



Cleo's Lament

It was a terrible life.

—HGB on the misfortunes of her mother, Cleo Sisco Bryan

THIN, TINY CLEO SISCO was hardly the only little girl in the Ozark Mountains of northwest Arkansas to have a baby on her hip at age four; it's just that she would have so many of them, in succession, to care for. Born in 1893, Cleo Fred Sisco was the first of ten children welcomed by Alfred Burr Sisco and Jennie Denton Seitz Sisco. Jennie, born in 1876, was a robust twenty years younger than her husband. For a time, Alfred ran the general store his father, Granville Sisco, had built in Alpena, a hamlet of a few dozen souls; he is also listed as a farm laborer in the Osage Township records. Alfred and Jennie lived in Alpena Pass (now Alpena), then moved to nearby Osage. Over the next twenty-five years, the babies kept coming. The last, and Cleo's favorite baby brother, Jack Harvey Sisco, was born in 1918.

It was understood that the eldest child would take care of the youngest baby, so Cleo was kept busy with child care until the blessed day that she was old enough to go to school herself. Even then, she was expected to get straight to her chores when she got home. Cleo's best chance to act like a child was during visits to her maternal

grandparents, Isabella and Lawson Seitz, who pampered her with attention and oatmeal cookies. At home, Cleo was afforded none of the playtime that her siblings enjoyed. Instead, Helen wrote, “she was nursemaid.” Gladys, the Siscos’ second child, was as blond and beautiful as Cleo was plain; Gladys was smothered with attention by family members and later by adoring classmates and beaux. The injustice would gnaw at Cleo for decades. Once she had her own daughters, Cleo would deliver ominous warnings on the unfair advantages of pretty girls.

Not long after Gladys clambered down off her older sister and started walking, she was also given nursery duties—until she dropped the infant she had been carrying. (“Smart kid,” Helen cracked.) From then on, the weight of child care rested primarily on Cleo’s slight frame. The strain on still-growing bones had a lasting effect: Cleo’s right hip was permanently higher, from hitching it up to support the succession of wiggly babies. Cleo concocted an escape plan. Most of her contemporaries had only an eighth-grade education; there were few high schools. At fifteen, Cleo wangled a miraculous reprieve when her uncle, a well-to-do dry goods merchant, and aunt agreed to let her live with them in Green Forest, twenty-two miles northwest of Osage, so that she could attend the high school there.

Green Forest was a teeming metropolis compared with Osage. For the two years she was with her aunt and uncle, Cleo shone in high school. As graduation approached, in the spring of 1913, one of her teachers, Jim Birney, hectoring her skeptical parents into letting her enroll in the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. He told them that she was a brilliant student who deserved the chance, and pleaded Cleo’s case again and again, until they finally let her go.

In later life, Cleo would tell her daughters every detail of her spring of 1914 semester at the university, over and over. She would remember it as her happiest, most hopeful time. She had only herself to look after, and she quickly made a close friend there, Miss Ola Stephenson. Though Cleo was a shade under five feet tall, she was an aggressive stealth player on the basketball court, darting below

the taller girls' elbows to steal the ball. It was all so exciting and audacious for a daughter of Osage.

Then, after just a semester, it was over. While Cleo was home for the summer, Alfred and Jennie thought of a new way for their eldest child to help out. Given the less rigorous teaching certifications acceptable in isolated rural schools and Cleo's claim to some college education, she would be eligible to teach, earn a salary of about thirty dollars a month, and help feed all those Sisco mouths. There would be no more college.

Summoning what became a lifelong habit of resignation, Cleo accepted her lot. She loved teaching; it was what she had wanted to study in college. Every weekday morning at seven, regardless of what sort of weather the Ozark Mountains might fling at her, twenty-year-old Cleo got up with the sun and saddled the family mare. Daisy was a small chestnut horse suited to Cleo's tiny frame; the animal was patient and docile and much beloved by Cleo for the sense of freedom and escape she represented. For the rest of her life, Cleo would have a fondness for horses.

