

AMELIA SARAH READ AND HER 1888 SAN MIGUEL ISLAND EGG By Marla Daily

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Researching the histories of the California Channel Islands is my profession and passion, and I'm always on the look-out for clues leading to new discovery of long lost island information. One morning during a research visit to the collections of the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, I happen upon a specimen of a Western Gull egg, (*Larus occidentalis*), accessioned as AV 24327—and labeled as having been collected on San Miguel Island by one Amelia Read between 1886-1888. What's this? A woman? On San Miguel Island between 1886-1888? Collecting an egg? Who is she? Why is she on the island? What is she doing out there? And thus the search both begins and ends with the provenance of one beautifully speckled, blue and brown, perfectly preserved 125-year-old Western Gull egg.

Through previous research, I know that Captain William G. Waters (1838-1917) raises sheep on San Miguel Island for thirty years— from November 1887 until his death in April 1917; that throughout the years Captain Waters has a number of employees who live and work on the island: Mr. and Mrs. Brown in 1891; William Devine, his mother Margaret and brother Francis, from about 1895-1901; Charles and Sallie Curryer in 1896-1897; Mrs. Stevens in 1900; the Rawlins family in 1903-1904; Lewis and Lillian Ward in 1910; John and Ada Russell from 1904-1929 (who stay more than a decade past Captain Waters death). I also know that Captain Waters marries a San Francisco widow, Mirantha "Minnie", who joins him on the island for the first five months of 1888, during which time she keeps a diary [*Mrs. Waters' Diary of her Life on San Miguel Island, January 1-June 27, 1888* in **A Step Back in Time: Unpublished Channel Islands Diaries**, Marla Daily, ed. Santa Cruz Island Foundation Occasional Paper Number 4, 1990 (p. 4-51). Could there possibly be clues to Amelia Read in Minnie Water's diary? Bingo!

May 29, 1888—Tuesday

The sloop came in about 8:00 A.M., and much to our disappointment we had no mail. Neither did Mr. Nichols¹ (Will's partner) come, but he sent a herder, 2 dogs and *a man to take charge — an Englishman who has a family of 8 with himself and his wife*. And if he comes he wants to bring them all and have one third of profits. Will feels uncertain whether he will agree to the plan unless he sees and talks to Mr. N.

May 30, 1888—Wednesday

Pleasant. I did not sleep much last night. Eve neuralgia. Today Will and *Mr. Read (the Englishman)* have gone to west end to see the ties, the lighter being towed by *Ocean King* around to our harbor; the herder is off with his dogs and sheep.

May 31, 1888—Thursday

Busy all day getting ready to go to Santa Barbara. Don't expect to leave before Saturday. Hope to then. The sloop is over on the west end now loading ties; and Will, *Mr. Read* and Jimmie with the sled and horses are over helping the Captain load.

June 2, 1888—Saturday

At last we are here in Santa Barbara. Left San Maguil [sic] Island at 8:00 A.M. and arrived after having a lovely sail across the channel about 3 o'clock... *Mr. Read doing marketing for us.*

June 3, 1888—Sunday

A lovely morn but the wind blew a gale this P.M... *Mr. Read went to Carpinteria to see Mr. Nichols...*

June 4, 1888—Monday

Very pleasant and warm. *Mr. Nichols and Mr. Read came and talked business awhile and it is decided that Mr. Read and family shall go to the island, he furnishing all of the food for the people, and he will have one third of the increase each year. We to go and come as we please. I hope it is all for the best and that we many all be profited by the arrangement.*²

The last name READ is right; the 1886-1888 time frame is right; the place—San Miguel Island—is right. Thus it is most probable the 19th century female San Miguel Island egg-collector, Amelia Read, is related to the Mr. Read of Minnie Waters' diary. So just who is this Mr. Read and what is his connection to Amelia Read? Thus far it's known he's an Englishman and he has lots of children. Through the usual online resources, Ancestry.com, Find-a-Grave.com, etc., the pieces to the puzzle fit nicely:

James Read (1839-1922) marries Anne Harris (1840-1922) in Suffolk, England in 1859, and they have twelve children over the next two decades, two of whom die at birth. In 1883 the family emigrates first to Michigan, thence to California, with their seven youngest children, including the person of my interest, daughter Amelia. The three oldest children stay in England; 13-year-old daughter, "Florrie", dies shortly after they arrive in California:

- 1. Annie Louise Read (1862-1954) stays in England, (26)
- 2. Henry Harris Read (1863-1949) stays in England, (25)
- 3. Katie Julia Read (1864-1948) stays in England, (24)
- 4. George James Read (1866-1948) moves to San Miguel Island, (22)

