

Grit, Grace, and Grandeur:
The making of a Denver diva

GLADYS HAGEE MATHEW
(1896-1981)



The Mystery of the Silver Spoon

In the late 1800s, a series of events unfolded, which led to a unique collection of British antiques, historical documents, and a mystery ending up in Michigan...

My great-grandmother, Dessa Hagee Roche, the daughter of one of General Sherman's "Boys in Blue," traveled from Texas to Colorado by wagon train as a young girl. Shortly after settling in Denver, the entire family was stricken with measles. Dessa lost all of her siblings within a few weeks. Two years later, Grandma and Grandpa Hagee welcomed another daughter, Gladys. Aunt Gladys arrived early with underdeveloped lungs. Grandpa Hagee crafted a homemade incubator using parts from the bread warmer on the wood stove to keep her alive.

Aunt Gladys went on to attend the University of Colorado where she fell in love with Steere de Montfort Mathew, the only child of the second son of a second son of a British gentleman (Second sons often pursued military commissions, vicarage appointments, or in the case of Steere's father, followed the "lure of the west" and moved to Colorado). They married in NOLA and honeymooned in Europe, settling in New York City where Aunt Gladys performed opera, and Uncle Steere became a pioneer in NBC radio. We used to play with an old xylophone from the studio that chimed the familiar "N-B-C" sound you still hear on TV today.

Uncle Steere also inherited the Mathew Family estate in England. Gladys lived in Ipswich, England for six months, organizing the collection.

Steere joined her for a month where they toured Pentlow Hall, the old Mathew Family home from 1749-1874, and even heard Lady Astor speak during a session of Parliament.

Never having any children, part of Gladys and Steere's estate was bequeathed to their great-nephew, my father. In the summer of 1981, my mother, siblings, and I spent two weeks in Manhattan, living in their Upper West Side brownstone, packing up the antiques and historical documents and having many adventures in Central Park. Mom spent the rest of her life preserving the collection. We enjoyed many magical afternoons as kids playing among those items at Broadlawn (my childhood home in Hillsdale, MI): Holding court in 500 year old Tudor chairs, fencing with antique foils, and granting knighthood with Lt. Colonel Henry Mathew's cavalry sword till my mother frantically rushed out and demonstrated the sharp edge.

Much of the collection has been dispersed over the years, most to members of the community, young couples furnishing their first home, donations to charity auctions, etc. I've been slowly researching some of the items that ended up on our farm, including a vintage roll of purple ribbon from a company that went out of business in the 1930s and an old silver spoon with unique markings. At first glance, the markings look like something out of a Dan Brown novel! The spoon's origin continues to elude me. Perhaps one day, I'll solve this mystery.



Solving the Mystery of the Silver Spoon

In 2023, I shared the fascinating story of my great-grandmother's sister, Gladys Hagee Mathew, from her humble beginnings in Denver, an opera career that took her to New York City and Europe and her marriage to a descendent of the British gentry, Steere de Montfort Mathew. In the early 1980s, their unique collection of antiques and historical documents ended up in Michigan, including items from the time of Queen Elizabeth I, sealed documents from the Church of England dating back as far as the 1700s, and an old silver spoon with unique markings.

A few clues regarding the spoon's origins surfaced with help from a fellow alum at Hillsdale College. My husband, Chad, and I attended a lecture series last fall where we met John. He shared an interest and depth of knowledge of history, antiques, and antiquities, so I shared Gladys' story and later a few photos of the spoon's hallmarks. Within a week, he emailed links to discussion boards about Sarl Silversmiths, including contact information for John Sarl's great-great-grandson.

Mike quickly responded to my query, sharing the tale of his distant grandfather, John Sarl. John was born in 1788 in Southill, Bedfordshire. He enlisted at the young age of 14 to fight in the Napoleonic Wars. After sustaining an injury, John pursued several business ventures, including work as a silver-smith and watchmaker from 1840-1865 in Cornhill, London.

