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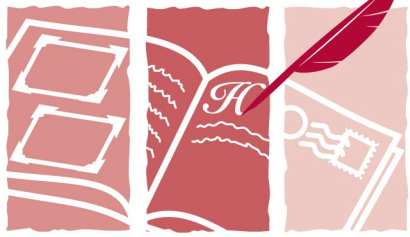


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The Ails of the Smiths: The Plight of an Early Pioneer Family

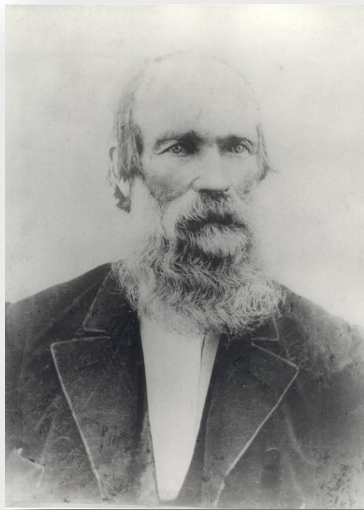
By Emma Gail Compton

The Smith Family, a missionary family in West Michigan, consisted of Reverend George N. Smith, his wife Arvilla, and their children, George Jr., Mary Jane, and Esther Ann (Annie). They had several more children that passed in their infancy, often hours after their birth. At the beginning of their trials as pioneers, the Smiths were effectively homeless and deeply impoverished. They had little to speak of in the way of a home, and even less to speak of when it came to food.

George, Arvilla, and their son, George Jr., came to Michigan from St. Albans, Vermont in 1833, as missionaries to Native American communities in West Michigan. The Smith family were one of many missionary families that set out to Christianize Native Americans. Setting apart the Smiths from their colleagues, an Odawa tribe of Western Michigan requested the presence of Christian missionary work in their community. George Smith was a minister as well as a school teacher. Arvilla Smith would also teach female students in the school house on occasion.

The Smiths first lived with a minister and his family in Kalamazoo, Michigan. They boarded in this home in exchange for the time and labor of building

a barn. From 1833 until August of 1835, they lived in a one-room apartment until they left for Plainfield. Two years later, the family relocated to Allegan County near Black River. From their first year in Michigan, they experienced great loss and suffering from disease.



George and Arvilla Smith (Courtesy of Holland Museum Archives)

Germ theory, the widely-accepted scientific theory for diseases that we know today, was not yet being promoted. It would not be until the 1920s that germ theory was widely accepted by science. That being said, the Smith family and their neighbors were not clueless about the spread of disease and illnesses. In their

respective diaries they show awareness of the impact of damp environments on lung health, as well as excessive work and lack of food on general wellbeing. There was also a clear demonstration of care for individuals suffering from mental health issues, as well as abuse.¹

Arvilla Smith described in *A Pioneer Woman*, a collection of newspaper columns she wrote for the Grand Traverse newspaper, that she regularly walked a quarter of a mile from the Smith home, with her son on her hip, to a river to get water for her family.² This water was not treated, and perhaps unsafe for human consumption, and used for

From the Collections Archivist



Happy Spring! This issue highlights an intriguing story from early Michigan history. Missionaries George and Arvilla Smith settled near Lake Macatawa (then called Black Lake) in the 1830s— years before the region’s famous Dutch settlers began to arrive in West Michigan— and founded Old Wing Mission with a local Native American community, the Black Lake Band of Odawa. The Smiths recorded their daily work, activities, and struggles in a series of diaries. Student archival assistant Emma Gail Compton’s article explores the family’s experiences with disease and loss, offering a brief glimpse at what life was like for some nineteenth-century pioneers.

This issue also includes our 2023 Honor Roll of Donors, a list of contributors who help to make the work we do at the JAH possible. The support of our donors allows us to continue our digitization efforts, fund student research projects, and plan for future preservation initiatives.

Thank you!

Sarah Lundy

drinking, cooking, and bathing. The use of contaminated water can cause a slew of infections, diseases, skin conditions, and digestive illnesses. Many of the common complaints of illness in the diaries of both Arvilla and George Smith were most likely a result of food and water-borne illnesses. Typhoid fever, dysentery, various digestive complaints, and even bilious fever were likely a result of contaminated water being used to drink or cook. On one occasion, recurrent complaints of stomach pain after eating corn led to the disuse of that batch of corn.³

Illnesses and diseases like typhoid fever and consumption (now known as tuberculosis) may have also been spread through contact with infected individuals from the broader community in Western Michigan. Several times, in his correspondence to supervisors, George Smith remarked on illnesses within the community. He often noted who was infected at the time, and if anyone had died as a result of the illness.⁴ Around 1850, Arvilla remarked that her daughter Mary Jane had “quick consumption.”⁵ While Mary Jane may have contracted tuberculosis from another member of the community, it may have also been a misdiagnosis. Mary Jane was, at the time, her mother’s nurse during a four-month-long bout of typhoid fever. It is possible that what Arvilla believed to be quick consumption, was a different illness.

