

## *Maria Jorgensen Was a Resourceful Girl*

Jens Hansen's half sister from his father's second wife

Life was hard on Utah's frontier. Without the help of children it is difficult to imagine how farms, ranches, and towns could have succeeded. The Hans and Dorthea Anderson Jorgensen family left Logan and settled some three miles west of Smithfield in 1869. Years later a small town would develop around them and be called Amalga after the Amalgamated Sugar Company factory. The land the Jorgensens, chose was on a sagebrush plain not far from the Bear River. The river banks were high, though, so the family built a rough lumber dwelling near a spring and used that water, carried by the bucketful, for home and garden. Long, snowy winters, frosty springs, and hot, dry summers made survival challenging. Bears, wolves, and coyotes roamed the area, and livestock had to be "watched continually." The Jorgensens had no neighbors nearby and had to be self-sustaining. Often they dug roots along the river banks for food.

There was a lot of work to do, and the eight Jorgensen children, five boys and three girls, helped with much of it. The family raised sheep. The wool was sheared, "washed, carded, and spun into yarn, then hand-knitted into socks, caps, sweaters, and mittens; also woven into cloth, and the clothing sewed by hand." Keeping the family in shoes was more difficult: "In summer the children, and sometimes the parents, went barefoot or wore moccasins made by the Indians."

With no bridge across the Bear River at that time, "the Jorgensen children soon learned to handle a rowboat skillfully on the swollen stream. One day William Pitcher of Smithfield came seeking assistance in crossing the river. Maria, then about nine years old, said, 'I can take you over.' The man seemed very frightened but in a great hurry to get across. Maria, instructed him to remove his saddle and place it in the front of the boat for balance, then tie his horse to the rear of the craft and sit in the back to keep the animal from striking the boat with his feet while swimming. The little girl rowed northward around the bend for some distance, keeping near the bank and away from the main current of the stream, until she reached a sandbar, from which the man was able to make the landing safely. Back again at home, Maria rushed into the house exclaiming: 'O Mama, see what I have! I took a man over the river and he gave me fifteen cents. I know it is fifteen cents; I can see the five on it.' The mother said, 'It is fifty cents!'"

Maria used the money to buy a bright calico print with a leaf design to make her first "store" dress. Her clothing was usually made of a homespun fabric. She remembered wearing the new dress when the Sunday School, children lined up along the road to Logan to welcome Brigham Young to a church conference in Logan. They threw flowers in front of the venerable leader's carriage, and he nodded and smiled at them.

Once when her father and brothers were away from home, Maria's mother discovered a break in the fence and decided to sleep on the roof of a small shed in the corral to protect the sheep. In the night the little flock became restless and woke her up. In the moonlight "she saw a large bear standing upright, his front feet resting upon the fence rails, apparently about to jump

into the corral.” Maria, who had a gun, wanted to shoot the intruder, but her mother was afraid the girl might only wound the animal and enrage it. So they waved their arms and shouted instead, and the bear walked away. When it returned they again frightened it off.

The remarkable thing about Maria's life in Amalga, may be that it was in many ways typical of childhood in a frontier Utah settlement. Children worked hard and faced many challenges. They also found joy in small things like 50 cents worth of bright calico or playing hide and seek among the willows and brush along the river.

When she grew up, Maria married William Toombs, Sr., raised a family, and cared for two foster children. She also “officiated at the birth” of over 200 children. She outlived all of her siblings. In 1951 when the town of Amalga, decided to compile its history, Maria was 91 years old. In a photograph of the town's elderly residents she looked lovely in a “store-bought” dress and hardy enough to still row a boat across the river.

Source: Amalga in Retrospect: The Story of Amalga, Utah (Amalga, 1951).

The History Blazer July 1966

THE HISTORY BLAZER is produced by the Utah State Historical Society and funded in part by a grant from the Utah Statehood Centennial Commission. For more information about the Historical Society telephone 533-3500.

960715 (MBM)