

THE WRITER'S ORIGINS

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI—
THE SMITH FAMILY ALBUM—1909

“Tootie’s too smart for her own good.”

—*Meet Me in St. Louis*

Moviegoers of the mid-1940s found themselves captivated by *Meet Me in St. Louis* with its Midwestern Smith family living amid their city’s preparations to host the 1903 World’s Fair. The melodies of “Meet Me in St. Louis,” the “Trolley Song,” and “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” were catchy and easy to sing. The lyrics, made memorable by Judy Garland’s voice, were enchanting. A welcome diversion from daily newspaper headlines’ grim reports of U.S. casualties on the European front, the film reminded audiences of their own childhood and evoked laughter at the shenanigans of Agnes and little Tootie (as young Sara Smith was known to her family). They applauded Rose’s and Esther’s efforts to win the hearts of local suitors; they shared the family’s reluctance to embrace Pa’s news that a move to New York was imminent; they sighed in relief along with the onscreen Smiths when Pa, acknowledging its impact, reversed his decision to accept his New York promotion. Such audiences left the theaters happily satisfied and returned to their ordinary lives somewhat refreshed. In actuality, however, they had been deceived. The Smiths’ story, though partially true, ended quite differently.

Sara Mahala Redway Smith, the future Sally Benson, was born on September 3, 1897, in St. Louis, Missouri. Less elegant than its Hollywood counterpart, her family home—a modest, red brick dwelling—stood on a rise above a lawn sloping down to Kensington Avenue. Like its neighbors,

close together—separated by about twenty feet—the Smith house sat five feet above the street. Purchased in 1891 by Sara’s father, Alonzo Smith, the house had a tiny front yard and an eight-stepped stoop leading to the front door. The first of its three floors was for living—kitchen, dining room, living room, and reception hall; the second and third, for sleeping. With its gabled roof, dormer windows, two chimneys, and large, arched window adjoining the front porch and main entrance, the Smith residence was striking in its day and served as the family home for eighteen years. Then, in the spring of 1909, unlike the fictional Alonzo Smith of *Meet Me in St. Louis*, Sara’s father decided to start his own business in New York City. Just eleven at the time, Sara could hardly imagine the life awaiting her in Manhattan.

Youngest of the five children of Anna Cora Prophater and Alonzo Redway Smith, Sara was a precocious and perky child. Full of life and

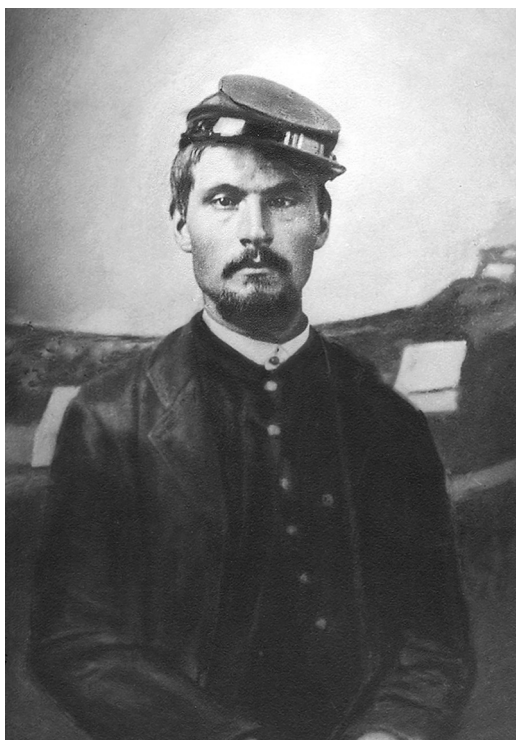


Figure 2. John Sidney Prophater, grandfather of Sally Benson, in his Civil War uniform, 1863

gifted with imagination, she readily made up stories from an early age. She had many friends—both girls and boys—and she was especially close to Agnes, her sibling nearest in age and spirit. Older siblings Alonzo Jr., Rose, and Esther completed the family picture until, when Tootie was six, their maternal grandfather retired from his position as steward on the Anchor Line and moved into the Smith home.

Benson loved and admired her grandfather, but she recorded in *Meet Me in St. Louis* little of his Civil War career beyond a poignant passage alluding to his brother James's death. Her *New Yorker* piece, "January 1904," situates Grandpa Prophater at a window. The leaden sky outside, the commonplace, ugly houses, their white porches stained with rust and soot, take his mind back to the day

when he had heard by rumor, for he was in Andersonville Prison Camp at the time, that his brother Jim had been killed, and of how he thought Jim was better off dead than sleeping on the cold hard ground without a blanket to keep him warm. (179)

Writing in December 1941, as the United States entered World War II, Benson highlighted not Prophater's prowess and courage but his suffering and melancholy, implying her negative critique of the then pro-war stance's gaining popular support.¹

