Georgiana Baird

Georgiana: My name is Georgiana Baird and these are two of my daughters, Bessie and Maud. I expect you’ve already heard about how the meaning of the word “george” is farmer. Comes from the Greek, with the “Ge” part meaning soil and the “orge” part meaning worker. And if that doesn’t say it all — well, my maiden name was *Weed*. (Shrug.) And I was a farmer’s daughter. So you might say it was pretty much destiny I would become a farmer’s wife.

Now my husband — his destiny was a little more varied. Comes of having a first name like Lafayette — don’t name your children after Revolutionary War heroes if you don’t want them going to war!

Maud: Oh, mama!

Bessie: I thought you were going to talk about when you and daddy were children, first.

Georgiana: I’m gettin’ there! My husband and I both grew up in Sandusky, Ohio. Nice midwestern town — you wouldn’t think much would happen there, right? Well, when I was 10, a cholera epidemic swept through town. One person in five died. My daddy helped out by making coffins for the 400 dead.

Bessie: Kind of creepy, mother.

Maud: Somebody’s got to do it.

Georgiana: After that we decided cities were no place for us and took up farming. Daddy was a staunch Republican — and you’ll remember that the Republican party had just been created in those days as the anti-slavery party. Sandusky was one of the premier stopson the Underground Railroad and I do sometimes wonder if my daddy lent a hand in that.

Bessie: Wasn’t Sandusky mentioned in Uncle Toms’ Cabin?

Maud: "And hark ye," said Tom; "we've got correspondents in Sandusky, that watch the boats for us."

Bessie: Show off.

Georgiana: Girls!! Now I can tell you for a fact that Lafayette had a more usual hand in freeing slaves — he joined the 67th Ohio in 1861. Served for three years, fighting mostly in Virginia. The troops had their own hard experience with sickness. His Lieutenant wrote in 1862 that many men were ill or dead from disease that could have been cured if there had been decent hospital care. Four of the lieutenant’s men died, and Lafayette was one of five who he left behind slowly recovering. Lafayette came back from the war a little sadder and wiser. He wrote to one of his friends at the time that he had seen the Union troops after victories in southern Virginia plundering and raping the *poor* white folks, while protecting and guarding the houses of the plantation owners.

Bessie: Not everything makes it into the papers, huh, Maud?

Maud: No, but most newspapers try to report injustices like that.

Bessie: I don’t recall your newspaper ever going much beyond gossip—

Maud: I’ll have you know, my husband and I—

Georgiana: Maud! Bessie! I don’t want to have to say this again! There will be no fighting in this cemetery! (Glares at them meaningfully.) Well. After Lafayette got back from the army, we got married and took ourselves off to Iowa, where we farmed and began to raise our kids. Ida and Fred were our eldest, followed by these two bickering trials of mine! In 1892, we came out here to Corona. Packed up our horses and chartered a couple flatcars on the railroad. Our house at 806 Joy Street is still there today. Although it’s been renovated a tad.

Maud: You wouldn’t let the builder put a bathroom in the house!

Georgiana: Everyone who ever grew up on a farm knows you don’t put the outhouse too close to where you prepare your food. Hadn’t Lafayette and I seen more than our share of sickness? It would have been unsanitary!

Maud: She put the toilet out on the back porch.

Georgiana: And grateful you should be that it wasn’t out proper in the yard what with rainy days and all — not that we ever get much rain here, do we?

Bessie: My favorite thing about the house was the pull-down stairs to the attic, where there was an old loom and spinning wheel to play with.

Georgiana: That got changed out, too, after I died, didn’t it.

Maud: It’s California, mama! We’re not supposed to have attics!

Georgiana: And what was that nonsense about your setting up some kind of business right out of my front parlor?

Bessie: That wasn’t me, mother, but my daughter, Neva — she taught school here in Corona and bought the house after you died in 1931, setting up the downstairs as a tea room in the summer of 1934 with her teacher friends. They did a lot of big business giving luncheons and parties.

Maud (to Bessie): Why did it only last that one summer?

Bessie: (whisper): The bathroom was still out on the back porch.

Georgiana: Bessie! Can we stop talking about toilets! (Sigh.) You know my obituary doesn’t say a whole lot about me and my life. But I do like how it opens “Deth summoned another one of Corona’s pioneers yesterday.” When you live to be 93, I’m thinking you’re bound to be a pioneer at something. My husband died a sight earlier in 1905, when he was 64. Here are some words from his obituary: "The Grim Reaper has again been in our midst and taken from us one of our choicest citizens."

Bessie: That sounds awfully gruesome, mother.

Georgiana: It’s the part about "one of our choicest citizens" that I like. Nice and respectful. And so he was. A deacon of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and serious about it — all that last year he worked with the Men’s Prayer Band, a group of men from all of the churches who met on Monday evenings to talk about a Christian life and how to bring it to more of the men in town. But those darn bees....

Bessie: It wasn’t the bees’ fault he spotted a fire up in the foothills while he was tending them.

Maud: But trying to put out that fire brought back Dad’s old heart trouble.

Georgiana: No point in talking about might-have-beens. At least, I had you children and the grandchildren to bring me comfort. Why don’t you two tell the good folks here something about yourselves.

Bessie: I married George Merriam who was deputy postmaster here in Corona before going on to work for the Santa Fe railroad in San Bernardino. His father, Captain John Merriam, first saw Corona before it even officially existed, when he led civil war troops here. Later he returned and was elected the first City Clerk of Corona with just 117 votes. George and I had two children and we both died in 1936, only a few years after you, mother.

Maud: I married Charlie Miller, who packed oranges for Corona's first citrus packing house on the day it opened in 1893, when he was just 15. His father actually named and created the design for the Queen Bee brand of oranges. Like his dad, Charlie went on to work with words and graphics — he became a newspaper man and printer. We had our own paper for three years, The Corona Messenger, with both of us writing articles for it. I joined about as many clubs as you can imagine, including Corona’s Civic Garden club, Readers club, Old Timers club, and the Women’s Improvement club. I was also a member of the Order of Amaranth, and the Mount Rubidoux White Shrine of Jerusalem, and was secretary of our local branch of the Order of the Eastern Star.

Bessie: Did you have a secret handshake?

Maud: I had *many* secret handshakes. Charlie kept busy, too, becoming a city councilman and mayor of Corona for 8 years. We had four children and I died in 1949, my husband in 1964.

Georgiana: So there you have it. The story of another George, a farmer’s wife, a mother, and a Corona pioneer — if I do say so myself. Thank you for listening, and if you see any of the great-grandchildren, tell them we’d appreciate a visit.