

Marie Antoinette Knapp Shiras Gehr

Eleven p.m., Halloween night, 1875, and darkness covers the grounds of the Osawatomie State Insane Asylum. Very few kerosene lamps and wax candles flicker in the windows of the large building and its two wings. Both staff and patients are abed.

A careful onlooker might notice a stealthy figure creeping from the front door and into the stables -- a pale white figure with a feather in long hair and deerskin tunic. Indians aren't unheard of in this part of the Midwest, and a few years before they were a very real threat.

The figure ducks into the stables, and after a few moments, comes out again, riding a white horse and letting out a war cry horrifying enough to wake the dead -- or just the insane. The apparition circles the entire building, screaming, before returning to the stables and quickly trying to unsaddle the beast.

"Father, don't go out there! You don't know where the Indian is!" come voices of two young children from the main building. A gruff voice responds to them, incoherent with rage.

As the figure of the father steps into the doorway, 13-year-old Nettie Knapp ducks behind the horse in a futile attempt to hide. She is dressed in a second hand Indian theatrical costume and is covered with -- flour. Hearing no movement from the father, she peeks over the horse's back to find a pair of blue eyes, matching her own, glaring back at hers. He, shaking with rage, points a finger directing her to return to the hospital and to her room. Nettie is in big trouble. The staff is being awakened because her antics have scared the patients and it will take the hospital hours to quiet once more (Shiras Family Stories)

She was bored.

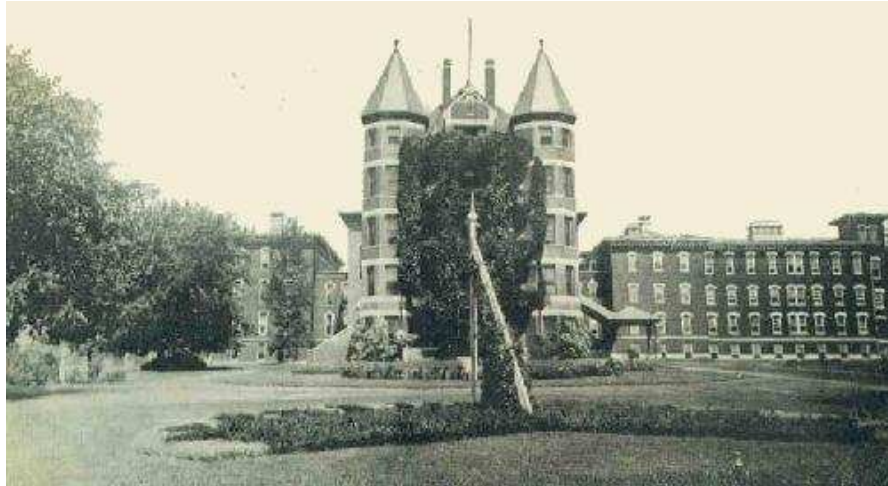
Marie Antoinette Knapp was 14 or 15-years-old when she decided to stir things up at the Kansas State Insane Asylum at Osawatomie. It had been a year, to the day, when she and her family had arrived to take up residence on the grounds of the hospital. Her father, A.H. Knapp was to be the superintendent, a position he would hold for almost 20 years and her mother Clara Jackson Knapp was the matron of the women's side. (Gish, Reform, p 122)

Nettie was a teenager who'd been removed from her friends and her society in Ottawa. She was entering adolescence – tough at the best of times – now here she was among the insane.

Hospital records of the time show the whole family was listed on the payrolls of the period, a practice not uncommon at the time (Atwater). The children might have earned their keep assisting with patient activities or helping the staff or groundskeepers while their mother acted as Matron to the women's side of the hospital. In Dr. Knapp's time there were theatrical productions, dances, musical groups and any number of other activities provided to help the patients occupy their minds with something other than their 'disease' (Gish, Reform, p 123)

When the Knapp family arrived at their new home at the Osawatomie State Insane Asylum they found the large main building, begun in 1869 in the Kirkbride design favored by Eastern asylums, having a central building and two wings, swept back in sections. At the time of their arrival it was only partially completed – but with enough room to house their family, the staff and more than 400 patients. When it was completed it would be five stories high and hold an auditorium with a stage and balcony, quarters for the workers and nurses, and quarters for the superintendent and his family. Later, they

would move into a house built separately. The patient population would double and double again before her father would finish his time there as superintendent.



