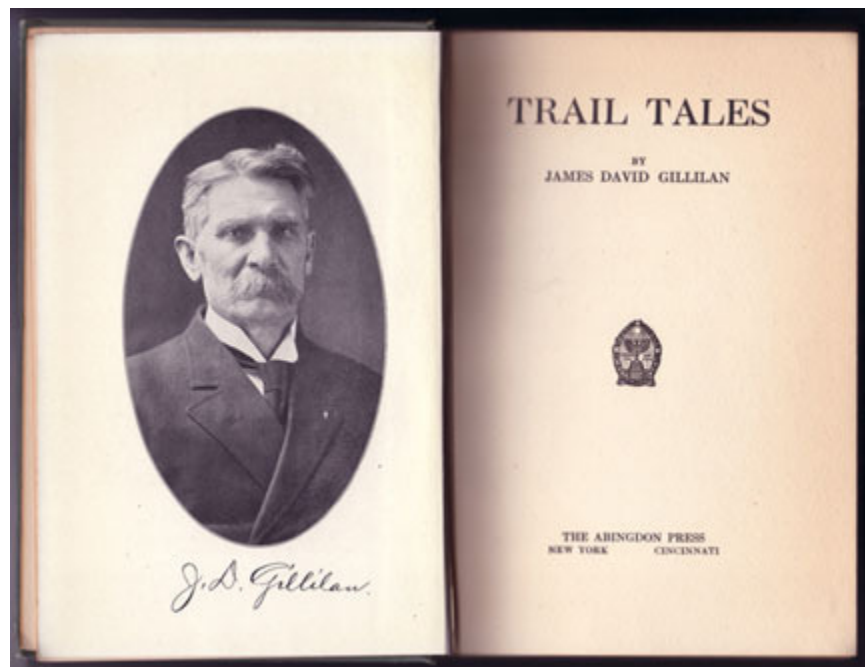


Trail Tales: The Life of James David Gillilan



This is another example of how I discovered a chapter of Gilliland history through the simple purchase of a book at an ebay auction. I recently had the opportunity to obtain -- at a remarkably modest price -- a signed, first edition copy (1915) of Trail Tales by James David Gillilan. I was not at all familiar with the author but ever-curious to find new connections to the family of James Gillilan Jr. and Margaret Boggs, who migrated from Greenbrier County (West) Virginia to Gallia County, Ohio, I was eager to find out whether this book held any clues as to several of the Gillilan descendants who eventually settled in Jackson County, Ohio. Among these, I knew, was at least one notable descendant, the humorist and author Strickland Gillilan.

Matthew Gillian, a cousin here on Gilliland Trails, has meticulously explained in his posts how these many variations of the Gilliland name evolved from this line. To review, I feel I should clarify here that James Gillilan Jr. was a grandson of Nathan Gilliland of Augusta County, Virginia, and simply dropped the "d" from the end of the surname. Later, some descendants of James Jr. further shortened the name to Gillian, as did Matthew's family.

But I digress. Before I had even received the copy of Trail Tales I decided to see if I could find additional information about James David Gillilan via a little web surfing. Sure enough, among the books in Google's digitized library is a copy of Paul Little's The Pacific Northwest Pulpit, which contains the following biography:

James David Gillilan
Superintendent Boise District, Boise, Idaho

James David Gillilan was born May 19, 1858, in Jackson, Ohio. He had the advantages of the public schools and academy, but did not complete his college course. In 1883 he became a member of the Utah Mission under appointment of Bishop Wiley, and in 1898 he began work in Idaho. In 1892 Bishop Hurst appointed him presiding elder in Utah. In 1904 Bishop Spellmeyer appointed him presiding elder of La Grande District, Idaho Conference, and in 1912 Bishop Luccock appointed him to the superintendency of the Boise District, which position he holds at present. He was a delegate to the General Conference at Los Angeles in 1904 and again in 1912 at Minneapolis.

In 1910 the Willamette University conferred upon him the degree of Doctor of Divinity. His book, Trail Tales, will be issued by the Methodist Book Concern this fall.

To embellish the short biography provided above, I can add that James David was the younger brother of writer Strickland Gillilan, sons born to Lewis Gillilan and Mary Alice Claar. Lewis' father Jesse was a son of James Gillilan Jr. and Margaret Boggs, those pioneers who trekked their way from Greenbrier County, West Virginia to the newly opened frontier of Ohio and the Appalachian foothills.

Two of their descendants, James David and his brother Strickland, followed paths in life that on the surface may seem diametrically opposed. Strickland, the engaging humorist, poet, and best-selling author, shared his wit and wordly wisdom as a popular guest on the dinner guest circuit and as a writer for the Washington Post. James David, on the other hand, traveled a more pious circuit as a minister for the Utah missions, just as likely to share his meal over a campfire with a familiar Bannock, Shoshone or Nez Perce. Nevertheless, it is obvious to the reader that both had been well-schooled in the classics of literature and in their own writings preferred short, anecdotal compositions and poems; both were fond of writing in the dialect of their subjects.

Trail Tales is an easy read and the collection follows an interesting progression from Gillilan's wonderment at the natural beauty of the unspoiled yet unforgiving land, to his portraits of Native American people who populated that landscape, particularly in Idaho, and finally, to his condensed history of Mormonism in the west and his virulent disdain for polygamy.

This is a book whose content must be digested with some consideration for the sensibilities of the day. Gillilan can be alternately patronizing and empathetic, condescending or genuinely compassionate towards the indigenous Americans of his acquaintance and of whom he writes; towards Mormonism he is resolute in his criticism, yet in some of that righteous indignance are defenses of women and their place in society that seem to hint at sympathies with the cause of women's suffrage. All of the grand changes in American society that took place in the latter half of the 19th century are reflected in Gillilan's journal of his time and travels.

James David Gillilan finally settled in Pocatello, Idaho, where he died in 1935. He had married Alice Wiseman, also of Jackson County, Ohio, and the couple had a sizeable family. In the 1900 census for Pocatello we find James and Alice with children Zelica, 19; James D., 17; Clara L., 14; and Paul L., 10. Interestingly, James David was not the only Gillilan descendant of Nathan Gilliland's line who made his home in Idaho, as the family of James Milton Gillilan (1868-1931) had settled in Homedale.

I very much enjoyed exploring yet another branch of the Nathan Gilliland family tree. Both Strickland and his brother James David, blessed with keen powers of observation and literary gifts, left quite a legacy to follow along the Gilliland trail.

-- Kate Maynard

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