

# **The Life and Times of Elizabeth Coleman**

## **Or, Elizabeth Coleman Walker Birch Yates Gillions**

### **Surviving and Enjoying Life**

*by Julie Cannon Markham, 4<sup>th</sup> great-granddaughter*

On a dark night in Oxford in 1828, Williams Coleman finished a performance. His career as a prominent musician supported his wife and their nine children. He never returned home and his family believed he had been robbed and murdered. Six years later his daughter Elizabeth married John William Walker. John died after they had been married ten years, leaving Elizabeth with three young children, Walter, Jane and Elizabeth. Eight years later, in 1852, Elizabeth and her children listened to LDS missionaries preach the restored gospel. At the cost of being forsaken by Elizabeth's extended family who were heirs of the Coleman spice company, (a life-altering decision for a widow,) Elizabeth, her daughter Elizabeth and son Walter were baptized. Fifteen year old Jane died about this time. Elizabeth and her surviving daughter desired to emigrate to America, but they did not have the funds to accomplish this. Walter was apprenticed to a shoemaker, and he could not leave England.

At this time, a second family becomes involved with Elizabeth's story. William Birch, a widower, was also a recent convert to the church. His two sons, Richard and James, and their families, had joined the church several years earlier. Richard emigrated in 1849 with his wife and young son, who died of cholera when they reached the Port of New Orleans. Another son died when they reached St. Louis. Richard, his wife and a baby daughter born in St. Louis crossed the plains in 1853 and waited in Salt Lake City for the other family members to arrive. Once Richard reached the Salt Lake Valley, his brother James made plans to emigrate with his wife Mary Ann, their three children, and his father, William.

William Birch approached Elizabeth during this time and offered to assist with her emigration costs. He needed clothing made, and he suggested they would get along better as a family. Elizabeth accepted his proposal of marriage. As a result, William Birch, age 58, his new wife Elizabeth, age 40, and her daughter Elizabeth Walker, age 16, traveled with James Birch, his wife Mary Ann and their three young children.

These two families departed Liverpool in March of 1856 on the ship *Enoch Train* with over five hundred fellow Mormons. The members on the ship were divided into five wards which were led by a ship presidency. One member of the presidency was Edmund Ellsworth, a son-in-law to Brigham Young who had crossed the plains with him in the first pioneer company of 1847. During his mission in Herefordshire, Elder Ellsworth had a recurrent dream of being asked by his father-in-law to lead a handcart company across the plains. The dream was so unique that he mentioned it to his mission president, who advised him to write the dream in his journal. A few weeks later, Elder Ellsworth received a letter from Brigham Young requesting him to consider bringing a company of British saints across the plains in handcarts. The dream recorded in his journal and the request in the letter were very similar. Crossing the plains by handcart had never been undertaken, but this concept had the potential of allowing thousands of saints to cross the plains more quickly and with less expense than by wagon train. A large number of returning missionaries who had served in Gibraltar, Denmark, India and England were requested to travel

on the *Enoch Train* and assist these converts on their heroic trek to Utah.

One passenger described these elders as “ministering angels, comforting and blessing the Saints” during the journey. *Enoch Train* was the first emigrant ship of the season. Many of the church members, including the Birch families, were traveling with the assistance of Perpetual Emigration Funds. Reportedly this was a peaceful journey with several babies born and only a few deaths. The sighting of whales was common and excited the passengers. Many passengers praised the cooks.

The voyage lasted thirty-nine days, the trip being extended because the captain sailed south to avoid ice in the Atlantic. The two Elizabeths, mother and daughter, had good singing voices and sang hymns with their fellow travelers as the ship sailed. (Grandchildren remembered their singing and told their descendants that these two women had lovely voices.) They reached the port of Boston on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1856 and the entire group was shuttled to the railway station in nine large omnibuses, two story wagons pulled by horses. They traveled one hundred miles by rail and the rest of the trip to New York City via steamer, where they arrived two days later. The PEF agents managing the various emigrant ships and wagon trains had learned that if passengers docked first in Boston, they were not charged one dollar per head as they were in other locations. From New York the passengers were “forwarded” on to Iowa City in boxcars, sitting on their luggage during the ten day journey. The cost was \$11.50 per adult, \$5.75 per child. Those under four years of age were not charged. There were baggage limits of not more than 100 pounds per adult.

