



When Duncan Met Esther

How did a west side Cedar Rapids farm girl and teacher meet a Jones County farm boy?

When researching our Dailly ancestors, one quirk that struck me was that although most of the Watson cousins I found had married others within Dailly Parish, none of our four known John Watson direct ancestors married a Dailly woman. And it turned out that only one of John Watson and Jane Lambie's seven children who married ended up with a spouse from Dailly.

Their son John met and married his wife Jemima in Riccarton Parish, and they emigrated to the United States. In contrast to his siblings and ancestors, their children generally married locally after the family settled in Jones County, Iowa.

This got me to wondering how those earlier John Watsons might have met their wives.

It also got me to wondering how my Wasson grandparents met. After all, I thought of Duncan Wasson as a farmer living near Onslow towards the east end of Jones County. Esther Gensicke was raised on the west side of Cedar Rapids, and was living there when she married Duncan.

John Watson, Dailly Parish, and Jannet Cathcart, Girvan Parish, 1728

When John met Jannet probably has the easiest explanation. John Watson lived at the Smithy of Old Dailly, within a mile of the boundary between Dailly and Girvan Parishes. As nearby parts of Girvan Parish in fact had at that time recently been part of Dailly Parish, it is possible that Jannet's family lived closer to Old Dailly than they did to the village of Girvan, and they were certainly within walking distance. The Smithy could also draw customers from the surrounding area. John and Jannet thus could have easily crossed paths in any of a number of ways.

John Watson, Dailly Parish, and Helen Skeene, Monkton Parish, 1761

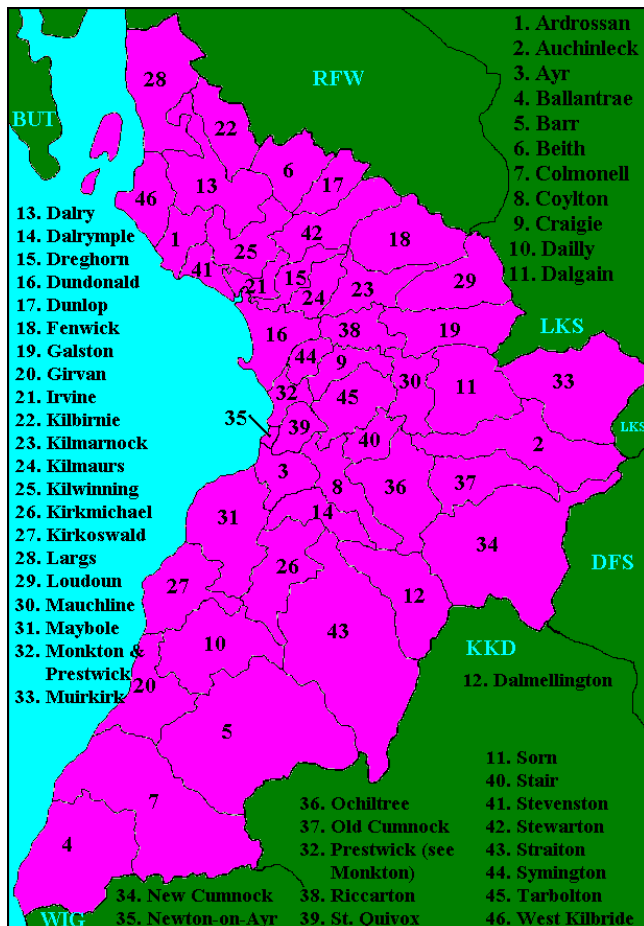
John Watson, Dailly Parish, and Jane Lambie, Galston Parish, 1802

John Watson, Dailly Parish, and Jemima Russell, Riccarton Parish, 1841

When I visited Dailly in 2012, I shared my observation with some of our cousins I met. After all, as any mirror might suggest, I had no reason to believe that our Watson ancestors were ugly, and I assume that they bathed regularly. At least once a week. Finding a local girl to marry should not have been a problem.

The cousins explained that back in those times, inns could serve alcohol, but there were some restrictions. On the Sabbath, an inn could not serve alcohol to a member of the parish where the inn was located. However, it could serve alcohol to travelers passing through the parish. So, on Sundays it wasn't unusual for people to travel to nearby parishes to have a pint.

That could certainly explain how people might meet prospective spouses in nearby parishes, especially if they had been drinking. But in the case of these three John Watsons, we're not talking about nearby parishes.



