

The Life Sketch of Elma Hansen Willes

Read at her funeral by her grand daughter, Cindy Ford Hills
April 5, 2002



Elma Hansen



Elma Hansen Willes

Elma was born the 3rd of October 1910 in the small farming community of Palmyra, Utah. She was the third of eleven children born to Peter Oliver Hansen and Emily Leysnon. This was a hardworking, LDS family.

I remember Grandma telling me that as a small child she learned the value of work from her father. Beginning at the age of five she was expected to work in the fields. She was also the baby sitter for her younger siblings.

As she grew older she learned all the homemaking skills expected of a young woman so that she could be of help to her mother. She learned to sew, knit, crochet, quilt, wash and iron clothes, cook & preserve food, as well as garden. It became her responsibility to mix up a batch of bread before school and make the children's lunches.

There was little time for play but occasionally she and her siblings were allowed to go down to Spanish Fork River to splash and swim. Sometimes there were picnics and dances for entertainment. These were very happy days in her memory.

World War I erupted when Elma was almost 4 years old. About the time she turned seven she remembered that some of the boys in her ward were called to serve in the war. She also had an uncle who was called to serve his country. The family was very worried about him.

Before these boys left there was a farewell party thrown for them which included dancing. She remembered feeling very worried and very sad that night. One of the soldiers, who had recently married, noticed this and lifted her to his shoulders to try and

cheer her up. He carried her around as he danced with his new bride. Someone asked him who she was. Teasingly, he replied, “this is my second wife!”

Elma remembered well when the war ended. She and her siblings were working in the beet field at the time. Suddenly whistles began to blow. Her father came racing into the field in his wagon. He was very animated and was shouting, “the war is over! The war is over!” The children were so excited at the thought of their Uncle returning home that they threw their beet knives into the air and began to jump up and down as they joined in the shouting.

I remember Grandma giggling when she told me this delightful story of when she turned either 9 or 10. She had always wanted to have a surprise birthday party so she instructed all of her friends to go directly to her house after school. But the only one surprised at the party was her mother who quickly baked a cake and made a drink for the occasion.

Sundays were special days at the Hansen home. After the family attended church they would hurry home to prepare dinner. They almost always had company. The table would often be set for as many as thirty people. A huge feast was prepared by the girls and their mother.

Elma dearly loved her Grandmothers. When she was young she enjoyed listening to them tell stories about immigrating to America from Wales and Denmark. She loved to hear their stories about crossing the plains and settling in Utah. All her life she was grateful for her heritage. She worked diligently on family history, collecting histories and pictures, for which I am deeply thankful for today.

After Elma graduated from Spanish Fork High School, in 1929, she found work at the J.C. Penny Store. She worked for \$1.00 a day. It was during this time that her childhood friend, Helen Jarvis, married and moved to McGill, Nevada. Helen invited her to come for a visit during the summer of 1930. After arriving in town Helen arranged a date for Elma with one of her husband’s friends, Bruce Willes. They enjoyed each others company so much that they spent much of her two week visit together. When it came time for Elma to return to Utah, Bruce took her class ring from her finger and placed it on his own. He told the men at work the next day that the ring was a symbol of the “fraternity of matrimony.” He intended to marry his new friend and he did on June 15th, 1931. This marriage was later solemnized in the Manti Temple.

After the wedding they returned to McGill, Nevada, where Bruce was employed at Kennecott as a steamfitter. Soon two sons blessed the Willes home; Eldon Ray, born May 1, 1932 and Sidney Blaine born Aug. 13, 1934.

During the early days of my Grandparents marriage the world was still suffering from The Great Depression. Grandma remembered these years well. There were months that would go by when she had only twenty five cents to buy the weeks groceries. She

did her best to be a good homemaker and make her resources stretch. She would sometimes boil the same bone several times over to try and give flavor to her soup. She felt fortunate that they had a garden and that she had been taught how to make her own bread and butter. Even with these she knew well the pains of hunger.

When Eldon was two years old he developed health problems. Grandma told me that this was a great test to her faith. She pleaded with the Lord for help. She prayed that Eldon would be healed but was willing to accept the Lord's will. She prayed that if he could not be well and healthy that the Lord would take him. After recovering from Tuberculosis, Eldon needed to have his tonsils out. Shortly after the operation he stopped breathing and the nurse said that he was gone. Elma was in shock! She somehow walked out to the car and fell across the back seat. She began to pray, "Dear Lord, you have answered my prayer. Not the way I would have liked, but I thank you. Now, Heavenly Father, give me the strength and faith to accept your will." After regaining her strength she went back to be with Eldon and learned that they had been successful in getting Eldon to breath again. Elma was grateful for his return and throughout her life she never forgot the blessing it was that he was allowed to live.

