

Grinnell is home:

A cemetery walk with Eva Pearl Craig Renfrow (1875-1962)



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Welcome! My name is Eva Pearl Craig Renfrow. I am the wife of Lee Augustus Renfrow (1872-1945) and the proud mother of six children, including my little Edith, who is now Mrs. Edith Renfrow Smith. I am also the youngest daughter of Eliza Jane Craig (1841-1924), and the

¹ Image cropped from a picture of the three Craig sisters, c. 1900, courtesy of Edith Renfrow Smith -- <https://digital.grinnell.edu/islandora/object/grinnell:12145>

granddaughter of Jane, an enslaved woman with only a first name. For three-quarters of a century, I claimed this town, Grinnell, IA, as my home.

My beginnings

My parents, George Russell Craig and Eliza Jane Gilbal Craig, were both born into slavery – my father in Kentucky and my mother in South Carolina. As they sought their freedom, they came to the midwest and eventually settled in central Iowa. In 1864, they married in Cedar County,² and then moved to Oskaloosa. Over the next nine years, they became parents to my older sisters, Theodora “Dora” (1864-1949) and Anna Katherine (1867-1946), and then me in 1875.³

My parents and I moved from Oskaloosa to Grinnell in 1887, when I was 12.⁴ At that time, my oldest sister Dora was married to John Brown Lucas, the son of Henry Lucas, the first Black landowner in Poweshiek County. That same year, my sister Anna, the first hairdresser in town, married Edward Goode, a barber.⁵

School meant the world to me, and I always loved it, much more than my older sisters. I was a reader my whole life and curious about the world around me.⁶ After moving to Grinnell,

² Marriage record for George Craig and Eliza Jane Gilball, April 18, 1864, Cedar County, IA. "Iowa, County Marriages, 1838-1934," database, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XJVT-16D> : 5 September 2017), Geo. Craig and Eliza Jilball, 18 Apr 1864, Cedar Co., Iowa, United States; citing reference P. 178, county courthouses, Iowa; FHL microfilm 986,805.

³ Eva Pearl Craig's birthplace is listed as Oskaloosa in two sources – 1) per her Smith Funeral Home intake sheet; and 2) per her 1901 Marriage License -- "Iowa, County Marriages, 1838-1934," database, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XJCV-VCS> : 10 February 2018), L. A. Renfrow and Eva P. Craig, 31 Jul 1901, GRINNELL, POWESHIEK, IOWA; citing reference 'F', PG 38, #3844, county courthouses, Iowa; FHL microfilm 1,028,404.

⁴ <http://www.grinnell.lib.ia.us/Obit/C/CraigElizaJ.pdf>

⁵ This marriage date is derived from the 1900 census, column 10, which states that says Edward Goode was married 13 years. "United States Census, 1900," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:M9L6-2M8> : accessed 2 August 2023), Anna Goode in household of Edward Goode, Grinnell Township Grinnell city Ward 3-4, Poweshiek, Iowa, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) 100, sheet , family , NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1972.); FHL microfilm . In the 1885 Iowa State Census, Edward Goode is listed as a barber in Grinnell, IA, and is single -- "Iowa State Census, 1885," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:HWBM-HN2> : Thu Jul 20 19:38:41 UTC 2023), Entry for Geo Manatt and Mary E Manatt, 1885.

⁶ Edith Renfrow Smith interview with Stuart Yeager, February 25, 1982: 14-15 -- "She just said that she always loved school. Her sisters didn't like school and she did. And she said she always had her nose in a book." Smith Funeral Home records for Eva Pearl Renfrow report her profession as "schoolteacher."

