

Marion Elizabeth Green

GOOD TIMES,  
BAD TIMES

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The intent of this project is to recapitulate, in some measure, the life of a small town at the beginning of the twentieth century. The locale is Sparta, Michigan, which is located fifteen miles north of Grand Rapids and thirty miles east of Muskegon and Lake Michigan. The time frame is approximately the fifteen-year interval between 1912, the date of my family's arrival in Sparta, and 1927, the date of my high school graduation.

The personae consist of the following family members:

\*Two sets of grandparents: Clarence and Ida Salome (Woodworth) Smith (paternal) and Henry and Katherine Ann Clark (maternal).

\*Parents: Erastus Woodworth and Lillian Anna (Clark) Smith.

\*Daughters: Marion Elizabeth and Dorothy Louise, who married, respectively, Andrew Jackson Green and Robert Warren French.

\*Two sets of uncles, aunts, and cousins: Eldred and Nina Smith and their surviving daughter, Anne Elizabeth (paternal) and Fred and Ethelyn (Pease) Clark and their adopted sons, Hugh and Eddie (maternal).

The material consists of my personal memories, some of which are undoubtedly based on hearsay. And, because these memories are so voluminous and emerge at differing times and in differing contexts, it has seemed advisable to employ a sociologically oriented topical approach in order to give some kind of form and order to the content.

The style is simple and tends to make use of the colloquialisms of the day. Unfortunately, much use is made of the personal pronoun.

Finally, I wish to dedicate my project to the memory of my sister, Dorothy, who must have been aware, in one way or another, of many of the events that are recorded on the following pages.

Marion E. Green  
St. Louis, Missouri  
1993

## **II. THE FAMILY**

## GRANDPA AND GRANDMA SMITH

My parental grandparents owned a farm a few miles north of Sparta. Dad and Uncle Eldred spent their boyhood there. Shortly before my birth, Grandpa and Grandma bought a two-story home in Grand Rapids. Grandpa died a short time later, but Grandma continued to live there until the time of her death, when she was in her late eighties.

I have many reasons to admire Grandma Smith. During the Depression, she brought up her granddaughter Anne Elizabeth. In order to maintain her independence she divided the upstairs rooms and



David Clarence Smith  
(Grandpa Smith)



Ida Salome Smith  
(Grandma Smith) as  
a young adult, probably  
before Marion's birth

let them out to roomers. Mother had no real liking for Grandma Smith, partly because of her garrulousness and curiosity about trifling concerns and partly because Grandma was an expert at squeezing out family secrets from us girls.

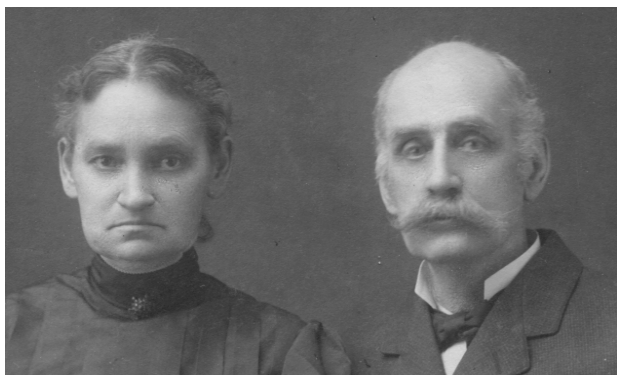
Personally, I remember Grandma Smith with a considerable amount of pleasure. She was lively and sociable; I trust she maintained her “joie de vivre” to the end [Ed .: see Appendix]!

## GRANDPA AND GRANDMA CLARK

Grandpa and Grandma Clark also owned a nice two-story house in Grand Rapids. Grandpa operated a nearby grocery store and post office.

Mother was loyal to both her parents, but she was especially fond of her father. When I

was five or six years old, she made weekly visits, by way of the Pere Marquette Railroad, to visit her ailing father. Mother was usually accompanied by her two little girls.



Catherine and Henry (Grandma and Grandpa) Clark

Eventually Grandma Clark moved to Sparta. She bought an attractive bungalow and remained fairly contented by gardening, reading light fiction, and taking in teacher roomer and boarders.

By the end of her life, Grandma Clark had lost her eyesight. Nothing was ever said about a cataract operation, so it will never be known whether all her suffering could have been avoided. Grandma, of course,

came to live with my parents, and it was a very bad situation for everyone. It must be said, however, that Grandma did have radio soap opera at her disposal.

Both grandmothers--especially Grandma Clark--were very good to Dorothy and me. We greatly enjoyed their storytelling about their past experiences. If only tape recorders had been in existence at that time! Both grandmothers spoke in a particularly unique language. Their dialects were based on standard English, but were replete with strange colloquialisms that I have never heard anyone else use. What was stranger, however, was that the speech pattern of each grandmother was entirely different. Unhappily, I was heartily ashamed of my grandmothers. Why couldn't they learn English like everyone else?

Of course I should have asked my parents for the origins of their respective ways of speaking. I know that Grandma Smith came directly from the Finger Lake District in New York. The basis of her speech must have come from much farther east [Ed.: see Appendix].



