

MARK TWAIN SOCIETY BULLETIN

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THE TRAGIC STORY OF EMMA NYE

By Herbert A. Wisbey, Jr.

A distraught Mark Twain wrote to his brother, Orion, in September, 1870 that Emma Nye, a school friend of his wife, was dying of typhoid fever in their own bed in their Buffalo home. On September 29, 1870 she died. It was one of a series of tragic events that the newly-weds had suffered since their marriage in February. First, Livy's father, Jervis Langdon, died in Elmira after weeks of painful illness. Livy herself, always in precarious health, was pregnant with their first child, born prematurely on November 7. Mark Twain himself was struggling to adapt to the new job of editor of the *Buffalo Express* and trying to complete his second major book, *Roughing It*.

Olivia Langdon Clemens and Emma Nye were born in Elmira within two months of each other; Livy on November 27, 1845 and Emma in January, 1846. Emma's father and mother came to Elmira in the mid-1840's, about the same time as Jervis Langdon. Unlike Jervis Langdon, however, George M. Nye was not successful. He tried manufacturing tubing for railroads and for many years had a variety store or "Bazaar" selling "fancy goods and Yankee notions." The family lived in a house owned by his wife's mother on the corner of Main and Second Streets. Interestingly, it was the first home of the Langdon family in Elmira after they moved from Ithaca. George Nye himself never owned any property in Elmira. Emma had an older sister, Mary, and a younger brother and sister.

The Nye house was next door to that of Henry C. Spaulding who had two daughters about the same ages as the Nye girls. The two houses were not far from the Langdon's home on East Union Street and in the same block after Jervis Langdon bought the large house on the corner of Main and Church Streets in 1862. Livy, the Nye girls and the Spaulding girls were part of a group of friends who were neighbors, schoolmates, and members of the same Sunday School class.

Jervis and Olivia Langdon were charter members and major supporters of the Congregational Church (renamed the Park Church in 1871). Livy joined the church by profession of faith at the age of thirteen in



EMMA NYE, Susan and Theodore Crane photograph album, Elmira College Mark Twain Archives.

1858. Emma Nye was twenty when she joined the church, also by profession of faith, in August, 1866. Her mother had been a member for several years but her father never joined. Mrs. Julia Beecher, wife of the minister, Thomas K. Beecher, many years later recalled her first Sunday School class "consisting of Alice and Clara and Fidelia, Ella, two Emmas, Jenny, Olivia and four Marys." The Olivia was Olivia Langdon, of course. Alice and Clara were Spauldings. One of the Emmas, one of the Marys, and possibly the Jenny were Nyes. The other Emma was Emma Sayles, another close friend of Livy's. The other names are subject to speculation.

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EDITORIAL

MARK TWAIN IN THE NEWS

The Mark Twain news story that dwarfed all others was the discovery of the long-lost first half of the original manuscript of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The events that followed form a plot that would have delighted Mark Twain. A retired children's librarian and her sister living in comfortable but modest circumstances found the missing pages in an old trunk that had belonged to her grandfather, James Fraser Gluck. Gluck wrote to Twain in 1885, and solicited the manuscript on behalf of the Buffalo Public Library. Twain sent the second half of the manuscript which was deposited in the library. Later he found the first half and sent it along to Gluck. Gluck died suddenly without delivering the first half to the library, and his widow and children packed his papers in several trunks when they moved to California. There the manuscript lay untouched for more than a century.

The granddaughters first contacted Sotheby's, the auction house, who certified the manuscript's authenticity and estimated that it might be worth a million dollars or more if sold at auction. Mark Twain scholars hailed the find. The Buffalo Public Library was delighted that the two halves of the manuscript might be reunited. For a short time it appeared that a reasonable settlement about the disposition of the manuscript might be worked out, but events showed that the greed that Mark Twain described so devastatingly in "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" was alive and well in the Twentieth Century. Lawyers were hired — for the grandchildren, for Sotheby's, for the library, and perhaps others.

At this writing it appears that at least one generation of lawyers and perhaps more will be supported until retirement by the dispute. If Mark Twain did get to heaven, I can visualize him giving Captain Stormfield a nudge and chuckling, "Human Nature hasn't changed much in a hundred years!"

"The lack of money is the root of all evil." *Mark Twain.*

EMMA NYE *continued*

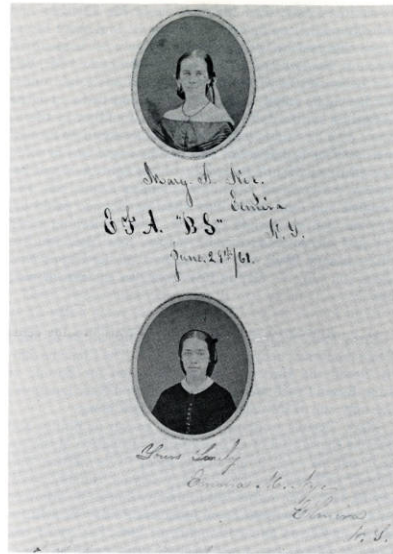
Both Livy and Emma began attending Miss Thurston's Elmira Seminary when they were only a few months short of five years old. They went to the private school from 1850 to at least 1858. It was a boarding school, but it also took day students. The courses offered ranged from basic elementary to college preparatory. The school was located in a large mansion on Main Street a block north of the Nye house and within easy walking distance of the Langdon's home on East Union Street. Livy continued her education after Miss Thurston's School in the Preparatory department of the newly-opened Elmira Female College, entering as a boarding student at the beginning of the second semester in February, 1859. Emma Nye and her sister Mary attended Elmira Free Academy, organized in May of that year. The first classes were held in the basement of the Congregational Church, a wooden building located on the site of the present Park Church. The Nyes probably could not afford even the modest tuition charges at the college. The first Elmira Free Academy building opened in the spring of 1862, a year after Mary Nye graduated. Emma Nye was able to go to school in the new building, graduating in 1864. She was living at home with her family in Elmira when the State Census was taken in June, 1865.