I helped take care of Dora's little ones, but I also attended the Industrial School for Girls in Grinnell.⁷ Although my school emphasized the domestic arts – sewing, cooking and being neat and upstanding women -- I was interested in much more.⁸ I was an attentive student and did my lessons with great care. And for my hard work, I became known in the newspaper as one of Grinnell's "brightest scholars."⁹

When I'd gotten as much of an education as I could in Grinnell, I began teaching. I had a cousin on my mother's side, and I was a governess to her children. My cousin's husband was a co-founder of Mound Bayou, Mississippi, which is the first all-Black town in the post-Civil War South!¹⁰ On a former plantation they purchased, these Black people lived independently, kept what they earned, and invested in their futures – and all on their own terms.¹¹ I also taught in Missouri as well as in Leavenworth, Kansas, where my father George Craig had lived before

⁷ [The Industrial School](#), "Grinnell Herald, June 20, 1913, p. 2, states that the school ended at the close of the 1913 school year. Also, a handwritten note in the Industrial School Secretary's book 1887-1897 at Drake Library archives – "This school was continued til 1917 (??) when domestic science and manual training were introduced into the public schools. I was either teacher or superintendent in the sewing school all those years. Dora Grinnell."

⁸ "[The Industrial School of Grinnell](#)," Grinnell Herald, March 6, 1888, p. 2 -- "The object of this organization, as stated in the constitution, is as follows: 'We, the undersigned, feeling desirous of promoting the welfare of the girls of Grinnell, do form an Industrial School for the purpose of teaching the girls sewing and cooking and also instructing them to be neat in their habits and desirous of becoming good and useful women.'"

⁹ [Grinnell Herald](#), March 19, 1889, p. 3; [Grinnell Herald](#), May 26, 1881, p. 3

¹⁰ Stuart Yeager interview with Edith Renfrow Smith – February 25, 1982, p. 14 – "What did your mother do after she went to the academy? She went to the academy for just a year or so? Yes. Then she went South to teach her cousin's children – as a governess to her cousin's children in Mound Bayou, Mississippi. And her cousin's husband was the first mayor of Mound Bayou."

Eva Pearl Craig's first cousin was Eva Pearl Gilbal Green, the daughter of Eliza Jane Craig's brother, Aaron. Eva Pearl Gilbal married [Benjamin Titus Green](#), who was cousin to [Isaiah T. Montgomery](#) (1847-1924), with whom he founded Mound Bayou in 1887. Mound Bayou was known as [The Jewel of the Delta](#), and Montgomery served as its [first mayor](#).

Additional information about Benjamin Titus Green

- <http://msgw.org/slaves/green-bt-xslave.htm>

Additional information about Mound Bayou, Mississippi

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mound_Bayou,_Mississippi
- <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/mound-bayou-mississippi>

¹¹ <https://medium.com/@cathrynstout/love-letter-to-mound-bayou-ms-and-all-historically-black-towns-eaae7183948d>

escaping to Iowa. I met his mother, my grandmother Jemima Craig, who – like my Edith – lived to see more than a hundred years.¹²

I've always felt deeply that it was important to be someone and do something.¹³ And after a century, my travels still feel bold and significant. Although I became engaged to my husband, Lee Augustus Renfrow, at age 16, we didn't marry until I was 26.¹⁴ So I was a young person, and my own person, before marriage. And I didn't start our family until I was almost 30, which might not seem old now, but was certainly less common then.¹⁵

However, despite all my traveling and trying, there was one thing I could not achieve -- what I call "a thorough education." I ached for that my whole life. So what I couldn't get, I made sure my Edith and all her siblings got – a college degree.¹⁶

¹² <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/149310024/jemima-lawnier-craig>. Link includes a link to her obituary.

¹³ Alice Renfrow Smith interview June 28, 2021: 50-51 -- "[Eva Pearl Craig Renfrow] wasn't one of those She didn't have this narrow, narrow view of things. She knew there was more in the world than Grinnell. And I think that's what she put into her children. Is that life is, education is important. You have to be something, and you have to do something.... You have to do those things."

July 14, 2023 phone conversation with Georgene Freeman describing her impressions of Eva Pearl Craig -- "She was an individual that had goals and pursued them. Her [Cousin Edith's] mother was into self-worth before that became a world."

