

10-1-1963

Mrs. Blake's Sunday School

Mary Blake Salmans

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr>

Recommended Citation

Salmans, Mary Blake. "Mrs. Blake's Sunday School." *New Mexico Historical Review* 38, 4 (1963).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol38/iss4/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Historical Review* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sarahrk@unm.edu.

MRS. BLAKE'S SUNDAY SCHOOL

By MARY BLAKE SALMANS*

WHEN my father visited New Mexico, only ten short years after we had moved from the United States into Mexico, he was surprised to find that Deming had grown into a good-sized town and had settled down to be respectable and law-abiding.

"It even has well-built churches and modern schools," he told us on his return.

But it had been a very different place when we arrived there in 1882. My relatives have long contended that I cannot possibly remember Deming, but I do, very distinctly, although I was only a few years old when I last saw the little western settlement. Probably my memories have been kept alive by hearing the older members of the family tell the adventures we went through there; but when I was about eighteen years old I finally convinced my father that I personally did recall them, because I could supply names and incidents which he had never mentioned in his narratives.

Away back in 1879, my father, at twenty-nine, was the city editor of the *Hawkeye* in Burlington, Iowa, and he was the father of three tiny girls. The quiet life of the beautiful little midwestern city which was our home was eminently suited to a book-loving, studious man, such as my father, and he had no desire to leave Burlington; but life has a bagful of changes for each of us and she is apt to pull something out of the bag at a moment's notice.

One day Poppa came home from a visit to his doctor, looking very dismal. (Like most American children of our time, we called our parents, "Poppa" and "Momma." Years later, after Momma had died and we had a step-mother who was also dear to us, we said, "Pa-pá" and "Mam-má," with the accent demurely on the second syllable. This was partly

* Apartado 51, Guanajuato (Gto.), Mexico.

because "Mam-má" was a stickler for correct English and partly because the title distinguished her from our own mother.)

"The doctor says I mustn't go on living in the Iowa climate," Poppa said to our mother sadly. "I could get a small job with that surveying company that's going south, but I can't leave you and the babies to starve."

Momma, who was a great contrast to Poppa, being as big, blonde and healthy as he was slender, dark and delicate, scoffed at the idea of starving.

"I taught school before I was married, and I haven't forgotten how," she said, "Of course, you must go!"

So Poppa joined the surveying expedition, while Momma taught school in Morning Sun, Iowa. We lived there with Poppa's mother, a wonderful woman who always seemed glad to take in any, or all, of the families of her three sons.

The life-giving air of the southwest gradually healed Poppa's lungs. When the surveying job was over, he got a position on a railroad, and after two years he was able to send for his family.

I had my fourth birthday on the southbound journey, and my mother celebrated it to the best of her ability, by buying us each a stick of peppermint candy. That journey was a marvellous experience to us children. I remember the disgust of my older sisters because I could not pronounce the word "train" correctly, but that didn't keep me from acquiring a keen enjoyment of "trains." In fact, I have never gotten over the thrill of travel.

After we had had a sojourn at Poppa's post in Benson, Arizona, he was made station agent at Deming, New Mexico.

What a bleak and barren place Deming looked after Burlington and Morning Sun, with their yards full of gracious trees and their streets ringing with the laughter of happy children! Our house consisted of a single large room in the middle of what seemed to me a vast lot, whose monotony was broken by an occasional dwarfed mesquite tree.

Momma divided our dwelling into two rooms by a heavy

curtain. One side of the room was our sleeping quarters, the other was kitchen, dining-room and sitting-room combined. We had a little outdoor "privy," and later the lot had the addition of a shed, when we could afford the cow who plays an important part in this narrative.

The raw little town seemed always full of "hands" from neighboring ranches, and for years the word "cow-boy" was for me a synonym of "bad man." I was terrified of them, although I am convinced now that they were as afraid of me as I was of them. I was the delicate and spoilt baby of the family and given to tears at the slightest provocation.

The saloon—which took the place of a club for the male inhabitants—was across the enormous lot, directly in front of our house. We children used to sit by our door and listen with big-eyed wonder to the reveling that went on there. We were convulsed with merriment by the efforts of the cow-boys to re-mount their horses, after a stay at "Mister Warren's," as we called the shack across the way; but when there was shooting, Momma always hurried out to shoo her little flock inside.

The saloon-keeper's family and older girl called Rose, who lived at the fort, were at first the only other children of Anglo-Saxon origin in town. My companion among the saloon-keeper's off-spring was a rather horrid small boy whom I called "Lonnie." Goodness knows what his name really was—"Lawrence," perhaps! One morning he whispered to me darkly, "Come wif me and I'll show you some-fin' that'll scare you."