The Old Main building where Nettie and her family lived when they arrived.

Nettie's older brother and sister, Louis and Dora, were to help the staff. Louis would go on to become a doctor in his own right, be married three times and die fairly young in Osawatomie. He had one legitimate child and one illegitimate, which family stories say that Nettie took in to raise as her own. Dora would remain unmarried and move to Kansas City with her mother after her father passed away. Family stories would tell only of Dora that, "She drank her whiskey straight." Her mother was noted, later in life, for her artistic skills in oils and portraiture and illustration in Kansas City (Westlake). Clara's illustrations were often published in *Harpers Weekly* (Sharp, Ramey).

Nettie was the third eldest at 14, and her closest playmates were her younger siblings, Frank at 12 and the youngest Clara at 11. The town of Osawatomie was a mile away over rough roads, so it was likely the children were home-schooled with their mother and the tutors were brought in to help occupy the patients (Atwater).

More occupied with her own day-to-day activities, she would still have been aware that her family was in the middle of a war between the local officials who once had control of the hospital, and the state officials who were taking over. Her father was a tool of the state, appointed by state officials and as such, life was being made very difficult for them locally with people calling them cruel and unfit caretakers (Gish, Reform, 124). As much as she might have wished they were back in Ottawa, Kansas, where they'd spent four years before coming to the hospital, she wouldn't have liked people attacking her family. From 1870-1874 the family lived at Ottawa, Kansas, where Dr. Knapp was a family physician. They attended the Episcopal Church and according to church records were active in the community. Prior to 1870 they resided in New York State where her father and mother were born, courted and married. Already Dr. Knapp had developed a good reputation in his profession. The governor of New York appointed him medical examiner for all enlisted men in the northern army (Westlake, 322).

Here, Dora and Louis might have started attending a school outside of the home. The younger children, until the age of 9, would likely have been home-schooled with their mother. Clara Jackson was an educated woman herself, so it is more than likely she would guide her children along the same path (Westlake, p 323).

Life for women in this period was generally considered to revolve around keeping house and raising a family. You were to marry as well as possible, have children and be satisfied – even if you wanted to do or be something else, or the man you married turned out to be less than perfect. Of course, it was also not unheard of that women of the day could be committed to institutions like Osawatomie against their will for being strong-minded. Perhaps they were headstrong daughters that fathers needed brought into

line or wealthy widows with enemies who coveted their lands. At the time in Kansas woman were allowed to inherit their husband's property at his death. So, if some unscrupulous sorts wanted it, they might bribe authorities to commit the widow and they could buy the land for a fraction of its worth (Greiert).

Some allegations made against Knapp during his beginning years at the hospital say he took bribes for such admittance, or that he had sexual relations with the staff and patients. No records can be found that prove that the allegations made against Knapp were well founded. Other versions of history laud him as a kind and just man who made great strides in psychiatric medicine. Newspaper coverage which once stirred up trouble and exploited the controversy to sell copies, suddenly in 1876 turned in favor of Knapp for a time (Gish, Reform, 125).

Family stories tell that Nettie may have played a part in the *Ottawa Republican* switching allegiance. Stories passed through the generations tell not only of Nettie's midnight ride, but also of a strange friendship with a silent woman admitted to the hospital Oct. 20 of that year.

Nettie saw "Jane" arrive one day when she was sitting in the construction area just above the main doors of the hospital. It was her special place and gave her a view of the country and the nearby river. From here she saw patients come, and once in awhile, go. Most were raving; some bound and gagged "for their own protection." Her father explained that until they could be cured they weren't responsible for their actions and they had to be protected from themselves.

A short blonde woman was led up the steps between two large men. Quiet, the new patient stared straight ahead. Nettie hurried to the first floor admitting ward to see

who this was. “Jane” was brought in with her husband and her brother. They advised the staff they had a small farm and could not care for her – she’d entered a deep depression since the stillbirth of her child and would not care for herself at all. They said she’d “relieve herself without making use of a chamber pot, and would do nothing to clean herself afterwards.” Dr. Knapp went ahead and allowed her to stay.