Dailly Parish (10) borders Girvan Parish (20), but it is some distance from Monkton (32), Galston (19) and Riccarton (38) Parishes.

When John Watson (Wasson, by then) met Jemima Russell probably provides us with a better explanation.

In families with more than one child, and especially more than one son, if you had a family farm or trade, such as being the blacksmith in Old Dailly, only one child (often the youngest son) typically stayed on at the business. The others had to go look for work elsewhere, whether coal mining in Dailly, farm work across the region, or jobs in emerging industrial centers like Glasgow. If you didn't have such a family business, all of the children generally had to leave home to look for work.

John had actually emigrated to New York in the 1830s, but he returned to Scotland in time for the 1841 census. However, he didn't return to Dailly Parish. His immediate family no longer lived there. He ended up in the village of Hurlford in Riccarton Parish, Ayrshire, living with his brother James and the family of their cousin Jean Cameron, mother Jane Lambie's niece through her sister Margaret. Hurlford at the time was little more than a crossroads marking the northeast corner of Blair Farm, where in 1841 Jemima Russell was working as a farm servant. John may very well have been working on Blair Farm, too, but the records don't show what farm he was working on, and as a farm laborer rather than a farm servant, he would not have been living on the farm where he worked.

In any event, John and Jemima were effectively next-door neighbors in 1841. They could have just as easily met at church or at a local inn as on the job at this point.



Hurlford lines the northeast corner of Blair Farm.

By the end of the year, John and Jemima were married at the Riccarton Parish Church in the nearby village of Riccarton, and they emigrated to the United States the following spring.



Riccarton Parish Church

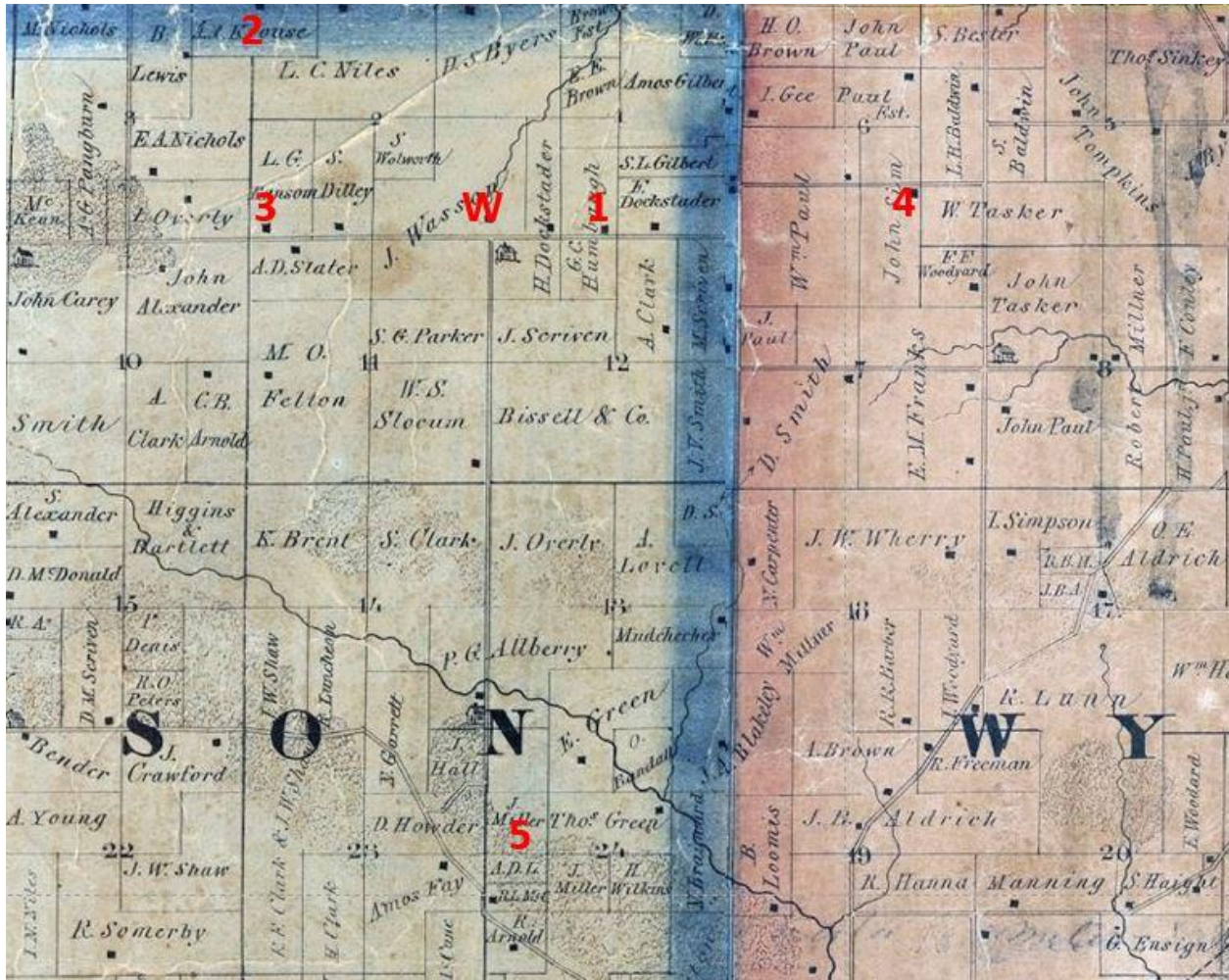
In rural areas, “hiring fairs” were common, providing a means to match farmers seeking employees with farm laborers and farm servants looking for work. These fairs drew people together from across parishes and sometimes from across county boundaries, both men and women.

