

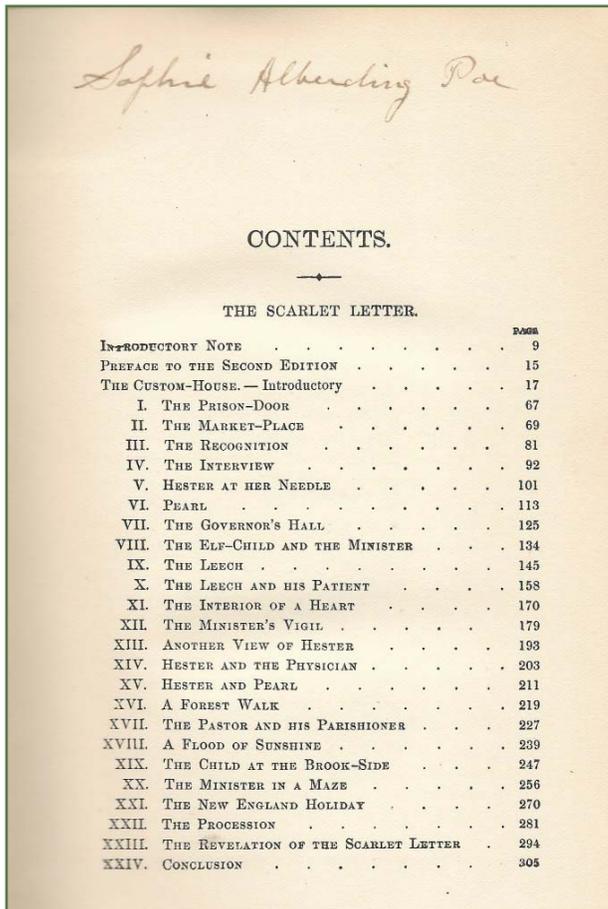
Murder She Wrote . . . Genealogically Speaking

My readers know that I find antiquarian books and albums with old inscriptions irresistible. The reason is two-fold: the challenge of the genealogical hunt for the owners and the possibility of preserving these items by reuniting them with descendants of the original owners or by getting them to a local historical society. I thought I might share the stories of two of my rescues: an inscribed copy of *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne with a connection to the infamous outlaw killer Billy the Kid and a photo album with some innocent teenage musings that led me to the story of a 1902 murder.

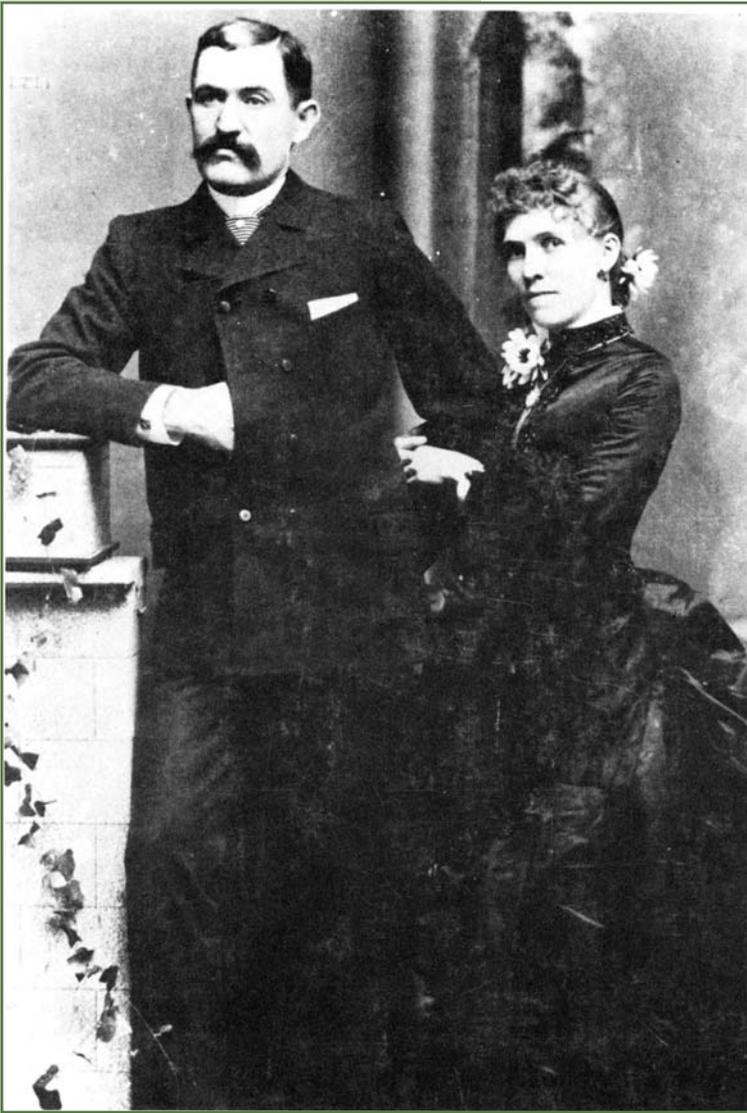
In doing research for my book *Scarlet Letter Lives*, I purchased several antiquarian copies of that book, each with an inscription identifying a prior owner. Among those was one inscribed "Sophie Alberding Poe." That book also had a printed label with her name and a Bret Harte quote: "It is a pleasure to loan a book—and a still greater pleasure to get it back." As is my custom, I did some genealogy research with the objective of finding out who Sophie was.

