

Do You Remember?

By Anne Homan
Livermore City Historian



Pumpkin Pie First?

Susan Ivy Graham loved sweets and, according to her granddaughter, Frances Nissen Prevost, she "insisted upon eating dessert as a first course in order to have an empty stomach to completely enjoy the feast." Frances owned Susan's original cookbook—the majority of its entries are cake.

Susan Ivy Graham came with her husband, Robert W. Graham, to Laddsville, California in 1869. Laddsville was the earliest incarnation of Livermore; the hamlet was centered around the intersection of Old First Street and Junction Avenue. The Grahams built and operated a general merchandise store there. By 1870 Robert Graham had become Livermore's first postmaster. On the 1880 census Graham gave his occupation as the town of Livermore's Justice of the Peace. City clerk Elmer G. Still noted that Graham had been appointed Justice of the Peace in 1878 and held that position until his death in 1887. The Amador-Livermore Valley Historical Society holds several of his court docket books in their Pleasanton museum.

Deciding to become a mortician, Graham gave up his store and attended a special school in San Francisco, passed required tests, and received a license. His first "undertaking a specialty" local newspaper ads are extant

from 1884. Susan was definitely an active partner in the firm of Graham Mortuary, which was located on First Street and later on the northwest corner of Second and South L. Perhaps like the early Schweer Mortuary at 706 Main Street in Pleasanton, the Graham Mortuary had a large glass window in front to display the embalmed bodies in their coffins, the custom of the time. The Livermore Grahams were not related to the Pleasanton Grahams, even though they were both in the undertaking business.

The Graham family home, a white clapboard, was at the southeast corner of Sixth and South K. Susan Ivy and Robert Graham had married in San Francisco in 1864, when he was 31 and she was 17. All but three of their children died before the age of five. Little Katy, Roberta, Mary, and Winnie are buried at Roselawn Cemetery with their parents. On a Friday evening in late November 1887, as Judge Graham and another man were driving out of Roselawn Cemetery, one of their spring wagon's wheels sank into a hole, causing the seat to tip over. Graham was thrown out and suffered a badly bruised hip. Unfortunately, he also had internal injuries not at first apparent, and he died five days later.

Susan Graham was 40 years old and eight months pregnant. She still had her older daughter and nine-



Pictured are (at left) Susan Ivy Graham; (at right) twins Susan and Robert Graham
(Photos from collection of Rae Terry)

year-old twins to support. After the stillborn birth of her last child, she followed in her husband's footsteps to become an undertaker and receive an embalmer's license—the first woman in California to achieve these goals, according to her granddaughter and a *Herald* article at the time of her retirement. The *Echo* noted in November 1890 that she was taking lessons in the art of embalming from a "leading" firm of San Francisco undertakers. She was "now prepared to preserve bodies for any length of time." In September 1894 in addition to the "funeral car" she had recently acquired, she purchased "an equally elegant white hearse for use at the funerals of children." Both of these vehicles were pulled by horses.

Her granddaughter described her: "Although not tall, Susan made a striking figure with her auburn hair and sweeping long black skirts, a gold lapel watch pinned to her blouse. She was said to be the first matron locally to

have trouser pockets sewn in her skirts, convenience prevailing over femininity." On call day and night, she was a familiar figure in Livermore and on byways outside of town in her one-seater buggy drawn by a roan horse. After a broken hip left her with a noticeable limp, she carried a black walking stick with her initials on its gold knob. Jim Elliott remembered that his uncle's funeral in Livermore in 1911 was handled by "the lady mortician with a limp."

Needing connection with a livery stable to conduct her business, she first took Louis Schaffer and then Arthur Fiedler as partners. John C. Reimers' Fashion Stable later bought Fiedler's business, and Graham sold out to Reimers when she retired in 1917 after falling ill with cancer. Reimers built an elaborate stucco mortuary at the site of the old Graham mortuary on L Street. Later, Leo Callaghan bought Reimers Mortuary. The *Herald* commented on her retirement, "Mrs.

Graham could tell of many curious and grisly experiences during her long years of service, especially in the early days, but undertakers never discuss their experiences and many thrilling stories are lost to the world."

When she died in 1919 at age 72, outliving her husband by 30 years, she was survived by two daughters—Hazzie, who married farmer William H. Galway, and Susan, who married into Livermore's Nissen clan. Graham Nissen was named for his grandparents. Susan's twin brother, Robert, had died at age 22 of injuries resulting from a bicycle accident.

One of Frances Prevost's favorite keepsakes is a Graham Mortuary sales sheet with a cake recipe hastily scribbled on the back by her grandmother. Surely, Susan I. Graham would approve of eating pumpkin pie garnished with a generous dollop of whipped cream before tackling the turkey.

(Readers can reach me at am50homan@yahoo.com.)