While unsafe food and water, along with illnesses, were a problem for the Smith family in the early years, malnutrition was a much greater threat. The first Smith house was built on a corner of a major road. As a result, the Smiths were often obligated to board and feed travelers. Arvilla recalled that, “All the merchants and land seekers from abroad laid siege to our hospitality.”⁶ These visitors created merriment and livened the mood of the family, however “when one meal was eaten nothing remained for the next.”⁷ Feeding a group of hungry adult men with water and flour is much harder to do than feeding a small, young family.

In 1841, Arvilla writes that her “sores trial was to get sufficient food for the three children.”⁸ That same year, their third child, Arvilla, died as a result of malnutrition. She was just three years old. Her mother recalled decades later that as she wept over her dying daughter, Arvilla said, “Mama don’t cry. I’m going to Jesus.”⁹ The Smiths lost a total of five children, and all but 3-year-old Arvilla died within hours of their birth. Having made it past the age of one, the Smith family was likely delighted to have another permanent resident in their home, only to have the dream of another daughter stolen. In a heartbreaking entry in his 1855 diary, George Smith writes, “Arvilla is 17 today if living.”¹⁰ The death of young Arvilla, the “angel” of the Smith home, did not only affect her mother, but her father as well.

While the exact cause of the high infant mortality rate within the Smith family is unknown, it may have been a result of poor hygiene during the birthing process. During the birth of a baby boy in April of 1849, Arvilla is recorded to have experienced heavy bleeding, with only the help of two neighborhood women. Two hours later, the unusually small baby passed. After the birth and death of this child, Arvilla experienced “uncontrollable” grief, diarrhea, and swelling of the mouth. These infant deaths may also be caused by genetic factors, unknown complications during pregnancy, or malnutrition of the mother. Regardless, they impacted the Smith family deeply for the rest of their lives. George wrote, “Why are some families preserved and others cut down in the very dawn of life?”¹¹ Both parents recalled deep sorrow for their lost children, all buried together, for decades after their children’s deaths. When the family moved later that year, Arvilla recalls her anger and sadness at being forced to abandon the graves of her children. She also remarked that she was still “feeble” as they packed up their lives.¹²

A number of occupational hazards were also recalled in the diaries and correspondences of George and Arvilla Smith. Many colonists became lost in the deep woods near the colony and froze to death. Several other colonists and members of the Smith family were severely sunburned in the summer months. The most disturbing of these incidents was a “swelling” that appeared on the leg of George Smith. In 1849, Smith complained for over a week of a bump on his leg that later swelled and “discharged freely.”¹³ The swelling was also reported to cause a fever. A month after the first swelling appeared, Smith writes “I have another swelling on my leg which disables me from walking, it is very painful.... It reaches a little below my knee to my toes.”¹⁴ While it is not clear how the swelling began, it might have been an untreated wound or cut that became infected as a result of unclean bathing water. Bathing in unsanitary water with an open wound may have allowed in bacteria or microorganisms that developed into an infection. Infections that began with an unclean wound were, at the time, terribly common. Any attempt to dress a wound with unclean water would have likely resulted in an infection, or worsening of an already-present infection.

The medication and medical tools available at the time were likely to be symptomatic treatments as opposed to the treatment of the root cause of the illness. The general illnesses that plagued the colony, that came and went depending upon poverty levels, cleanliness, and season, did not pass by the Smiths. The family was deeply impacted by illness and death in their young family throughout their time in Michigan. The plight of the colony itself also deeply affected George Smith. He wrote to Robert Stuart, the Acting Superintendent of Indian Affairs in Michigan, that “Medicine is very much needed; and it might be well if the Government could appropriate a small fund annually for the purchase of medicines. I could, at least in all ordinary cases, administer with advantages.”¹⁵ George Smith volunteered, if the money for medications were to be provided, to administer the medication to the sick. This would have put George in even more danger himself.

The young Smith family, missionaries in an area and culture unfamiliar to them, were harassed by death and disease. Their early years in Michigan were rarely without the death of a child, or a worrisome illness that lasted months. Despite the evidence of their despair at the loss of five children, hope remained. Arvilla and George Smith often

found themselves cleaving onto their faith as a comfort in their pain. They often closed their writings lamenting the pain that would not leave them, with the comforting understanding that their God was with them.

About the author:



Emma Gail Compton is from Detroit, Michigan, and is currently a Junior at Hope College. She is double majoring in History and German Language. Beyond her classes, Emma enjoys reading, listening to music, and practicing yoga. After graduation, Emma

would like to continue her work with archival material, especially in law and translation work.