Another clue serendipitously emerged when organizing a desk drawer at home. I came across an old wooden box. Inside was a small handwritten note from 1931 and a sketch with writing across the bottom, "Cruce, non leone fides." Part of the sketch looked similar to the markings on the old silver spoon. I researched the phrase and found another clue. The symbols (see picture below) are from the Mathew Family Crest, on the right, a bird with a piercing arrow and on the left, a lion's gambit, holding a cross. The family motto translates to "My trust is in the cross, not in the lion."

My father also provided another clue. A few months before his passing in 2006, he penned a 20+ page family history, detailing the family's roots in Colorado and how we ended up in Michigan in the 1970s. These papers include a small section about Gladys and Steere. Apparently, the Mathew Family are descendants of Simon de Montfort (1208-1265), the founder of British Parliament. Steere's family tree offers additional clues through repetition of the same middle name carried by many of the men, de Montfort.

Over the past few months with help along the way, I've narrowed down a time period when the spoon was made (1840-1865) and identified the markings on the handle from the Mathew Family Crest. As with any worthy historical journey, more questions and paths have emerged along the way. Next on this historical quest: Start reviewing Aunt Gladys' personal papers and verify the connection between the de Montfort and Mathew families. Perhaps a "recce" to England is required.

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Tuesday's Child (Excerpt)

Written by Gladys Hagee Mathew

Edited by Maggie Roche Murphy

Editor's Note:

The story of the tragedy that befell my family was passed down over the years in vague fragments reluctantly shared by survivors. Imagine my surprise when beginning to organize Aunt Gladys' memoirs, I found four pages written by my great-grandmother, Dessa Hagee Roche, one of the survivors of this tragedy. My brother, George, commented that Jeremiah Hagee (our great-great grandfather and Dessa's father) was an infantryman from 1862-65 for General Sherman's campaigns with the Army of the Cumberland. It turned out that Denver was worse for him than Atlanta.

PROLOGUE

Written by Dessa Hagee Roche in the last year of her life.

I was born in Ft. Worth, Texas, January 7, 1882. My parents had lived in Illinois and Missouri. When they moved to Texas, there were three children, Gertie, Howard, and Ella. Annie and I were born in Texas. I remember my brother, Howard. He was a handsome, sweet natured boy of fourteen.

He was devoted to me, and I loved him dearly. When he died, Mamma almost lost her mind. Later, after our home burned down, my parents decided to move away from Texas, hoping to leave tragedy behind and find a new life.

Papa registered for a piece of ground in Kansas that was part of the Government grant reserved for veterans of the Civil War. We traveled in a covered wagon, drawn by two horses. At night Papa slept under the wagon with his dog, while Mamma, Gertie, Ella, Annie, and I slept in the wagon. Papa took us to Shell City, Missouri, where Mamma's sister Susie was living with her husband and daughters. Mamma was expecting a baby soon, and Papa did not want her to be out on the prairie for the birth, so he left her, Annie and me with Aunt Susie. He went on to Kansas, taking the oldest girls, Gertie and Ella with him. Shortly after Florence was born, we followed him to Kansas on the train. Papa met us in Garden City about 20 miles from the homestead land on which we had built a sod house. For a living he delivered the mail throughout the district on horseback. We girls walked four miles to school. There was a bull in one of the fields we crossed, and we often had to run and roll under the barbed wire fences to get away from him. A part of the Great Desert, it was unbearably hot in the summer and cold in the winter. Few trees relieved the dreary landscape. The prairie offered little for a pleasant home or farm on which to raise a family.

JEREMIAH & ELLEN HAGEE'S

Family Tree



JEREMIAH HAGEE



ELLEN (COBLE) HAGEE



GERTRUDE (HAGEE)
MYERS



HOWARD HAGEE



ELLA HAGEE



DESSA (HAGEE)
ROCHE



ANNIE HAGEE



FLORENCE HAGEE



GLADYS (HAGEE)
MATHEW

My oldest sister, Gertie, was a beauty with sparkling brown eyes and soft curly brown hair. Stacey Myers, a son of a farmer in the vicinity, met Gertie, and they fell in love. He was a pen and ink artist and newspaper writer. June 30, 1890, they were married. Gertie even crocheted her own wedding dress.

