

Sarah Thompson



One of the first white women to settle in Eastern Montana, Sarah Thompson lived in Billings during much of her life. Sarah Shevlin was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to Irish immigrants in 1860. While she was still a child, the family moved on to Kansas. Sarah was only sixteen when she married 19-year-old Hiram Thompson.

Hiram's older brother was working for the Army at Fort Custer, near present Hardin. Hiram decided to join him there. He, his young wife, her younger brother Thomas, and his younger brother Jeff came overland in a covered wagon from Kansas through Nebraska and Wyoming, facing daunting hardships along the way. One day, they encountered X. Beidler, better known as the leader of the Montana Vigilantes, but then a deputy marshal. Beidler gave them directions, and ran into them several more times along the way, once helping them hide from

a raiding party. They arrived in Fort Custer on July 24, 1878 after a two-month journey.

Hiram got a job getting hay for the fort, and Sarah ran a stage station, which also served as lodging for travelers. Two stages came & went a day, one to Junction City and one to Coulson to get mail, each driver going halfway, trading mailbags and returning. In poor weather, they went by horseback. That first winter, one of their stage drivers was lost in a blizzard. Hiram and other men went searching for him, but in the meantime his horse eventually found their home. He was so numb with cold, that Sarah had to pull him off the horse to get him inside and treat his frostbite injuries. Sarah cooked for 45 woodcutters working for the fort, and provided food at \$1 per plate to travelers and others with business at the fort. Sarah also started a primitive bank for the men of the camp. She gave them a tin can to put their treasures into, and these she buried under the floor of her cabin, with her bedstead atop the log that opened the vault at night. Her daughter Laura was born at Fort Custer in 1881.

The Thompsons lived at Fort Custer for four years before moving to Coulson in early 1882, and to Billings late that same year. Their daughter Maggie Evelyn was born in Coulson that spring, and a son was born after the move to Billings who did not survive, and was buried in Boothill Cemetery. Hiram had been getting into trouble, and Sarah had had enough. She divorced him in 1884, though in later years she said that he had died – even though he outlived her. She supported her girls by operating a private hospital. She held a contract with the county to nurse the poor for \$6 per week each, and to see to their burials for \$25 if they did not recover.

In 1891, Sarah remarried, to Richard L. McDonald, a former Billings man who had moved to Nye. This marriage did not go well for her either, and she divorced him three years later and changed her name back to Thompson. In the meantime, Hiram had remarried and his second wife had died. He and Sarah remarried six months later. This marriage also seems to have ended in divorce.

After St. Vincent's Hospital was built, the Sisters of Charity got the nursing and burial contracts from the county in 1898, even though Sarah was the lower bidder. She had to find a new source of income and found it by taking in boarders.

Sarah's bad luck with romance struck again. She married a California miner named Calvin Thompson in 1909. She testified that he had deserted her after 14 months when obtaining a divorce in 1912. That was her last try at marriage.

As Sarah grew older, she moved in with her younger daughter and her son-in-law, and stayed active in the community with a dizzying number of clubs and organizations. She passed away in 1936 at the age of 72, and is buried in Mountview Cemetery.

Sources:

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