia** was



then ready for High School and we found a place about one-half way between her school and mine where we got room and board with a widow, **Mrs. Hutchings. Eugenia** walked to **Howell High School** and I walked the opposite direction to my teaching job. I still lacked one month of my eighteenth birthday. I did the janitorial work and taught children in several different grades. I don't recall now, how many children-I received \$45.00 per month and paid 3.50 per week for room and board. Two events that fall are quite vivid in my memory. One was the day the **Armistice** was signed **ending World War I.** the children outside at recess came running in to ask why all the bells were ringing and whistles blowing in **Howell.** The townspeople were celebrating. Then later there was the epidemic of Influenza, which was fatal to many, among them, my cousin **Agnes'** husband, **Dr. D. O. ?Cranston.** He went into officer's training after graduating from College of Veterinary Medicine. He was at East Lansing and died after only a few days of illness. A little later in the winter **Eugenia** became came ill. Mother came to care for her. Our Landlady, **Mrs. Hutchings,** was so fearful of the disease that she made my mother stay in the room with **Eugenia** - she or I prepared the food for them and of course the dishes were all carefully boiled. One day **Mrs. Hutchings** told me I could kill one of her chickens and make soup for them. I had never killed a chicken and I made a terrible job of beheading it. Ha! Ha! Later as a farmers wife I became quite accustomed to the task.

**March 26, 1919** was memorable day for me. My father's cousin, **Taft Van Syckle** and his wife **Jennie** had an only daughter, **Hazel.** They lived on the farm where I was born - moving there with **Uncle John** soon after we moved to Grandfather's farm. She was several years older than I was but we were good friends. On that day she was married to **David Black,** a Dairy farmer from East Lansing. The ceremony was performed in her home, as was the custom at the time, with only family members and a few close friends present. She asked me if I would help serve the meal following and I came home from **Howell** to do so.

I had of course heard about the "**Blacks**" but this was the first time I met any of them. **David and his brother William, "Bill",** to my family and friends, had arrived in Michigan from their home in **Suffolk, England** a few months before the beginning of **World War I.** their mother's brother, **Robert Mackie,** was living in **Saginaw, Michigan.** He had found work for them at **Michigan Agricultural College Farm.** When they came in **April 1914, David was 18, Bill not quite 17.** They worked in the barns caring mostly for cattle and hogs. During the first summer they lived in a tent pitched on the bank of the **Red Cedar River.** In the fall they were able to



move into the farmhouse. **In 1916** their **father, mother and sister, Nancy** came to the U.S. Because of the War, they had to come with their ship camouflaged and "Blacked - out" - no lights allowed for the enemy to see.

With their money they brought with them they were able to purchase a farm near the College farms and they went into dairy business - bottling and pedaling their milk **in East Lansing**. Of course, **Dave and Bill** were engaged in that business. ~~Then the~~ U.S. became involved in the war and young men were being called into service, **David joined the Navy**. Because of the need for milk, **Bill** was exempted and spent long hours caring for and milking the large herd of Holsteins.

During the wedding festivities, I found them all very friendly and when **William** asked if I would like to go with him to take the bride and groom to the **train station at Stockbridge**, I accepted. We drove the approximately six or seven miles to the station to the clatter of tin cans on the graveled road. Some of the wedding guest had tied a goodly number of them to the back of the car. When we had seen **Dave and Hazel** aboard the train for their honeymoon trip, **Bill** cut the ropes and got rid of the cans. We were able to talk at a normal voice as we drove back to the house where my parents were waiting for me to go home with them. This, then was my first date with the man I was to marry three years later.

**In September 1919**, I started teaching at the rural school I had attended as a child in **Plainfield, Michigan**. The first year there were thirty-two pupils in eight grades. I not only taught but I also did the janitorial work all for 45 dollars per month. The second year the school board made arrangements for the seventh and eight graders to go to Gregory to school. I had fewer pupils and they doubled my wages to 90 dollars per month.

My grandma, widowed then for several years was happy to have me live with her. However, during the second year she became ill and we both lived with my parents. My little sister **Majorie** was one of the pupils. She was required to call me Miss Van Syckle the same name as the others - a bit of a hardship. Ha! Ha!

During the summer of **1920** I went with a friend from **Gregory, Elizabeth Driver**, to work as a waitress at **Les Cheneaux Hotel near Cheneaux Island**. To get there we went by train to **Mackinaw City**, then by ferry to St. Ignace and finally by boat to the Hotel. People from Missouri operated this and many of the guests were well-to-do- people from St. Louis. It was an enjoyable experience and I learned a great deal. While there we were able to visit Sault Saint Marie and also Mackinaw Island which fascinated me. On our return home we came by ship from St. Ignace to Detroit where the State Fair was in Progress. The **Blacks** were exhibiting



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some of their prize **Holstein** and I enjoyed a day there before returning home to start another year of teaching- my last.

As I mentioned before my grandmother became ill that winter and eventually died of a heart attack. I felt her loss keenly. As the school year drew to a close, **Bill and I** was discussing marriage plans and I felt ill prepared for housekeeping, especially cooking and baking. My mother liked best to cook so she had always done that and taught **Eugenia and me** to do the cleaning, ironing, etc. Also, during the summers we had spent a lot of time helping outside with the farm work.

So it was decided that I would not teach another year but would stay home and learn to cook. I learned to sew and crochet and knit and I put these skills into use preparing my wedding trousseau.

In reading, what I have written about the **Blacks**, I feel I should write more about their **immigration to the United States**. **Alexander Black** and his wife **Margaret Wilson Black** were **natives of Scotland**, he from **Edinburgh** area and she from **Glasgow**. Before they married his older brother **David** had moved to **England** and he encouraged them to join him, which they did. **Alex** was able to find a position as Overseer on a landed estate. In fact, he worked on two different estates. One was called **Westthorpe**, the other **Lawling Hall** - both quite pretentious establishments in a very nice area. There were three children born to **Alex and Maggie** - **David Alexander**, **William Mackie Tomlison**, and **Agnes Lang** who was **nicknamed Nancy**. **William** received the extra name **Tomlinson** from the vicar who christened him because he was the first child christened by him. **David was born in 1896 on February 29**. Since there was no February 29 in Centennial year 1900 he actually had no birthday until 1904 when he was 8 years old. Then they had a big celebration inviting all of their family and the workers and families on the estate. In later years **William** told how jealous he felt because he never had a big party like that. After being first tutored at home the boys furthered their education by driving several miles with a horse or pony and cart to what was called a Standard, probably equivalent to our Intermediate schools. When she was old enough **Nancy** accompanied them.