Elva Queen: A Genealogical Study of Homesteading Women

by Melissa Queen

In the early 2000s, the Queen family of Dallas, Texas learned a shocking secret about their family history. James Boyd Queen was the son of Melvin Queen, a WWI veteran, successful business man, and a devoted father and husband. While researching his lineage, James Boyd was contacted by a woman named Lindsay Clark, who claimed to be a cousin from his father's side. Yet, James Boyd was positive his father was the only Queen child. It was soon unveiled that Melvin had a sister named Elva. Full of trying times, abuse, poverty, and cross-country travel, Elva's life differed greatly from her brother's. Elva lived a life many lower-class women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries experienced, a tragic life of poverty on the frontiers of America. With historical focus typically on middle-class women on the forefront of women's rights, Elva's life proves that lower class women in the nineteenth century were living drastically different lives than their suffragette sisters.

Born in Daviess County, Indiana in 1884 to James C. Queen and Sarah Jane Queen, Elva had a relatively normal life for a young farm girl before her parents' separation. While there is no documentation of James C. and Sarah Jane's split, it is certain that the marriage did not last. By 1891, Sarah Jane had remarried to a man named Jesse Holt.[1] For roughly ten years, the newlywed Holts, along with Elva and Melvin, lived on a farm in Indiana. The final account of Jesse, Sarah, Elva, and Melvin in Indiana is the 1900 census record taken in Daviess County, Indiana, with three additional children, Francis Ariel, Elbert Roscoe, and Siegel Chester.[2] By 1902, the Holt/Queen clan traveled from Indiana to the border of Indian territory in Tulsa, Oklahoma.[3] The family were essentially homesteaders, self-sufficient farmers that took advantage of cheap lands during the rampant spread of U.S. territory in the late nineteenth century.

The journey was strenuous, but the Holts were late travelers on the frontier. The later waves of settlers experienced a slightly easier journey than the first wagon trains. Railroads had crept into the countryside which made access to supplies easier. In 1909, fellow homesteader Elinore Pruitt wrote home, "we are sixty miles from the railroad, but when we want anything we send by the mail-carrier for it."[4] Earlier homesteaders

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[1] County of Daviess, Indiana, 1891, Sarah Jane Queen and Jesse Holt; Marriage License.
[2] 1900 U.S. Census Record, Daviess County, Indiana: 9 June 1900, sheet no. 4.
[3] Lindsay Clark (Elva's great granddaughter) in discussion with the author, April 2018.
[4] Elinore Pruitt Stewart, *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988), 13.

frequently assisted the later travelers, and death and illness were less likely.[5] The most common illnesses seen on later ventures were typical symptoms of "heat, fatigue, and mineral-laden water."[6] Regardless of the simpler trip south, a journey with five children to an unknown land would be an intense adventure for the family, especially the women. Their responsibilities of the home transferred to the trails, regardless of their difficulty. Adaptability would be key to survival on the journey.

There must have been a grand plan in Jesse's mind when he moved his family from Indiana, where he'd known the land his entire life, to Oklahoma. In 1889, land in Oklahoma was available to non-Indian settlers for incredibly low prices due to close proximity to hostile tribes. In 1901, the Holt/Queen family left for the region known as the "Twin Territories," the west territory was Oklahoma, the east was Indian Territory.[7] The family's new home sat on the border of the two territories, just east of the Oklahoma line. Natives were easily the main concern for new homesteaders in the Oklahoma territory. Propaganda flooded newspapers with stories of the savage native attacks and travelers were "confronted with fresh memories of the Custer battle."[8] Attacks on later settlers was rare, but fear was a constant.

Upon arriving in Oklahoma, Elva was a young woman of seventeen and her role was not that of a child, but of an adult. Her experiences as a woman in the poverty-stricken frontier were vastly different than most early twentieth century women. The trip in covered wagon left little room for luxuries as families were left with the task of finding supplies to build their own homes. Poverty was ubiquitous among settlers. While railroads were available, money for equipment was not. Bartering played a significant role in the development of homes, and women predominantly ran the trade operations.[9]

Houses were nothing as they were on the East coast. Initial homes were built as temporary structures. As the wealth of their land grew, so would the homes. In the plains regions, like Oklahoma, families frequently built sod houses, or "soddies."[10] A sod house was built using the thick prairie grass piled up to create walls. Sod houses were not the most elegant of houses but were sturdy enough to withstand the treacherous elements and were spacious enough for large farming families. The houses