Aunt Mary, Mamma's older sister, had been writing about the beauties of Colorado and urged us to come to Denver. It was decided to make this last move. So Mamma took baby Florence on the train to Denver where they stayed with Aunt Mary until Papa could dispose of the place in Kansas and bring Ella, Annie and me out in the wagon. In the last few minutes while Papa was harnessing the horses, although we had been warned to be good girls and behave ourselves, I had to climb to the top of the walls and run along the top of the sod house. I fell down and hurt my shoulder. I was in terrible pain, but we were afraid to tell Papa. Ella cut up my food and helped me dress, so that he did not know what happened. When we arrived in Denver, Mamma was shocked to discover that I had broken my shoulder.

In Denver, Papa, as a Grand Army of the Republic Veteran, was able to obtain a position in the new Denver Mint. The family, together again, was thrilled with the beauty of the Rockies and happy that, at last, they had found a home in Colorado, God's beauteous land. My parents rented a house on 26th and Lorimer. Later, Gertie and Stacey came to Colorado from their farm in Kansas after Stacey obtained a position with the Denver Times.

One night, Stacey came home sick with measles. In a few days, Ella had the disease, then Annie and Florence a few days later, and then Gertie, Mamma, and I. I think we lost Annie first. Stacey and Florence passed away one night about an hour apart, then Ella a week later. Stacey was twenty-four, Florence three. Ella, then twelve, often acted like a little mother to us younger girls.

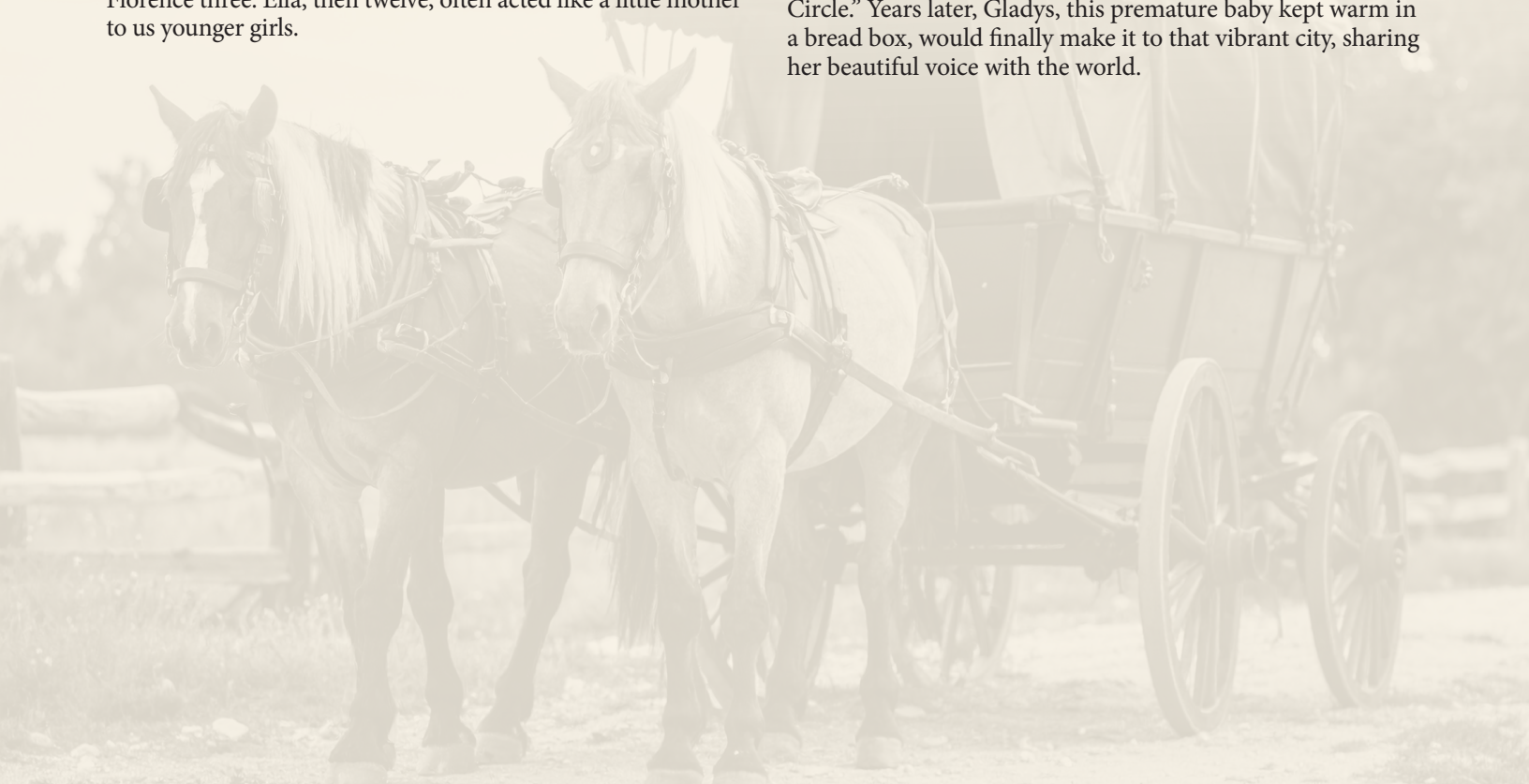
The city sent fumigation crews who insisted on burning sulphuric candles in the halls. The fumes seeped into the room with Mamma and Gertie. Gertie choked on the acrid smoke and expired. After a long period of uncertainty and convalescence, Mamma and I recovered.

