

Sixth generation - Robert C. Hannah and Ethel May Johnson



Robert taken about 1926

The following account is a combination of the recollections of Robert's three sons, Merle, Lloyd and Wayne, and of records found during family research.

Robert Clifton Hannah was born in Eagleville, Harrison County, Missouri on Aug. 4, 1894.¹⁷ His mother was Nancy Jane Woolsey, born in Kentucky in 1850 (see chapter 13 for the Woolsey family). Robert's father was Joseph R. Hannah, who was born in Pocahontas County, West Virginia in 1859 but raised in Iowa (see chapter 8).

Joseph and Nancy and their family moved around quite a bit. Bill, Robert's brother, was born in 1891 in Fremont County and the family can be found there again in the 1900 census. In 1904 Nancy and Joseph moved the family from Iowa to Thurston County, Washington, where in 1911 they bought the house at 6th and Grant Streets in Tumwater.

Robert went to school through the 8th grade, but we think that was the extent of his formal education. Failure to finish high school was not unusual for the time: men were expected to work for a living and school did not take on the importance it did in later years.

He is listed in the 1910 census of Thurston County, Washington - almost 16 years of age and working as a yardman at the Olympia Brewery in Tumwater. We don't know how long he worked for the brewery, but we believe while he was there he learned the plumbing and steamfitter trades, which he followed for the rest of his life.

Robert worshipped his mother. She was both firm and loving. Judging from the pictures of her (see the photograph in chapter 8) one might think "firm" was the predominant trait! For years we have referred to one portrait of her as "Old Grouchy". When he got roaring drunk one time, she treated his sick stomach and aching head, but did not beat him about the head and shoulders as he probably deserved. He was a teen at the time, and we think he may have been up to more than his share of devilment during those years.

Robert married Ethel May Johnson on September 16, 1916 in Olympia. Ethel was born in Thurston County September 25, 1895 to Robert and Mary Belle (Carter) Johnson. In July of 1917 Robert and Ethel had a stillborn girl. She is buried in the Olympia Cemetery in an unmarked grave.



Robert and Ethel's wedding picture - 1916

On June 5th, 1917 Robert registered for the World War I military draft at age 22. Rumor was that his draft papers were later found after having been "lost" in a desk at the draft board. Thus he was not called to serve.

Robert's mother, Nancy Jane, died April 27, 1919. In 1920 Robert and Ethel were living in Tumwater and owned their home -- probably Nancy's home at 6th and Grant - free of mortgage, according to the census record. Before long they moved to Walla Walla, Washington, where on June 30, 1921, Merle Robert Hannah, their first son, was born.

They soon returned to Tumwater, and with the help of Philip Meek, (husband of Robert's half sister, Dora (Allen) Meek), built the house at 415 North 4th Street, starting about 1922. The workmanship in the house is excellent and he must have put very good materials into the house, since it is still, in 1999, in reasonably good condition. Merle

recalls that some of the materials were well-seasoned beams and posts from a wrecked building in Olympia. The original hot water radiator heating system was still operating in 1985 when the house passed out of family ownership. The property included eight city lots where Robert planted a large orchard, always had a big garden, and for a while raised chickens on a fairly large scale. In the 1930's the brooder house, a building of about 14 by 25 feet where baby chickens were hatched, still stood and some of the old brooder equipment was still stored around the place. Robert's father, Joseph, lived in the building for a time, which probably accounts for the plaster walls on the inside - not too common for a chicken house!

Both Lloyd Carlton Hannah and Wayne Edward Hannah (the author of this book) were born while Robert and Ethel lived in that home - Lloyd on Nov. 28, 1923, and Wayne on Jan 25, 1927,

Merle, Lloyd, and Wayne have shared reminiscences about life in the North 4th Street home in Tumwater. While our recollections may be a little fuzzy, we can remember many fun times as a family. Robert and Ethel loved to dance and we recall being taken to the Saturday night dance at the various Grange halls and going to



The Hannah house on 4th St., Tumwater, WA. about 1935

sleep on a bench in the midst of all the music and dancing. Other evidence of good times are the many pictures of camping and fishing trips taken during the 1920's. The old family picture albums from that era show Robert, Ethel, kids, and friends at various places like Hood Canal and La Push with the day's catch appropriately displayed. On one such trip, Robert said as he passed through Sequim, Washington, "This is a nice place. I want to live here someday." And he did, many years later.