In Ayrshire, hiring fairs were held the third Tuesday in April and the third Tuesday in October. Fairs took place in every town and at every parish church, as many as 200 fairs in Ayrshire every year, each generally drawing 1000 or more people. Hiring fairs were often social events as much as hiring events, sort of a poor man’s holiday. Some couples actually met at these fairs. Others may have met because they were hired to work at the same farm.

That may be how John Watson met Helen Skeene, or how their son John Watson met Jane Lambie. This could also explain why John and Jane Watson’s other children who married in Scotland found spouses outside the parish. For our ancestors, this explanation makes a lot more sense than going out for a pint on Sundays does.

The Children of John and Jemima Wasson in Jones County

For all the inter-parish marriages among our ancestors in Scotland, the children of John and Jemima Wasson who grew up in Jones County, Iowa for the most part married locally.



Where the Wasson children and their spouses were from

The Wasson children finished growing up on the John Wasson Farm (**W**).

- Son John married Sarah Himebaugh in 1874, who lived on the Himebaugh farm (**1**).
- Daughter Jane married J.G. Krouse in 1868, who lived on the Krouse farm (**2**).
- Daughter Mary married Charles B. Gridley in 1865, who lived on the Ransom farm (**3**).
- Daughter Jeannette married David Sim in 1871, who lived on the Sim farm (**4**).
- Son William married Maggie Ransom in 1875, who lived on the Ransom farm (**3**).
- Son James married Mary Scoville in 1878, who was a newcomer to the Onslow area and thus her family does not appear any of the plat maps. Some records suggest that the Scovilles may have lived in Scotch Grove township, just north of Madison Township.
- Son Joseph married Carrie Sawyer in 1879, who lived for some years on the Sawyer property (**5**), purchased by Samuel Sawyer after this plat map was published.

Except for the unknown location of James Wasson's wife Mary Scoville, these Wassons married someone who lived within a few miles. Apparently, the pickings in this part of Jones Country were pretty good.

Duncan Wasson and Esther Gensicke

This brings me to when Duncan met Esther.



Duncan Wasson (left) and Esther Gensicke (right)

Duncan grew up on the farm that his father Joe rented from his parents, John and Jemima Wasson. When John and Jemima's heirs sold that farm in early 1906, Duncan was 20, and he and Joe moved to the 200-acre farm east of Onslow that they rented from Joe's sister Jeannette Sim. Duncan owned that farm by 1910.

Frederick Henry and Johannah Gensicke farmed near Watkins, in Benton, County, Iowa, when their daughter Esther was born in 1900. In 1903, they bought Sunny Dale Farm on the west side of Cedar Rapids, and in 1908 they bought another farm on Edgewood Road, also on the west side of Cedar Rapids, where the Westdale Shopping Mall was built decades later. This also included land on the southeast corner of Edgewood Road and 23rd Avenue – present-day Wilson Avenue – they later built a family home on 23rd (Wilson) Avenue adorned with granite from their Sunny Dale Farm.