Once in Iowa City, the men began building the handcarts from hickory or oak. The handcarts were very large, being six or seven feet long, but the width was the same as a wagon so as to be able to follow the paths the wagon trains had already made. Many of the carts had iron axles and these could hold four to five hundred pounds of supplies. A few wagons were assigned to the handcart companies, but because people could move faster than oxen, the handcarts were always far ahead of the wagons, something Brigham Young had anticipated. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of June, 1856, Elder Ellsworth’s company was the first handcart train to leave Florence, Nebraska. Two other companies departed within a few days. The trek ahead of them was fourteen hundred miles. Each handcart company carried twenty tents with twenty saints per tent. They were allowed seventeen pounds of luggage each on their journey. Other luggage was sold at auction or arrangements were made for the extra to be shipped with wagon trains. The company stopped every Sunday to rest and partake of the Sacrament. Due to the haste in construction, some of the handcarts were not made as sturdily as Brigham Young had requested, and repairing them en route was a frequent hindrance.

A grandson of Elizabeth’s, Lafayette Grover, remembered eating with the silver flatware that his grandmother had brought across the plains. He said it had been used for so long that it had worn thin on the edges. This was probably her greatest possession and she took great care in protecting it as she traveled on the ship and then pushed the handcart across the plains carrying her meager supplies.

Summer storms while crossing the plains were majestic and terrifying, with one pioneer being killed by lightning during what sounded like a description of a micro-burst. Sightings of buffalo

herds were common, but killing them while on foot was difficult. Occasionally the pioneers would shoot a buffalo but it would continue running with the herd, dying long after it was of use to anyone. Young Elizabeth later told her children that she feared being trampled to death by the massive, running herds and believed they were miraculously turned away by God. She also told of messages left by preceding companies on the skulls of buffalo heads telling them where the road was better or where the grass was taller. They forded the streams and rivers quickly, often not stopping to take off their shoes and stockings, if they had any. One sister lamented that they crossed the streams as cattle would cross, with their clothing drying as they continued walking. Young Elizabeth later told her grandchildren that she crossed the meandering Platte River sixteen times. She also told an account of seeing some beautiful flowers in the midst of the desert grasses. "Just after wading the river one time, she saw a large head of the cacti flowers in their blooms of red and yellow. With the thought of gathering flowers, she walked right up to the cactus, with her shoes in her hands, not knowing of the thorns she would encounter!"

While today we might imagine that the pioneers crossed the plains in isolation, in fact journal entries recorded that supplies, including iron parts for repairing handcars, were obtained from nearby communities. A brass band traveled with the Ellsworth Company, to the enjoyment of everyone, and many visitors came to their evening camps. Residents of nearby communities would appeal to the Saints to cease their journey and settle with them, with LDS leaders admonishing the faithful that their interest was only in "our prettiest girls and our strongest young men." At one point apostates from Kansas and Missouri approached the traveling companies and told them, "God never required such hard things as drawing a hand cart." The response from one of the captains was, "He had not read his Book right. He required his Only Begotten to do a harder thing than draw a hand cart." Many felt the journey across the plains was good training and discipline to show them that Father in Heaven was "a God of great power."

In another instance, the companies encountered a group of seventeen missionaries heading east accompanied by Elder Parley P. Pratt of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. As the new elders saw the approaching handcart companies, they formed in line and gave three loud Hosanna shouts and waved their hats. The saints of the handcart train greeted them in like manner, with the hills and valleys resounding with shouts of gladness. The scene was a powerful one to the elder who recorded it. Elder Pratt wrote, "Their faces were much sunburnt and their lips parched; but cheerfulness reigned in every heart, and joy seemed to beam on every countenance. The company gathered around us and I tried to address them, observing that this was a new era in America as well as Church history, but my utterance was choked, and I had to make the third trial before I could overcome my emotions." (Elder Pratt was headed for a mission in the eastern states. He was martyred the following year in Arkansas.)

