

# A Strange Story of Armentrout Sisters

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*This story is being written down primarily as a means of collecting my facts in one place. It should be considered preliminary. Actually I hope that its circulation might lead to clarifications and explanations. I invite all such comments and corrections.*

*Basically the question is "why did four daughters of a middle class Civil War era Virginia family have six illegitimate children over a span of eight years?". I am personally curious because one of those daughters is my great-great-grandmother and one of those children is my great-grandfather. I had been confronting a genealogical question (i.e., "Who was my great-great-grandfather Cline?") for twenty-some years until I finally discovered that I had no great-great-grandfather Cline. Apparently the issue of illegitimacy of my great-grandfather was suppressed within my family -- so much so that now people only "think they heard something about that" but with little more to recall. It is my hope that this story may refresh some memories and lead to some understanding of the circumstances.*

**The Background** An excellent introduction to the background of this family is provided by Russell Armentrout's *The Armentrout Family History*. In it, one learns of the arrival in Philadelphia on August 27, 1739 of a 40 year old widow, Anna Elizabeth Ermentraut, and her seven children ranging in age from 22 down to 10. The family located in Lancaster (now Berks) County, Pennsylvania and collectively owned over 500 acres of farmland there. In 1752 the mother and her five sons moved to the area of Keezletown and McGaheysville, Virginia in what was then Augusta County and is now Rockingham. The two daughters had married and remained in Pennsylvania. Various members of the Rockingham County family were the founders of two churches in the region: Peaked Mountain and St. Phillips (sometimes called "Ermentraut's Church"). Both had combined Reformed and Lutheran congregations.

Johan Phillip Ermentraut was the third child of Anna Elizabeth. He had been age 16 at the family's arrival in Philadel-

phia. Until her death in 1775, his mother lived with his family in Virginia. He acquired sufficient land to leave each of his three sons, Phillip, Peter, and Henry, farms of their own. The third son, Henry (occasionally using Heinrich) was born in 1755 and had nine children. Henry served in Captain Frazier's Company of the Virginia Militia during the revolution. Henry's ninth child, Jacob, was born close to his own death between 1806 and 1810. Jacob, the great-grandson of the matriarch Anna Elizabeth, is the father of the women in this story.

**Jacob's Family** The family's name was more often spelled Armentrout during Jacob's life - as it is today. Jacob married Catherine Lutz, the daughter of Baltzer and Elizabeth (Wunderlich) Lutz. Jacob and Catherine settled in an area south of Keezletown then named Taylor Springs (and now called Massanetta Springs). The two had seven children: Elizabeth Ann, Sarah, Eveline Maria, Amanda, Esterline, Susannah, and William. Apparently they stopped when they had a

son. The mother Catherine died between 1850 and 1860 (perhaps February 4, 1853) leaving Jacob with the task of raising the children. It is possible that Jacob's maiden sister Elizabeth also lived with the family. In the 1850 census, Jacob's farm was valued at \$3,000. In the 1860 census, the value had risen to \$3,200 and his personal property was estimated at \$2,000. A cursory scan of the census pages suggests that Jacob's wealth was in the top half of Rockingham County families. Within a year, the Civil War would begin and have dramatic effects on the family's situation.

The taking of the census was (and is) an inexact process. The entire family of William Henry Cline (who we shall see, was to be the husband of Elizabeth Armentrout) is listed twice in the 1860 census. Elizabeth herself is listed with her father, brothers and sisters, but also living with the family of David and Harriet Eiler. The only other occupant of the Eiler house was the sixteen year old son Albert P. Eiler.

**The 1860's** The first of the six illegitimate children was born to the third daughter, Eveline Maria, on April 2, 1861. The boy was named George Luther Armentrout. Eveline Maria was about 25 years old at the time. (One source<sup>1</sup> gives her birthdate as November 22, 1835.) Her eldest sister Elizabeth married William Henry Cline at about the same time - June 16, 1861. He was the son of Nicholas and Frances Cline and was 33 years old at the time of the wedding. Elizabeth was 29. (Corman gives November 12, 1831 as the birthdate for Elizabeth, but Peaked Mountain Church records give November 9, 1832.)

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<sup>1</sup>Charles A. Corman: *Genealogical Record of the Wunderlich Family in America*.