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[5] Linda Williams Reese, *Women of Oklahoma 1890-1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 26.
[6] Reese, 26.
[7] William D. Pennington, "Twin Territories (term)," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, www.okhistory.org (accessed March 2018).
[8] Reese, *Women of Oklahoma*, 29.
[9] Reese, 32.
[10] Linda S. Peavy and Ursula Smith, *Pioneer Women: The Lives of Women on the Frontier*, (University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 50.

were not without problems. There were no partitions to divide rooms, no running water, and the earthen floors "turned to muck" in the rain.[11]

Homesteading families owned little to no furniture. The accretion of furniture was an important aspect in homes becoming "more permanent" structures.[12] Upon settling, Elva lived with her mother, stepfather, three half-brothers, and Melvin. Elva likely had minimal privacy since sod houses rarely had partitions.[13] For a young woman, the crowded conditions were not ideal, and her responsibilities were growing daily. While men were working the fields, women were equally busy, often taking the liberty to wash and cook for the single men in the community.[14] Women were expected to help the community, complete their daily household duties, and transform the rough temporary structures into socially acceptable homes. They "planted flower pots, sewed bright window curtains, braided colorful rag rugs" to liven up the gloom of their earthen homes. Expected to keep a tidy home, the women on the frontiers were no match for the "centipedes, fleas, spiders, and flies," that constantly invaded their humble abodes.[15]

Still, women in Oklahoma were clever in their ability to adapt to their new homes. Women often found the local native women were friendly, and they frequently befriended one another. According to historian Linda Reese, Indians—especially the women—were curious about white settlers.[16] Through several years of intermingling, white women and native women became aware that "female activities" like sewing, nursing, food preparation, and child care, had significant meaning to both groups of women.[17] Native women became critical to surviving the rapidly changing life of a homesteading woman.

Equally important to frontier survival were the children. The ability to make ends meet rested largely on their efforts, as farming required many hands. Children provided a free form of labor for poverty-stricken families. Sarah Jane had six children that lived to adulthood.[18] This was a normalcy in these societies, but a heavy burden on the women. Doctors were limited, hospitals miles away, and safety for the woman could never be assured. "Continual childbearing affected not only the pioneer women, but their daughters as well."[19] It was expected for the older girls to help care for the younger siblings, throwing them into the roles of motherhood at incredibly young ages. Elva, as the eldest girl, would have been expected to help care for her younger siblings.

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[11] Peavy and Smith, 51.
[12] Peavy and Smith, 53.
[13] Peavy and Smith, 55.
[14] Reese, *Women of Oklahoma*, 51.
[15] Reese, 35.
[16] Reese, 54.
[17] Reese, 54.
[18] Lindsay Clark (Elva's great granddaughter) in discussion with the author, April 2018.
[19] Reese, *Women of Oklahoma*, 44.

Both Melvin and Elva attended school in Indiana, but after only three years of school, Elbert was born. At nine, Elva was at an appropriate age to start assisting in the care for Elbert and learning her role in society. Meanwhile, Melvin continued to attend school daily.

Eldest daughters responded to their roles in the family in a variety of ways. Some, like Chloe Holt (no relation) "pursued careers, but others ran away from home and married at an early age to escape the constant burdens."[20] Elva stayed; in fact, she didn't even marry at what would be considered a typical age for a woman in the early 1900s. In the 1910 Federal Census Elva (mistaken as Elvie) is twenty-five, unmarried, and still living with her mother, stepfather, and brothers.[21] (Fig. 1)