Endnotes:

¹Arvilla Smith, *A Pioneer Woman*, 1892. p. 15. H02-1465.5, Smith Family Papers, Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, Michigan.

²Arvilla Smith, *A Pioneer Woman*, 1892. p. 2. Smith Family Papers.

³Arvilla Smith, *A Pioneer Woman*, 1892. p. 9. Smith Family Papers.

⁴George Smith to William Richmond, 31 August, 1847. H02-1465.5, Smith Family Papers, Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, Michigan.

⁵Arvilla Smith, *A Pioneer Woman*, 1892. p. 9. Smith Family Papers.

⁶Arvilla Smith, *A Pioneer Woman*, 1892. p. 2. Smith Family Papers.

⁷Arvilla Smith, *A Pioneer Woman*, 1892. p. 2. Smith Family Papers.

⁸Arvilla Smith, *A Pioneer Woman*, 1892. p. 7. Smith Family Papers.

⁹Arvilla Smith, *A Pioneer Woman*, 1892. p. 7. Smith Family Papers.

¹⁰George Smith, Diary, 1807-1881. Smith Family Papers, p. 13. H02-1465.5, Smith Family Papers, Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, Michigan.

¹¹George Smith, Diary, 1807-1881. p. 12. Smith Family Papers.

¹²Arvilla Smith, *A Pioneer Woman*, 1892. pg. 8. Smith Family Papers.

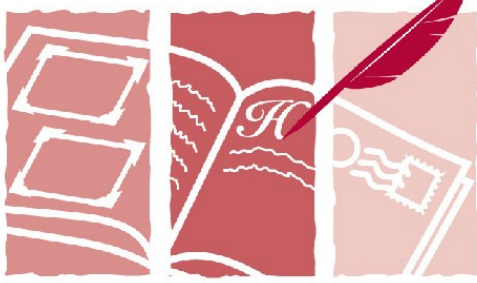
¹³George Smith, Diary, 1807-1881. p. 10. Smith Family Papers.

¹⁴George Smith, Diary, 1807-1881. p. 11. Smith Family Papers.

¹⁵George Smith to Robert Stuart, 23 August, 1843. H02-1465.5, Smith Family Papers, Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, Michigan.

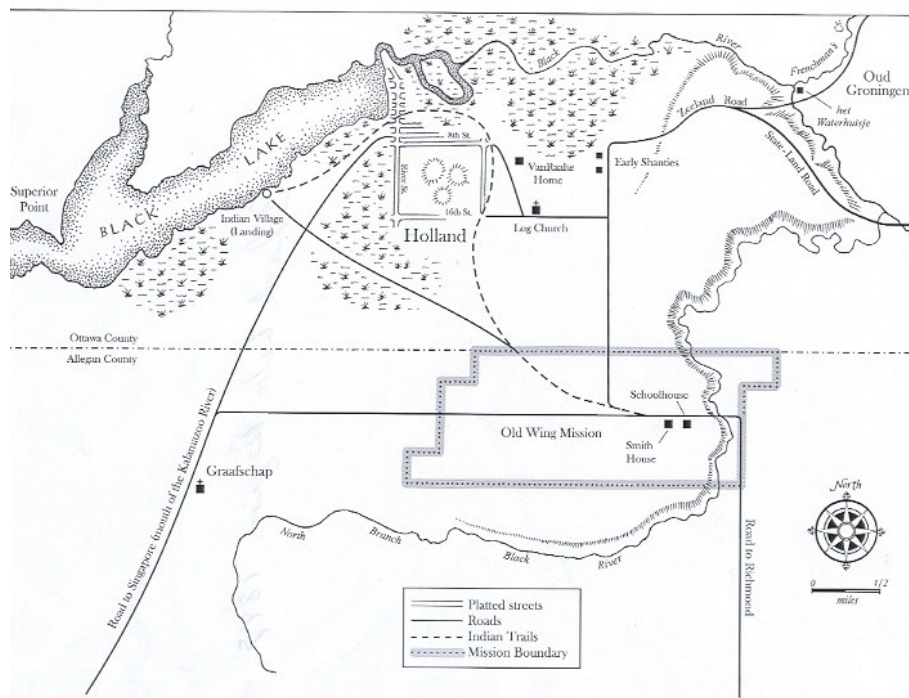
¹⁶Robert P. Swierenga and William Van Appledorn, *Old Wing Mission: Cultural Interchange as Chronicled by George and Arvilla Smith in Their Work with Chief Wakazoo's Ottawa Band on the West Michigan Frontier* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 2008).

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Black Lake Region, 1840s (Map Courtesy of Mark Cook)¹⁶

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