Selden Ira Munson

Clan Waitstill

Scandal in Kansas!

by Debi Bacon

Selden Ira Munson was the seventh of nine children born to Ira Munson and Lodema Williams, 6 Dec 1828 in Wallingford, New Haven, CT. Ira was a farmer and sometimes found work as a joiner. Though described as a social, lively man, he died young, aged 49, when Selden was about 13.

Selden married Sylva Clapp Damon in Springfield, MA in March 1858. Sylva was a direct descendant from Mayflower Passenger Richard Warren (Hannah Torrey, Joseph Torrey, Stephen Torrey, Stephen Torrey, David Torrey, Sarah Torrey, Nathaniel Warren and Richard Warren). They almost immediately moved to Leavenworth, Kansas, where their first of six children, Sylvannus Ira, was born three days after Christmas, 1858. After Sylvannus came Abraham Lincoln, Mary Lodema, Willoughby Wiliams, Frank Selden and Francis Elizabeth. Selden, like his father's part-time work, was a joiner. Selden and Sylva enjoyed 36 years together but, she died in Leavenworth in 1894.

When they first arrived, Selden owned a grocery business that prospered. He saw Leavenworth, perched on the Missouri River, as having potential for growth should the town become a prominent supply line along the river. He sold the grocery to build what would, for a time, make him quite wealthy. The S. I. Munson Planing Mill, Furniture and Lumber Co. included a lumberyard and planing mill, manufacturing doors, sashes, blinds and furniture.

Unfortunately, around the time of Sylva's death, that growth had not been realized, and the business began to fail. In early 1895 *The Leavenworth Standard* described his having to offer chattel mortgages, including to his son Abraham, for almost $10,000. The paper describes "one of the surprises of the time as no one even suspected that the concern was in any other than flourishing condition." The article ended with the fact that both S.I. and his sons were well-known and respected businessmen and the "embarrassment" would come as a surprise to everyone. The embarrassment continued to 1898 when the company was foreclosed on.

What remained of the business burned around 1900, never to be rebuilt, and he retired. Later, he is listed in the city directories as a "gardener," so it seems he really fell from an exalted position.

The" scandal" begins about November, 1898. According to newspaper reports, he met Eleanor Hoppe, a German emigrant and widow with at least two children. Within eight days they were married on December 2, 1898.

The couple went into business, with her supplying about $400 to buy property to farm, selling the produce from a truck garden. In 1908, she sued him for divorce, alleging he starved and mistreated her and defrauded her of the property. She charged him with purchasing at least two pieces of property but putting them into his children's names. She said he called her children "vile and indecent" and, she was afraid he would "do her bodily harm."

Her lawyer volunteered that she spoke little English, can hardly read and write and that her husband used this to defraud her. She alleged his children encouraged him in his actions. She filed for a restraining order which was granted.

The next year, the divorce played across the papers. *"The Courtship Was Short;" "Elenora and Selden Munson Take Their Differences into District Court;" "Declares That She Found the Home Uncared For and the Corners Stuffed With Gold and Bank Notes;" "He Charges Neglect in Time of Need."* The accusations flew. She said when she married him, his house hadn't been cared for nor the beds made for a year and called him "that old man there." Selden, meantime, sat in court smiling at her explosiveness and filed a cross-complaint, saying she had not cared for him when sick.

Elenora filed a suit for alimony alleging his children induced him to deed all the property to them, claiming she did not know until the transfers were shown her in the newspaper. He, in turn, disclaimed any interest in the lands saying they are "now the property of the children and out of his control." She also included children, Sylvanus, Frances, Mary and her husband John Whitman in the suit. Interestingly, my great great grandfather Abraham was not included in that suit.

The ultimate outcomes of the cases are not known. Selden did move to Oklahoma with his daughter and died August 28, 1912. He is buried with his first wife, Sylva in Mount Muncie Cemetery, Leavenworth, Kansas.

Selden's granddaughter, Sylvia Ethel Munson, was a young woman at the time this was happening. Ethel was my great grandmother and lived until I was in my late teens. She

was always judgmental about family members who were divorced, including a son and a granddaughter. When I discovered this “scandal,” I couldn’t help but think she had been mortified to have this play out in public in a relatively small town.

Published 01 Sep 2024