¹⁴ Transcript of Edith Renfrow Smith speaking about family photos, Drake Library, October 6, 2015, p. 76 – "She got engaged to my father when she was 16. She waited 10 years."

¹⁵ <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/time-series/demo/families-and-households/ms-2.pdf>

¹⁶ A "thorough education" is a phrase Mrs. Renfrow utilized in recounting the family history behind her daughter's graduation from Grinnell College. From "Up from Slavery: The descendant of a slave mother and a French master gets her degree at a middle western college," *The Crisis*, August 1937, p. 239.

When Edith Renfrow graduated with her own thorough education and made Grinnell College history in 1937, she was following the pattern of college attending set by her siblings. Here's what the Renfrow had to show as a family by that June 1937:

- Helen – BA, University of Iowa
- Alice – BA, Hampton Institute
- Rudy – Hampton Institute
- Evanel – BA and MA, University of Iowa
- Paul – at Howard University

My motto

My Lee and I married in Grinnell, in July 1901, and we began our family in 1904. We moved up to Red Wing, Minnesota for a few years, but returned home to Grinnell in 1910. By 1917, I bought the house that I would call home for almost 50 years – 411 1st Avenue.¹⁷ Like our southwest neighbors, we were hard-working people who earned everything we had. But my Lee and I were rich in aspirations for our children. We had dreams big enough to defy what some might guess was possible for a Black family living south of the railroad tracks. And I nurtured those dreams every day by telling our children my motto, “No one is better than you.” And this is what I meant:

*I don't care who it is. There is no one born any better than you are. They may have more money and they may be more beautiful. They may have outward things. But there's no one any better.... You are unique and you are you. So never forget how important you are.*¹⁸

And hearing these words thousands of times over her first 23 years with me, my Edith made history in 1937, when she became the first Black woman to graduate from Grinnell College!

I couldn't always protect my children when they left our house. I knew that some people would shun them. But what I could do was give them a way of rejecting this poison to their spirits. So when my straight-backed, confident, and lovingly affirmed Edith was called ugly names, when other parents would not allow her to play with their children, when none of us could enjoy treats at the sweets shop, I would envelop her in my arms and tell her, “Just

¹⁷ In 1917, the Renfrow household included all six children – Helen (13), Alice (11), Rudolph (10), Evanel (9), Edith (3), and Paul (1).

¹⁸ Edith Renfrow Smith interview with Stuart Yeager, February 25, 1982: 16 -- “[My mother] said, ‘I don’t care who it is. There is no one born any better than you are. They may have more money and they may be more beautiful. They may have outward things. But there’s no one any better.’ So naturally if you’re taught there’s no one any better than you are, why you think you’re pretty special. And so, I think that that made a great difference.”

Edith Renfrow Smith interview with Dan Kaiser, October 7, 2015 :6 -- “And she always taught us, ‘There’s no one [better than you]. They may be richer and they may be more beautiful, they may have more clothes, but you are unique and you are you. So never forget how important you are.’”

remember the motto. So they must not be very good. They're not better than you."¹⁹ With these words, I kept my children's light bright, and I'm very proud of that.²⁰

Go-getting in Grinnell

As my children were growing up in the 1920s and 1930s, I spent much of my time helping to make Grinnell a place where we all could dream and grow.²¹ So if you look for me in the paper, you'll see that I was busy with several women's clubs and activities – mothers groups, town pageants, and book clubs. I firmly believed in women's suffrage, and I worked with lots of women on behalf of our children and ourselves.²²

Passing down our family histories

My Edith is such the family historian, and let me tell you why. Even before she started school, she was always under my feet, imploring me, "Mama, tell me a story. Mama, tell me a story."²³ With her big soft eyes and those high cheekbones, I could hardly answer her anything but yes when I had some time. And so this growing girl-child would ease into my lap and I'd wrap us up

¹⁹ Edith Renfrow Smith interview with Ben Binversie, 2019, <https://www.grinnell.edu/about/leadership/offices-services/communications/podcast/all-things-grinnell/edith-renfrow-smith/transcript>

²⁰ Reference to African American traditions of "light making, or embodying that which is lighthearted, encouraging, and self-preserving." See Renee Nishawn Scott (2022: 1), "Taking on the light: Ontological Black girlhood in the twenty-first century," *Girlhood Studies* 15(1): 1-16.