Esther Gensicke was a farm girl growing up, and she attended country schools near their farms before attending high school at the old Washington High School in Cedar Rapids. Esther went on to become a teacher. She taught briefly at Edgewood No. 2 School, Polk School, and then at Jackson School while living at home with her family at their 23rd (Wilson) Avenue home.

23rd (Wilson) Avenue and Onslow are about 50 miles apart, about twice the distance any Dailly Watson had to travel to find a spouse. So how did a west side Cedar Rapids girl meet a Jones County farm boy?

Duncan was indeed a farmer, but Jones County newspaper articles from his early adult years paint a picture of a rather restless young man not particularly interested in farming. He attended business college in Cedar Rapids for a while. He moved to Anamosa for a while. He lived in California for several months. He opened a pool hall and a barber shop. In 1912, Joe and Duncan moved off his farm and back into Onslow – Duncan rented out his farm for the next ten years. Joe and Duncan got into real estate and livestock trading, and often traveled to Chicago.

By 1918, Duncan was working in Cedar Rapids as a railroad brakeman for the Cedar Rapids & Iowa City Railway, and he eventually moved to Cedar Rapids, where he was living by 1919.

Duncan's sister Jessie had married William McBride in 1903, and lived with him in Canada until they separated and then divorced in 1919. She then moved to Cedar Rapids.

Harbison Orr rented the Sim-Wasson Farm from Jeannette Wasson Sim. He then bought the farm next door, and was living there when Joe and Duncan lived on the Sim-Wasson Farm. Also, Harb's late wife Mary was the sister of Duncan's friend Will Dennison. So, Joe and Duncan Wasson already knew Harb Orr.

It is not known if Jessie knew Harb earlier, but she did meet him by July 1916, when Jessie and her son Hobart joined her father Joe, Edna Orr Hanna and Edna's daughter Mina, and Harb Orr on the July 1916 trip to Missouri where Joe and Edna got married. As Edna's cousin, Harb vouched for her in the marriage paperwork.

In 1919, Harb and Jessie decided to get married. Because a year had not passed since her divorce, Jessie had to petition the court to allow her to marry again so soon. Once the court granted her petition, Harbison Orr and Jessie Wasson McBride were married on July 24, 1919 in Anamosa, Iowa.



Harb Orr (left) and Jessie Wasson McBride Orr (right)

The newlyweds bought a small property in Cedar Rapids, also on 23rd (Wilson) Avenue, and moved there once their new home was ready. Duncan moved in with his sister and brother-in-law. By the 1920 U.S. Census, Duncan was working in auto sales or service (the occupation is partially illegible) while still living with the Orrs.

That census record that shows the Orr household (starting on line 14) also shows on the very same page the Gensicke household (starting on line 40) where Esther was living. The Orr household – including Duncan – and the Gensicke household – including Esther – were neighbors on the same street, living just a handful of households from one another.

During the 1920-21 school year, Esther started seeing the art teacher at Jackson School, a pre-fame Grant Wood, who taught in the room across the hall from her classroom. They went canoeing on the Cedar River, he visited the family farm, and they went for drives together after he bought his first car. Esther thought that “he might have proposed if he had not had the responsibility of supporting his mother on a limited income”.

Esther met Duncan in the spring of 1921, and as she put it, “a few months of ardent courtship followed....” When Esther was attending summer school in Ames in 1921, Grant sent her a painting he did the previous summer when in Paris titled Basket Willows of Paris. Duncan, however, pursued her in Ames, and proposed marriage with a large diamond ring. Esther agreed and lost contact with Grant.

Female teachers weren’t allowed to get married in those days, so Duncan and Esther eloped to Galena, Illinois, where they were married in the parsonage at St. Matthew’s Lutheran Church on October 6, 1921.



St. Matthews Lutheran Church and Parsonage, Galena, Illinois

Duncan J. Wasson, Cedar Rapids, Iowa.	Miss Esther Gensicke Cedar Rapids, Iowa.	October 6 1921	B. B. Billings Melie Pagels	365
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Duncan and Esther's marriage was recorded in the logs of the St. Matthews Lutheran Church in Galena, Illinois. Note that both listed Cedar Rapids as their place of residence.

The lease for the last tenant on Duncan's farm near Onslow was up in early 1922. Duncan and Esther moved onto the farm on March 20, 1922, and raised their family there. They sold the farm and retired to Cedar Rapids in 1958.

Prepared by Mark David Wasson
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