

Hannah Elenna Hilden -
A Grandmother Who Was Also a Felon

by Judy Darland

Hannah Hilden was born in Kemi, Lappi, Finland on 4 July 1875 and died in Sandpoint, Bonner, Idaho on 17 July 1933. She married three times but never met the child of her youngest son Edwin. He shared a few things about his mother with his daughter, but not much. Grandma Hannah was always a shadowy figure from the past. So I ventured on a voyage of discovery for my sister-in-law to find out who this woman had been and how she had lived her life. Little did we know what an interesting story it would turn out to be.

Hannah raised her first family with Mathias Reini in Calumet, Houghton, Michigan after arriving from Finland in 1890. By 1910, she was living with James Folden in Sandpoint, Idaho. Together they had two children by 1908, one of which was to become my sister-in-law's father; however, Hannah and James did not marry until 19 September 1921. Even though they were living in Sandpoint, they chose to get married in Thompson Falls, Sanders, Montana. Since they had a café in Sandpoint, they were probably very well known in the local community. One can surmise that they married some distance from home to prevent a scandal. The fact that her first husband, from whom she had never been divorced, didn't die until 1921 may also have played a role. AND, James' divorce from his first wife wasn't granted until 5 Oct 1921.

Known throughout Bonner County as a pioneer restaurant operator, Hannah's first business venture in Sandpoint was the Lumbermen's café. Later she opened what was known as Jim's café, which she operated for several years. These cafés were frequented by lumberjacks who were always looking for a good time when they came to town. Hannah served her own home brew. In 1922 during Prohibition, she ran afoul of the local police. She tried to bribe an officer to allow her to replace her moonshine with water and not arrest her. That didn't go over well. She spent 25 days in jail. That wasn't enough for her to cease and desist. Less than a year later she once again faced a judge and was deemed a "persistent violator of Liquor laws regards them as Puritanical Blue Laws more honored in the breach than observance". Because of her previous conviction, she was sentenced to a term of one to two years of hard labor in the Idaho State Penitentiary.

When she was processed into the penitentiary, the following physical description was put into her file:



"Very fat and stout like sack of feathers tied in the middle. Arches of feet broken from excessive wt. Madame type."

By this time, however, she was living with yet a third man, Walter Brackett! He was a WWI veteran who contracted active tuberculosis in France and whose physical condition was such that he required constant attention; she was his sole source of care. As soon as

Hannah was sentenced, she filed a petition for a reprieve because Walter's health had seriously deteriorated in her absence. This reprieve was granted with several stipulations:

- She must remain out of Bonner County
- She was to report to the Governor every thirty days by letter , such report to include full information as to Mr. Brackett's physical condition
- The reprieve was granted only upon the condition that Hannah devote herself to taking care of Mr. Brackett, and that when his health was restored or the necessity of her services had ceased, she was to return at once to the penitentiary to complete he sentence.

Hannah and Walter departed for Arizona which was thought to be a much better environment for someone suffering from tuberculosis. There, she devoted almost all of her time and a large share of her property to the care and nursing of Walter. Hannah was pardoned in June 1924. She and Walter returned to Sandpoint where they were married on 5 October 1925.

Unfortunately, Walter died a year later. Hannah took a trip back to Michigan to visit family and to restore her health. She later returned to Sandpoint where she passed away on 17 July 1933.

This story just shows us that our images of our ancestors can often be so very wrong. It was quite a surprise for my sister-in-law to hear this story. And yet, it does bring Grandma Hannah to life.