Nettie took it upon herself to check on the woman every day, to assist with her bath and toilette. She would keep up a running commentary, talking to her as if she’d talk back, a technique her father would’ve taught her and one still used in psychiatric treatment today. Three days after her arrival, she did talk back. Jane would ask specifically for Nettie, and Dr. and Mrs. Knapp were happy to oblige. She would ask the girl to walk with her and they were a common sight on the grounds for the next five days.



Views still on the hospital grounds today that were there during Nettie’s time.

Two days before Halloween, Jane admitted to Nettie that her disease was a ruse; that she was a reporter for the *Ottawa Republican* newspaper sent to see if the allegations

against her father were correct. And none were, she assured the girl. In two days her brother and husband would arrive to “check on her progress.” They both knew, considering her “miraculous” recovery – Jane would leave with them. For the next two days she told Nettie everything she could about women’s lives in the city, the brave women who worked and the ones who were breaking rules – as she had. It lit a fire in Nettie’s mind. The idea that she could have what she want – if she were willing to fight for it – would stay with her.

Nettie was becoming a ‘modern woman’ along with many others during that turn of the century. A paradigm shift was taking place in women’s history. It was a time of change where women expanded their world view to occupations outside the four walls of their home and family and Nettie bought into the idea. Her Indian war cry of Halloween night, after waving goodbye to her friend that morning, was her first cry for freedom. And with the arrival soon afterwards of a bank clerk from Ottawa, come to talk business with her father, Nettie set her sights on her first goal in life – Charles Shiras.

C. E. Shiras, dealer in groceries, provisions, and wooden and willow ware, was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, June 29, 1856, and came to Kansas in the spring of 1875, locating at Ottawa. He was for two years employed as a clerk in the People's Bank. In 1877 he engaged in dry goods business in company with C. D. Crane, remaining in that business about two years. Was then not actively engaged in business until January, 1882, when he purchased his present establishment from his brother, W. M. Shiras. The subject of our sketch has a nicely fitted up store, carries a stock of about \$3,500, and is doing a large trade (Westlake).

On 28 May 1878 at Ottawa, Kansas the pair was married. A notice in the local paper stated:

For the past few weeks nothing has been talked of in society circles here but the approaching marriage of Mr. Chas. E. Shiras and Miss Marie A. Knapp, daughter of Dr. A. H. Knapp. Charley is one of the most popular

young business men of the city, and Nettie, as her friends love to call her, is an acknowledged belle...Promptly at the hour the bridal party -- Dr. Knapp with the bride, and the groom with his brides mother -- advanced down the aisle...Charley and his bride took the afternoon train for the East, and will pass a few weeks in Cincinnati and other cities.

Ten years and three children later, Thomas, Enness and Hallie – Nettie plucked up her legendary courage and rocked her family’s lives. In a scandalous move for the day and age, Nettie filed for divorce from Charles in August 1889 in Miami County, Kansas, where her parents still lived in Osawatomie. To divorce a well-to-do storekeeper after ten years of marriage and three children would have been severely criticized and stigmatized in American society between 1870 and 1934 (Greiart).

At this point, she likely didn’t care what the rest of the world thought. The divorce was granted in October, to be final in six months. The divorce decree, finalized in the Miami County court August 6 1889, cited extreme mental cruelty. It is known in the family that Charles was an alcoholic.

The decree states the court:

“... finds that the said defendant has been guilty of the allegations charges in the plaintiff’s petition, to wit: extreme cruelty and that said petition is true. It is therefore ...decreed by the court that the marriage relations heretofore existing between the said plaintiff and defendant be and the same is hereby set aside and wholly annulled and said parties wholly released from the obligations of the same.”

Nettie got the children. Charles got a restraining order and was barred from collecting the rents on his land. She however, could collect them – their version of child support? Charles also paid the court costs. He killed himself two years later in an Iowa hotel.

On July 17, 1891, the day before Charles' funeral, *The Republican*:

William Shiras returned with the remains of his brother, who died at the Palace Hotel, Cedar Rapids, Ia., on the Kansas City train at noon today. They were taken to his residence from where funeral services will be held at 10 o'clock a.m. tomorrow. Rev. Morrill will conduct the exercises, and the interment will take place in Hope Cemetery.

