

A
Sketch of the Life
of
My Mother

JOHANNA REESE PALMER

By

Katherine Palmer Macfarlane

History of JOHANNA REESE PALMER

Born in Pontypool, Wales, August 6, 1842.

Died in Cedar City, Utah, April 29, 1925.

*arrived in New York harbor 18 July 1863 on ship
Amagon - Captain of ship William B. Small.*

Arrived in Utah, October, 1863 in the _____ Company.

Married to Richard Palmer, October 10, 1863, in the
Old Endowment House, Salt Lake City, Utah.

History written by Katherine Palmer Macfarlane,
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Submitted by Zoella Palmer Benson, December, 1960
Iron Mission Camp
Cedar City
Iron County, Utah.

JOHANNA REESE PALMER

An old Welsh village holding within its boundaries cobble streets and bright windowed stone houses; a mouldering churchyard beside an ancient church; the village bake oven, where the housewives gathered to bake the weekly supply of brown bread and currant loaf; fishmongers crying their wares and old clothes men making their singsong rounds from door to door. This was the village of Pontypool in South Wales where Mother was born in 1842, and where most of her girlhood, until she was twenty-two, was spent.

From listening to her reminiscences the boys and girls of the Palmer family have built up in their minds a series of pictures of Mother's childhood, that not only tells something of herself but of the setting in which she grew up. One of them is of a little girl dancing down a green lane behind the hurdy-gurdy man as he passed through the village on his way to the county fair; another shows her setting out to visit Uncle David's farm "over in the next valley", where she was lovingly served with whin-berries and cream, supplemented with slices of thin bread and butter and a serving of ale which she drank from a small copper noggin cup that afterwards,

a parting gift from Uncle David, came with her over oceans and continents to find abode in a far wilderness. There were pleasant occasions when she ran out to greet a maiden suitor, who riding horseback from the ancestral farm, alighted at the door with saddle bags filled with new sage cheese and jugs of clotted cream. And once when she was six years old, there was a visit to this same ancestral farm, where she gazed eagerly around the great low-ceiled kitchen with its wares of pewter and brass and wood; examined with childish curiosity her grandfather's broadcloth riding coat, with its tiers of voluminous capes; skipped through the meadows gathering cowslips and watching half fearfully the peaceful fat cattle; and listening wide-eyed when a neighbor came to the door in the early morning to beg a cup of mare's milk with which to treat his children for whooping cough.

For awhile the family lived on a farm of their own, in a pretty countryside where the father and mother were picturesquely known as Harry Greenmeadow and Betsey Greentree. But hard times came and the older children, all girls, had to go out to work. So we see Johanna next as a little maid at service living

in a town some distance from her own. Each week the train brought her a bundle of fresh laundered and mended clothes which she opened and examined with critical eyes. If the workmanship suited she let it stay. But it seldom did, and so a weekly task was to unpick and re-set with fine stitches and invisible darns. And once when a favorite brown dress came with a rent darned in a shade of thread which didn't quite suit her notion, she searched the shops for one more exact and, not finding it, drew out strands of her own hair and wove the hole in daintily with that. Her mistress was a kind old lady and the little maid was eager to work, and if only she might have been her family oftener all would have been well. But home was much in her mind, and one evening, hearing the train whistle, she cried out, "That train goes right past my mother's door." Then she felt a touch on her arm and a kind voice said, "Would you like to see your mother? Then get your bonnet on quickly and run to the station, and when you have had a good visit with her come back to me." And so she did, and found a pleasant home with the kind old lady for a long time.

When she was about nineteen, my mother met my father, who was in Wales at that time on a mission. The friendship between the two soon ripened into love, so that when the mission was up, two people instead of one were ready to join the company of emigrants headed for America.

Seven weeks on the ocean in a crowded sailing vessel was bad enough, but it was infinitely worse to arrive in a new country during a season of civil war, to crawl on uncertain trains through a blackened and war-gutted country, where the hungry company could procure no food or feel certainty as to what awaited farther on. But they arrived at last at the Missouri River and got together the necessary wagon train. And then the Plains!

To an old country girl grown up in the domestic landscapes of Great Britain, where quiet green hills enfold a world as intimate and lovely as a garden, what an experience to stand out under the vast dome of the prairie sky, to gaze out over the limitless expanse of earth in the midst of which the wagon train crawled motelike toward its destination, and then to see for the first time the great buffalo herds, stretching away to the horizon in endless black clouds; to

sit about the campfires and while wolves howled in the darkness beyond and the tramp of the herds reminded of dangers unknown to the Old World, to listen to stories of outlawry and tales of Indian massacre until the very crickets in the wayside grass sounded like harbingers of destruction.