The two settled into the clop-clop cadence of their long, all-weather commute up the winding road to the schoolhouse in Rule, on the northern side of Osage Creek. Rule wasn't much of a town. There was just the school, a church, a post office, and a graveyard; students came from nearby farms. Given the wild mood swings of the area's rivers and creeks, the poor mountain roads, and the distances, many teachers would board in homes near their one-room schools. But more often than not, Cleo and Daisy made the weekday trek, about two hours' ride.

They headed northwest, away from the rising sun. Disappearing behind them in the morning mist was the small, unlovely, and very crowded Sisco house, where the wail of the newest infant regularly sounded reveille through the quiet Ozark dawn. Cleo was relieved to become a career girl, although they didn't call it that. "Schoolmarm," "teacher"—the title didn't matter. This job was sweet deliverance. At least, during those long days in a one-room schoolhouse with a privy

out back, she was free of the domestic drudgery she had endured for as long as she could remember.

She was content to have her own classroom domain, where she juggled six grades. Her students numbered ten to fifteen on any given day, depending on who was needed at home. Their teacher understood the absences all too well. No note was necessary, just the terse explanation that they had been kept home to “hep out” with planting, mowing, milking, feeding chicken and cattle, and child care. Most students preferred to be in school, with the gentle Miss Sisco teaching them history, reading, geography, math, and the few extras she could manage. She colored Easter eggs for them, an unheard-of frivolity, and carefully carried these to school aboard Daisy.

The bigger boys listened for Daisy’s tread in the morning and took her reins as Cleo dismounted. They fed and watered the little horse. In cold weather, the older children chopped wood and tended a small woodstove. School lunches, toted from home, were basic and portable: a roasted yam, a chunk of bread or pone. Discipline was rarely a problem in Miss Sisco’s class. Though some of the bigger boys towered over her, they were respectful. Helen had a couple of photographs of her mother in those days, prim and unsmiling in a starched white blouse and an ankle-length cotton skirt—“a solemn girl-woman,” she observed.

Hard times and reversals of fortune had long plagued Cleo’s maternal ancestors, who had been on this land bordering both sides of Osage Creek for nearly a century. Jennie Seitz’s family had seen some boon times for a couple of decades before the Civil War. Her grandfather Charles Sneed—Helen’s great-great-grandfather—was awarded land in Arkansas for his service in the War of 1812. Born in Kentucky in 1797, he had been a private in the Twentieth Regiment of the United States Infantry. The land grant, Bounty Land Warrant #21796, was issued in July 1819. Between 1840 and 1847, Charles extended his property to more than two hundred acres. He was one of the first settlers along Osage Creek.

Much of the area had long been a favored hunting ground of the

Osage Indians. The Osage, originally from the Ohio Valley, were characterized as a “reckless and warlike tribe,” so much so that, following the Louisiana Purchase of more than 500 million acres of land from France, the United States government moved quickly to push the Osage westward into it. With an 1808 treaty, the tribe ceded much of the land to white settlers like Charles Sneed. In the spirit of either tribute or triumph, the town originally named Fairview became Osage.

As the newer settlers staked their claims and cleared the forests for planting, they bore witness to one of America’s deepest shames. Throughout the 1830s, a tragic procession of an estimated thirty thousand Native Americans passed from their ancestral homes along the Atlantic Seaboard and the Mississippi Valley through parts of Arkansas to assigned reservations designated by the federal Indian Removal Act. Their routes were known as the Trail of Tears; some ran through the northwestern corner of the state and across the Sneed homesteads.

