

MARY SUSANNAH HIGGS

Born: February 11, 1849, Utica, New York

Age: 7

Hodgett Wagon Company



Mary Susannah Higgs
(Sleater)



Elizabeth Stowe
Higgs

Thomas Higgs and his wife, Elizabeth, were both born in England, but were in America when they were married, May 21, 1844, in Utica, New York. By 1851, three of their five children had died. As the family moved further west in 1856 toward Utah, Elizabeth gave birth to a son, Thomas Young Higgs, June 4, in Davenport, Iowa. Little Thomas died there on July 2, 1856.

Thomas and Elizabeth and their living children, Mary Susannah (age 7) and Annie Elizabeth (3), and Elizabeth's mother, Ann Kite Stowe (66), left Iowa City in July with the Hodgett wagon company. Elizabeth was very ill during the trip and Grandmother Stowe took responsibility for the care of this family. When the weather became cold, Ann carried a biscuit in her blouse to keep it soft and warm for little Annie to eat. Mary's shoulder was broken during an oxen stampede one day. Mary received a Priesthood blessing, and the bone knit perfectly. The Higgs family had a great deal of difficulty during their trip. One of the last challenges was coming down Big Mountain east of Salt Lake City. It was so slippery and steep, the wagon tipped over and the children had to sit on a quilt in the snow while it was turned right side up.

In 1938, Mary gave an interview for her 89th birthday: "People nowadays don't know anything about traveling. . . . We came through Parley's canyon in the deep snow and, believe me, we were nearly frozen when we arrived. Our oxen had starved to death because they could find no food through the snow and we were stuck there in the canyon until teams were sent out to our aid from Salt Lake. They did not send enough teams from the city to take all the wagons in, so some had to stay there in the canyon for several days until the animals could make a return trip. Those of us who stayed for the second trip were rationed a biscuit a day until the biscuits gave out, then we ceased to eat. There were one or two of the oxen left, but they were so thin there was no meat on them. The men in the party killed [the oxen] one night and we boiled the bones for soup the next day. It was very thin soup."

Mary gave another interview on her 100th birthday. She reportedly had a "razor-sharp" memory and retained "the ability to laugh at herself." Mary recalled that her family arrived in the Valley in December, "in weather just like it has been this year. . . . I remember coming down Big mountain because it was so slick the oxen had to sit right down and slide down. And I remember coming up the other side because the wagon tipped over and we children had to sit on a quilt in the snow while they turned it right side up again."



Thomas Higgs

Mary's father went to work for Brigham Young as a carpenter. The family moved into a small home behind the Beehive House. The children attended school with Brigham Young's children. Sitting beside a pot-bellied stove in Salt Lake City that winter, Mary remarked how it was wonderful to be warm all over at once. That first Christmas, Mary received a piece of charcoal, a stool made of sticks, a small potato, a little apple down in the bottom of her stocking and one stick of candy. Thomas eventually moved his family to Manti, Utah, and they had 5 more children.

Mary had a career dancing and singing in the Salt Lake Theater as well as the Tabernacle Choir. She herded and milked cows, taught Sunday School, married Robert G. Sleater, became the mother of 11 children and lived to be 102 years old. Annie married William Clayton and they had four children before he died. She married again, to a younger man named Michael Jensen. She had nine more children and lived to be 93 years old.

Thomas died in 1895. Elizabeth stayed in the log cabin near the temple in Manti until the last few years of her life. She died in 1913 at age 89.



Anna Elizabeth Higgs
(Clayton) (Jensen)

Sources: Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel website; Daughters of Utah Pioneer history files; family histories in files of Jolene S. Allphin.