But where and how did Sally Benson's writing career begin? The answer lies among her familial roots and is traceable to childhood days in St. Louis. The earliest extant sample of Benson's writing is a letter mailed from Manitowoc, Wisconsin on August 27, 1903 to reach St. Louis for her father's fifty-first birthday. In penciled, back-slanted handwriting—the same that Sally Benson maintained all her life—the almost six-year-old Sara wrote: "Dear Papa, We are going to play dolls and we got a playroom by ourselfs [*sic*] and have a lot of fun in it. I wish you many happy returns of the day. Sara."² Though young Tootie had not yet started school, her strong interest and high motivation to learn had inspired Agnes to teach her how to read and write. By the time she was ready for kindergarten, Tootie could already read all of Agnes's primary grade books. For this reason, Anna Cora refused to send her to kindergarten. The adult Benson proudly reflected this intellectual prowess in a passage of *Meet Me in St. Louis*. Tootie, her fictional alter ego, after only half a day, dismisses kindergarten as beneath her—"The children in that kindergarten couldn't even read." Unwittingly, the child occasions a major argument between her parents.

The fictional Alonzo, reproaching his wife for “carrying on about her being the baby,” states defiantly: “Tootie should have been in school this year” (246). The fictional Anna Cora, however, defends keeping their daughter at home, arguing that even Alonzo thought it “foolish to have her running around pretending to be a squirrel. . . . Tootie’s too smart for that” (246). Alonzo’s angry retort—“Tootie’s too smart for her own good. . . . She needs to have someone over her who’ll put his foot down” (247)—reflects the real Alonzo’s viewpoint and suggests that similar disagreements occurred between Benson’s parents. If Alonzo’s analysis of Tootie were correct, however, he did little to discipline her—largely because of his lengthy absences from the family—some necessitated by business, others for questionable motives—as shall be seen.

A brown-eyed, golden-haired child,³ Benson had shown signs of her complex personality at an early age. A natural daredevil, she enjoyed taking risks like skating down Union Hill in St. Louis just in time to slide under the noses of an oncoming team of horses. Well into adulthood, Benson exhibited the traits of her fictional “Tootie”—part tomboy, part rebel—ever ready to seek adventure. Dorothy Lobrano Guth, daughter of Gus Lobrano, one of Benson’s *New Yorker* editors, remembers Benson’s visiting the Lobrano home in Chappaqua, New York. “My brother and I had spent an entire afternoon creating a steep and slippery sled run,” she relates. At twilight, Sally Benson, after a few drinks, “insisted on going for a sled ride. She had no boots and would have killed herself if she hadn’t dragged her high-heeled shoes all the way—ruining our afternoon’s work.”⁴

Benson’s love of challenges found an outlet also in reading adventure stories and mysteries—two genres that accompanied her into adulthood as did her gift for storytelling. As Benson’s grandson, Alexis Doster, explains, Alonzo Smith, though he “didn’t interact much,” was particularly fond of Charles Dickens and frequently read aloud to his children from Dickens’s novels. In fact, Dickens was such a favorite that the Smiths named their third daughter Agnes Wickfield for the *David Copperfield* character. Hearing Dickens read by her father engendered in Sally a similar love for Dickens that continued into adolescence.⁵

As her father’s love of reading had taken root in Sally, so, too, had her mother’s habit of storytelling. Anna Cora’s fertile imagination and sense of timing enlivened family gatherings. Her dinner table in St. Louis provided a natural setting for the storytelling trait shared by Sally and her sisters. The pattern continued years later at Anna Cora’s home in Connecticut,

where, during family visits, young Barbara Benson and cousins Albert and Bobbie Thompson, Toby Wherry, and Tony Smith sat around the dining-room table absolutely in awe as their mothers (Rose, Esther, Agnes, and Sally) and grandmother talked.⁶

Besides being gifted storytellers, Benson's sisters were also talented writers. When Rose lived in Madison, Connecticut, she was a columnist for the *Shore Line Times*. Esther was an advertising copyeditor at Franklin Simon's Department Store in New York City and Agnes, after graduating from the Horace Mann School in 1912, had a regular column—"In Passing"—in the *New York Telegraph*. She was also an editor for the *New York Sun*, wrote twenty-four articles and reviews for *Photoplay*, and then became managing editor at *Motion Picture* magazine. Eventually, Agnes married another writer—Frederick James Smith, editor of *Screenplay* magazine—and moved with him to Hollywood to write for silent movies.⁷ (Barbara, Benson's daughter, would also have a career in journalism as editor of the women's section of the *Arizona Sun* in her later years, and her son, Alexis Doster, would become editor of the *Smithsonian* magazine. Esther's son also had a career in publishing.)