I don't recall how many times I heard Grandma tell the following story but I recall that each time she did she would end up laughing. You see, it became evident, at an early age, that her second son, Blaine was a natural born climber. They lived near the railroad yard in McGill. Sometimes when Grandmother would be out hanging the wash or working in the garden Blaine would get away from her and race towards the railroad yard. He liked to climb on top of the box cars which terrified his poor mother! Grandma told me that she was scared to death every time she had to go outside for fear he would get away from her and head for the box cars. The only way that she could think of to keep him away from danger was to hold him between her legs or tie him to a pole.

In 1938 the family moved back to Utah. They bought an old farm house in Benjamin. It was in disrepair and the yard was in shambles. Elma worked hard to make this house into a home. As Bruce worked away from home much of the time it was largely Elma's responsibility to care for the farm. She was a hard worker. She cared for the animals, garden and yard. Grandma grew to love this home. It became the place for many happy scenes for her children and grandchildren. On Jan 23rd, 1943 Elma's third and last child was born. A little girl she named, Jeanette.

When Elma went out to gather the eggs she always wore a red polka-dot dress. The chickens recognized this dress and remained calm when she entered the coop. Jeanette recalls that when it was her turn to gather the eggs, that she had to wear this dress or the chickens would fly at her. I've always been curious what Blaine and Eldon had to wear if they had a turn at gathering the eggs!

Elma spent 17 years serving the local girls as their 4-H Leader. She enjoyed teaching these girls how to cook, finish wood, upholster, garden, and other such things. She looked forward to the camping trips she took with these girls. She especially

enjoyed the years Jeanette was in 4-H. She spoke fondly of one year when Jeanette was only three or four and attended camp with her. They slept out under the stars that year in the same sleeping bag. She and Jeanette both remember the little squirrels that ran around them at night. They remembered the beautiful night with its full moon. At these camps Elma enjoyed the nature walks, the making of crafts and the campfire programs which included singing.

Years of service were also given to the church. She enjoyed her years as Primary teacher. She loved to teach children. She also served as the Ward Primary President and Stake Primary Leader. She taught Sunday School, worked in the Library and taught in the M.I.A. Grandmother also served in the Relief Society for many years as the Work Day Leader, better known today as a Homemaking Leader, serving both the Ward and Stake. During all these years she also faithfully served as a Visiting Teacher.

As the years passed, Eldon went into the Navy, and both Eldon and Blaine served missions for the Church. About the time Blaine returned from his mission Bruce was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Grandmother was devastated! She worried about how she was going to care for her family. She didn't know where to turn for employment. Again she pled with the Lord for his help. The Lord heard her cries and touched the heart of Dr. Hughes, a man she spoke kindly of throughout her life. He trained her to be a nurse and she was blessed to care for her husband as well as earn what was needed to care for her needs. She spoke of many wonderful experiences as a nurse which time will not permit me to share.

Bruce passed away Nov. 27, 1957. It was Thanksgiving Day. Elma was a widow at the young age of 47.

After the closure of the Spanish Fork Hospital, Elma went to work for Dr. Foote. Later she worked as a lunch lady at Spanish Fork High School. It was about this time that my older cousins and I came into her life.

To supplement her income she worked on quilts. Grandmother made beautiful pieced quilts and elegant painted quilts. She was a master of color and truly an artist. She won awards for her quilts. As a young girl I remember many quilts set up in her small living room. Her grandchildren will long remember playing under these quilts with the homemade wooden blocks that Grandpa Hansen made.

As Elma grew older her health declined and she was unable to do many of the things she enjoyed. Because of this her older grandchildren had a much different experience with her than her younger grandchildren. As I remember her when she was more lively I would like to share with my younger cousins a few experiences so that they will know what kind of grandmother she would have liked to have been with them if she had felt better.

Grandmother loved the spring! She used to take us around her yard to look for signs of its coming. She would point out the bulbs as they began to shoot up their green leaves. She would take us over to her pussy willow tree and let us feel the fuzzy buds. I remember her pointing out the Robins when they began to fly into her yard.

With spring came the planting of the garden. As we planted the seeds she would talk to us about the smell of the earth. She taught us about the importance of earth worms. She taught us how to space the seeds and how much dirt to cover them with. Then as the seeds began to sprout she would teach us the difference between a weed and a vegetable plant.