The trip was extremely arduous, with food shortages being the greatest difficulty. Whether to feed the people or the oxen cobs of corn was an excruciating decision when grazing was limited. The dead were buried without coffins as there was no wood, their boots and shoes being kept by the survivors. Journal entries recorded re-baptisms along the route, some for the remission of sins while some were baptized for their health. Elders also administered to the sick. Periodically a handcart would irreparably break down, but burning the wood from the handcart for cooking fuel instead of burning buffalo chips was welcomed, although the baggage from the disabled handcart

had to be redistributed. Another problem with the handcart companies was there was no room in the carts for the ill. One mother carried a sick child on her back for days while pushing her handcart. Another woman, being told there was no room in the handcart for her colander, tied it to her apron tie and there it hung for the entire journey.

Two inches of snow fell in early September as the companies passed through Wyoming. Fifteen days later, after more than two months on the trail, James Birch, only twenty-eight years old, died in a weakened state after an illness and was buried near Green River on a bluff. His widow Mary Ann, their three children, her father-in-law William Birch, his wife Elizabeth Coleman and her daughter Elizabeth Walker reached the Salt Lake Valley one week later. Reportedly, Elizabeth and her good friend, Margaret Bourne, pulled the first handcart into the city. Margaret had traveled with her husband and six children. They were met by a brass band, and a “great company from the city who had come to meet us and bid us welcome. Prest. Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball and other of the heads of Israel among them to thus highly and distinguishingly honor us.” Richard Birch and his wife Ellen, who had settled in the Sugar House area of Salt Lake City, took the exhausted travelers into their home. The trip from England had taken six months.

Brigham Young recorded that he had always had faith that men, women and children could cross the plains on foot, and after the Ellsworth Company arrived, he said that his faith was followed with knowledge. “My reasoning has been like this: Take small children, and if their steps were counted and measured, those that they take in the course of one day, you would find that they had taken enough to have traveled from 12 to 20 miles. Count the steps that a woman takes when she is doing her work, steps enough to have traveled from 15 to 20 miles a day. So with men. I wanted to tell one secret. While those brethren and sisters were faltering, and did not know whether to stop or go along, there was faith in this valley that bound them to that journey. That is the secret of the movement.”



Elizabeth Coleman Walker Yates Gillions  
1816 - 1903

Elder Wilford Woodruff of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles wrote that the captains of the companies “earned honor and glory to themselves in the leading of those companies. Brother Ellsworth went through the city covered with dust at the head of his brave company, drawing a handcart under the close scrutiny of the thousands who crowded the streets with weeping eyes to gaze upon the scene. As he passed by his own lovely home and saw his family standing in his door, he made no halt, only gave a passing salute, continuing with his company until he reached the public square and saw them all comfortably encamped and fed. President Young has declared from the beginning that it was a practical, safe operation; his sayings in this, as in all other cases, have proven true. Never has a company been so highly honored since Israel has arrived in these mountains, as the pioneer handcart companies.”

William Birch traded his handcart for a dugout for himself, his wife and step-daughter. He had suffered from frostbite caused by the late snows. Blood poisoning set in, and ten weeks after their arrival in the Great Salt Lake Valley, William Birch died, leaving Elizabeth a widow for the second time. The next week, his recently widowed daughter-in-law Mary Ann gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Two years later she married her brother-in-law Richard in the Endowment House, at which time he was also sealed to his first wife Ellen. They settled in Summit County where he raised her four children and they had seven children. Nine years after crossing the plains, Richard married Mary Ann's fifteen year old daughter in the Endowment House. They had six children.