Grandma Clark holding Marion  
in the summer of 1908

## DAD AND MOTHER

Instead of finishing high school, Dad left the farm at the age of fifteen to attend a business school in Grand Rapids. At the age of sixteen, he was hired as a bookkeeper by a logging

company at Mancelona. However, in later years, Dad must have regretted this early employment; nevertheless, he certainly was a direct participant in the destruction of Michigan's forests.

In spite of his loathing of the policies of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Dad did give full support to the CCC program. The young men in the construction project managed to plant baby pine trees throughout much of Michigan. Today, as any tourist will testify, Michigan is endowed with many wonderful stands of mature pine.



Marion's parents Erastus and Lillian  
at their wedding in June, 1907

Still at a very early age, Dad worked at a small department store in Grand Rapids. His employer, one Ira Smith, induced Dad to move to Sparta to manage a general store owned by the Johnson Brothers. In the many years to come, Dad, with the help of Mother, not only successfully managed the store, but became full owner in his own right.

Mother graduated from a Grand Rapids high school at the age of sixteen. I really know very little about her early life. She was apparently encouraged by the Kent County Superintendent of Schools, and she had several good friends at the United Brethren Church. Mother and Dad spent their honeymoon at Niagara Falls.

They lived with Grandma Smith until their move to Sparta, at which time they had the responsibility of four-year old Marion and baby Dorothy.

## **UNCLE ELDRED AND AUNT NINA**

Uncle Eldred, like Dad, grew up on the family farm. He probably had little formal education; and, although good with his hands, he had no special manual skills.

Somewhere along the way, he married Aunt Nina; they had five children, the first four having died in early childhood. Anne Elizabeth survived, and we were in contact with her at infrequent times.

Eldred floated from job to job, and during the Depression Nina left Anne Elizabeth with Grandma Smith. She departed northwards by means of the Pere Marquette Railroad to engage in precarious house to house sales canvassing. Mother was so impressed by Nina's spunk that she invited her into the store's sales force.

Anne Elizabeth must have had some kind of a commercial course, for, in time, she was added to the store as a bookkeeper. I also well remember Dad's supplying Eldred with monetary handouts. Not surprisingly, the largess of my parents was not always appreciated; and, in fact, it was sometimes resented.

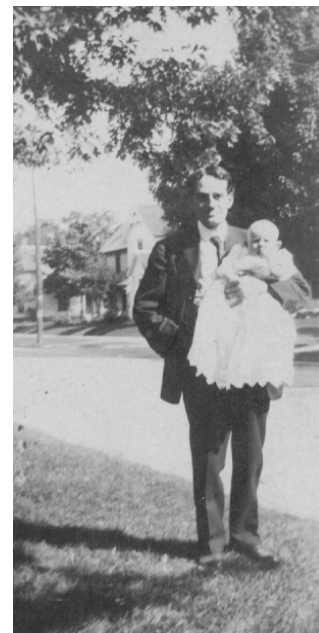
Eventually, Anne Elizabeth left the store to become married. I have no recollection of Nina's last days. I'm happy to report that the last time I saw Uncle Eldred he was proudly involved in the growing of commercial strawberries on a little sandy farm near Sparta. He was also the proud possessor of a tiny artificial fish pond which contained, at the time of my visit, a glorious school of trout. Inevitably, disaster prevailed: a thorough-going freeze occurred, the pond froze over to the depth of several inches, and the fish, of course, met an untimely death.

## **UNCLE FRED AND AUNT ETHELYN**

My first memory of Uncle Fred and Aunt Ethelyn was their living in a flat in Grand Rapids near Grandpa and Grandma Clark. They had just returned from their honeymoon to Denver and the nearby Garden of the Gods. (No ordinary Niagara Falls for them; Grandpa Pease, Ethelyn's father, was always generous with funds.)

In due course of time, Fred and Ethelyn moved to a farm adjacent to that of Grandpa Pease, four or five miles south of Sparta. Uncle Fred went into dairy farming, and although Dorothy and I weren't exactly enchanted by the barn lot, we did delight in the many varieties of delicate wild flowers which grew in the nearby wooded area.

Eventually the Clarks bought another dairy farm located on the southern boundaries of Sparta.



Uncle Fred Clark and Marion in 1908

Uncle Fred and Aunt Ethelyn were very good to us girls. Aunt Ethelyn's little tea parties were works of art; and both aunt and uncle delighted in giving us small treats from time to



time. And, as Dad was wont to say, Fred and Ethelyn were the very “salt of the earth.”

Fred and Ethelyn had two adopted sons, Hugh and Eddie. Hugh was stolid and phlegmatic; he inherited the family farm. Eddie went in for model airplanes and eventually became an airline mechanic.

## EARLY PETS



Dorothy, Lillian, Marion, and  
“Mike,” a dog who may also be  
Togo, at Lake Michigan in 1922

first two pets for long. We had a most unfriendly neighbor who didn’t take kindly to the littering of his backyard, and who was also a believer in the use of poison.

As very young children, Dorothy and I had two pets in succession. One was our cat Percy, who was of indeterminate vintage. The other was an Airedale with impressive papers. Dad paid the stupendous price of fifty dollars for him.

Naturally we children loved both pets dearly, and I remember Dorothy pushing Percy around in her doll buggy. We named the Airedale Togo, and he became our constant companion. Somehow he was trained to carry a package of steak from the store back home.

Unfortunately,  
we didn’t have  
either of these



“Three Little Mugwumps  
of Erastus Smith”  
1920