"Oh, what?" I asked, intrigued by his mysterious manner.

"You jes come 'long and see."

Of course, I went, although my mother did not altogether approve of Lonnie, who led me to a dark-red pool near the saloon.

"Look!" said Lonnie, with unholy enjoyment, "That's blood! A feller was shot-bang! Like this—and deaded right here!"

I am afraid I disappointed Lonnie by not being half as

"scairt to death" at the time, as he urged me to be, yet that dark, sinister pool haunted me for years.

Although the men of the neighborhood were rough and uncouth, they had a strange respect for my mother, perhaps because she had the reputation, falsely acquired, of being a perfect shot. As there were constant threats of attacking Indians, the saloon-keeper, the two officers at the fort and Poppa had bought guns, to be used only in self-defense, for their wives. When the four women took their first lesson in the use of firearms, Momma took up her gun indifferently and shot at the bottle which had been set up on a fence as their mark. The shattered pieces of glass flew in all directions!

Poppa concealed his surprise at this remarkable accident and said with a proud laugh, "she does that every time! Ria, it's no use trying to teach YOU anything more about guns!"

"No, I guess not," said Momma, quick to understand his reasons for this whopper of a lie, "I'd better go home and get along with my mending."

That was the first and last shot she ever fired, but her reputation was assured.

One day we had dragged Momma from the house to see some little tad-poles which had appeared in a rain-barrel, and as we stood gazing at these phenomena, two cowboys on horseback dashed around and around the lot, firing their pistols in the air.

"Momma, why are those men acting up like that?" asked my sister Nancy.

"Oh, they are probably signaling to those wagons over there," Momma answered, and she waved her hand in a friendly gesture to the young men, who probably reminded her of some of her former pupils. It was not until some days later that she learned that the young riders were trying to frighten her, for they had heard tales of her great courage. It is true that she was very brave, but on that occasion she had not had the least idea that there had been any reason to be frightened.

"I miss going to church more than anything else," she told Poppa one day, "I'm going to start a Sunday school."

"You can at least try to have one," Poppa answered sceptically.

It seemed that the captain at the fort was delighted with the idea of a Sunday School in Deming, and gave Momma all sorts of impractical advice about running one, and the railroad company put another one-roomed house at her disposal. (To do that company justice, they were constructing a row of comfortable, five-roomed houses for their employees, and we moved into one of these later; but the earlier days are the ones I recall most clearly.)

Momma faithfully taught her little group of seven pupils every Sunday. There were three of her own children, three of the saloon-keeper's and Rose-of-the-Fort. The younger cowboys also were earnestly invited to attend, but although each answered sheepishly, "Yes, Ma'am. Thank you, Ma'am. Maybe I'll show up," none of them ever did.

One very warm Sunday morning, a notoriously wicked cowboy rode into town. He was a picturesque and handsome rascal, and although our little legs seemed to turn to jelly with fright when we looked at him, we little girls could hardly be dragged away from the door from which we watched him, fascinated, as he swaggered at the bar across the way.

"You'd better give up your Sunday School for today, Ria," Poppa advised, when he saw Momma making her preparations for the service, "Shooting Jack is in town, and one never knows what outrageous thing he'll do next."

"Well, this ONE doesn't care," retorted Momma, as she braided Nancy's yellow locks, while Lula washed my face with a vigor that was painful. "I'm certainly not going to close my Sunday School just because a smart-alecky boy is in town. He should have been spanked years ago. There, Nannie! Put on your white dress, and help Mary with hers."

"Why don't you leave their hair loose?" How often I heard Poppa ask that! "They'd look a lot prettier that way!"

"Too hot," returned Momma, briefly, "Besides, I want my daughters to look clean and good, rather than pretty."

She was always saying that, but I noticed that she looked pleased whenever Lula's beautiful dark eyes or Nannie's rose-petal cheeks were praised!

"Seems to me that they could look clean and good AND pretty," Poppa said mildly. "But about Shooting Jack—maybe he has been spanked too much! I hear he comes from one of the oldest New England families, and you know how strict they are—some of them, anyway. Call off Sunday School today, like a good girl."

"Indeed, I shan't! Not unless you absolutely forbid me to have it."

But Poppa never absolutely forbade anything any of us wanted to do, as Momma very well knew.

Over in the saloon, Shooting Jack stopped pouring whiskey down his throat long enough to ask, "Where are those young 'uns going with that tall white squaw?"