The confusion only begins here because the birth records indicate that William Henry and Elizabeth had a daughter, Sarah Frances Cline, on June 22, 1862. However the records also indicate a child with the same name and parents having been born on April 22, 1864. Yet the girl died October 22, 1864 and her age at death was listed as 1 1/2 years. Even if two different daughters had been born, both being given the same name, the age together with date of death are inconsistent with each of the birthdates. I have concluded simply that there was at least one daughter named Sarah Frances and that she died while still an infant.

Elizabeth's unmarried sisters were busy having children as well, however. On September 27, 1863, Amanda Armentrout, the fourth of Jacob's daughters, had a son named John Robert. She was 23 at the time. Jacob's son, William Armentrout died of diphtheria about two weeks later on October 13. He was 16 1/2 years old at the time of his death. Two months later, on December 2, the father Jacob died as well. From that point William Henry Cline may have been the oldest male associated with the household. However the military records indicate that someone with the name of William H. Cline was enlisted with several different units over the war period. Thus, it may actually have been that his wife Elizabeth took the reins of the family at the death of her father. I have found no will for Jacob but records from that era are fragmentary.

On April 12 of the following year, 1864, a son, Henry, was born to Sarah. Sarah was the second oldest sister, being nearly 30 at Henry's birth. A few month's later, Jacob's maiden sister Elizabeth died at age about 72. Since her

death was reported by her niece Sarah, I suppose she may have lived with Jacob's family. It is also possible that Jacob's youngest daughter, Susannah, died about this time. In any case, I can find no record of her after the 1860 census.

Elizabeth and William Henry Cline had a son Jacob, born July 12, 1864. The second half of that year was to be the most dramatic period for the Cline family. As mentioned earlier, their daughter Sarah Frances died on October 22. Within two weeks, William Henry himself was killed in battle on Rude's Hill. That battle was one of the last actions in the Shenandoah Valley and was located only about 20 miles north of William Henry's home in Taylor Springs. Although William Henry Cline died in November, he left Elizabeth pregnant: she bore John William Cline on July 10, 1865.

Perhaps it would clarify the story if I were to summarize the status of the Cline/Armentrout household at the time of John William's birth, which roughly coincides with the war's end. Elizabeth was a 33 year old widow with sons Jacob (age 11 months) and John William. Her sister Sarah was the 31 year old unmarried mother of Henry (age 15 months). Her next sister Eveline Maria was the 29 year old unmarried mother of George Luther (age 4 years). Her 27 year old sister Amanda was the unmarried mother of John Robert (age 21 months). The 21 year old sister Esterline was still living at that time but she was to die a year and a half later, on December 2, 1866. As I mentioned above, I am not sure whether the youngest sister, Susannah, was alive at that time. I also do not know when Elizabeth took over as head of the household although I suspect it

was at this time. If so, Elizabeth was the head of a household with at least four other women and five children. On the basis of the later listings of the census, I believe none of the women could read or write.

Shortly after Esterline's death, Eveline Maria gave birth to her second son, Harvey Michael (sometimes given as Michael Harvey) Armentrout. That was on December 26, 1866. Within the year, her sister Amanda also had her second child out of wedlock, a daughter with the unusual name of Tom Anna Armentrout, born on October 12, 1867. The decade closed with the birth of James Edward Cline (my great-grandfather) to Elizabeth on May 12, of 1869. Elizabeth had no husband. Actually she never remarried after the death of William Henry Cline.

An aside on birth records is in order here. At that time in Virginia the listing of the fathers of illegitimate children was not an option: it was not allowed. Thus the birth listings for George Luther, John Robert, Henry, Harvey Michael, and Tom Anna Armentrout as well as that for James Edward Cline either say "Illegitimate" in the space for Father or leave the space blank.

**The Strange Household** The remainder of this story tries to follow the women and their children through marriage, death, and offspring. The question of illegitimacy arose at various stages of their lives and the family's changing response to the social stigma tells a tale in itself. We find that although some of the children are quite honest about it, some are not, and some concoct rather far-fetched fibs.

When the 1870 census was taken in about June of 1870, Elizabeth was listed as age 39, living with Sarah (listed as Sally) 37, Maria 34, George 10, Robert 6, Henry 6, Jacob 5, Harvey 3, and James 1. Obviously the ages are slightly at odds with the dates given previously but, as anyone who has studied many census records recognizes, such discrepancies are not unusual.

group, including Elizabeth, Jacob, and James, were listed under the name Armentrout. This is the only government record I can find of Elizabeth Cline reverting to her maiden name (although there are church records for an Elizabeth Armentrout at this period as well). I have only poor guesses of why she may have done that (or why the census taker may have done that).