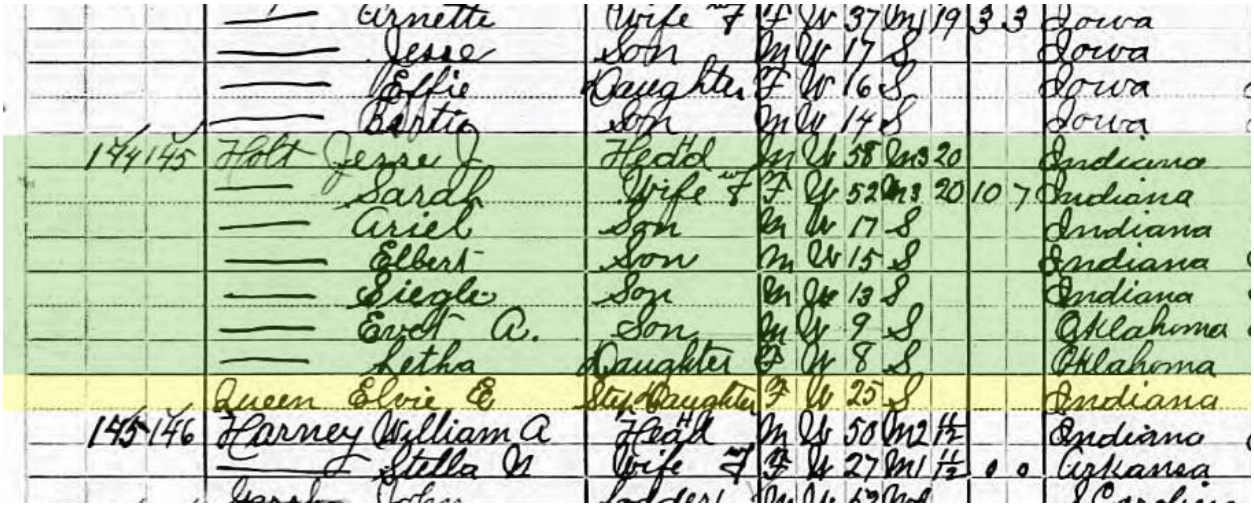

Fig. 1 – 1910 Federal Census Record

Life for the Holts was difficult. On the verge of Indian Territory, in a newly formed state, the family was considered lower class living on rented land.[22] To make matters worse, Sarah and Jesse's youngest child Everett, was a sickly young boy.[23] In 1901, when Everett was born, Sarah, Jesse, and the children were on their way to Oklahoma. The trip from Indiana to Oklahoma would be incredibly difficult on Sarah's pregnant body. At forty-three, carrying five children to term previously, and traveling the frontier, some complications in her pregnancy, delivery, or Everett's infancy, would be expected. A successful farm needed young strapping men that could assist with the difficult labors of the farm, and Everett was not in that condition.

Excessive childbearing in the nineteenth century was seen as unhealthy for women. In homesteading communities, it was common for women to use surrogates if

[20] Reese, 45.
[21] 1910 U.S. Census Record, Tulsa, Oklahoma: 9 May 1910, sheet no. 8.
[22] *Ibid.*
[23] Lindsay Clark (Elva's great granddaughter) in discussion with the author, April 2018.

they could no longer have healthy children of their own. In the early twentieth century, this meant the husband would sleep with another woman to produce a child. The wealthy had more access to healthy women that could be paid to be surrogates. Living in poverty, if Sarah and Jesse desired more children for the farm, an alternative form of surrogate would have to be used.[24] Only one person would make financial sense: Elva. Lindsay Clark claims that Elva was indeed forced to conceive with her stepfather, Jesse Holt.[25] For our modern culture this is absurd, but in twentieth-century homesteads, this was relatively common.[26] Still, Elva would have repercussions from conceiving with her stepfather. This would cripple her in society and her ability to marry upwards would be destroyed.

When Elva was pregnant with Jesse Holt's child in 1902, Melvin was fifteen years old. According to James Boyd Queen, his father, Melvin, lived at home until roughly seventeen and spoke often about growing up and working on a farm in Oklahoma.[27] Melvin would have been living at home when Elva became pregnant with Jesse's child. It is unknown if Melvin was aware of the situation between Elva and Jesse, but in the dwellings depicted earlier, there was little privacy. Melvin was likely aware of what was occurring. Since Melvin died an untimely death, the family was never able to discuss Elva with him. Many questions are posed: Did Melvin approve of the relationship? Did he try to stop it? Was he aware of the arrangement? Being a younger brother, Melvin would have had little control over Elva's life, but it would be an interesting tidbit to understand the relationship from Melvin's point of view.

It was common for women on the frontier to react in explosive ways to unwanted or difficult pregnancies. In letters written to a well-known doctor in a newspaper column, women repeatedly expressed their dissatisfaction with their pregnancies. In one titled "An Awful Letter," the woman explains that her family was living in deep poverty and she was struggling to provide for her five children, but still her husband begged for more.