"That's Mrs. Blake, the station agent's wife," answered Mr. Warren, the saloon-keeper, who was his own bar-tender.

"She's a good-looking girl, all right. Having a picnic, I suppose?"

"No-o." Mr. Warren was very apologetic. "Mrs. Blake is religious, and we kind of indulge her. You know how sot women folks can be. She has a Sunday school in that little house over there."

"A Sunday school," Shooting Jack shouted, and then he gave a succession of frightful oaths. "She's spoiling Deming!", he declared. "I came south to get rid of churches and colleges and all that nonsense. She'll be starting an annex to Harvard next! Why do you boys stand such an outrage?"

"Look here, Jack," said one of the men present, "Mis' Blake aint the sort of snivelin' white-livered critters you're thinking of. She's a mighty good sort. Tied up my hand when it got hurt in a shooting scrape and talked to me purty and jolly while she done it."

"I suppose she got in some good advice about mending your evil ways," remarked Shooting Jack bitterly.

"Wal, she did some of that, too," Momma's defender had to admit.

"You see! She's spoiling Deming! I'm going to that Sunday school and frighten that dame so that she'll never try again to plaster this town with prayers and hymn-books."

"Better stay here, Jack. The boys are all set for a game of cards," Mr. Warren said, trying to speak casually.

Jack laughed.

"Your own brats are over there, eh? You needn't worry," he answered, "I never have hurt a child even when I've been twice as drunk as I am now, and I never shall."

"I'll bet you five dollars you can't scare Mrs. Blake," said one of the cowboys, suddenly.

"And I'll bet you ten!" cried another.

"Taken! And much obliged to both of you for offering me easy money!"

The assembled cowboys watched Jack swagger away. The Sunday school could be plainly seen from the saloon in that scantily settled place. I like to believe that they were standing ready to help Momma, in case of need.

"She's putting the young 'uns out of the back window!" exclaimed one, "But she herself aint leaving."

"Now she's at the door, a'talking mighty polite to Shooting!," another reported. "She don't look a mite scairt. Well, of all the—things! He's going in! Reckon he's drunker than we thought."

There was nearly half an hour of waiting. The cowboys moved restlessly about, but they all kept their eyes on the little Sunday-school shack. At last, to their astonishment, they saw Momma emerge, calm and smiling, followed by a somewhat unsteady Shooting Jack. The couple walked to our house which my mother entered and came out carrying her clothes line. Then, to the intense delight and merriment of the observers, they watched their anti-Sunday-school com-

rade give Momma a long and earnest lesson in the art of throwing a lasso.

What had happened was that Momma had glanced out of the open door in time to see the cowboy leave the saloon. She noticed that all the cowboys were crowding together and looking her way, so she said, quietly, to us children: "It's too hot to have Sunday school, so I'm going to send you home. And I'm going to have you all climb out of the back window to fool the cowboys. You run home the back way, too. Won't it be fun? They'll think we are all in here, having Sunday-school!"

Small children love novelties, and if she had told us that it would be fun to walk home backwards, we would have accepted the idea with equal enthusiasm. We were delighted to be sent home by way of the window! When she had seen us off, Momma went to the door, just in time to meet the belligerent cowboy on the threshold.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she cried, "You're the very first rancher who has come to my Sunday-school, and it's just over! We only had a short prayer and a hymn, and then I sent the children home, because it's really too hot later for them to be out. But I'm very glad to see you. Do come in and sit down. I've been wanting for ages to know you!"

The young man was so astonished by the cordial sincerity of this greeting that he actually went in and sat down. Momma seated herself, too, and went on cozily, "I do wish that Mr. Blake could be a cowboy like you! He's very delicate, you know, and an out-door life is just what he needs. But I'm afraid he'd never be the strong man you are!"

She gave him a glance of such open admiration that Jack turned scarlet and muttered, "Oh, I'm not so much." Then, remembering his bets, he said, with a terrible scowl, "Don't you know that I'm the damnest toughest man in all the Southwest?"

"Yes, I've heard that!" she laughed. "My goodness! You must be dreadful if half the stories about you are true! But I've heard, too, that you are really quite an authority on

cattle, and I wish you'd give me some advice about our cow."

"About your cow, Ma'am?"

"Yes; she's the meanest, crankiest creature I ever saw! She has to have her hind legs and her head tied before we can milk her; and neither my husband nor I can throw a lasso. Mr. Warren comes over to help us, but we hate to bother him. He's so busy!"

