

Sarah Jane Stepro Helmick History

Sarah Jane Stepro Helmick was born 4 July 1823 in Mouckport, Indiana
She married on 13 April 1845, age 21 to Henry/Harry Helmick (1822 to 1877)
She died 23 Dec 1924 (101 years old), and is buried in Fircrest Cemetery in Monmouth.

After her parents divorced her mother moved the family of 12 children from Indiana to Burlington, Iowa. Sarah was known to be a gifted spinner and weaver, hat maker, dress maker. She was likely the primary family breadwinner. In all it is believed that she had only 3 months of schooling in her entire life. Perhaps as an attempt to escape spinsterhood (and the burden of being the sole support for her family) she married Henry/Harry Helmick and they headed west within just a week or two of the marriage. Sarah, her husband, her brother Harvey and cousin James joined an 1845 wagon train westward bound. Their wagon was built by Harry Helmick and pulled by oxen. They invested their life's savings, \$2,000 of supplies for the journey. It is thought the wagon train departed late April 1845 (somewhere between a day and 2 weeks after marriage)

Along the way they met various Indians who were curious and pleasant, not hostile. On July 4 the wagon train celebrated our Independence and her birthday on the trail just east of Rocky Mountains. When they finally arrived at the Dalles in Oregon Territory they loaded wagons and their belongings on rafts to float down the Columbia River. Henry and Sarah waited on shore. A storm blew in and the raft broke loose, drifted into middle of river, hit rapids, and sank leaving them without transportation and possessions, only left the clothing they wore. It is unknown where her brother and cousin were at this time. The next morning two Indian women found them, gave them 6 potatoes and showed Sarah how to roast them. The women then left to notify a Mr. Ebberts (Columbia River log driver who floated timber down the river) from Tualatin Plains of their need for assistance. Ebberts took them to his logging camp where they stayed for 2 weeks. During this time Harry took possession of an old wagon which he repaired. Once repairs were made they proceeded to Oregon City. In Oregon City Dr John McLoughlin gave Sarah enough cloth to make Harry a shirt and herself a dress. It was the only dress she had for two years.

They settled in the Salem area where Henry helped Mr. Ebberts and Mr. Judkins build a grist mill at the request of John McLoughlin. In 1846 they moved south to what is now the Monmouth area and established a 640 acre donation land claim (the amount of land for a married couple) on the Luckiamute River, now south of Rickreall, west of Hwy 99. There they built a log cabin. Henry continued as wagon maker and wagon repairer, and raised hogs. In 1849 Henry and Sarah's brother Harvey left this area and headed to California, lured by gold. Sarah and her brother's wife, Elizabeth were left alone to care for the land and Sarah's 2 yr old son. During her life Sarah had five children. Sarah became a pipe smoker during this time.

Sarah moved to Albany about 1878, shortly after her husband died. She had a large home built at 138 E 7th in Albany. This house is still standing, however the top floor of the building was removed sometime between 1925 and 1949 as seen in Sanborn maps. Sarah Helmick was one of the twenty two founding members of Albany's Cumberland Presbyterian Church. She donated/loaned small rawhide seats/chairs to the church to be used until pews were available. Helmick family members still own the chairs which were returned to the Helmick family when pews replaced them. She was blinded by cataracts, spending her last 20 years sightless.

Newspaper articles describe a large local celebration for her at her home on her 100th birthday. At one time was one of Linn Co's oldest residents, resided in Albany for over 45 years.

In 1922 Sarah gave 5 acres of her original land claim to the State of Oregon for the purpose of establishing a park. This land is west of Hwy 99, along the Luckiamute River. The donation to the State of Oregon was given in appreciation for the Helmicks receiving their DLC so many years earlier. This donation was the first land given to Oregon and the beginning of the Oregon State Park system. Sarah Jane Stepro Helmick is considered the Mother of Oregon State Parks. There was a great celebration Sept 24, 1924 in which over 7,000 citizens turned out to mark the place of the first state park in Oregon. The park was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2022.

Associated names:

Marjorie Tedrow (GGD of Sarah)

Verda Hill

Joyce Wiest

Helen Riddell, History Jan 2000

Frances Helmick Hill (GD)

Gift and Endowment Drive Planned for University

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