> "Oh! It seemed as if I would rather die a thousand times than go through that awful, awful torture again. I believe my soul did desert me for a time. I scoured the country on foot and bareheaded for days. At last I tried desperate remedies to kill the unborn child, and succeeded at the risk of my life."[28]

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[24] Charles Rosenberg and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Sex, Marriage, and Society: Birth Control and Family Planning in Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York: Arno Press, 1974), 19.
[25] Lindsay Clark (Elva's great granddaughter) in discussion with the author, April 2018.
[26] Rosenberg and Smith-Rosenberg, *Sex, Marriage, and Society*, 19.
[27] Brian Queen (son of Boyd Queen) In discussion with the author, February 2018.
[28] Rosenberg and Smith-Rosenberg, *Sex, Marriage, and Society*, 104.

The woman, only known as H.M.L, had successfully aborted her unborn child. The thought of bringing another young being into a poverty-stricken home was more than she could bare. The pure stress of child bearing and raising children in poverty on the frontier was enough to send women into fits of powerful depression. Whether Elva experienced any form of depression during her pregnancy with Jesse Holt is unknown. However, from stories passed down through the family, she was highly displeased with her life in Oklahoma.[29]

Elva gave birth to her eldest daughter, Letha May Holt, in 1902 in Tulsa, Oklahoma.[30] Letha was just one year younger than Everett, the youngest son of Sarah Jane and Jesse. Clark often wonders how Letha dealt with the confusion of her relation to Francis, Elbert, Siegel, and Everett: "Did she call them uncles or brothers?"[31] Many questions are raised as to how Sarah Jane treated Letha as well. The goal of Jesse reproducing with Elva was to produce strong men for a more successful farm, but a daughter was another mouth to feed. Letha rarely reflected on the Holts in Oklahoma, leaving a missing piece to the puzzle.

Between 1902 and 1910, things were quiet for the Holts. Little occurred as the family attempted to adjust to the new extended family. Elva was still living in Tulsa, Oklahoma with Jesse, Sarah Jane, her half-brothers, and daughter Letha. Melvin was long gone, at twenty-three, he was living in San Antonio, Texas, working for Uvalde Rock Asphalt Company.[32] The other boys were now old enough to be working fully on the farm with a newly hired farm hand, John.[33] Things on the farm were looking up. It would seem there was no longer a need for Elva to continue childbearing with Jesse, but in 1911, Edith Opal Holt, was born. Sarah Jane was furious with this pregnancy. She allowed Elva to birth Edith in Oklahoma but would boot Elva, Jesse, Letha, and Edith out of the house, and ultimately, the state.[34]

There are two possibilities as to what was going on behind closed doors in the Holt household that created Elva's second pregnancy with Jesse. Either Elva and Jesse were continuing a secret affair, or Jesse was having his way with an unwilling Elva. There is evidence to support both claims. As for an affair, Elva stayed with Jesse until he died in 1923 in a nursing home. Throughout his time at the Eastern Oregon State Hospital, Elva continued to write Jesse letters informing him of his home and children.[35] For a woman in a forced relationship, her elderly husband's demise would be more of a celebration than what is perceived through Elva's continued contact with Jesse and the

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[29] Lindsay Clark (Elva's great granddaughter) in discussion with the author, April 2018.
[30] *Ibid.*
[31] *Ibid.*
[32] Queen, Melvin. "WWI Registration Card." Ancestry.com, San Antonio, 1917.
[33] 1910 U.S. Census Record, Tulsa, Oklahoma: 8 May 1910, sheet no. 8.
[34] *Ibid.*
[35] *Ibid*.

nursing home. For Elva, a disorder like Stockholm's Syndrome, where victims create connections to their captors and abusers, may be a factor.[36] It is possible that Elva continued contact with Jesse, because he was the only family, other than her children, she had remaining. In Estelle Freedman's *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation,* she claims women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were unable to be victims of rape. Unwarranted advances were often blamed on women's lack of "self-control" and their ability to "seduce men."[37] Even if Elva was being forced into a continued relationship with Jesse, society and the law, would not have been in her favor; A sad, but frequent fate for women in this period.

