

# WILLIAM RAY: AN ORAL HISTORY

John Andrew Gallery



*(William Ray was born in 1773 and died in 1847. All we know about him is found on six gravestones in a small cemetery on the outskirts of Great Barrington, Massachusetts.)*

Yes, it's been a long life. But the strange thing is I can remember the early years a lot better than I can the recent ones. When I was growing up the war was going on. There wasn't much of it in our neck of the woods, but my father and oldest brother, Seth, would come and go serving in the militia. I can remember when they'd come home, worn out and tired, and how happy we would be to see them. And then they'd be off again and we wouldn't know when they'd turn up next. My older brother Ned—he was two years older—he and I had to do most of the chores even though I was only five or six.

About six months after they said the war was over Seth came home. He was happy it was over, but never wanted to talk about it much and didn't stay around too long. Although we needed him on the farm, he had a need, it seemed to me, to get away from his memories. So he headed west. We got a few letters from him, but soon they stopped and we never heard from him again. We waited for Pa to show up, but months went by without a sign. It's strange to think of now, but we had no way of knowing where he was or any way of finding out about him. After about a year we kind of gave up hope, but no one would really say that, not out loud I mean, and we all went on harboring the secret hope that one day he'd turn up. Ma eventually got a letter from a general who said he had commanded the squadron Pa was in, explaining that they'd been in some terrible fight near the end of the war and many men were killed or wounded. He didn't really say anything about Pa, just that it was hard to tell who the dead were on the battlefield and, if your husband—that's what the letter called him—wasn't home by now maybe he was one of them. Even after that I'd still go to bed at night and pray he was alive and would turn up eventually.

I guess that's one of the reasons I stayed around here. I liked the land—we had a nice farm near the lake. It was uphill from town and a hard walk, but it was beautiful to look down into the valley and see the stream wandering through. But for a long time I think I held onto the dream that he was alive and if he could he'd find his way back, and I wanted to be there when he came.

Working the farm was hard and there wasn't much else to do. I had some schooling, but not a lot because there wasn't much time. Ma dragged us all to church and, though it didn't mean much to me, I went along because the church socials were the only place you could really meet the young ladies in town. That's where I met Elizabeth. She was a year older, but I liked her from the start. I was just nineteen and she twenty, but I was ready and so I asked her and we got married. Lord, I remember how scared I was. I had no experience with women and what I'd picked up secondhand from other boys was pretty slim. So the first night was something no one had quite prepared me for. Even now I can remember the sight of her—the strangeness of it and yet it feeling right and proper at the same time. Well, we kept at it night after night—didn't matter to me how tired I felt coming in from the fields—and long about nine months later young Will came along. And then pretty soon after that—two years I think—along came Carolyn and we were a real family. Ma lived with us then, but Ned had decided to move along and try his luck going west too, so I ended up the man of the place though I was still a boy, really, twenty-two or so. I don't remember much of the details—nothing much happens when you work the farm day after day, it's all about the same—but it seemed to be a good time

and I enjoyed watching Will as he grew and followed me around while I did my yard chores the way I had followed my Pa around when he was home.

You know how sometimes you can know things but not let yourself know them? That's the way it was with him. I knew other folks lost their kids to some sickness they couldn't handle—two of my own sisters died young, but that was before I was born. But I never thought of it happening to him, so when he first got a fever and was too tired to get out of bed I didn't pay it much attention. But then it seemed it wasn't going away. I'd come in and he'd be lying there covered with a sweat so thick you'd have thought he was out there plowing the fields in the August sun instead of me. The doc couldn't offer much but wait and pray, and Elizabeth sure did a lot of that. Praying and crying, that seemed to be all she could handle. She'd stay with him all day and then at night I'd sit with him and wipe his forehead with a cool cloth and we'd talk as best he could. That night he said it was getting dark. The sun's down, I said. But no, that wasn't it. He wanted to know if the candle had gone out and could I hold his hand. I could hear Elizabeth crying in the other room. Then his grip got loose and he was gone.

