

## METTE KIRSTINE MORTENSEN

Born: 2 May 1845 Haarbolle, Fanefjord, Praesto, Denmark

Age: 11

Willie Handcart Company



Mortensen home in Haarbolle, Denmark

Mette's parents, Peder and Helena (Lena) Sanderson Mortensen both came from families that were well-off and well-respected. Peder and Lena likewise owned their own home and farm and were quite well-to-do. They had married in 1827 and were raising their family in the village of Haarbolle in the southwest corner of the little island of Moen, Denmark. In 1855, two LDS missionaries, Soren P. Guhl (or Gould) and Mark Scoby, came to their small town. The two oldest sons, Morten and Anders, heard them speak and came home and told the family that the message was true. Their father's first response was, "There is so much evil said of these Mormons, how can they have the true gospel?" However, after hearing the missionaries themselves, the rest of the family also believed their gospel message and joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Lars Mortensen was 12 years old at the time. He wrote: "I was born of goodly parents whose delight was ever to teach their children according to their best knowledge the ways of truth and virtue. ... The testament [was] used as a reader in the school. It gave me an early knowledge of the Doctrine of our Savior, though not properly understood. ... I attended a conference of the latter day saints held on the island of Falster. ... Much instruction and good counsel was given by the elders in connection with the first principles of the gospel which was set forth in great simplicity. ... My two oldest brothers, Morten and Anders, were baptized and confirmed into the church [of Jesus Christ] of the latter day Saints, this being the first time I had the privilege of witnessing the performance of these ordinances. The feelings I experienced in witnessing these ordinances perhaps I shall never forget."

After the family was baptized, they were no longer respected or accepted by some in their community. One night an angry mob converged on their home, but the family was saved by the sudden collapse of the mob's leader as he stood at their gate. Lars wrote: "As soon as the news spread through our little village that our family had joined the Church of [Jesus Christ of] the latter-day Saints, it began to create a feeling of hatred towards our family and persecution began to reign to quite an extent and our lives and property was endangered at various times. My Father being subject to rheumatism, it was deemed advisable that we should sell our property and come to Utah. ... In the spring of 1856 we bid farewell to the home of our birth with a hope of making a new home in the valleys of the mountains."

The family first traveled to Copenhagen where they stayed in the mission home for a short time, "waiting for the emigration to gather." The mission president asked Peder and Lena to leave their son, Morten, in Denmark as a missionary for three years. Peder and the oldest daughter were handicapped. Losing Morten's assistance would mean a significant sacrifice. The mission president promised that if Morten stayed, they would all reach Zion in safety and they would be protected on sea and on land. In her broken English, Mette expressed: "My oldest Brother was remained on a mission."

Lars summarized the Mortensen's departure from Denmark with a testimony of the faith of his family: "While staying [in Copenhagen] it was deemed advisable that my oldest Brother should remain and preach the gospel. After staying for about a month we took leave of our native land. As it was our calculation to cross the plains with the handcarts and the journey all together was a long and tiresome one, and our family was not in a very good condition for such a journey, the Lord inspired his servant then presiding over the Scandinavian mission to utter a prophesy in relation to our family, that inasmuch as we would keep the commandments of God, we should all reach the vallies of the mountains in safety. Ever having faith in the promises of the Lord through his servants, and a strong determination to serve the Lord, it was ever a stimulant to press on through trials and difficulties to the end of our journey. On our journey from Copenhagen to Kiel, [Germany] we had the privilege once more to view the island of our nativity."

The Mortensen's left Denmark on April 23, 1856 on the steamship *Rhoda*. Three weeks before that, on March 30, Mette was baptized by her brother, Anders. The family traveled to Liverpool where they boarded the ship *Thornton* on Mette's 11th birthday. The ages of the others were: Peder (age 50), Lena (48), Annie Kirstine ("Steena") (24), Anders Jorgen (22), Hans Jorgen (18), Lars (13), Mary (9), and Caroline (5). Peder Jr. had died previously. Mette recorded:

We prepared to leave our happy little home for the Land of Zion. I remember how rough the north sea was. ... How well I remember the day we went on board the ship at Liverpool. It was the 2nd day of May and my eleventh birthday and on the 4th we set sail. Our trip across the ocean was 7 weeks and 4 days and we arrived in New York. After a few days we left for Iowa City. My father had intended to purchase a team of horses and wagon to bring his family but on account of so many poor Saints they were promised by those in authority if they would come with the handcart company and help others to come that not one of the family should be lost, which blessing was fulfilled, though we suffered much on the way.