There are three observations of import, however. The first is that the entire

#### The Children and Grandchildren of Jacob and Catherine Armentrout

1. Elizabeth Ann Armentrout (1831 - 1894)
  - a. Sarah Frances Cline (1863? - 1864) - Father: William Henry Cline
  - b. Jacob Cline (1864 - ?) - Father: William Henry Cline
  - c. John William Cline (1865 - ?) - Father: William Henry Cline
  - d. James Edward Cline (1869 - 1953) - Father: ?
2. Sarah Armentrout (1834 - 1898)
  - a. Henry F. Armentrout (1864 - ?) - Father: ?
3. Eveline Maria Armentrout (1835 - 1880)
  - a. George Luther Armentrout (1861 - ?) - Father: ?
  - b. Harvey Michael Armentrout (1866 - 1951?) - Father: ?
4. Amanda J. Armentrout (1837 - ?)
  - a. John Robert Armentrout (1863 - 1953) - Father: ?
  - b. Tom Anna Armentrout (1867 - ?) - Father: ?
5. Esterline Armentrout (1843 - 1866)
6. Susannah Armentrout (1844 - ?)
7. William H. Armentrout (1847 - 1863)

The second observation is that her son John William Cline was not listed (by that name or as John William Armentrout). Since I can find no more

reference to him at all, I have presumed that he died within his first five years.

Lastly, it should be noted that although Amanda's son (John) Robert was listed,

neither Amanda herself nor Amanda's daughter Tom Anna was listed. (Skipping ahead in the story a bit, we find in the 1900 census that Amanda was living with her nephew George, and at that time claimed to have had two children one of whom was dead. Thus Tom Anna died sometime prior to 1900 and it may actually have been prior to 1870. Alternatively, one might suppose that it was decided that that household was not the proper place for a little girl.) In any case, I found no listing for either Amanda nor Tom Anna in the 1870 Virginia census. Nor could I find a record for Tom Anna at any time with the exception of her birth.

**The Family Separates** By the 1880 census, the family had broken apart. I surmise that this may have been forced by finances. Maria died sometime in 1880. Her will, dated May 11, 1880, leaves \$10 to each of her two sons. The remainder was left to Benjamin F. Billheimer (Billheimes?). The will makes reference to the possibility of some amount due her from the estate of her father Jacob who had died nearly 16 years earlier. It is likely that at some point within the 1870's, Jacob's farm was sold. Maria marked her will with an X in place of a signature. The witnesses were Michael Wirth and R. B. Ragan.

In 1880 Elizabeth Cline, age 47, was listed in the census as a servant in the household of A. P. Eiler of Keezletown. It also says she cannot write. Her son James Cline, age 11, was also listed as a servant in the Eiler household. It should be recalled that the 1860 census listed Elizabeth living in the household of Eiler's parents when she was 27 and he was 16. (Another aside: Albert. P. Eiler was the closest thing my great-grandfa-

ther James had to a father. In recognition of Eiler's support, James named his son - my grandfather - Albert Franklin Cline and his daughter - my great-aunt - Erma Eiler Cline.) Although 11, James could not write, yet he was attending school at that time. (Apparently James eventually did become literate. My father recalls James being a voracious reader in his old age.) James's half-brother Jacob, age 16, was listed as a laborer in the house of C. S. Earman. Their aunt Sarah, age 45, was listed as a servant in the house of Rush Nicholas. Her son Henry was a laborer for William Wine. There was a listing for a George Armentrout, age 20, as a servant for D. N. Washington. Perhaps this is Maria's son. I can find no listing in 1880 for Amanda. Thus Amanda was listed in neither the 1870 nor 1880 Virginia census (at least under that name). Neither was there an 1880 census listing for Maria's son Harvey.

**Amanda** Two year's later, however, Amanda was back in the records. On March 7, 1882, she married Peter A. Earman. He was 30 at the time. She gave her age in the marriage records as 40 (actually 44) but admitted that she was single as opposed to widowed or divorced in spite of her two children (at least one of whom, John Robert, was alive). Apparently she fibbed about her age but not about the legitimacy of her children.