I made a pine box for him myself and filled it with straw and laid him in it. I went down to the piece of land we and the neighbors had set aside as a small burying ground and dug a hole for him myself. Plenty of people offered to help, but I wanted to do it alone. Dug that hole, put the box on a cart and pulled it down, set it in and covered it over again. It was something I just had to do myself. Twenty-five years old and burying my first-born son in the warm earth. I got old man Hawkins to lend me his tools and carved the stone myself, too. Asked the schoolteacher to help me find some words to put on it, but in the end I guess they were mostly mine. Carved them in right down there in the burying ground. When I was finished I was leaning over on my hands and knees reading it through to make sure I'd done it right. "Sleep here my darling son..." I noticed the drops of sweat falling off my body onto the stone, but when I read those words I realized it wasn't just sweat, it was tears as well. I hadn't really cried much up to then, but then I did, lying on that stone and trying to hold it as if it was Will himself, bawling my heart out.

For some time after that Elizabeth and I were both a bit skittish. She didn't want to talk much about it and didn't want me to touch her at night, but she wanted to be held. I had a need for her, but I knew how she felt—I didn't know if I wanted to risk going through that again myself. One Sunday I went to church with her and coming back said I guessed we had to put some trust in God that he knew what he was doing and get on. That seemed to fit her too and that's what we did.

Mary Jane was born the following year, but she was sickly from the start, and she lived only two months. That was the hardest on Elizabeth I think, because she carried the child so long and it lived such a short time. I felt like God was testing us. Her box was so small I could carry it down to the graveyard in my arms. But we buried her and moved on. Sarah came next, then Alice, and finally Seth. For a while it looked as if we were fine, but when the fever came through one year it took a whole lot of children in town, Sarah as well. She was eleven then and took her place in the row along the hillside in the graveyard.

It does a funny thing to you, all this death of your kids. In a way you start to keep a little distance, not knowing what's going to happen next. And never quite relax, it seemed to me. There was no particular point when you could be certain that now they were safe. I guess by the time Seth reached fifteen I felt we were ok. The girls were older; Carolyn had married the Riley boy and Alice was being called on by several beaux. Seth was full of life, a wild boy unlike the rest of us. Elizabeth said we let him do whatever he wanted 'cause he was the youngest and we were too tired by then. But he was full of spirit from the start. Had a head of blond hair that blew in the wind, and he was loud, yellin' and hollerin' about everything he did. When I looked at him I had to think, he's home free. But that wasn't the way it worked out.

I wasn't there when it happened. The other boys said his horse had been spooked by something, turned too quick, and caught Seth off his guard. When he fell his foot got caught in the stirrup and he was dragged, knocking his head against the rocks. There was nothing they could do. His blond hair and face and shirt were covered with blood and his head was bent all out of whack where his neck had been broken. The others had all died in their beds, bodies intact so to speak, but he looked like life had been beaten out of him, and I guess that's what made it so hard. I remember how big the box had to be—made me realize he was a grown man in a way I hadn't thought of before—and how long it took to dig that hole and cover him over. Hawkins's boy was his best friend and wanted to help, so I had him help me dig and let him carve the stone: "Died at the age of 17 from an accident on his horse." Something made me want to tell it that way. I had no use for God after that. It wasn't that I was angry with him; I just decided he really couldn't be there at all. What God would put a man through this—burying both his sons and two daughters. So when I walked away from the graveyard that time I walked away from lots of other things as well.

Oh, we went on of course. The farm was there to be worked. Carolyn's and Alice's families took part of it so we had less to do ourselves. Elizabeth spent more and more time helping at the church and I worked on as best I could. Alice was lucky—two children was all she had and both of them lived fine. Carolyn lost one, but the

other three were fine. The two boys used to follow me around the yard and now and then I'd stop and remember when Will and Seth did that, but that was a long time ago and the memory very dim.

Last year I put Elizabeth to rest. She'd been frail for the past few years and that last winter was too much for her. She made it through to spring, but it was as if she just wanted to see one last sunny day and once she saw it she went. I had young Hawkins cut the stone, my hands aren't steady enough to do that anymore. "Here lies Elizabeth Ray," it says, "loving wife and mother" 'cause that's what she was. Had him cut one for me at the same time—figured I might as well since my time's coming near, too. He asked me what phrase I wanted on it, and you know, I couldn't think of anything. Isn't that strange—after all these years of living and I couldn't think of anything I wanted on it. So I just left it blank. He's got it over there in the yard waiting to cut in the final date.

Here lies William Ray

b. Sept 6, 1773

d. June 11, 1847

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