Whether Benson's talent for writing stories was innate or acquired, she once attributed her gift for "the brilliantly malicious phrase" to her mother: "She seems all Irish to me. She never gives anybody a compliment. She used to say, 'Go on to your party, you look terrible, but maybe somebody will dance with you'" (Block 69). While many Irish parents encourage humility in their children by giving them scant praise, Benson had to be fabricating in this discussion of her mother's "Irishness." The numerous letters Anna Cora wrote to Benson over the years reveal her to be a caring and loving presence in Sally's and her siblings' lives. On August 18, 1910, for example, Anna Cora wrote to Sara, who was vacationing as she did every summer with Grandma Esther Smith in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. After giving family news, Anna Cora enclosed some money: "You are all but broke, I know, so here is a 'bone.' So, go while the going is good." She closed by giving Sally her "fondest love" and her "heart's best," then signed, "Lovingly, Mother."⁸

With the money Anna Cora sent, Benson hired a horse and buggy to drive out to Uncle Jay's farm with Bunchie, a summer friend. More importantly, the gift occasioned a second extant letter—this time to her mother—and its contents reveal traits found throughout Benson's life—a flair for the dramatic, a love of challenges and horses, and a willingness to help the underdog:

Dear Darling Sweet Precious Mama,

I got your letter this morning when I was in bed at nine-thirty. Yesterday was my day to write to you, but I couldn't because Bunchie and I went to Jay's farm. Sunday I told Jay that we were coming out there Monday and for him to leave Susie so I could drive out there. He said he couldn't that I would have to walk. It's a mile and a half out there and it has been quite warm, so I told him I wasn't going to because it was too hot. He asked me what I was going to do then? And I told him to never mind. I knew. He laughed and bet a dollar I wouldn't be there. The next day Bunchie and I went over to a livery stable and priced a horse. We could get one for three-quarters-of-an-hour for fifty cents and so we took it. . . . The buggy came at twelve-thirty and we took off. We had a fine horse that wasn't afraid of anything and a pretty buggy. A man came along with us and sat in the box part in back. He told me the way so I drove there. Jay was so surprised to see us and he wouldn't believe that we rode out there. But he saw the horse and buggy coming up with us in it. We worked awfully hard. First we got up in the hayloft. I don't know how we ever did because it's so high. But it wouldn't have hurt us if we had fallen because we [would have] landed on a whole pile of hay. Then we rode out on a wagon to where they were going to get in the hay. We came home through the woods. We then got in with a bull. I think we came out faster than we went in.⁹

The letter is a window into Benson's early sense of humor, determination to reach a goal, willingness to work, and ability to write a narrative with strong dramatic interest. Undaunted by obstacles like the height of the hayloft, she engineered a system for helping Delmar Hansen, Jay's thirteen-year-old hired hand, to transfer hay from one loft to another. With insight into the ornery Jay and empathy for an injured horse, Benson describes the situation with humor. "Jay kept calling him to hurry up," she writes, "and he couldn't because Charlie [the horse] was lame so we pulled the rope back for him. I told him to holler up to Jay, 'Are you ready?'" Benson, a mere twelve-year-old, had taken charge of the situation as though she were an adult, yet her narrative voice is charming in its simplicity. Her advice to

Delmar made Jay “mad and he came down and kicked Charlie the horse twice in the stomach. I got mad at him. I just scolded him like everything. He got ashamed of himself.” The conclusion to her story is striking: “Before I got threw [*sic*] Delmar had to go after the cows so we did it for him.” Benson ends the letter without further comment, suggesting no heroism on her part. She had done merely what should be done: “We went home in a wagon. The colt followed us all over. Well, I must close. Lovingly, Sara. P.S. Thanks for *Desperate Desmond*. P.S. I got my herpicide.”¹⁰

The situation of middle-class vacationers voluntarily helping a farm-hand is rare, but to Benson it was second nature to help when help was needed. Years later in *Meet Me in St. Louis*, she portrayed six-year-old Tootie walking into the kitchen through the back door to see if Katie the maid needed help with dinner. Tootie then chides her sisters: “If everybody helped with the work in this house, we’d be all right” (162).

Though the letter to Anna Cora and the aforementioned one to her father are the only examples of Benson’s early writing, the Smiths’ moving to New York in 1909 gave rise to regular correspondence between eleven-year-old Benson and her friends. Extant letters from Helen Yule, Emma Stuyvesant, Mary Johann, and Katherine Pierce indicate their recognition of Benson’s giftedness in composing stories and her interest in attending the theater. Pierce, for example, misses “the funny way [Benson] used to say things.”¹¹ Yule appreciates Benson’s recommendation of a show: “I’ll try to go see *The Arcadians*. I’d love to.”¹² Yule also thanks Benson for sending her a copy of “The Moon,” a newspaper they had written together. “I thought I’d die,” said Yule, having reread the humorous pieces she had “absolutely forgotten all about.” As early as her elementary school days, Benson had begun the habit of writing—a distinct foreshadowing of a career that lay ahead.