**John Robert** Five years later, Amanda's son John Robert married Melvina "Dolly" Huffman. He was 23, she 18. She was the daughter of William and Elizabeth Huffman. For his parents, John Robert listed " & Amanda" in the marriage records. The wedding was January 9, 1887. John Robert died in September of 1953. Dolly died 10 years

earlier in July of 1943. They had a single daughter Clara, who for a time was married with the name Zumpft. I believe Clara had no children so there are no living descendants of Amanda (assuming Tom Anna died prior to having children). As mentioned previously, Amanda herself was listed in the 1900 census as living with her nephew George Armentrout. She was then a widow but had returned to the name Armentrout, or so was listed in the census. The 1953 obituary for John Robert is interesting for its statement that his parents were "the late Henry and Manda Earman Armentrout". Amanda's name might once have been "Amanda Armentrout Earman" after her marriage to Peter Earman, but of course, to admit that John Robert's mother's maiden name was Armentrout was very close to admitting he was illegitimate (precluding his mother's marriage to someone else named Armentrout). Recall that John Robert had been quite candid 66 years earlier when he applied for his marriage license. Perhaps the fiction had been created over the years to protect the family. Whether any "Henry" Armentrout actually was his real father is unknown. I believe it likely that this was simply a name constructed for the purpose. My belief is somewhat based upon a similar fiction created by my great-grandfather: again probably for the protection of his family. A final note on this issue: it is entirely possible that John Robert did not create the story at all but that whoever gave the details for the newspaper obituary (perhaps Clara) was the one responsible. This is one of the mysteries that remain. John Robert and Dolly were buried in Harrisonburg's Woodbine Cemetery.

**Sarah and Henry** Sarah's son Henry married Dora A. Collier on March 9,

1887 just two months after his cousin John Robert had married. Henry was 22 and Dora, the daughter of Andreas J. and Martha Collier, was 20. Just as John Robert's marriage record left a blank for the bridegroom's father, Henry's record says " & Sallie E.". I can find no more record of Henry. When his mother died in 1898 there was no mention of him. In fact, Sarah's will primarily deals with her gravesite. Her property, if there was any, was left to her preacher J. W. Hansefick. Sarah, like Maria, marked her will with an X. The witnesses were George N. Earman and Jeff D. Wills.

**George** Since nearly the entire 1890 United States census was destroyed, there are no further such records until 1900. However, on November 8, 1892 Maria's son George married Josephine Shifflett, the 28 year old daughter of Henry and Mary Shifflett. George, 31, as his two cousins previously, listed nothing for father on the marriage records. The record states for parents: " & Maria". The 1900 census found George and Josephine with a five year old son William H. (This man would be nearly 98 if he were living today.) Also in the household were Josephine's mother Mary and George's widowed aunt Amanda. This was the last record I can find on Amanda. George, Josephine, and William were in the 1920 census living in the Mt. Crawford/Pleasant Valley area. At that time George could not read nor write and was a farm laborer. William was a public works laborer.

**James** On January 9, 1894, my great-grandparents James Edward Cline and Rosa May married. James was then 24 and Rosa 27. She was the daughter of George Wesley and Elizabeth Ann (Teter) May. For the marriage record,

James claimed as parents William and Elizabeth Cline. It is possible that he actually believed then that William was his father (in spite of William's death actually preceding his own birth by five years). It is also possible that this was the tale he was using.

His mother Elizabeth was still alive at the time of James's marriage but died within the year. In December of that year, James and Rosa had a daughter, Erma Eiler Cline. In March of 1897, they had a son Albert Franklin Cline, my grandfather. It is my understanding that both my great-aunt and my grandfather were very sensitive regarding the issue of the identity of their father's father. Neither was alive prior to their grandmother Elizabeth dying and at this point it is hard to guess what they did know of the situation. Perhaps they knew enough to decide that they didn't want to know more.

When James died in 1953, his obituary listed his parents as Charles Edward and Elizabeth Cline. This seems to be total fiction and even contradicts the listing of "William and Elizabeth" that James himself used when he married. (The only Charles Edward Cline in the records is James's own grandson who died as an infant.) My great-grandmother Rosa died in 1920. Her daughter Erma never married and instead cared for her widowed father. Since Erma had no offspring, the total living descendants of James and Rosa now include two grandsons, four great-grandchildren, six great-great-grandchildren, and one great-great-great-grandchild. Since I can find no record of Edward's half-brother Jacob marrying, it is possible that these 13 people represent all of the living descendants of Elizabeth as well.

