

ELIZABETH MILLS WHITAKER

From handwritten notes
compiled by her grand-daughter Bessie Whitaker and
written by Rhea Smurthwaite.

Elizabeth Mills (Whitaker) was born March 7, 1839 at Douglas on the Isle of Man (which belonged to Ireland at the time). Both her parents were Manx. Her mother's maiden name was Elizabeth Hall. Her father, John Mills was a tinsmith. (An aunt of French descent nursed soldiers in the Battle of Waterloo.)

When she was two years old she had a severe case of scarlet fever, which caused her to be totally blind. Her parents, believing that the wearing of ear rings would restore her eye-sight, purchased some for her. One day, when her nurse girl left her for a few moments outside of a shop, a beggar woman stole the earrings and all the child's clothing.

Soon after this incident the Mormon elders (John Taylor and George Q. Cannon) came and administered to Elizabeth. Good fortune smiled upon her for she was completely healed. Her parents were so delighted that they immediately embraced the gospel and sailed to America on the ship Rochester (in 1841). The ship was tossed on the storm swept sea for 12 weeks. They traveled by way of the Mississippi River from New Orleans and reached Nauvoo, Illinois where they were met by John Taylor. He baptized them and took them into his home.

At Nauvoo, Mr. Mills started a tinshop. He was often visited here by President Joseph Smith and John Taylor. Elizabeth often carried her father's lunch to him. One day when she was there the Prophet Joseph Smith came for a visit and they became acquainted. Thereafter, he often took Elizabeth on his knee and talked to her. When the Nauvoo Temple was being built, Elizabeth's father was requested to make the horns and ears of the oxen holding the baptismal font.

When the Prophet Joseph Smith was killed and all the saints had to move, Elizabeth's family camped at the side of the river. Later they moved to Fort Madsen where they witnessed the burning of the Nauvoo temple (Nov 19, 1848). Their stay here was short for they soon went to Drakeville. Here Elizabeth's father engaged in making telegraph wires in his tin shop. Their next change brought the family to Council Bluffs where they settled. Two years later they sold their home and bought a wagon and provisions to start on the journey westward.

In the spring of 1852 Elizabeth started with her father in one company while her mother and brothers followed in another four miles farther back. During the trip her brothers Thomas and John died, one of mountain fever and the other having been bitten by a snake. The St. Louis Freight Company, Ft. Larrimer Co. and Independent Co. joined them later and they were organized into companies of fifty with a captain over each. There were eighteen in each wagon, but many were compelled to walk. Elizabeth's father had the care of two cows, two oxen, and a wagon of provisions. The caravan covered about 20 miles a day.

Each day a regular routine was followed. At six in the morning a bugle was sounded and everybody gathered for prayer. After the morning's duties were completed they were on their way again by eight o'clock. At the end of the day the bugle was again sounded. After supper everybody joined in song and dance and enjoyed themselves, thus forgetting many of the unpleasant parts of the trip. The

young folks danced the Virginia Reel and the Quadrille to gay music and after the "look-outs" reported that all was well, they retired. Some slept in beds, some in tents and some on boxes of provisions. The men took turns guarding at night to prevent a surprise attack from the Indians. They had good food such as pork, sausage, potatoes, cabbage, canned lard, honey, etc. They made their butter by placing their milk in a can which churned itself by the jolting of the wagon on the rough roads. Whiskey and gin were also included but used only for the purpose of sickness. On Saturdays they stopped and spent the day washing and mending and on Sundays they held their meetings.

They traveled along the north side of the Platte River sometimes being compelled to travel at night on account of the attacking Indians. They came upon the decapitated body of a gold seeker which frightened them so they traveled all one night. Captain Wilkins said that he knew of a place to camp where the smoke from the campfire would be carried away by the wind and thus not be noticed by the Indians. When they reached the spot they pitched camp and the men drove the cattle into the foothills while the women prepared breakfast. While the women were left alone thus, a band of Sioux Indians, decked in bright colored blankets and feathers, as a sign they were on the war path, came on horseback. Elizabeth was attending some of the little children in the back of one wagon. (She was 13 years old.)

She became terribly angered and frightened as she saw the chief teasing the children in her wagon. She struck him in the face with an ox bow. Her spirit pleased him so much that he called her a brave squaw and put his arm about her waist and lifted her on his horse and rode away. The other Indians who had been taking the food, knocking the kettles over, teasing the women, etc. followed their chief. The Indians demanded thirty head of horses, flour, coffee, tea, crackers, tobacco, blankets and sugar as ransom before they would release Elizabeth. When she was returned to camp the company immediately resumed their journey westward. The Indians followed them for three days until the company was forced to halt to repair their wagons. After a count they discovered sixteen horses missing. The Indians again became annoying so a cannon was fired, which failed to frighten them. Captain Wilkins had previously crossed the plains three times and knowing some of the Sioux language, told them he would fire the cannon at them if they continued their annoyances. Then the Indians finally disbanded and left them alone.

(Brother Charles Duncan, told of being in Capt. Wilkins' company and of the Indians taking a little white girl. When Grandmother told of being that girl he said "providence must have been over you for the Indians caused the animals to stampede and you fell out in a small ravine, the wagons going over you. We all thought you were dead, but the way you fell lengthwise of the wagon wheels, they did not touch you".)

The company now continued westward to the mountains. They traversed streams without bridges; and when they were too deep, bridges were built.

They encountered wild bears, wolves and coyotes. They also came upon herds of buffalo, some of which were killed for food.