By 1893 when Nettie's father's estate was settled, the family has proof among Dr. Knapp's probate papers that she had married Captain Pierson H. Gehr of the McCaslin Post No. 117, Department of Kansas, Grand Army of the Republic (MICOGESOQU).

No date or place of the actual marriage has been found as yet, however she is referred to in the probate paperwork as Mrs. Nettie Gehr.

An 1896 listing of Civil War veterans participating in a reunion in Miami County, near Nettie's home, showed Gehr was in the area in 1896 and may have resided there for some time.

"Most of the veterans were residents of Miami Co., KS, but some were from other areas, such as Drexel, MO, and Kansas City. One veteran (Wm. Walters) was associated with the Mexican War. The others all appear to be Civil War veterans" (MICOGESOQU).

Gehr is described by the remaining eldest family members as "the little one-armed miner" having lost one arm in a sawmill accident in Montana (Ramey, Sharp). Since his discharge from the army he was a mining prospector.

The family history changes focus in the family papers to Nettie's son Tom.

"After the divorce of his parents, his mother and her children lived in Kansas City, Kansas. Tom and his brother Enness worked at the Drovers' Telegram in Kansas City -- Tom as a reporter and Enness as a linotype operator. In the early 1900's, Tom's mother and step-father, "Captain" P.H. Gehr, a miner, moved to Mountain Home, Baxter County, Arkansas, where Captain Gehr had a good deal of mining land. Tom loved the area, and a few years later purchased the local newspaper, The Baxter Bulletin, in partnership with his brother Enness. The paper remained in the family for over seventy years" (Sharp, Barr Family).

An older man, born in 1846, it might be supposed that Gehr encouraged Nettie's free-thinking and her free-spirit. Several pieces of writing, most of an occult/spiritual nature were found and dated so we know they were written during the marriage.

One example, below the photo, is dated 1904.



Nettie in Mountain Home, approx age 45years.

**To my Helper and my Guide
By Nettie Gehr**

**O, please, please give me just a clue
How to pay my bills past due
Is there no way I can turn?
No way the money I can earn?
A voice answers:
“Yes, dear, just start to live without
The thing you need, and there will come about
A way for you, if you will heed,
You’ll have everything you need.”
Maybe this means starvation, with
Everything needed, added afterwards –
But I’m inclined to believe that when
Earthly hopes fail us, the unseen law
Steps in and brings the relief we need
Here and Now.
Anxiety is a poverty thought,
And will cause poverty --
Whereas a letting go of it
Will relax the body and mind.
Be indifferent to whether you**

Live or Die.

Perhaps Nettie realized that the younger man wasn't the best in the long run. The second time around, even though it wouldn't have been considered a 'good match' in her younger days she seems to have married where she wanted and by all indications was happy – a little strange maybe, but happy.

By the time she passed away on March 16, 1934, Nettie was a mother of three, had been married, divorced and remarried, was a published composer and writer, a believer in the occult and reincarnation and the adoptive mother of two – one said to be the child of her older brother.

She was also known around the town of Mountain Home, Arkansas, for some eccentric behavior. She fed her livestock at the dining room table with her but was known for being a very caring soul and would feed anyone who needed a meal. She was also known for keeping track of community birthdays and arriving on doorsteps on the celebratory day with one of her famous birthday cakes. She was apparently a very good hand with a pastry (Ramey). Her sons were often obliged to give her money to supplement Gehr's war pension because she was constantly feeding anyone who needed a hot meal (Ramey).

Marie Antoinette Knapp Shiras Gehr, after years of living her life in the expected manner, took it back and lived the way she wanted to with the man she wanted to. Not so uncommon now, but unthinkable in the late 1800s.

She still makes her presence known to the family, from time to time. Some are sure she still checks up on us. The latest tale confirms it for them. It revolves around a meeting of several cousins in a 100-year-old family home where old relatives were being discussed. Cousin Ginger is said to bear a remarkable resemblance to Nettie herself.

When the subject of the lady arose, a flutter of paper was heard from across the room. The paper floated down a small hole that led to the attic and made its way on invisible breezes across the room before dropping at the group's feet. It was a piece of handwritten sheet music – signed Nettie Gehr.