The ghastly procession had largely ceased by the time Charles Sneed’s final ownership entries for additional tracts were completed in the Carroll County records. He was also listed as sheriff of Carroll County from 1835 to 1842, and was the area’s first postmaster. Charles’s last will and testament, filed and witnessed in 1860, contained a prosperous man’s detailed bequests of land and goods to his wife, Jane Sneed, three sons, and seven daughters. To Jane: “I bequeath her all my household and kitchen furniture . . . and also my negro man slave named Jack and my woman slave Phillis, and her infant child to have and to hold for her own use during her natural life hereby giving and granting to her full and absolute power to sell either or both of said slaves, if both or either of them, in her opinion shall become refractory or disagreeable to govern.” The Sneed sons and daughters received household goods, livestock, and slaves chosen specifically for each heir from the household roster. Listed as rightful inheritances of chattel were Louisa, Dallas, Hannah, Luce, McDugan, Ellen, Steph, Zac, Dick, and Ann. Isabella Sneed, Jennie’s grandmother and Helen’s great-grandmother, received “a negro girl slave named Ann about 8 or 9 years old, and two good horses or mares, two good cows and calves and one good bed and bedding.”

Charles Sneed had finalized his bequests just in time. The ensuing war years brought dreadful privations and violence to that corner of northwestern Arkansas. Jayhawkers—rogue antislavery groups that rose up in Kansas just before the Civil War—made occasional incursions and raids on slaveholding households in northwestern Arkansas. So did bushwhackers who were simply outlaws and renegade opportunists. These horseback pirates of shifting loyalties pillaged and murdered at will.

Within the state, loyalties were either sharply divided or dangerously blurred. The war did hit the area hard, and the violence that surrounded Helen's ancestors was anything but a clear-cut standoff between North and South. Marauders posed as partisans from both sides as they raided and robbed local families, depending on their victims' loyalties. By 1865, most of Berryville lay in ruins. Farms and private homes had been plundered by both armies and gangs of freelance outlaws prowling for food, livestock, fodder, and supplies. Charles Sneed's pretty homestead was ill-used during the hostilities, and so was he. In February 1865, the patriarch, then sixty-eight, was kidnapped by a Union soldier; some accounts claim his abductor was a bushwhacker. He was forced to ride over a mountain in frigid weather. The assailant made off with Sneed's horse and left him there to die. Tattered, starved, and weakened by his desperate scramble off the mountain, Charles Sneed made it back to his depleted homestead, where he died soon afterward. The cause given was exposure.

Just a quarter mile from Cleo Sisco's old home, on what is now Route 412, the keen eye will make out a weathered wooden sign that reads SNEED. The grass is waist-high in some places, obscuring the smaller, mossy gravestones that tilt around Charles Sneed's rather imposing monument, an orb-topped obelisk. The only sign of recent visitors: a few plastic Confederate flags driven into the ground snapped in a sudden breeze.

Much of what Helen understood about her people was colored by her mother's melancholy worldview. Even the story of Cleo's own court-

ship was more about regret than romance. Though she wasn't batting away the suitors like her younger sister Gladys, Cleo did catch the eye of another local schoolteacher, named Ira Marvin Gurley, who taught in both Carroll and Boone Counties and was briefly principal of Green Forest High School. In a replica of a one-room school in the Carroll County Historical Museum, above the rows of authentic desks and well-used primers, the walls are hung with framed class pictures from area schools, pre-Depression. In one photo, Ira Gurley, a short, hale-looking young man with a robust shock of curly hair, smiles beside his pupils.

Ira was born in 1891 to John Gurley and his wife, Cedella Lipps Gurley, in Alpena. John had come from Georgia; his wife's people were from North Carolina and Tennessee. Ira had three sisters and three brothers. Four of his siblings moved far from home, two to Texas and two to California. Ira had an urge to go as well, but he was slower and more moderate about his exit plan. Ira was a charmer who put on the full courtship press with Jennie, Alfred, and the rest of their brood. He hunted and fished with the boys and teased Cleo's sisters, who adored him as well. Ira had plans. In addition to teaching, he was attending law school. Someday he might have a thriving legal practice, or even run for political office. Ira Gurley could be good for the whole Sisco family. He presented himself as a sturdy, willing proposition for jacking up the clan's dismal prospects, and he seemed crazy about their petite, intelligent daughter.