In the fall of 1852 they reached the Salt Lake Valley. President Brigham Young was just building the Whitehouse (now known as the Beehive House). Elizabeth's father and mother settled in the seventh ward in a log cabin they rented from Jarvis Oakden.

Elizabeth was now a grown up young woman and young men began to call on

her to take her walking and riding as most of the men were looking for wives. Charles Oakden was one of these young men. A brother of Charles, William came on the scene and began to keep company with Elizabeth. He seemed to be more congenial and suited her better than Charles and she fell in love with him. They kept company about two years and were married October 10, 1854 by Bishop Hognlon. She wore a lavender silk dress with a little white vine running through the pattern. It was made with short sleeves, an infant waist, and a full skirt. Her mother's folks gave a wedding supper. They lived in a small adobe house the first winter until March.

(William Oakden was a brother of Jarvis.) The couple journeyed southward where Mr. Oakden worked on an Indian farm and where they remained until June 17, 1855. Upon returning to the city Mr. Oakden crossed the Jordan River to West Mountain in search of food but was drowned when he attempted to return. His body was later recovered. (As this young couple had loved each other dearly, Elizabeth could not understand why her husband was snatched from her in this manner. She stayed alone nights refusing to have anyone stay with her, thinking that he would come back and explain these things to her. In her sorrow she found out that the dead do not return.) The young widow, just sixteen years old, gave birth to a son, William the following September. (Sept 24, 1855)

Two years later, Johnson's army came and the people were forced to move south. Elizabeth walked all the way. She lived with an uncle, Wm G Mills, her father's brother. He was very kind to her and her little boy. Thomas Whitaker visited the home regularly and paid much attention to Elizabeth and finally proposed to her. She was married to him in 1858 (Sept 4 or 16) by President Brigham Young in his office. Later they were married in the in the endowment house. She wore a dress of red and black pin stripe silk with a black muslin waist and overskirt. A hot wedding supper was waiting at the uncle's when they returned from the ceremony. It had been prepared by Aunt Louisa and Emily. Her uncle gave her \$60 to buy a trousseau. She already had a number of things given her, ie, quilts, blankets, and other bedding, table cloths and a silk dress which had been brought from the Isle of Man. She also had some dishes of willow ware, one large platter Emily now has. Mr. Whitaker made his own tools to make their furniture. He also made a trundle bed which could be pushed under the larger bed during the day as space was limited. He carved a potato masher, ladles, etc. Ducks furnished pillows, a cow their milk. They had chickens and a pig. They made their home in Centerville (in a log cabin). The first winter there, an old woman, named Brown, taught her to spin and weave and how to prepare dye from weeds, berries and wild currants. Black walnut hulls while yet green were used for brown, onion peelings for buff, saffron for orange and yellow, polk berries for red. For green they mixed coporis and indigo. She cut wool from the sheep's back, washed, carded, and spun it into yarn. Then wove it into cloth which she used to make her husband's and childrens' clothing. (There is a photograph of her husband showing the clothes he had on, she gathered the wool, dyed, spun and wove, and made his suit. Also the plaid tie of silk for which she raised the cocoons, unwound, dyed, etc.)

Mr. Whitaker sent to London for silk worm eggs. From these hatched the worms which were fed on lettuce and mulberry leaves. The silk in the cocoons was unwound and several strands had to be twisted together to form a thread. In this way she made some of the first silk in Utah. She made a crocheted necktie of silk and gave it to President Brigham Young. The first silk cloth was not very smooth because the threads were not uniform in size due to the different varieties of silk worms. On their farm they also raised flax which she spun and wove into linen towels. They raised cotton, seeded and carded it and made it into batts. They raised sugar beets to make molasses. They made soap from their own lye from wood ashes mixed with water, which was allowed to stand until clear, and the liquid drained off. They used all kinds of fat drippings, boiled over a bonfire with a large iron kettle. They added

rock salt to harden it. They would cool it, cut it, and leave it in the shade to cure. Candles were made from mutton or beef tallow, melted and strained, poured into candle molds through which wicks had been strung. When cool, candles came out. They grated potatoes for starch. They made vinegar. She used her own candles when sewing or working after dark. She later became proficient in the making of point lace handkerchiefs, Batenburg curtains and bedspreads.

She was the mother of six sons and six daughters. Eight of her children reached maturity and had a total of fifty one grand-children. These in turn have made her posterity reach 175. On April 27, 1886 her husband suddenly died of what was later recognized as appendicitis. After the death of her husband she learned nursing and supported her large family. She was 51 years a widow. She has nursed many sick people and lightened the hearts of many in their hours of bereavement. She was well read and had a wonderful memory. At the age of seventy seven she rode horseback; at eighty nine, took a dip in the surf at California. She enjoyed good health and abundant vitality, (died on June 6, 1937, 98 years.) She was greatly interested in the young people and has witnessed many of the weddings of her grand children. She kept busy knitting beaded bags, making braided rag rugs.

She was as modern as any young girl of today. She was loved by all who knew her. She always had invitations to stay in the homes of friends and relatives and never carried a tale nor broke their confidence. In the winter following she caught influenza, which weakened her a great deal and her health gradually failed until she died at the age of 98. She was independent mentally as well as financially to the last. On her death bed they called in a doctor whose mother she had helped in childbirth. After his visit she asked him what his bill was for handling her death certificate, etc. and since he was obliged to ask some fee, he said - "One Dollar". She asked for her purse and paid him an ounce. I remember being present once in her last years when she was asked to say the family prayers. As there were so many there, she was a little timid and asked to be excused. When she was urged a little bit she answered "I am thankful every day of my life".