The Mortensen family acted on their faith and parted with their means in support of the less fortunate immigrants among them. Anders was placed in charge of one of the Willie Company's six provision wagons which carried tents and other supplies. Peder and Steena were allowed to ride in this wagon. Lena and the other children were provided with two handcarts. After the Willie company suffered the loss of most of their draft animals in early September, a difficult decision was made which required Peder and Steena to ride in the Mortensen family handcarts. Peter Madsen wrote of this day: "[Sept. 4] Up at 4 o'clock. At 7 o'clock prayer. Some oxen had disappeared during the night, and the brethren were sent out to find them. ... During the night a storm raged with strong hurricane like winds that threw some of the tents down and brought much disturbance."

Levi Savage wrote of this day: "Sometime last night thirty of our best working cattle left us. We had a guard around them, but no one knows when or where they went. I and a number of the brethren, spent the day unsuccessfully hunting them. ... We had an awful storm last night."

At this time Mette had walked about 300 miles through Iowa and there was about 1,000 miles left to traverse. Mette wrote: "I remember that the first part of our journey for the children was happy. We thought only of the new home we were going to, but it [was] also sad for many of the things we had brought with us such as clothing and bedding that would have given us many a comfort had to be left behind.

"Many times we were very frightened at the sight of Indians. ... I especially remember our stop at [Fort] Laramie, on account of the cups full of bright colored beads that we children gathered from the ant beds. I suppose they were from the discarded buckskin, for then, as now, the Indians richly embroidered their buckskin. ...

"The journey was hard. How well I remember when the food supply began to get short for we had always had plenty of good food at home and this was hard for me to understand. ... When food became scarce and flour was rationed out in small quantities, Mother would cook and fix it some way so that we got the most good from it, instead of giving each their portion of raw flour as some did."

The Mortensen family struggled on, trusting in God's promises and suffering from hunger, cold and deprivation, along with everyone else. Lena's handwoven linen sheets were sometimes used along the way to cover the bodies of those who died. One of the last of her sheets covered those buried in the common grave at Rock Creek. One sheet made it to the Valley and is preserved in the Daughters of Utah Pioneers museum in Parowan, Utah. Mette wrote: "Cold and storm came early that year and as we neared the mountains, suffering became intense, especially from hunger and cold. I think every one had their darkest hour then, our family certainly did. One day the boys pulled the cart out of the line and lay down beside it saying, 'Mother, we can't go another step.' We children stood by crying, thinking of the terrors in store for us. ... The train had gone on way ahead of us, but oh! how thankful we were to reach camp after dark. ... My brothers helped shovel the snow and picked the frozen ground to bury in one grave 14 bodies and the last one of mother's hand woven linen sheets was covered over them before the dirt was put in. The thing I regret most in all that terrible time was taking a piece of bread from a dead woman's pocket. She was a woman I had walked with day after day and I knew she had this bread she had not eaten. How well I remember now the 14 that were buried in one grave. My two brothers just older than myself helped to prepare the grave and my mother helping to wrap the bodies as best they could. [We stayed there] two nights and one day. ... We were helped the last miles of the journey into Salt Lake, but after what a lot of suffering. I wish we might have been allowed to forget it."

(Mette Mortensen - Page 3)

Perhaps the event which Mette most wished she could forget was the one which was most impressed upon her memory, and was the one she mentioned often—the common grave at Rock Creek. In 1933, Mette’s daughter, Ann, wrote: “There are many descendants [of Peder and Lena Mortensen], but only one member of the [original] family remains—Mrs. Mette Mortensen Rasmussen. At the age of 88 years, she still retains her stalwart character of thrift and frugality. She is still industrious, active and with her mind clear, recalls many of the early experiences, especially her first home in Zion. She also remembers when the 14 were buried in one grave at Rock Creek;<sup>1</sup> her two brothers helping to dig the shallow grave in the frozen ground. Her mother and oldest sister helping to sew up the bodies in sheets and what they could spare.”<sup>2</sup>

The entire Mortensen family survived and arrived safely in the Valley. Within a few days, the Mortensens were called to go to Parowan to settle. They accepted this assignment and took at least one of their two handcarts with them. For the rest of his life, Peder was carried to church each week in this handcart by his son, Lars. Morten completed his mission and arrived in Utah three years later.



Peder was an only child who had inherited wealth and property. He was well educated and musically talented. He played the clarinet. Peder was disabled in his youth and walked with crutches. He also suffered from severe rheumatism. Peder worked hard as overseer of his farm, shoemaker, cooper, carpenter and craftsman. Peder was resourceful and prepared for his trek to Zion. He had taken pieces of smooth shingles and oiled them. Then taking old worn-out shoes and boot tops, Peder attached them to the shingles so that his children had a sort of shoes and did not go barefoot like many did when bad weather came.