Sophie Alberding, born in California in 1862, met John W. Poe in 1882 in Roswell, New Mexico, introduced at the home of Captain Joseph Lea, often called the "Father of Roswell." Sophie and John Poe married in Roswell in 1883. At the time of their meeting and marriage, John W. Poe, a dozen years Sophie's senior, had already lived a diverse and adventurous life. Born in Kentucky in 1850, Poe followed his youthful dream of traveling west by the time he was twenty years old. He took up farming and then construction work on the railroad in Kansas. He made his way to Texas a few years later, engaging in commercial buffalo hunting and later becoming a deputy sheriff. By 1881, he had become a detective investigating cattle rustling which led him to New Mexico and a meeting with Sheriff Pat Garrett who soon made Poe his deputy. Garrett was entrenched in the pursuit of Billy the Kid (aka William Bonney and Henry McCarty). Garrett had captured Billy and charged him with murder, but the outlaw escaped in a bloody jail break. Poe and Garrett partnered in the search for Billy and, based on a tip, caught up with him at a ranch near Fort Sumner. Poe was stationed outside when the outlaw entered the house and was confronted and shot dead by Pat Garrett in July 1881.

Poe succeeded Garrett as Lincoln County sheriff and served for three years in that position. Remaining in Roswell, he went on to become a leading citizen and businessman. He was a highly successful rancher for a decade



Sophie Alberding Poe's signature



Sophie and John William Poe

before selling that property and beef stock enterprise in 1893. He invested his profits in the stock of the Bank of Roswell and became its president. He later sold that stock and started a new bank, Citizens Bank of Roswell in 1900. These business ventures (and personal adventures) of Poe's had happened before New Mexico became a state in 1912. Poe, a Roswell senior statesman and entrepreneur, had positions in public service through the period of World War I. Described as modest and unassuming despite his colorful life and business success, Poe died in 1923 as the result of congestive heart failure. Sophie Alberding Poe wrote a book about her beloved husband's adventurous life titled *Buckboard Days*, published in 1936. She passed away in 1954.

Recently, I rescued a small beat-up circa 1900 photo album at the Golden Nugget Antique Market in Lambertville. Only three photos were left in the album—all young women—two of those marked in pencil on the reverse with the name Media Payne and the other unmarked. The pages of the album also had numerous other penciled names along with some short verses. A boy named Frank Estes wrote:

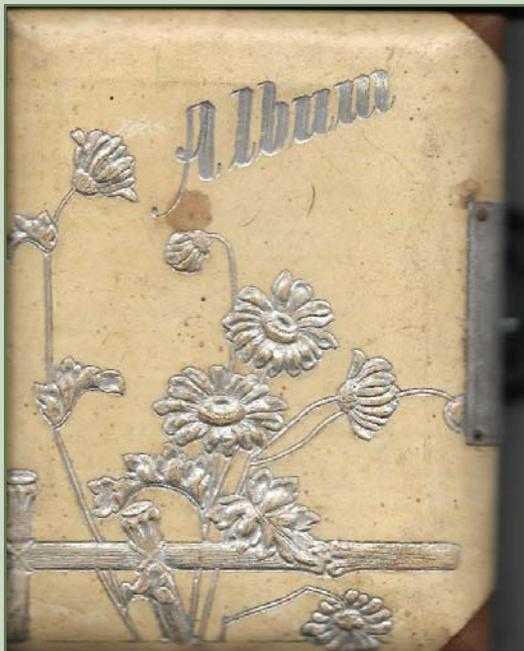
Beneath the oyster shell uncooth (sic), the poorest pearl may hide; Trust me you will find a heart of trooth (sic) beneath my rough outside.

Another was signed by Media Payne:

My Dear, when in the silent grave I sleep and bending willows o'er me weep, tis then My Dear I'll remember you no more.

One name written multiple times on different album pages was that of Charles Austin, identified as being from Enville, Tennessee and Caruthersville, Missouri. The names David Austin, Maggie Ray, Cora Estes, Lula Williams, Myrtle Williams, and Corda Williams were also written in the album. I set off in search of these young people who were friends over a century ago never expecting what I found.

According to the 1900 U.S. census, Myrtle, Lula and Corda Williams were sisters aged 12, 15, and 19 respectively. They lived in Hayti Township, Missouri with their older brother Thomas and



The photo album's cover and three remaining photos.

widowed father William, a farmer. On the very same census page, I found Media Payne, age 17, living with her widowed mother Mary. Also living in the Payne household was a boarder, Maggie Ray, age 21. The next page of the 1900 census listed the Estes family: Cora, age 18, Frank, age 13, and their parents and older sister Janie. Sadly, Cora Estes died a year later in 1901, a local newspaper describing her as a "bright young lady just budding into womanhood."

Those discoveries left me to find out what I could about the person most often mentioned in the album, despite there being no photos of him: Charles Austin. A newspaper search turned up unexpected information connecting those mentioned in the album. A July 1902 social column included the following:

Misses Lula, Myrtle and Corda Williams spent last Sabbath with Miss Ala West. Misses Media Payne and Maggie Ray spent last Monday with Corda Williams. Charles Austin paid Miss Media Payne a visit last Sunday. He says health is not very good in his part of the county.

So, who was Charles Austin? According to the 1900 US census, Austin was born in Tennessee in 1872 and his parents were born in North Carolina. At the time that census was taken, Austin was living in Missouri in a town called Little Prairie and gave his occupation as "saw mill owner." Living with him at that time were his brothers La Fayette (known as "Fate") and David who were working as day laborers. Two years after that census was taken and barely four months after the *Pemiscot Press* noted Charles Austin's visit to Media Payne in the summer of 1902, all three Austin brothers would be charged with murder.

In November 1902, the Austin brothers got into a heated dispute with a neighbor over a fence. The neighbor, a woman named Carrie Johnston, had, at gunpoint, stopped the Austin



Goldie Johnston

brothers from pulling down the fence. The following day, the Austin brothers and several other men returned and lured Mrs. Johnston out of her house by attempting to remove part of the fence. Johnston came out of the house, once again armed with her shotgun, and was ambushed by seven armed men. The men opened fire on her as she tried to make her way back inside, fatally shooting her in the back. When her daughter Goldie, age 9, came to the door, the men fired at the child, but she was able to get safely back inside and was unhurt. The men fled but Charles Austin and one of his brothers were soon apprehended and charged with murder. Charles Austin was tried and convicted in 1903, sentenced to twenty-five years in prison. Little Goldie Johnston, eyewitness to the murder of her mother, testified for thirty minutes, identifying both Charles Austin and his brother Fate.

After my research and the rediscovery of the stories of the people who owned these two items, I thought about how the book, and especially the tattered album, had survived more than a century to find their way to me. I wondered how that album got from Missouri to New Jersey and who had removed the photos of Charles Austin and when. I also thought about the teenage girls who once giggled with him and then watched as he became a convicted killer. I expect I'll never tire of these types of genealogical research adventures. They often surprise, never disappoint, and provide unique views of life that illustrate how things have changed . . . and how they haven't.