²¹ Edith Renfrow Smith interview with Tamara Beauboeuf, June 28, 2021, pp. 97-98 – "But [Eva Pearl Craig Renfrow] was a go-getter. My father, [he] wouldn't let you impose on him. No. But she went out to work for us, for us all."

Edith Renfrow Smith interview with Tamara Beauboeuf, July 16, 2022, p. 41 – "And you know, Mama wasn't going to let her children not have as good as she could get. And Mama was a fighter. So that's why she got everything she could get."

²² For example, "[Society](#)," 10/28/1921, *Grinnell Herald*, p. 4. Mrs. Renfrow was also in the town historical pageant of October 17 and 18, 1929, [Pioneers of Progress](#).

²³ Edith Renfrow Smith interview with Tamara Beauboeuf, July 15, 2022, p. 40 – "From Mama. See, I learned all I know from Mama, because Mama taught about stories. And all this history. And see, I was just a little kid running around by her feet. And see, she talked to me so much, because see her older children were gone. They weren't with her. I as down there because I was down on the floor. Wherever Mama was, that's where I was. And that's why she talked to [me] and they [my siblings] were gone. Yeah. They didn't know any of this because she didn't ever talk to them."

in our family stories. My other children didn't have the gift that my Edith did, and nobody else really listened to us. They would say, "Mama talk too much." But my Edith and I would pay them no mind, and I'd share with her all that my mother told me -- how slavery looked and felt like to her mother, Jane; how my father, George Russell Craig, had run away because of an owner who threatened to whip him to death for displeasing him; and how as a three-year old, little Eliza Jane, my mother, had traveled hundreds of miles north to Ohio on a covered wagon with her older brother, Aaron, to be free.²⁴ My Edith took it all in, as well as the deep message of what these stories say about us – that ours is a family of fighters."²⁵

Here, I am home

Here in Hazelwood, I can't quite see 411 1st Avenue. But I know it's near -- I feel it -- and that is so reassuring to me. It edges the community we fortified with family – the Craigs, the Lucases, and the Renfrows -- in the southwest neighborhood I called home for over seven decades. I rest here with my mother Eliza Jane, my husband Lee Augustus, and three of our children -- Alice, Rudy, and Paul. Nearby is my sister, Anna, and down the hill a bit rest my little Edith's husband, Henry, and their first born, Virginia. We are together. We are home. We are Grinnell.

²⁴ I thank Hemlock Stanier '25 for this emphasis on distance.

Recounting of Eva Pearl Craig Renfrow's family history taken from "Up from Slavery: The descendant of a slave mother and a French master gets her degree at a middle western college," *The Crisis*, August 1937, p. 239.

For details about George and Eliza Jane Craig, see an article about Mrs. Eva Renfrow in the Shelhamer Memorial Missions News (Washington, DC; June/July 1981) states, "We especially enjoyed hearing the stories of her childhood and of her parents. She recalled to us the bitter persecution that her father had to endure when he tried to escape slavery. One owner threatened to put him to death on a whipping block for displeasing him. He later managed to escape. She also told of her mother who came to Ohio on a mule train when only three years of age with an older brother." [Article](#) courtesy of the Renfrow Smith family, published by the Poweshiek History Preservation Project.

²⁵ Edith Renfrow Smith interview with Jackie Hartling Stolze (2007: 17, 20) -- "And see why I know so much about our history is my mother was a great storyteller and see, she would tell us all about the slaves and what happened to them. [My grandfather George Craig] fought. He fought for his rights. You know, we came from a bunch of fighters."