- 5. Amelia Sarah Read [Marsh] (October 26, 1867-December 21, 1918) who collects the Western Gull egg on San Miguel Island, (21)
- 6. Ada Fanny Read [Lewis] (1869-1965) lives on San Miguel Island, (19)
- 7. Florence “Florrie” Jemina Read (1871-1884) dies shortly after the family moves to California, (13)
- 8. Gertrude Lillian Read (1872-1872) dies at birth
- 9. John Edward Read (1873-1898) lives on San Miguel Island, (15)
- 10. Philip Earnest Read (12) (1876-1876) dies at birth
- 11. Gertrude Mary Read [Rudolph] (1877-1955) lives on San Miguel Island, (11)
- 12. Grace Evelyn Read [Lindsay] [Thompson] (1880-1963) lives on San Miguel Island, (8)

On June 4, 1888 James Read is hired by Captain Waters and his partner, W. I. Nichols, to manage their sheep ranch on San Miguel Island.³ Six of the nine Read children, ages eight to twenty-two, move to the island with their parents for about two years: Grace, Gertrude, John, Ada, and George⁴, in addition to our egg-collector, Amelia Sarah Read, who turns 21 on October 26, 1888.

On January 20, 1897, Amelia, who prefers to be called “Millie,” marries Arthur Clark Marsh (1861-1935), and they have one child, Ernest True Marsh (1898-1962). Amelia “Millie” Marsh dies in Oxnard, California on December 21, 1918 at age 51. She is buried in Lompoc Evergreen Cemetery. Her son, Ernest True Marsh, marries Grace Esther Wadsworth (1902-1978) in 1923, and they have two daughters, one of whom is Amelia Marsh Anderson (1926-2013) of Provo, Utah.

Research on this most curious Western Gull egg from San Miguel Island, that I happen upon by chance, now comes full circle. In 2007 Amelia Marsh Anderson, namesake granddaughter of Amelia Read, donates this fragile family treasure to the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, simply accessioned as AV 24327. During the past 125 years, this Western Gull egg from San Miguel Island survives crossing Santa Barbara Channel by schooner in the late 19th century. It survives three generations—the lifetimes of Amelia Read; her son, Ernest Marsh; and his daughter, Amelia Anderson, who, at age 80, entrusts it to the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History in perpetuity. Was it kept on a shelf? In a drawer? On the mantle? In an attic? We will never know. We do know, however, this is definitely one coddled egg!

Photo: Western gull egg, photo courtesy of the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History

Photo: James and Anne Read, photo courtesy of Judy Piper ⁵

Photo: Amelia Read, photo courtesy of Judy Piper

Photo: Amelia Anderson, photo www.findagrave.com

1. Washington Irving Nichols (1838-1895), New York-born judge from Siskiyou County, and investor in one half interest of San Miguel Island in 1887 for \$10,000. He buys the interests of his friend, Warren Mills, thereby becoming

- partners with Captain William G. Waters who buys the other half for \$10,000. In 1889 and 1890, Nichols practices law in Santa Barbara. In 1895 he forms a partnership with Charles A. Storke and practices his profession until his death later that year in Santa Barbara. "His humorous and genial nature made him liked and respected by all." He is buried in the Santa Barbara Cemetery. Nichols is survived by his son, Charles Percy Nichols (1875-1933).
2. Minnie Waters' diary ends June 27, 1888 in Santa Barbara. She never returns to San Miguel Island. Following a series of health cures in San Francisco, Minnie dies of consumption (tuberculosis) in Santa Barbara on January 17, 1890. She is 38 years old.
 3. James Read is hired to work on San Miguel Island on June 4, 1888, thus it can be stated with certainty that the Western Gull egg is collected by his daughter, Amelia, after this date, and before the family moves off the island sometime before November, 1891, when a Mr. and Mrs. Brown are hired as caretakers. By 1892 the Read family is living in Lompoc.
 4. Santa Barbara County Voter Register for 1890:
GEORGE JAMES READ: age 24; country of nativity England; occupation farmer; local residence San Miguelito [sic]; naturalized July 24, 1889 Santa Barbara Superior Court.
JAMES READ: age 51; country of nativity England; occupation farmer; local residence San Miguelito [sic]; naturalized Aug. 24, 1889 Santa Barbara Superior Court.
 5. Judy Rudolph Piper of Santa Barbara is the granddaughter of Gertrude Read (1877-1955), who moved to San Miguel Island with her family at age 11. Judy graciously shared her photographs and knowledge of the Read family history.