No one paid much mind when Cleo began mooning over another boy she had met during her time at high school in Green Forest. William Leigh Bryan, known as Leigh, was no squirrel-gun-toting man's man. He loved books and was not athletic. His family was even poorer than the Siscos. Cleo was smitten, but he just did not stack up as a suitable prospect for her family, especially once Ira had duly acquired his law degree from Cumberland University in Lebanon, Tennessee, in January 1916.

This Ira accomplished with prodigious effort and considerable investment of his schoolteacher's wages. The university's bulletin from 1916 lists law degree requirements of two five-month junior and senior

terms, costing about \$150 each for room, board, textbook rental, and sundry fees. Needy students might compete for a cash prize by writing and delivering the finest, fieriest temperance lecture. Miss Sisco was indifferent to Ira's enterprise, so deep was her other attraction. It is unknown whether Leigh Bryan returned Cleo's affections. Cleo had begun to exhibit what would be a lifelong penchant for one-sided attachments, poor social acuity, and unrealistic expectations; it would lead to some bizarre family odysseys and awkward misunderstandings.

Cleo didn't love Ira, but he was steadfastly enamored of her and pressed his suit. The Siscos made their preference plain, and soon Cleo and Ira were engaged; they married in January 1917 and settled down in Green Forest. Their first home was a shabby little house as Cleo described it, with a yard full of weeds that Ira seemed content to ignore. He had bigger things on his mind, ambitions that would someday take them to finer places—maybe even to the state capital of Little Rock, 150 miles to the southeast.

Eloine Mary Gurley's birth, on November 18, 1917, came exactly ten months after the marriage, and it nearly killed her mother. Cleo was so small that it was an extremely difficult delivery, far beyond the limited skills of the country doctor called in to attend her. Her injuries were horrific and poorly treated; her recovery was long and incomplete. She nursed Mary, as they came to call her, in great pain and anxiety throughout the bleak Ozark winter. It must have been desperately lonely; often the route between Green Forest and Osage was impassable in winter, though Cleo would have found small comfort, if any, in her childhood home. Her mother, Jennie, was still having babies of her own. Worse, Cleo would tell her daughters later, she still did not love Mary's father—never did, never would—and would always pine for Leigh Bryan.

Married life had also delivered a jolt to Cleo's assumption that she would resume teaching when she was able. Helen was horrified to find out later in life that her beloved daddy had been "a devout male chauvinist, the kind they had in those days." Cleo had another name for him: "caveman Gurley." Ira was vehemently against women's suffrage

and would loudly deplore the 1920 passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, which gave women the right to vote. Moreover, he would not allow any wife of his to work outside his home. After Mary's birth, he insisted that Cleo give up teaching, though they were very poor and her salary would have helped. No more could she take pride in the independence and satisfactions of her profession. Cleo's lot as a home-maker was settled.

In the fall of 1918, Ira began to fulfill his promise: he stood for a seat in the Arkansas House of Representatives, in the general election. He was a dark-horse Democrat, very young for the job at twenty-seven, and inexperienced in politics. He was hardly an imposing figure at five foot six and stocky. But with his ready grin and easy manner, he was the sort of man other men warmed to. Ira could tell a yarn or a joke, hunt and play cards with constituents while chewing over local issues. He had backers in Carroll County, some willing to buy paid endorsements in the Berryville paper, the *North Arkansas Star*: "Ira M. Gurley, Democratic nominee for the legislature, has made a clean, gentlemanly race of this office. He is a graduate of the law department of Cumberland University, one of the finest and most successful educational institutions in the south. He is worthy of support in every way and will make the county a credible representative."

Like many adoring children, Helen grew up with a somewhat inflated and incomplete understanding of her father's career. Records from the Arkansas State Legislature, along with election results and editorials in the Carroll County newspapers, offer a more accurate assessment of Ira's political moxie. On November 5, 1918, he won a seat in the state House of Representatives in a squeaker, 1,187 votes to the 1,023 cast for John Wells, an older Republican who would not soon forget the humiliation. The vote was unusually close for a heavily Democratic state.