The cool of the morning was Grandma's favorite part of summer. She believed in getting out in the dirt early, before the sun came up. She loved to listen to the bees as they flew around the flowers. She liked looking at the clouds. I remember her pointing out that the shapes of the clouds sometimes looked like things. After work was done we would often have a picnic on a blanket spread under the shade of a tree. After lunch we would lie on the blanket and look for shapes in the clouds.

Often summer afternoons were spent with Grandmother teaching the granddaughters how to knit or crochet. She used to teach us how to paint or do other crafts. As she aged her fingers became stiff with arthritis and she was saddened that she was unable to do these things anymore. Occasionally we were invited to have a sleep-over at Grandmothers. We usually built a fire in her outdoor fireplace and roasted hotdogs and marshmallows. As grandchildren we always had grand ideas of sleeping out under the stars, but I can not recall a single night that we didn't eventually go indoors to escape the mosquitoes. It was when we came in doors and spread our sleeping bags out in the living room that I learned that my Grandmother was an avid reader. I remember her sitting on the sofa reading as we tried to fall asleep which was not easy for a city girl like myself because the crickets were so darn noisy!

Autumn was Grandma's favorite time of year. She loved the harvest. I remember sitting with her while we snipped the beans or husked the corn after the morning picking. I enjoyed listening to the adults talk during these times. I learned a lot about my family history as I listened to their conversations.

The granddaughters were allowed to rake the leaves into lines that formed imaginary walls to our leaf houses. Grandma enjoyed watching us play and would often give us crackers or something so we could have a tea party in our imaginary home.

The grandsons will always remember duck hunting near Grandma's home. Do you recall what happened at dinner time if Eldon, Blaine or one of the boys heard the call of a duck? All the male members of the family would drop their forks and race for their guns!

Grandma enjoyed taking drives up one of the nearby canyons to see the colored leaves. Sometimes these drives included a picnic or a stop to order her favorite fast food; fish and chips and a fresh lime drink.

Grandma loved the autumn sunshine! She loved the way the sun hangs low in the southern sky. She loved the mellow colors of autumn and the stillness in the air. She told me this was her favorite season because everything seemed to slow down. Grandmother enjoyed quiet times when she could just sit and read or sit and think.

After the harvest was over Grandma would begin preparing for the holidays. She would gather her family for both Thanksgiving and Christmas. While the food was being prepared by the women, the men would sit in the living room and visit. The cousins would dress warm and go outside to play. The older children will remember playing fox and geese in the snow. When dinner was ready we would gather for prayer to thank the Lord, acknowledging that he was the source of all our blessings.

Christmas Eve at Grandma Willes house was the most exciting night of the year. Grandma always made homemade candies and gifts. Some of the gifts that the grandchildren will most remember were her homemade T-shirts, rag dolls, stuffed animals, crocheted doilies, and rice balls. We kept our eyes peeled for Rudolph's nose which strangely always seemed to appear on top of West Mountain (even on other nights of the year).

Yes, Elma Willes was loved by many. Each of us here today treasure in our hearts special memories shared only between Elma and ourselves. These are deeply personal and will always be cherished. But the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ promises us that those experiences that we've had with her in the past are not the end but only the beginning of our experiences together. Life and relationships will continue throughout eternity!

Six or seven years ago Grandma Willes gave me a manila envelope. On the outside were written these words, "To be opened when I die." After Grandmother passed away last Monday I opened the envelope. Inside I found; her funeral requests, the handkerchief she is now holding in her hand, and three pages of notes that she had written, on "How to draw closer to the Lord through reading the Doctrine and Covenants." I puzzled over those 3 pages all week. Why had she included them? Yesterday afternoon I believe I came to an understanding.

Yesterday my mother, Jeanette, suggested that I read section 138 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Because of my love for Family History, this selection of scripture has always been among one of my most favorite, it is very familiar to me. It speaks of Christ's visit to the spirit world and the redemption of the dead. With the events of this week so near to my heart I reread this section. It was as if the eyes of my understanding were opened at a new level. The spirit taught me truths too sacred to share here today but I promise you that if you will humbly go home and ask the Lord to reveal to you his

truths in Section 138 that he will teach you something new because no matter what level of understanding you have today, he can always teach you something new tomorrow. Yesterday I grew closer to the Lord through reading the Doctrine and Covenants, just as my Grandmother knew that I would. I believe that she wanted this message shared with her descendants.

I stand today to bear testimony to you, with my Mother and my Grandmother, that you can grow closer to the Lord by reading his words. I am so grateful for my close relationship to him and my faith in him. I know that he is the Son of God and that he is the only source of Redemption and the Resurrection. I do love him! And I say these things in his holy name, even Jesus the Christ, Amen.