**Elizabeth** Elizabeth died November 15, 1894. Her will was dated February 28, 1890. In the will she left her son Jacob \$10 and the rest to James. As her sisters had done, Elizabeth marked her will with an X. Her witnesses were G. R. Nichlas, A. P. Eiler, and H. M. Roudabush. Elizabeth was buried in the Keezletown cemetery. The name on the stone reads "Mrs. Elizabeth A. Cline". In spite of the prominently stated desires in the wills of Elizabeth's sisters Sarah and Maria to have proper burials, I can find no record of gravesites within Rockingham County for either.

**Harvey** I found no further reference to Harvey other than in his mother Maria's will of 1880. However, there is a Harvey Armentrout buried in the Old Bethel Cemetery, about 5 miles from Keezletown. He died on August 30, 1951. The date of birth is February 4, 1866, which is at odds with the December 26, 1866 date, I have for Maria's son. Nevertheless, this may be the same person.

**The Mystery** Recognizing the facts is only the first step toward understanding. Unfortunately in this situation because of the elapsed time there may be little understanding forthcoming. As I close this story the best I can do is pose some questions and hypothesis.

The broadest question is what led these women to risk (and endure) the scorn of their community associated with bearing illegitimate children? It was not one isolated event but six; furthermore, two of the sisters each had two children out of wedlock. If one scans the birth records for Rockingham County for the 1860's it is apparent that there are illegitimate births. In particular, since the

opportunity for marriage was generally denied to the slave population, there is a large number of illegitimate births marked "Colored". Among the whites there was perhaps one illegitimacy per 20 or 30 births. Therefore to have six from the same family was not simply a huge case of bad luck.

Various easy explanations of the cause of the events may be offered: rape, boyfriends not returning from war, "female promiscuity", etc. However, although such explanations may handle one or two of the cases, they cannot handle all six. For example, if rape was the cause, why was this group so unfortunate over such a long period and so many times? Fiancées who never returned because of the war could explain only two of the six since one birth occurred one month before Virginia entered the Confederacy and three occurred more than a year after the war's end. The promiscuity explanation must also deal with the fact that two of the children were born while the father Jacob was still alive and a third was most likely conceived while he was still alive.

The real causes may be more subtle and more complex. First we must recognize that the records precluded the naming of fathers. It was possible that the fatherhoods that have been so carefully excluded from the records were actually common knowledge in the community. (In fact, one can image that at least the five boys must have borne some resemblances to their fathers as they grew up.) It is also true that the women were quickly passing the prime age for marriage during the period and the period was certainly characterized by a large loss in potential husbands. Many men

died in the war and others returned in conditions incapable of supporting families. Thus if the women were to have children, either for the joy of mothering or for the providing of care during old age, it was possible that they decided that they would do this without husbands. During this period the patriarch Jacob's estate may have seemed to offer better financial security than marriage to a soldier or a war veteran.

I also wonder if there was not a "triggering" event provide by the first of the illegitimacies: George's birth to Maria in April of 1861. Did this cast some sort of shameful cloud over the entire family convincing the sisters that their chances for marriage, especially given their ages, were quickly evaporating? Perhaps also did they witness an ability by Maria and later by Amanda to withstand the social scorn and decide that the price was worth paying? In the extreme, was there a feeling among the sisters that "we're all in this together": a sort of amazonian spirit that convinced them that they could get along fine without men?

In addition to the "why did they do it?" sort of question, there is also the "why did they stay around?" kind. At least three of the sisters stayed in the county, in fact the very same community, throughout their lives. Amanda (if she ever left) was not gone long. If the stigma had been so great, what precluded the women from heading West or anyplace where they could have hidden their pasts? It is true that they probably all were illiterate and without skills but if the ostracism was so great, wouldn't it be just as easy to be servants in Ohio or Illinois?



What kind of lives did the sisters actually live? Were they social outcasts and were they ostracized for the last thirty or forty years of their lives? Did the boys suffer as well?

**Final Words** Genealogical histories certainly present their casts of characters as one dimensional. Reading these one would believe every individual in the past has been noble, virtuous, and successful. Who then was in the poor-houses, the asylums, and the prisons? Whose life was a series of misfortunes? If there were not such people in the past, why are there so many now?

Is it that the unfortunate people have simply not been part of the families whose histories have been written? I doubt that. Rather I believe that there is a tradition of omitting or ignoring this sort of color. Unfortunately such a tradition lends more towards ancestor worship than understanding.

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