"Yes, the boys certainly do keep him busy, pouring drinks," Jack agreed, and he was soon laughing heartily over Momma's spirited account of their various experiences with the fractious cow.

"He's just a boy, a badly-brought-up, misunderstood boy," Momma told Poppa later. She had always been a defender of what is now called "the problem child," and had been a wonderfully successful teacher and friend of all kinds of young people.

"There's nothing to lassoing, really," said Jack. "I could teach you in an hour."

"Oh, could you?" cried Momma, and I know how her blue eyes must have shone. "Could you teach me now?"

"Of course, if you've got a rope handy!"

"Oh, I can get one! Come along!"

We astonished little sisters watched from the shade of the rough porch Poppa had constructed in his free hours. It was absorbingly interesting to see Momma take her lesson in lassoing. Our pet donkey watched, too, from a shady spot near us, and even the cow stuck her head out of her shed and seemed to smile in derision. Little by little, we three small girls approached the instructor and his pupil. Lula, because she was very old—eight and a half—kept tight hold of the perspiring little hands of her younger sisters. As Momma's sunbonnet, which she had snatched up with the rope, had ample sides, she did not at first notice her audience.

It was not long before she could use the rope, and she had triumphantly lassoed a small mesquite tree, when Poppa appeared on the scene. He stood petrified by the sight. I have often heard him tell the tale, to tease Momma.

"I was so hungry that day," he said, "that all the way home from the station, I thought of the good Sunday dinner Ria had promised me; and when I got there, I found no wife, no children, and no dinner!"

"Served you right for working on Sunday," one of the hearers might remark here.

"Well, you know trains don't stop running on Sunday! As I was about to remark when I was interrupted, (as the Autocrat said) after looking around a bit, I found my small daughters and their undersized pet donkey standing in a row, out in the lot, watching the remarkable performance of my wife. There was Ria, laughing triumphantly because she had just lassoed a poor, innocent mesquite, while that handsome brute of a Shooting Jack clapped his hands and gave war whoops. By that time, he was leaning against the shed, having been overtaken by the number of whiskeys he had downed earlier in the day. At the saloon, men were craning their necks to see the circus, and they were yelling and applauding, too."

When Momma saw Poppa, she exclaimed, "My Goodness! I must see about dinner. Won't you stay and have a bite with us, Mr. Jack?"

"No, ma'am, I must get along. If you want any help with your cow, Mr. Blake, just send for me!"

"Thank you, sir," said Poppa, gravely.

"Thank you," echoed Momma, and added, quickly, "Come again to see us."

"Maybe I shall, Ma'am. Thank you."

"If you aren't—" began Poppa, as Shooting Jack walked away, with the solemn dignity of an intoxicated man.

"Well, what IS Momma?" demanded Lula, when our father paused.

"She is Momma, and there's none in the world like her!"

Poppa, of course, was told how Shooting Jack was greeted in the saloon by shouts of derision.

"Yes, laugh, you . . . hyenas!" he said, "Here are your filthy fifteen dollars, you two. I'll tell you all, right here, that

if any one of you ever so much as gives a mean look at that woman or her young 'uns, he'll have me to reckon with!"

Perhaps that threat made our life easier in that almost entirely masculine community. I remember alarms about the Indians being on the war path, although they never actually raided the town while we were there, but I think we never had any trouble caused by a white man.

Shooting Jack did not again visit our Sunday school, which soon grew to a respectable size, with the arrival of other families. After a while, he went to work on a somewhat distant ranch, and no longer indulged in his favorite sport of smashing whiskey bottles—which must have been a relief to Lonnie's father.

Months later, when the comfortable railroad houses had been completed and we were living in one, Momma strolled down to the station to walk home with Poppa.

My father looked through the ticket window to say, "Ria, you're just in time to say goodbye to your favorite Sunday school pupil."

"Do you Mean Shooting Jack?" she asked.

"That's the very one. He has shot once too often, and he's in the waiting room with two guards. You'll find him handcuffed."

"Murder?" gasped Momma.

"Yes, murder. It's his third or fourth, they reckon!"

Momma went into the waiting room, where Shooting Jack was sitting with his handsome young head held high and looking proudly about him, in spite of his manacled hands.

No doubt, in her staunchly Presbyterian mind she had hastily prepared something religious to say to him, but when he smiled at her, and greeted her with, "Well, Mrs. Blake, they've got me at last, you see," her heart melted.

"I'm sorry, Jack," she said, and kissed him on the forehead.

"Why, thank you, Ma'am. Goodbye Ma'am. Say hello to the little girls for me."