

Irene Coleman Evans Strang 1888 – 2003

AUNT IRENE

by Mildred B. Harker

Early in the morning we awakened to her singing. She couldn't suppress the joy she felt each day just to be alive and able to work. It burst forth in song as she shoveled a ditch to irrigate, hoed a row of garden, milked the cow or swept her walk.

Aunt Irene was our neighbor while I was growing up. She was always cheerful and presented a bright smiling face. When older, I realized the sorrows her gaiety hid.

Her husband, Joseph Evans, was killed in a grain elevator accident in 1926 leaving her to rear four young children with very modest means. In 1933, their second son, Everett, a promising basketball hero, got pneumonia and died. Ten years later the Second World War took the youngest son, Harold. But still she sang.

Irene Evans was well known for her fine alto voice. Her best friend, Mary Fletcher, had a lovely soprano tone, so they sang duets at town programs, weddings, church services and funerals. I never hear "The Old Rugged Cross" without recalling the many times she and Mary sang it. With the Bridge brothers they made a harmonious quartet. No matter what the occasion Irene was willing to share her talent and she still sings in the choir.

Irene Coleman was born in Park valley, Utah, June 6, 1888, the daughter of Moroni and Jemima Price Coleman. Shortly after, the family moved to Star Valley, Wyoming, where she grew up on a dairy farm and learn the therapy of hard work. Seven brothers milked the cows but she recalls going up the hills to bring the cows in each night.

There were many skills for a young girl to learn then. Clothes were made by hand, so she learned the art from her seamstress mother. Perfect stitching was required to hold seams on boys shirts and overalls as well as for long full-skirted dresses.

A garden was a necessity for there was no store with fresh produce in the lonely valley. Irene helped plant, weed, water and preserve the vegetables and fruit they grew. Perhaps that explains the beautiful garden she still grows each year.

Mixes and packaged foods were unknown so she learned the culinary arts from scratch. When frosts came early, they had to use the blackened wheat and starter yeast to make their bread. Butter was churned from cream. Cheese was made from milk. Chickens provided eggs and meat. With a large family there was always baking to do. Irene became proficient while helping her mother.

This training proved its worth when the Coleman family trekked to Canada in 1903. Irene's mother stayed in Montana for a month to visit her sister. The young fifteen year old girl, Irene, was sent on to cook for her father and brothers in Magrath, Alberta. They settled across the Pothole Creek in a two-room house with a coal stove, boxes for cupboards, a table and benches. It was a hard life but the pioneers knew how to make their own entertainment, too.

Irene was on the first girls basketball team the Pothole organized. The town team north of the creek was known as The World. Their competitions were Pothole against The World. Even today old timers recall those lively games when Pothole won. They were victorious in surrounding towns and were invited to a tournament in Lethbridge. Travel was by team and wagon but the girls bundled up for the thirty-mile trip across country with their coach. No one could afford a hotel room, so they slept under the wagon. Next day, they won the tournament proving their title "Pothold Against The World." Irene is the only survivor of that team. She recalls the little medals they were given-- each engraved with a star-- and the five dollars presented to each player. When Irene married Joe Evans in 1906, she had the medal made into a watch fob for him.

There was much to do in the new settlement and Irene did her share. Women gathered for rag bees to make carpets. Quilting bees produced warm quilts which were pieced from dress or shirt scraps. Wool was washed and carded into batting. Everyone would help stitch around each block to hold the material firm. Irene Evans became an expert quilter and was in demand at every quilting. She still helps several times a month although now the material is sometimes soft nylon tricort with a traced pattern. Relatives cherish the pretty satin spreads she had done for them.

Gifted in many other ways, this cheerful woman visits the sick and lonely often. Each week she calls at the local hospital regardless of who the patients are. This compassionate service was continued when she married Jesse Strang in 1938. Together they showed tender consideration for those alone without means to travel. Her loss was keen when Jesse died in 1952, but she did not wallow in self pity. Irene sang.

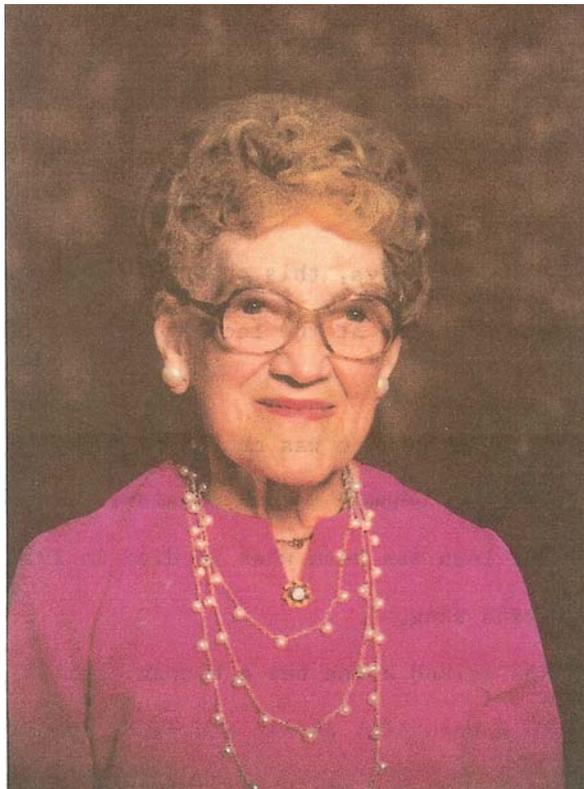
Once again she walked alone but her buoyant spirit gave spring to her step. She took pride in a beautiful garden and yard, found time for those less fortunate, was a grandmother to new neighbors children who affectionately called her "Grandma Strang."

Her rosy apples are the best to pick in the fall and her cookie jar is always open.

When older friends come to call, she shows them the latest crocheted articles or shares a favorite poem. Memorizing has been a hobby for years and brightens her conversations as this lovely lady uses poetry so aptly to convey her feelings. It must appeal to the music in Aunt Irene's soul.

Firmly believing she is the "master of her soul," she does something about it. To all of us she is an example of cheerful endurance through trials, a friend we can turn to in need, a courageous woman who sings as she goes.

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