

EMMA GIRDLESTONE RIDGES SMITH
by Carol Jayne Whitehead Avery

Emma Girdlestone Ridges Smith was born March 31, 1835, in Norfolk, England, in the village of Barford. She was the eighth child of Thomas Girdlestone and Mary Betts. There were 7 boys and 4 girls in the family.

She spent her early childhood at Barford and moved with her parents to Great Melton when she was a little girl. Here her father had charge of a large farm on the estate of a well-to-do land owner. He was well-liked by his employer and was retained as head man on the estate for several years.

Emma attended school as a little child but as she was old enough to work she was taught plain sewing and dress making. She was very apt with the needle and found plenty of this kind of employment. Most of this work was done in private homes.

Having a natural religious inclination of mind, she read her Bible faithfully, and though she attended different churches, she did not belong to any of them. Her father was a staunch Wesley Methodist, and her mother a Ranting Methodist, but Emma could not bring her mind to see as they did. It was a source of wonder to her that her parents did not belong to the same church, so in her bewilderment she one day asked her why it was so. "Father," she said, "why don't you and mother go to the same church to worship, so that you will be in Heaven together?" Wondering much upon this, she offered up a prayer one night, telling the Lord that she would like to join one of the churches if she could know which was the best one to join. A gentle voice seemed to say, "Someday you will hear the true Gospel and obey it."

The "Mormon" elders were laboring in her village at that time, and having a desire and an opportunity to hear them she went to one of their meetings. Many others went, also, partly from curiosity and partly from a hunger and desire for truth. She at once knew the message to be what she was looking for, and a chill seemed to take hold of her when she heard Elder Dye's voice. What she heard at that time filled her with hope, for she never once doubted that this was the truth. On the 11th of June, 1848, when she was about 13 years of age, she was baptized by Elder Dye, and became a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

She and one sister were the only ones of the children to join the Church. Later one sister died, but the other, Mary Ann Hewitt, who was healed by faith, came to Utah. Her father and mother both became devout members of the Church. When the gathering to Utah was advised, they saved and prepared to leave all that they had behind, as well as their native land, and start anew in a foreign land.

In the spring of 1856, Emma and her father and mother set sail in a sailing vessel, the *Thornton*. After being almost 6 weeks on the ocean they landed at New York. They stayed there but a few days, then they left for Iowa City, Iowa. Here, and at the camping ground of the Saints in Florence, Nebraska, they stayed for several weeks. The women sewed tents, while the men made the handcarts for their journey. These were to carry all their worldly possessions across the trackless plains. In sewing the heavy canvas, Emma's fingers would bleed from using the twine. We can well imagine how different this work was from what her fingers had been accustomed to before.

Through the summer as they journeyed, their spirits were light and their troubles for the time forgotten in their desire to reach the Promised Land. Sometimes they would travel 30 miles a day. Emma walked beside her father pulling the cart for hours, buoyant and happy, and taking her share of the load, for she was young and strong. When she was tired and could go no further, she would drop down beside the wheel, and with her head in her hands, sleep for a short time. Then on again for there was no time to be lost.

As colder weather came on, the journey became harder and provisions ran low, so that the rations were cut down to one-half and later to one quarter, and still later to barely enough to sustain them through the day. Imagine if we will, the trial this must have been to play the part of beasts of burden with barely enough food to hold body and spirit together. In this weakened condition, many grew ill from exposure and lack of food. The suffering they endured from hunger, fatigue and cold is now a part of history. It grew so bad that many lived for days on only the rawhide soup made from what bits of leather could be spared from the harnesses and tires of the handcarts.

Sometime in October, Emma's father began to fail, and for days he dragged his weary steps, with not a word of complaint. At night he cleared the snow for a place to rest their weary bodies. When they neared the South Pass, 11 people passed away during the night. Thomas Girdlestone was one of the men who helped dig the mass grave for them, including the son of Jens and Elsie Nielson, Niels Nielson, and 10-year-old Bodil Mortensen who was traveling with the Nielsons. Thomas Girdlestone died the next day, and was buried nearby. He was 62 years old. His name, along with another man who helped dig the grave and also passed away, is on the memorial stone there along with all those buried in the mass grave. Thus it was in the camp from day to day, fresh graves were left by the wayside.

Soon thereafter Emma witnessed the miracle of Elsie Nielson being able to pull her husband in her cart, after his feet froze and he could go no further.