Legislative sessions are short in Arkansas; during Ira's two-year term, the representatives met only from January through March, every other year. So Ira sensibly left his wife and child in Green Forest when the House was in session. By the time the next election neared, in the

fall of 1920, the vanquished Mr. Wells, running for Ira's seat again, had some arrows in his quiver. He excoriated Ira's record in the home-town paper:

Page 503 he voted to abolish Fish and Game Commission

Page 733 he voted for 8 percent interest bill

Page 506 he voted to abolish Actuarial Bureau

Page 572 he voted against dog tax

And on it went. In a paid notice directly below Wells's charges, Ira invited his opponent to a gentlemanly debate: "Will you attack my record to my face as you do in my absence and let me defend myself?"

In the end, it was not campaign skirmishes but some disgruntled constituents that mounted the biggest challenge. With a political newbie's best intentions, Ira threw his energies behind a road project that many Carroll County voters had clamored for. Archival records of the session suggest that this was most likely Act 151, one of three bills he voted for that term, described as an "Act creating Carroll County Highway District No. 3 and for other purposes." Governor Charles Hillman Brough signed it on March 1, 1919.

Getting his constituents what he *thought* they wanted seems to have done Ira in. Wells prevailed by forty-two of the nearly twenty-four hundred votes cast. The November 1920 election results ran in the same edition of the *Star* as notices of livestock auctions, ads for Purina Pig Chow ("puts the gain on"), and a paid "invitation" announcing the formation of a local chapter of the five-year-old Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. The paper also had a sympathetic paid notice from a supporter deploring Ira's defeat and insinuating that he was turned out of office by a passel of "not-in-my-backyard" locals living smack-dab in the way of progress: "In the matter of the bill for the good road south from Berryville to Madison county line nearly the entire population signed a petition asking for this bill to be passed and for passing it it seems the people along this road became dissatisfied and voted against him for re-election."

It closed on a philosophical note: "Mr. Gurley is a young man and will learn that the path of duty often leads in curious ways."

Young Mr. Gurley wisely retreated to the relative security of clerk's positions in the House, as well as in the state's Fish and Game Commission, the very body he had once voted to abolish. Its offices were also quartered in the shining white capitol building set atop a hill in central Little Rock.

It is unknown whether Ira Gurley was in Little Rock or Green Forest when his wife felt the dreaded onset of labor on February 18, 1922, and wondered, quite reasonably, whether she and her second child would survive. Though the doctor attending Helen Marie Gurley's arrival was more skilled than the first, the result was just as bloody and perilous. So often did Cleo recount to her girls the tales of their harrowing births that Helen was still confessing her guilt, at age seventy-eight, at not being more sympathetic to her mother's ordeal:

Cleo also told me a hundred times—two hundred?—through the years that her body was torn up giving birth to both Mary and me. Country doctors didn't know from Caesarians then, just "let her rip"; she still had pain. Did I ever bring up the subject of her residual pain . . . ? No. I knew my father, Ira, had taken her to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, for repair work because Mary and I went along, surgery not real successful. For me that seemed to take care of the subject.

It is not a great leap to assume that the gory tales, constantly rehashed and with the specter of near death, did not make the idea of childbirth appealing to Helen or Mary.

Despite their excruciating entry into the world, Cleo did love her daughters; she would cook, sew, and fear for them, hover over their homework, comfort them, keep them in long underwear until April, spoil them beyond measure, and drive them witless with her own disappointments and depression. Through the crises yet to come, enduring it all together in the cramped intimacy of a series of small, ugly, and

all-too-intimate homes, Helen acknowledged the inescapable tug of the mother knot. Whether it constituted a noose or a lifeline—she would always seem of two minds about it—there were a couple of evident truths:

“She didn’t ruin my life, she was the making of it.”

Love and bad luck would bind them to an ineluctable destiny.

“We were close as stitches.”