Yet this immigrant company in which my mother traveled possessed that which sustained them, and gave them greater assurance than if an army had traveled alongside, and as for the girl herself, she must have had in her the natural fibre of the pioneer, for I have heard her many a time say that she fairly danced her way across the great Plains. And after she arrived at the far frontier settlement that was to be her future home, though many a time she looked toward the East with homesick eyes and wept for a cup of English tea or a glimpse of cowslip meadow or some such dear lost comfort, yet she took to pioneering like a duck to water, and in no time could cure meat and dye cloth, make soap with cottonwood ashes, turn a length of homespun into a man's suit, and carry on with skill and thoroughness the manifold activities of a pioneer household.

It was in '63 that the bride arrived in Cedar City, and the first housekeeping was done in the old

Wood log house that now stands in the town park, as an interesting relic of pioneer life in this region. How long the couple remained here I do not know, but work was going forward on their own four walls, and it was a proud day when the young wife walked down the steps of her new dug-out and became the mistress of her own home.

What stranger passing through that pioneer village and knowing nothing of the surprises it held, could guess that beneath the dirt roof of that dug-out was to be found coziness and cheer and that kind of exquisite cleanliness that is like a fragrance! Inside were plastered and white-washed walls and clean scrubbed floor; in two corners of one end, homemade four-poster bedsteads covered with patch-work quilts in the clear colors and charming, quaint designs of that old day; corner cupboards in the other ends with mantel between, holding pieces of pewter and copper and brass polished to jewel-like brightness; the big fireplace with its fresh whitened hearth and andirons of Father's own making; and beyond the latched door a porch with a pantry on one side and on the other an old-fashioned footstove that cooked many a pot of broth and Welsh griddle cake

for the guests who came in ever-increasing numbers to sit around my mother's hospitable board.

In the first year or so before the good clothes from overseas began to wear out, it must have been a pleasant sight to see the newly-wedded pair climb the steps of their dug-out and set off on the Sabbath day for church, he in a broadcloth suit with perhaps a blue army cape over his shoulders, and she in a wine-colored merino dress with a white linen collar about the neck and the daintiest of white horsehair bonnets tied over her shining brown braids. A trim couple walking to the adobe meeting house to join in worship with other couples many of whom like themselves might for awhile have moved through the pages of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, only to move out of them into an alien landscape that neither of those authors ever dreamed of as a setting for their characters.

British in speech though many of them were, and dressed in silk and broadcloth, those men and women were in reality stripped fighters, come to do battle in an austere field, where there could be no pretense or indolent evasion of the desert's stern decree, "Fight or perish!" Father had already, during his first years in Utah, passed through a gruelling test

of fitness for pioneer life, and Mother, as I have said, had in her the natural stuff of the pioneer. So they faced their program without fear, and while Father worked in the field and at the forge, Mother toiled from daylight until dark and, finding her hours not long enough, stole from the night to wash and iron and mend and sew that her family might go decently clad on the morrow.

With a climb in the family fortunes, the family itself climbed out of the dug-out, and so closed a period that I think must have been a sort of Golden Age in Father's and Mother's married life, for I have often heard Mother declare that those were their happiest years, and why not, for when has Romance passed by the dweller in dug-out and cot, to seek shelter under the roof only of the rich?

But with the closing of the chapter in Mother's life of which I have just been writing, hard work did not end for her, for pioneer conditions in Southern Utah held over long after the days of log cabin and dug-out, and that house-mother who would bring to the family life standards of comfort and decency did so at the price of unremitting labor and unswerving self-sacrifice. Never can I

remember seeing Mother sitting with hands folded idly in her lap, and even to the day of her death she still "carried on" nor claimed for herself the leisure which should be the reward of worthy old age. Yet it would be unfair for me to hold up Mother's life as a symbol only of toil. There was time for friends, for religion, for much of kindness both in the family circle and out of it. And though the strenuous years took their toll of body and spirit, they did not coarsen her or make her forgetful of the fastidious tastes and habits of her girlhood. So that when I think of Mother now, I recall her most clearly brushing her hair or fastening the bit of snowy muslin she wore about the collar of even the cheapest work dress; and when I think of her gnarled hands, it is to see them not holding the scrubbing brush or knitting needles, but cutting thin bread and butter to serve to the friend who chanced to call and brought pleasure to her hospitable soul by remaining for afternoon tea.