Just a couple of years after Edith's birth, Elva and Jesse were forced to pack up their belongings and flee the home in Oklahoma. Soon after the forced eviction, Jesse received word of an orchard in Oregon full of fruit and financial opportunity. With a land deed signed by Woodrow Wilson in hand, Jesse, Elva, Letha, and Edith headed to Oregon.[38] The family had little money and while passenger trains west were common, they could not afford the trip for four people. Elva set off on a familiar journey just a couple of years prior to the outbreak of the First World War.

When the family arrived in Oregon the terrain was vastly different than they expected for an orchard. It is believed that Jesse Holt was tricked into buying land ill-suited for growing the proper trees, much less anything of value.[39] In the 1920 Federal Census for Deschutes County, Oregon, Jesse Holt is no longer listed as a farmer, having taken a position at the local lumber mill (Fig. 2). More interesting, Elva is no longer playing the role of a homestead housewife but is listed as an industrial woman in a box factory.[40] By 1920, industry was booming and lumber was the primary industry in the heavily forested Northwest. The Brooks-Scanlon lumber mill sat on the "far side of the Deschutes River" in the town of Bend, Oregon.[41] Just across the river was another lumber mill, the Shevlin-Hixon mill. There are several clues that point to Jesse and Elva's employment at the Brooks-Scanlon mill. Most telling, Brooks-Scanlon was more than a lumber mill, it was a box factory. Opened in 1916, the Brooks-Scanlon box factory frequently hired female employees, particularly during war time (Fig. 3). Elva stayed at the box factory for several years, predominantly making wooden crates, popular to Brooks-Scanlon, from the lumber gathered by men at the mill. In 1920, Jesse J. Holt was

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[36] Laura Lambert, "Stockholm Syndrome" *Encyclopedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/science/Stockholm-syndrome (accessed April 2018).
[37] Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violences in the Era of Suffrage and Segregations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 17.
[38] Jesse J. Holt Lakeview, Oregon, no. 05785 and 05931; Land Patent, *General Land Office Records*, 1917.
[39] Lindsay Clark (Elva's great granddaughter) in discussion with the author, April 2018.
[40] 1920 U.S. Census Record, Deschutes, Bend, Oregon: 12 January 1920, sheet no. 11A
[41] Joshua Binus, "Shevlin-Hixon and Brooks-Scanlon Mills, Bend" *The Oregon History Project*, www.oregonhistoryproject.org (accessed March 2018).

sixty-eight years old. A lumber mill was vigorous for a man of his age. Jesse's health in Oregon deteriorated quickly. Sometime before 1923, he was admitted to the Eastern Oregon State Hospital.[42]

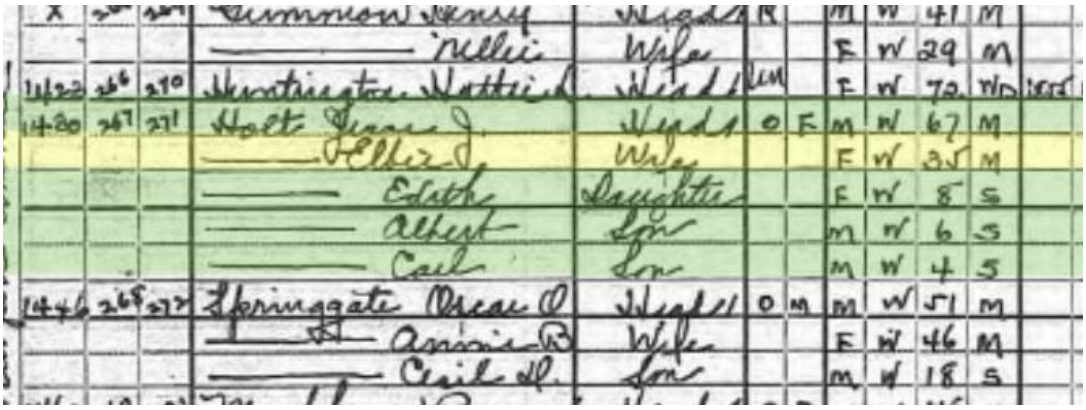

Fig. 2 – 1920 Federal Census Record

Fig. 3 – Brooks-Scanlon Box Factory girls 1916 – Elva is the top right next to the foreman.