The two Elizabeths, mother and daughter, were on their own. Seventeen year old Elizabeth was a beautiful girl with a clear complexion and a profusion of black, wavy hair. In January of 1857, four months after arriving in the valley, Elizabeth became a plural wife of Thomas Grover in the Salt Lake Endowment House. Thomas had been a body guard to Joseph Smith, had served on the high council in Nauvoo, and had accompanied Brigham Young and Edmund Ellsworth in the first pioneering company of 1847. Perhaps Captain Ellsworth introduced Elizabeth to Thomas. Elizabeth's friend Emma Walker, (no relation,) who had sailed on the *Enoch Train* and crossed in the Ellsworth company, had married Thomas Grover five months earlier. Thomas Grover took both wives into his Farmington home and eventually had nine children with each of them.

Elizabeth the mother moved with her daughter to Farmington, where she was courted by a widower. In the spring of 1857 she married John Yates in the Endowment House. John was a British convert who had crossed the plains in 1852, his wife dying en route. They moved to his home, also in Farmington, where he still had two young sons. The next year John died. Elizabeth remained in his home for two more years caring for the boys.

In 1858 Elizabeth married John Gillions, a farmer who had emigrated from Liverpool in 1854 with his widowed father and three sisters. John, ten years younger than Elizabeth, was known to the family as "Uncle John." In 1861 he and Elizabeth moved to the new settlement of Logan, following John's sister Elizabeth who had married James Quayle, an immigrant from the Isle of Man who later became Logan's mayor. The first year these Logan pioneers struggled when frosts came every month.

In 1864, Elizabeth's son Walter emigrated to Utah with his wife Sophia and three children. He settled in Farmington to be near his mother and sister. His wife had two more children, but in the fall of 1869, she had a baby boy who died at six weeks of age. Sophia died two weeks later. The next year Walter married a Welch immigrant with whom he had seven children. He and his family eventually settled in Seattle where he worked as a shoemaker, dying there in 1923.

Daughter Elizabeth visited her mother in Logan often, traveling on the train after it was built in the 1870s. When young Elizabeth was widowed in 1886, her mother offered her a home if she would move to Logan to care for her and John. During the 1890s, young Elizabeth lived in the home with John and Elizabeth, along with young Elizabeth's son Lafayette. Lafe, as he was known, remembered that John Gillions was bitter towards Joseph Smith and other authorities of the church, and as a result he was excommunicated. Lafe said his Grandmother Elizabeth was

encouraged to leave John, but she did not. As a result, according to Lafayette, she was treated as though she was excommunicated and as a result she could not speak or pray in church. He said she never failed to quietly bless her food and that she never lost her faith, nor did she ever speak a word against the church. Lafa also remembered that John Gillions was quite prosperous and there was always plenty to eat. He said John kept a big barrel of wine in the cellar.

A great-grandson, Odell Grover, wrote that John was “quite a student of astrology and evidently believed he could forecast some events.” John was a well-trained English farmer and gardener, a “lover of good stock and his animals were always well cared for. Many saw him go out night after night and feed the neighbor’s cattle in the winter when it was difficult to gather all the grass for them.” Grandchildren recalled that everything was orderly in the home and garden of this good couple, and they never failed to give help to the early settlers of Cache Valley. Elizabeth owned a small music box which she would wind up and then dance to the music, much to the delight of those present. Mary Elizabeth Grover Innes, a great-granddaughter, wrote a note in her family history journal about John Gillions that said, “the one we kids all loved.”

Elizabeth Coleman Walker Birch Yates Gillions died in 1903 at the age of eighty-seven from old age. Her funeral was held in the Logan Tabernacle, and her casket was completely covered with flowers. Four men from the LDS Church spoke during the services, including her husband’s brother-in-law, James Quayle, city leaders Thomas Morgan and B. M. Lewis, and Edward Smith, another early settler of Logan. Her funeral notice stated that each of these men, “bore testimony of the pure life, uprightness and unflinching integrity of the deceased since their acquaintance with her, some of which extended over forty years.” John died in 1911 at which time Elizabeth the daughter moved to Garland, where her son Walter Grover built her a home. Elizabeth Walker Grover died in 1918 at the age of seventy-eight while visiting a daughter in Idaho.

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