Robert especially liked to pick wild mountain blackberries - probably because it was an activity that took him out of doors to ramble around, which he dearly loved.

We can follow Robert's working career fairly well using the Polk City Directories for Olympia and Thurston County and some personal papers, which were saved. The 1915-16 and 1917- 18 Olympia City Directories list him as a helper to Guiles and Schlosser Plumbing Co. In 1918 the Polk directory lists him as a shipfitter at Sloan Shipyards Corporation at the foot of Washington Street. The 1921-22 directory does not specify an occupation but the 1923-24 edition shows him to be a plumber. In 1925 he is listed as a steamfitter at Martin's Hardware.

In October of 1926 Robert and Ethel borrowed \$1600 by mortgaging the house. This was undoubtedly to start a plumbing and heating business, since in the 1927 Olympia City Directory Hannah Plumbing & Heating is shown at 213 N. Capitol Way. The company is listed at 116 State Ave in 1929-30, but in 1930-31 Robert is once again shown as a steamfitter. The company failed partly because of the depression of 1929-30 and partly due to mismanagement. Robert had sunk everything into the business and tried to grow too fast, with too much inventory and too much variety. Merle recalls that at one point they hid the car to prevent repossession. In 1928 the family home was deeded to the Peerless Pacific Company, a supplier of plumbing and heating material. Several letters, which have survived, show that Robert and Ethel were in grave danger of losing their home because of debts to this supplier. The letters demand payment of the debt and rent of \$15 per month or the property would be sold and the family would have to move. Those were desperate times in the depths of the Great Depression, with most people out of work and with no money to spend. Their situation was all too common in the depression years.

In about 1933-34 Robert started "Utilities Service Co.". This was a small-scale operation in a small rented corner storefront in A. W. Lewis' Reliable Welding Works. This lasted a couple of years and it was during this time that Robert borrowed Ethel's 1929 Pontiac (they were separated by this time) and parked it in a garage on West 4th Street in Olympia. One day the garage burned down and our car with it. We children remember being very upset. He soon got another car, but in the meantime he occasionally borrowed a car from Ada (Steiner) Englund, a family friend and his future second wife.

The depression years were very hard. Robert and Ethel were having marriage troubles by then, but he was always a family man and worked hard to provide for them. He traded work for firewood for our wood furnace and also cut our own trees and sawed them up for firewood. He had a steady job at \$25 per week, making us probably better off than most people in those times. For instance, when many people turned off their electricity in favor of kerosene lamps, we still had power. He was always a champion of the work ethic and taught that one should always "give better than you receive".

Robert served on the Tumwater City Council and was Mayor for one term about 1926. He was active with Mayor Ray Johnson (not related to Ethel) in establishing the town's first water system. In fact, tradition has it that they surreptitiously sold the piece of land that the Olympia Brewery had donated to the city of Tumwater for a park. The proceeds of that sale went to finance a desperately needed city water system. It was probably done so that the city would not have to buy water from Biddie West, who had sunk a private well in the gulch near the city hall so he could sell water to the city. Politics! The water system thus started has served the city to this day - a darned good investment. By the way, the park came much later and in the same location as the original piece of land sold by Robert and his cronies.

While he was Mayor, he appointed Vera Martin, a close family friend, as Town Clerk. Vera told us in 1989 that the reason she was appointed as the first female Clerk of Tumwater was so the council would quit telling dirty stories at council meeting and get the business of the town taken care of earlier.

Another story was related to Lloyd by J. B. Johnson (no relation to Ethel) who was Town Marshal at the time Robert was Mayor. It seems that J.B. was assigned to watch the city hall to protect against vandalism on Halloween night. Late in the evening Robert came along and said, "I see that no one has tipped over the city outhouse yet." J.B. replied in the negative, whereupon Robert said, "Let's do it!". And, so the story goes, the Marshal and the Mayor did the deed!!