Four days after her father was buried, Emma's mother, Mary, who had been unable to walk for many days quietly followed her husband in death. She, too, was buried on that lonely plain with no wood or stone to mark her resting place. This was at Green River, Wyoming. Mary was 60 years old.

Now Emma was all alone, and it would be hard to picture her desolation with both of her loving parents taken from her, but she always fearlessly kept her face towards the Promised Land. She had for a companion now, a young girl of about 16. One night while they side by side, her young friend closed her eyes never more to waken in this world. In the morning, Emma spoke to her and said, "Come, get up- the bugle has called." There was no answer. Thus another of the blessed souls that had given so much for the gospel's sake had gone to her reward.

Many were the hardships that were endured by this brave, true-hearted band. It was truly a "survival of the fittest" and those who were spared were spared for the fulfillment of some great purpose.

Finally, rescue came, and the snow had been very deep through the mountains, but as they came into the valley on the trail that the pioneers had made long before, the sun was shining and

flooded the valley with its glory. It looked like a heaven of peace and rest to these weary pioneers. Emma's heart longed for her dear parents, but with the faithfulness that characterized her whole life, she bowed to the wisdom of God.

Through the kindness of some friends, she was sheltered for a time until she found work. In this busy place where everything had to be done by hand she soon found plenty to do. The deftness of her fingers kept her busy among the different homes in doing sewing for the families. Although there was very little money, she soon earned plenty for her necessities.

Emma had been in Salt Lake City for about 2 years when she married Joseph H. Ridges, the builder of the Salt Lake Tabernacle Organ, and a man of great musical ability. She was a plural wife, his second. At the time of the move south, she went with him and the rest of the Saints. Here they stayed until the call was made to return to their homes again.

She had one child, a daughter, Mary Jane, by her marriage to Mr. Ridges. Their union was not a happy one, and President Brigham Young gave them a church divorce. She supported herself and her child until she married again, as a plural wife again, to Ralph Smith. She moved with him to Cache Valley, Utah, and settled at Logan, where they lived the rest of their lives. She bore her husband eight children, six boys and two girls.

With all of her hardships of which she had many, her faith was always strong in the Gospel. She was very devoted to her duties as a Latter Day Saint, staunch in attending to her prayers and her meetings. She always bore a strong testimony of the truthfulness of the Gospel. She died December 31, 1914, after a brief illness. Had she lived until March 31, 1915, she would have been 80 years old.

This account was taken from an old copy of an account of Emma's life by an unknown relative (probably from her second family with Ralph Smith). I have had it in my old book of remembrance for as long as I can remember. I copied it from the original text, adding just a little further information that I have gathered myself.

I am a descendant of Emma Girdlestone Ridges Smith, a great great granddaughter through her daughter Mary Jane, from her marriage to Joseph Harris Ridges. Mary Jane grew up and married Henry Perry, had 14 children, the last one being my paternal grandmother, Letha Perry Whitehead. She married Mathias Earl Whitehead, and their son, Rulon Boyd Whitehead was my father. I am Carol Jayne Whitehead Avery.

I am so proud to be a descendant of Emma. It has just been in the last several years that I have studied the journey of the handcart pioneers and become aware of the hardships they endured, and the miracles they witnessed. I pray that I will be able to endure as they did. Emma has been very concerned with this little branch of her large family, from her daughter Mary Jane. It has been evident on several occasions that she has been in contact from the other side of the veil, assisting us, especially me and my daughter Chrissy. She loves Chrissy- we have known from the time when in high school Chrissy did a report on Emma and the handcart journey for a history class. We joked at the time that Chrissy must be channeling Emma, because of the way the report unfolded and turned out, but we know now that Emma was with her, helping her with detail and making sure it all turned out right. Chrissy has had many trials, but we know they are for important reasons, and I believe that Emma sympathizes with her and knows exactly how she

feels. I imagine her to be much like my grandma Letha, small in stature but direct and to the point, and making sure that things get done, even if it means she has to take matters into her own hands and make sure it's done and done right! I want to be like her, always having faith and never giving up.

None of the members of the Martin or Willie companies expected the trials and miseries they were given. No one knew they would die or lose their family members, no one knew they would suffer starvation, frostbite and all of the other trials they had, but they counted them as a privilege to become acquainted with God. I want to be like them, so that when I meet them on the other side, they will be proud of me, because I love them very much.

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