Jesse remained in the nursing home until his death in October of 1923. Elva wrote to the nursing home regularly to check on his status, but his death brought her freedom. When he passed, no one even bothered to claim his remains. A telling sign of Elva's feelings towards her stepfather and the father to her children. Elva now had four children with Jesse: Letha, Edith, Albert, and Carl. Without a man to provide for her and the children, she needed to do more than work in a box factory. By 1930, she was working as a nurse in private homes, an impressive feat for someone with limited early education.[43]

[42] Lindsay Clark (Elva's great granddaughter) in discussion with the author, April 2018.
[43] 1930 U.S. Census Record, Deschutes County, Bend, Oregon: 3 April 1930, sheet no. 3A.

It is believed that it was her nursing position that led her to William Seaman.[44] Seaman grew up on a farm in Missouri, had been widowed twice, and served in WWI. His life was equally as traumatic as Elva's and the two fell madly for one another. William Seaman would be the only man Elva would officially marry. At the age of forty-nine, in 1933, Elva married William Seaman in Ada County, Idaho. In the 1940 Federal Census Record, Elva is no longer employed, she is back to her roots as a homemaker in a farming community.[45] William Seaman and Elva lived in solitude until Seaman's death in 1950, enjoying seventeen peaceful years together.

It took until 1933 for Elva to enjoy the life that many women in the twentieth century experienced, one they chose for themselves. Ever since she was a young girl, Elva had been forced to care for her siblings, work on the family farm, and engage in unconventional relationships. The life she lived was not one of a suffragist woman, she was a woman plagued by unfortunate events and circumstances of a lower-class farming society. In her later years, Elva continued to keep in contact with her half-brothers in Oklahoma, but not Melvin. Elva's connection to the Holts provided her information about Melvin's life, his wife, and his child. James Boyd was no stranger to the Holts either, Melvin continuously brought his wife, Lillian Dyer, and son to visit his mother and half-brothers in Oklahoma before he died. The family has strong reason to believe that when Melvin died in a tragic industrial accident in 1936, Elva sent Lillian and James Boyd a mourning gift held in a wooden apple crate. A style common to the Brooks-Scanlon box factory. For decades, the family tried to toss the old apple crate, but James Boyd insisted on keeping it. For him, this was not a clue to Elva, but a piece of his father in the days soon after his death. Unbeknownst to James Boyd or the Queen family, the box holds a tie to the family history more significant than perceived.

As Elva grew older, her children and grandchildren were her happiness. She was proud of the people Letha, Edith, Albert, and Carl grew to be—even more proud that her daughters turned in to successful, independent women.[46] As her life simplified, Elva's exterior remained tough, the stories of her early life are riddled with missing pieces that her family tirelessly aimed to fill. When Elva spoke of Jesse, it was rarely derogatory, nor was it pleasant. The children, especially Letha and Edith, knew enough of their father to understand Elva's displeasure with him. He was not the man of her picking, and was "quite mean" to Elva, especially in his later years.[47] The liable sexual, physical, and mental abuses are not recorded, but given Elva's circumstances and the time period, are apparent.

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[44] Lindsay Clark (Elva's great granddaughter) in discussion with the author, April 2018.
[45] 1940 U.S. Census Record, Ada County, Idaho: 10 April 1940, sheet no. 12B
[46] Lindsay Clark (Elva's great granddaughter) in discussion with the author, April 2018.
[47] *Ibid*

Elva's story is a tragic one but holds importance to historians of women in the period of growing women's rights. In the era of suffrage, Elva experienced a life no different from the one women had faced for centuries. While middle-class women were living lives of luxury and gaining independence, Elva's life was stripped from her the moment she entered womanhood. Forced to move with her mother and stepfather to a flat, dry, and hot region, Elva's troubles were just beginning. The land in Oklahoma barely provided enough for the family to survive on. Living in poverty, Elva was likely forced to conceive with her stepfather in hopes of birthing a strong young farmhand. Elva was essentially a single mother at the age of eighteen, with limited potential to pull herself out of her demeaning situation. Becoming pregnant a second time, Elva was dragged away from her home again, but would say goodbye to her mother and brother for good. It wasn't until Jesse's death that Elva gained a sense of freedom. Her unfortunate life had been controlled by societal expectations to be a subordinate daughter, wife, and mother. The disastrous life of Elva Queen is a symbol of women's continued struggle in an era of independence and suffrage.

Pictured: Fern Elizabeth Gilbert, Elva Queen Holt Seaman, Letha May Holt, Baby Lindsay Clark