Evidently her education qualified her to teach school. On April 7, 1866, Olivia Lewis Langdon, Livy's mother, wrote in her diary, "Emma Nye returned from her school in Port Jervis this morning. This evening she, Alice and Clara Spaulding spent with Livy." Emma must have visited Livy frequently in the period from about 1861 to 1864 when Livy was bedridden at home. Livy's geography book, signed by her and dated August, 1863 has "Miss Emma Nye" written in pencil on the back cover, one of three names of friends scribbled there.

In 1869, the Nyes decided to leave Elmira and move to Aiken, South Carolina. That year, the estate of Mrs. Nye's mother, who had died earlier, was settled and the house in which they had been living was sold. The sale, completed in November, 1870, brought \$4,000 in cash, divided between Catherine Nye and the children of a deceased sister. Perhaps this modest inheritance enabled the family to move to South Carolina.

Aiken is located 56 miles southwest of Columbia, South Carolina, at the edge of the Piedmont. Its healthy climate attracted planters from Charleston before the Civil War and after the war it was promoted as a health resort accessible by train. The Nye family may have moved to Aiken for reasons of their own health or to take advantage of business opportunities created by a rapidly increasing number of people attracted by the mild winter climate.

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Pictures and autographs of Mary and Emma Nye, autograph album, Elmira College Archives.

Olivia Langdon was a sensitive young lady and felt badly about her friend moving away. In November, 1869 she wrote to Alice Day, a friend in Hartford, "There has been another departure in the neighborhood. Mr. Nye's family have moved to Aiken in South Carolina. Mr. Nye failed in business. Emma and Mary were all a good deal out of health, and it seemed best and necessary for them to make some change. It seemed very hard for them to go away from their home of twenty years — to take up a new life among strangers and particularly at their stage of life — as I bade them good bye the feeling was strong upon me of how much [illegible] sun shine falls in my life than in most lives...."

Emma went South with her family and was recorded in Aiken with them in the Census of 1870. She was living in Detroit, Michigan in December, 1868 with the family of Mr. and Mrs. John Sill and probably teaching in his private academy for young ladies there. John Sill had been the first superintendent of the Detroit public schools and later had a distinguished career as an educator and diplomat. At Livy's repeated urging, Mark Twain called on Emma Nye at the Sill home while in Detroit for a lecture and enjoyed a visit of more than two hours discussing Livy. Livy had evidently confided to Emma that she

was often tired when she had to get up for breakfast, prompting Mark Twain to write urging her to sleep later and to take care of herself.

Emma planned to return to Detroit in the fall of 1870, and, after spending the summer at home in Aiken, she headed North, visiting friends in Elmira and possibly attending the funeral of Jervis Langdon who died on August 6. Livy was terribly upset after her father's death and could not sleep. Since Buffalo was on the way to her job in Detroit, Emma went home with Livy to help out. Here she came down with typhoid fever, probably contracted in Aiken. Although she had the best medical care available, and Livy nursed her herself although she was six months pregnant with her first child, Emma Nye died on September 29. She was only twenty-four years old.

Sadly, while Emma was so desperately sick in Buffalo, her nine-year-old sister, Jennie, was also sick with typhoid fever in Aiken. On September 3rd, Emma's father wrote to her at the Detroit address telling her of her sister's illness. The symptoms he described — high fever, abdominal discomfort, diarrhea, cough, weight loss, hallucinations, — are those of typhoid fever. The letter was forwarded to the Clemens address in Buffalo, but we do not know if Emma received it or was able to read it. Jennie did recover and eventually married although she "died in the early years of her happy married life." The Nye family returned to Elmira where George M. Nye died in 1900 at the age of 85. His wife, Catherine Nye, lived to be almost 95, dying in 1913.

Emma's body was brought back to Elmira to the Spaulding house, next door to her former home. Her funeral was held in the Congregational Church with Thomas K. Beecher conducting the service. She is buried in the Second Street Cemetery where her father and mother joined her so many years later.

The death of Emma Nye in the Clemens's "own bed" was perhaps the worst in a series of unhappy events that colored Mark Twain's and Livy's attitude towards Buffalo. Mark Twain was not happy trying to settle in to the routine work of editor of the *Buffalo Express*. He was trying to find time to work on the manuscript of *Roughing It* and to make life as pleasant as possible for Livy, pregnant and away from family and friends for the first time in her life. She had felt a sense of guilt when the Nyes moved away from Elmira and it is not surprising that the death of her friend brought on a deep depression that disturbed her husband, who was always concerned about her fragile health. That Livy recovered from this as well as the death of her father and the premature birth of her son, and even the baby's death nineteen months later, shows that she was much stronger, physically and emotionally, than was believed. It took a strong person to survive as the wife of Samuel L. Clemens for thirty-four years.

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