

Two Claras, or one. Take your pick. The identity of Clara Caldwell.

by Susan Chance-Rainwater, Feb 2021

In October 1916, the Los Angeles Herald and San Diego Union and Bee both carried a story about a family reunion. [2981] Here's how the Bee put it:

Re-united After 42 Years

Pendleton, Ore., Oct. 14, 1916 — After a separation of forty-two years, Mrs. Clara Caldwell of Los Angeles was re-united here today with her brother, W. I. Rainwater. They were separated when their mother died in Kansas City, and only recently did Rainwater learn where his sister was living.

So let's parse this. We need a W. I. Rainwater with a sister named Clara who lived in Kansas City in 1874 when their mother died. This comes down to a single option – William Ira Rainwater and Clara Rainwater, children of George Washington Rainwater and Robinette Butler.¹ [9]

Robinette died in 1874, and George W. Rainwater remarried in 1875.[b] A few years later, William Ira Rainwater set out for the west. From here on, I'm going to call him Ira, because this name appears to be what he called himself in adulthood. According to the Gallatin Valley Gazetteer and Bozeman City Directory, 1892-1893, Ira settled in Montana in 1887.[a] He married Kate Murray in 1891,[c] had a brief stint as a gambler, then settled on a safer position as a shop clerk, and moved to Oregon between 1894 and 1904.[a] In 1916, Ira reunited with his sister Clara Caldwell, and eventually moved to California, where he died in 1928.[d]

Ira was buried in Inglewood Park Cemetery in Inglewood, California. BJW, the Findagrave contributor who took the photo of Ira's headstone, also took a group shot of everyone in the family lot, #160 in the Dahlia section.[2312] Here's what BJW wrote:

Left to right: William and Susie (Caldwell), Clara and John Caldwell, Ira and Kate Rainwater, Martha and William Laird. Clara may be Ira's sister. Her maiden name is Rainwater and his marker says "brother." In the row in back of them are Ruth and Sherman Caldwell.

The dates on Clara's marker are 1870-1956,² and the California Death Index supplies a corresponding death record for Clara, dated 29 May 1956, father's name–Rainwater.[d] So that ties things up in a neat bow, right?

Not so fast.

We need to take a look at the Caldwell family, the family Clara married into. From the cemetery plot information, we know that Clara's husband was John O. Caldwell, and that William and Sherman are related in some way. The 1900-1920 census records make clear that these two men are John and Clara's sons. Their death records say their mother's maiden name was Laird.[d]

Wait, what? Shouldn't that be Rainwater?

Further complicating this is the 1920 census record for John Caldwell's household, which includes an elderly couple, William S. and Martha Laird, listed as his father and mother-in-law. In other words, they are Clara's parents.

This suggested the possibility that John was married twice, to two women named Clara. The first wife, Clara Laird died before 1900, and the second Clara was Clara Rainwater. This matches up nicely with the 1916 newspaper article, and allows for the two sons to belong to Clara Laird. Only problem – it's wrong.

The marriage record for John Caldwell and wife Clara is for Clara Laird, married in 1891 in Thurston Co, Oregon.[g] Their 1900 and 1910 census records say they have each been married only once, for 8 years (in 1900) and 18 years (in 1910). In both cases, this corresponds to the 1891 marriage date, and precludes a second marriage for John. Additionally, Clara gives her parents' places of birth as Pennsylvania and Indiana, which match the Lairds. George W. Rainwater and Robinette Butler's places of birth would have been Tennessee and Illinois. [11, 12, 13]

Finally, there's this. William S. Laird was a Union Civil War veteran. He served in the last year of the war in the Pennsylvania 3rd Provisional Cavalry. In 1923, he was admitted into the Old Soldier's Home in Sawtelle, CA. [37] When he died the following year, his remains were released to "Clara R. Caldwell, daughter." Daughter, not daughter-in-law. [e]

So the Clara living in 1923 is Clara Laird Caldwell, but the Clara living in 1916 is Clara Rainwater Caldwell. And yet, the two sons were born in the 1890s to Clara Laird Caldwell. This was the point where I went "Arghhhhhh!" and stopped working on the problem for a while. Putting a perplexing problem on pause is sometimes the right thing to do, just to let the ideas percolate.

And percolate they did.

Only one census record captures the Laird family with Clara living in it – the 1885 state census

of Colorado, where she is clearly listed as the 12-year-old daughter of William S. and Martha Laird. This would put her birth in 1873,² which not coincidentally, matches the birth year of Clara Caldwell from the 1900 census and Clara Rainwater from the 1880 census. [f, 9]

Which raised for me this question: what happens to a newborn baby when her mother dies? Sometimes the father gives the baby away.

The resolution I am proposing to this problem is something I have seen multiple times. I have it twice in my own immediate family, with Barbara Albret, born Buckley, and Marion Earl Stafford, born Chance. In both cases, when their mother died, the family's newborn was adopted out into a different family. In the case of Marion Earl Stafford, his father remarried a year after his first wife died (just like George W. Rainwater) but he still failed to fetch back his youngest son. In the case of Aunt Barbara, she didn't know of her natal family until she was an adult. Newborns presented a care-taking problem for widowed men and adopting out the baby was a common solution. If you want more examples, I've got them.

So why had Ira Rainwater lost track of his sister Clara? Not because he went west, but because she had been adopted by the Laird family. William and Martha Laird adopted Clara Rainwater as an infant because they had no other children, and she needed a mother.^{3 4}

So Clara Rainwater is Clara Laird, and both are Clara Caldwell. Problem solved.

NOTES

¹ Since I'm working with the entire Rainwater family, identifying these individuals was simply process of elimination.

² Despite the 1870 date on Clara's headstone, all other records support an 1873 birth year.

³ Martha Laird's maiden name was McClain or McClane, as was George Washington Rainwater's second wife. There may have been a family relationship – I think it's likely – but I have not been able find it.

⁴ The Lairds adopted a second daughter, Priscilla, in 1897, after she was left on their doorstep. In the 1900 census, Martha says she is the mother of 0 children, which I read as meaning that *she has not borne any children*. In 1910, she says she is the mother of 2 children. Both answers are literally correct.

REFERENCES

9: 1880 Federal Census

11: 1900 Federal Census

12: 1910 Federal Census

13: 1920 Federal Census

37: Sawtelle Veterans Home, Wikipedia,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sawtelle_Veterans_Home

2312: BJW, Findagrave ID #47094611, photographs of Inglewood Park Cemetery

2981: "Brother and L.A. Sister joined after 42 years," Los Angeles Herald, Vol XLII, No 299, pg 2, 14 Oct 1916, Los Angeles, CA, and "Reunited after 42 years," San Diego Union and Daily Bee, pg 8, 15 Oct 1916, San Diego, CA

a: U.S., City Directories, 1822-1995, online database. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011

b: Marriage Records. Kansas Marriages. Various Kansas County District Courts and Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas. Ancestry.com and Familysearch.org.

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g: Washington, U.S., Marriage Records, 1854-2013, online database. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012. Original data: Washington State Archives.

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