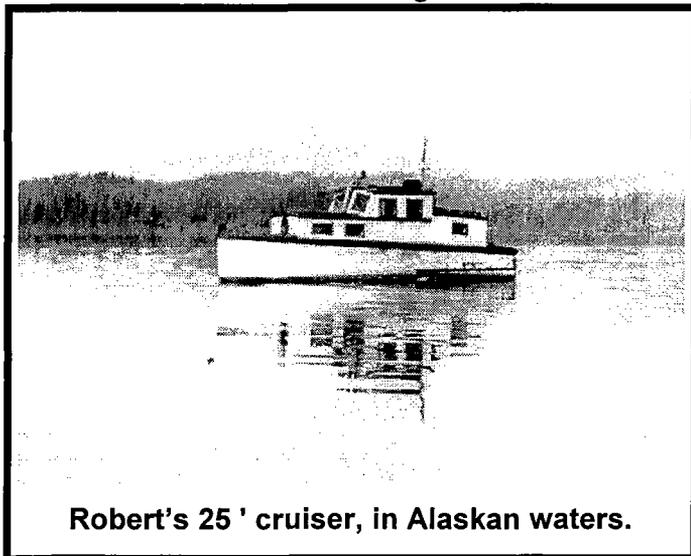
Whether business failure or drinking came first is open to conjecture, but the end result was the break-up of the marriage, leaving Ethel with three boys to finish raising. Ethel was able to keep the home on 4th Street by a loan for \$2240 dated January 24, 1935 from Home Owners' Loan Corporation, a government sponsored organization created for the purpose of helping families save their homes from foreclosure during the depression years. The payment was \$17.71 per month.

By 1936 Robert had left for Alaska, and in the Olympia City Directory of that year Ethel is listed alone and is City Treasurer of Tumwater. Ethel filed for divorce in March, 1936, and it became final in June, 1937, giving her possession of the house and custody of the boys.

Robert lived in Craig, Alaska for a time, but settled finally in Ketchikan.

Sometime later he was joined by his next wife, Ada (Steiner) Englund.

He seemed happy in Alaska and Merle and Lloyd visited him in Ketchikan for varying lengths of time. He had a 25' cruiser and boating, fishing, and hunting were enjoyed by all. He worked for Hamilton Sheet Metal doing plumbing and steamfitting, and bought a small apartment house. He and Ada rebuilt a couple of the units and added a couple. He replaced the plumbing in a lot of houses in Ketchikan with copper



Robert's 25' cruiser, in Alaskan waters.

A Hannah Family of West Virginia

pipe because the water was ruining the galvanized pipe. He worked hard, played hard, and apparently drank hard.

In late 1940 Robert and Ada moved to Seattle. They lived at 8542 32nd Ave SW for several years and later moved out to the Ballard area. During the war years he worked in Seattle in the defense industries, as well as at the Hanford Plant in eastern Washington. Like most others who worked there he probably had no idea he was contributing to the making of an atomic bomb. During these years drinking became a real problem, and it was well into the 1950's before he got himself under control through Alcoholics Anonymous. He fell off the wagon more than once, but by the late 1950's he had overcome the problem completely. He continued with AA off and on for several years, and we would say he was one of their success stories.

In the late 1950's they moved to Southworth (near Port Orchard) and, after a couple of years there, moved to Sequim, Washington. Their 20-acre farm close to Sequim had to be irrigated because the rainfall is so low in that area, and Robert could often be seen on his small tractor repairing or digging new ditches for the irrigation system. He raised registered Black Angus for breeding stock, grew a garden, and remodeled the old house. We suspect this was one of the happier times in his life. The grandkids, both his and Ada's, had many a tractor ride at the farm and we all enjoyed our visits there. Also, during this period he returned to Alaska a couple of times for a few months working on a paper mill or refinery construction job.

Robert saw everything on a grand scale. His mountains were the biggest and most awesome, his ocean the deepest, his fire the hottest, and the fish that got away was always the longest. He was not a braggart, nor did he have fanciful daydreams and come to believe them. It was just that all outdoors and many of his experiences so impressed him that he simply read more into them than the average person might experience. Robert loved the out-of-doors. Anything that grew fascinated him, and he treated nature with great respect. When he went rambling in the woods, he never smoked - always chewed "snoose"! He loved to hunt, but seldom killed anything; and he loved to fish, but was not really a dedicated fisherman.

He was a great story teller. He had many experiences in his long life and loved to tell stories. Probably many people would consider him to be a "talker", but he just liked people and wanted to share his life and experiences with everyone.

In the late 1960s Robert and Ada sold the farm and bought a house in the town of Sequim, Washington where he spent his declining years. He had cancer of the prostate in the 1960's and died in a rest home on September 2, 1973. He is buried in Sequim, Washington.

A Hannah Family of West Virginia