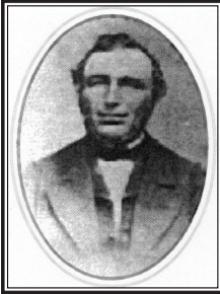


Helena was said to be pleasant and good-natured. She loved peace and harmony and could not bear arguments. A petite and jovial woman, Helena loved to step-dance and often did so for her children and grandchildren. She managed her family’s journey with wisdom, mixing bread at night and rising early in morning to bake it. When rations became very short, she baked tiny biscuits which she kept in her apron pocket and gave little bits to her family throughout the day. She gathered berries along the way and made juice. She also gathered herbs to use in teas, soups and stews. She parched a small amount of grain that Captain Willie gave her and made a warm barley drink. After one day of trudging in heavy sands, her son, Hans, was so weak and faint that he left his handcart and said he could go no further. Helena brought out a little fruit juice and a dry crust of biscuit. She said, “Be brave, my boy—we must go on.” He ate and drank and took up the handcart again. One day she remembered a pincushion she’d brought filled with bran. She tore it open and made a little bread. She also took rawhide from carts, scraped and boiled it and used it in soup. Helena told of her challenges and faith: “We walked by the river day after day, following the Platte six hundred miles, crossing and recrossing it about 90 times. We had to have stout hearts and great faith in meeting these great trials, misfortunes and sickness, pain and death, burying our beloved dead ones, who gave their lives for the sake of the gospel. We wept as we went on our journey. We went before the Lord and pleaded for Him to make good the promises which were given us by His servant when we were in Old Denmark. How we implored Him to raise the sick and give us strength to carry our burdens without complaining for we had the lame to haul on our handcarts, the maimed to care for and our beloved dead ones to bury by the wayside, never to see again the place where they were laid to rest.

“[We] were often reminded of Jeremiah’s vision and prophecy [of the last days] recorded in the 31st chapter [v.6-9, 12, 13]: ‘For there shall be a day that the watchman upon Ephraim shall cry, Arise ye, and let us go up to Zion unto the Lord our God. For thus saith the Lord; Sing with gladness for Jacob, and shout among the chief of the nations:

## (Mette Mortensen - Page 4)

publish ye, praise ye, and say, O Lord, save thy people, the remnant of Israel. Behold, I will bring them from the north country and gather them from the coasts of the earth, and with them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her that travaileth with child together: a great company shall return hither. They shall come with weeping, and with supplications, will I lead them: I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way, wherein they shall not stumble: for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn. ... Therefore they shall come and sing in the height of Zion, and shall flow together to the goodness of the Lord. ... They shall rejoice in dance, both young ... and old together: for I will turn their mourning into joy, and will comfort them, and make them rejoice from their sorrow.”



Morten, age 27, was studying to become a Lutheran minister when Elders Guhl and Scoby came from Utah. He attended their meeting out of curiosity and expected to confound them. Instead, went home and told his family that he had found the religion that they had been looking for, the one that was to be established in the last days as taught by Martin Luther. (Morten had been preparing to be a Lutheran minister at the time he met the Mormon missionaries.) Morten stayed in Denmark as a missionary and his unused ticket was used by Bodil Maline Neilsen (Mortensen).



Anders drove a provision wagon for the Willie company. He married Christina Anderson on August 22, 1857. Christina emigrated with her family from Denmark in 1855. Her parents died of cholera in 1855 in Mormon Grove, Kansas. Christina traveled from there to Florence, Nebraska, where she joined the Willie company. She assisted the Mortensen family with their handcarts.

Lars married Cornelia Decker at the age of 21. She later gave this account of an occurrence shortly after the Mortensens arrived in Parowan: “An afternoon party or dance was being held for the children. Lars, who could scarcely speak a word in English, dressed in a factory shirt and a pair of trousers made out of his mother’s cast-off underskirt [and a home-woven straw hat] entered the door. As he stepped into the hall, someone was heard to say, ‘Oh, there is that little Danish boy’ and naturally a titter followed. Luckily for him, he did not understand that it was meant for him. Under his arm he carried his violin. Walking to the front of the hall, he began to play. Never again was he referred to as ‘the little Danish boy,’ but as ‘Lars, the musician.’” (The famous King Sisters and Lex and Ric de Azevedo are descendants of Lars Mortensen.)