<p>ARKANA, Baxter Co.—2 G Pop. 10—Banking Town Mountain Home House R. A. & Sons..... Saw Mill & Gln. K 4 Bomer J. B..... G. S. K 3½</p> <p>BENVILLE, Baxter Co. Pop. 10—Banking Town Mountain Home Dilbeck H. T..... G. S. L 4</p> <p>BIG FLAT, Baxter Co.—2 G Pop. 150—Banking Town Mountain Home Baker & Mabrey... Jewelry & G. S. E 2 Bohl & Fogel..... G. S. H 3½ Kelsey A. S. &..... G. S. M McCaine Wm. H.... Drugs & Phys'n. M</p> <p>BUFORD, Baxter Co.—2 G Pop. 15—Banking Town Mountain Home Nelson G. N..... G. S. K 3½</p> <p>DEVERO, Baxter Co. Pop. 25—Banking Town Melbourne Chase Bros..... G. S. J 3½ Chapman F. L..... G. S. Montgomery T. M..... G. S. (Also Calico Book.)</p> <p>GAMALIEL, Baxter Co.—2 G Pop. 10—Banking Town West Plains, Mo. Davis A. B..... G. S. K 3½</p> <p>GASSVILLE, Baxter Co.—2 F Pop. 100—Bkg. Town Mountain Home Balsam Chas. H..... Gro. G 3½ Browning H. C..... G. S. K 3½ Bum H. H..... G. S. J 3½ Mounry & Robertson..... G. S. K 3½ T Reno & Doo..... Gro. M 4 Talley Bros..... G. S. L 4</p> <p>HENDERSON, Baxter Co.—2 G Pop. 10—Banking Town Mountain Home Cox B. A. & Co..... G. S. Wilson & Hars..... G. S. M</p> <p>HOPEWELL, Baxter Co. Pop. 10—Banking Town Batesville Leakey L. M. & Bro..... G. S. M White & Williams..... G. S. L 4</p> <p>INDEPENDENCE, Baxter Co.—2 G Pop. 20—Banking Town Mountain Home Dilbeck H. O..... G. S. M 4</p> <p>LONE ROCK, Baxter Co.—2 G Pop. 100—Bkg. Town Mountain Home Batesville & Winnerva Telephone Co. Cockrum T. H..... G. S. L 4 Hudson & Wickersham..... G. S. K 3½ Lindrich & Balcom..... G. S. & Lbr. G 3½ Merrell A. J. & Son (near)..... G. S. L 4</p> <p>McPHEARSON, Baxter Co.—2 G Pop. 5—Banking Town Mountain Home Belph & Mabrey..... G. S. J 3½</p>	<p>MOUNTAIN HOME, Baxter Co.—2 G Population 384—A Banking Town Baker Bros..... G. S. D 1¼ Combs & Baker..... G. S. G 3 Daniel L..... Harness, M Davis Bros..... Publishers Douglas W. H..... G. S. G 3 Buschbeck E. A..... Gro. Johnson O. A..... Hardware, J 4 Livingston B. G. & O..... G. S. J 3½ McMahon E. J. Drug Co. (not inc.)... M 4 Massey H. J..... G. S. F 2½ Massey H. J..... G. S. M 4 Morris L. J..... Agri Imp'ls Mountain Home Drug Store (not inc.)..... M 3 Redna H. W..... Mill G 3 Russell Bros..... Hardware, M Talbert L. J..... Undertaker, & Co. L 4 Tar Spring Asphalt Co..... M-frs. (Also Comanche, Ind. Tor.) Tracy J. T..... G. S. H 2½ Trueman A. J..... G. S. L 4 Westmorland H. H..... Livery, M Wolf A. A..... G. S. J 3½</p> <p>TRACY, Baxter Co. Pop. 20—Banking Town Mountain Home Roberts G. W..... G. S. M 4</p> <p>WINNERVA, Baxter Co.—2 G Pop. 12—Bkg. Town Mountain Home Giffin & Musick..... G. S. H 4</p> <p>MOUNTAIN HOME, Baxter Co. MOUNTAIN HOME BANK..... State Paid Cap—\$5,000..... Surplus \$2,000 B. E. Massey, Pr..... Rudolf Brown, Cas Corr—Merchants-Laclede Nat., St. Louis</p>
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A listing of existing businesses in Mountain Home, Arkansas in 1904.



Old Timers in the Mountain Home area around Nettie's time.



East side of the 1902 Mountain Home town square.

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