After the epidemic, talk of former days was painful. Papa, the only one who was immune to the disease, saw one after another of his children taken away. He held on through the days and weeks of horror, acting as nurse and taking care of all emergencies and burials as best he could. I was very lonely without my sisters and was happy when my new little sister was born.

INTRODUCTION

All was changed. Each of the survivors existed in a nightmare of constant loneliness. As they attempted to take up life again, they longed for another baby, so after two years, when Mother, now forty one years old, realized that she was in "the family way," new hope came into the home, arriving on Tuesday, March third, eighteen ninety-six, at 8:00 p.m. Gladys Rebecca Hagee arrived early, weighing only four pounds, with a rupture in the lower left side of her abdomen. Papa used parts from the bread warmer on the stove to craft a rudimentary incubator for added warmth at the end of another harsh Colorado winter.

Papa wanted to name the baby Rebecca, but his daughter, Dessa, chose the name "Gladys" from the society notes of the Denver Post. Gladys Vanderbilt was the youngest daughter of Cornelius Vanderbilt, one of New York's "Four Hundred." The Denver Post brought to the West the stories, with illustrations, of "opening night" at the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York City where the Vanderbilts made a grand entrance in the center box of the "Diamond Circle." Years later, Gladys, this premature baby kept warm in a bread box, would finally make it to that vibrant city, sharing her beautiful voice with the world.





Pictured from front left:
Ellen Coble Hagee, George Roche III, Dessa Hagee Roche
Back left: Margaret Stewart Roche, Gladys Hagee Mathew (1937)



Courtesy of Rocky Mt. News

GLADYS HAGEE MATHEW
Colorado A



MAGGIE MURPHY

Maggie Murphy is a lifelong Michigander and modern day renaissance woman. She earned her B.A. from Hillsdale College, attended graduate school at GVSU, and currently works at Kellogg Community College. Maggie is also the author of the children's book, *Sara Dippity*, and is a contributor to *Smart Women*, *Smart Money Magazine* and Kalamazoo's *Good News Paper*. She can often be found performing Irish, Scottish, and Americana folk music, foraging in the woods for ingredients to brew the perfect cup of tea, and running a small farm with her husband. More information can be found on their website: www.cairnhillfarms.net