Lars and sister, Mary, about 1860



Christen and Mette Rasmussen

Mette married Christen Rasmussen on April 30, 1863, when she was almost 18 years old. He had also emigrated from Denmark and was twenty years older than Mette. He said he had never seen another woman he wanted to marry, so he waited for her to grow up. They lived in Parowan, Utah, and had 9 children. Mette lived to be 90 years old.

Annie Kirstine (called Steena), age 24, was suffering from knee problems and subsequently required to ride in handcart. She assisted in sewing tents and wagon covers until her fingers were raw. Steena also helped her mother with preparing the bodies of those buried in the common grave at Rock Creek.



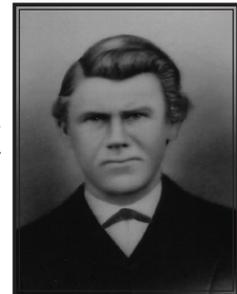
(Mette Mortensen - Page 5)



Caroline turned 6 shortly after leaving Denmark. She rode in a handcart much of the time, but also walked a great deal. Her brothers took turns carrying her on their shoulders. She grew up in Parowan and sang soprano in the ward choir led by Thomas Durham. She married Thomas, who was 22 years her senior, at age 17 in the Endowment House. She, too, had descendants with great musical talent. (See Thomas Durham story *Tell My Story, Too*.)

Caroline's home was open to many visitors, friends, and Church leaders. President Heber J. Grant was a special friend and sent books he loved to Caroline. The Durham family was of musical fame in Utah. When Caroline was 40, she gave birth to her tenth child, never recovered and was an invalid the rest of her life. She died in 1915 at age 65.

Hans lived to be 75 years old. He left a large posterity. A nephew said, "Uncle Hans was of a very lively disposition; agreeable in company; always ready to do his part for entertainment; quick tempered and quick to get over a spell of temper, a member of the choir, a good bass singer; a scientific caller for dances; a good cornet player; a member of the bishopric of Parowan for several years; [and] always thought well of wherever acquainted." Hans worked one summer at grading the right of way for the Union Pacific Railroad.



Mary, age 8, remembered asking her mother if they would ever have enough to eat again. When the rescue party reached them, Mary said it was the happiest day of her life and they all cried for joy. Mary remembered the time when 13 people died and were buried at Rock Creek. The two Danish children buried there, Niels Nielson and Bodil Mortensen, were her playmates.

Mary learned how to card and spin the wool for clothing to help support her family. While in her teens, Mary had a serious illness that left her right hand crippled, making tasks difficult. One day, while Mary sat spinning, she met her future husband. He was a Scandinavian emigrant who had just arrived from the old country. Mary and Peder Jensen were married on his 25th birthday, December 6, 1867. They had five children. They attended the dedications of the St. George, Manti, and Salt Lake Temples. Mary was a faithful worker in the Relief Society and the Primary.

Mary's motto to her children was to never waste food. She never forgot the time in her life when she had seen so many go without for so long. Mary died in 1903 at the age of 56.

Sources: Daughters of Utah Pioneers history files, Parowan Daughters of Utah Pioneers Museum; "Peder Mortensen [and] Helena Sanderson," compiled and edited by Carmen R. Smith, June 1961; autobiographical sketches written by Mette Mortensen Rasmussen, in possession of LaKay M. Weber; *Zion Bound: The Ancestry & Descendants of Arlington Peter & Fannie Burnham Mortensen*, by Kathryn Mortensen Harmer; *The Morten P. Mortensen Family*, by Viva Cluff Whetten and Lillian Jones Richins; email from Tony Arnold, Bonnie Brantley and Connie Gibbons regarding Decker and Mortensen ancestors; *The Crossing: Trials of 1856*, by Ron Ray, 1997; [www.ldsep.org/denmark/lfm/sp/55lmort.htm](http://www.ldsep.org/denmark/lfm/sp/55lmort.htm); familysearch.org; "Mortensen, Christine," obituary 1910; "History of Christine Anderson Mortensen," by Clara Beck; "Mormon Grove," research by Laura Anderson; email from Laura Anderson, August 2005; "The Mortensen Family," by Anders Mortensen, son of Anders J. and Christine Mortensen, 1917. See *Follow Me To Zion* by Andrew Olsen and Jolene Allphin, *Deseret Book*, 2013, for artwork and more family stories.

<sup>1</sup>The official number of deaths at Rock Creek from the Willie Company Journal is thirteen. Quite a few other reminiscences indicate fourteen as the total.

<sup>2</sup>This original handwritten account is in LaKay M. Weber's box of histories she inherited from the Rasmussen family. Ann Rasmussen told of "sitting in sewing bees and listening to the stories over and over." For more information, contact Laura Anderson, descendant of Mette Mortensen, 801-898-9085.