

History of Elizabeth Hannah Parkes Higgs Handcart Pioneer of 1856

To write a history of one's grandmother becomes something of a task when we find that specific information about her life is pitifully meagre. Of the handcart Pioneers, of whom she was one, there is much available. Of Elizabeth Hannah Parkes herself we know almost nothing, except for that part of her life which was shared by her two daughters-in-law. There is no great abundance of detail concerning her up to 1887, at which time the two girls who later married her sons came to know her.

Elizabeth Hannah Parkes was born in Derby, Derbyshire, England, May 2, 1827. She was the eldest daughter of William Parkes and Mary Brentnall. The other children were Jemima, Annie, Thomas, John and William. Jemima married Joseph Robinson. Their children are Lizzie Done, John, Jed and Josephine Harris. Annie married Martin Littlewood. Their children are William, and Annie Curtis. John died at 16, and William in infancy. Thomas' wife was name Mary. He was cut off from the Church of England because for six months he did not pay his tithing. This grieved him very much and he died out of the church. To us this seems a bit drastic. When Mary was left alone, Elizabeth sent money from Utah to help her and the four children get to Zion. These children are Thomas H.O. Parkes, Georgina Kendall, Mamie Cazier and Lizzie Bryan. They lived with Elizabeth and she helped the girls get started in work. Sometime later Mary married Alphas Miller and was sealed to him. This always grieved Elizabeth, though she did not blame Mary. Mr. Miller was very kind to them all and fond of Mary's family.

Elizabeth's grandfather or great-grandfather Parkes had owned a silk mill in Derby. He must at one time have been well fixed with earthly goods. However, he seems to have wasted it all, having had too great a fondness for drink and the mill went to other hands. Elizabeth worked in this mill as a girl. The girl workers, of course, received very little pay, but like all girls, liked some of the finery that was fashionable at the time. It seems that at one time paisley shawls were very much in vogue, and all the girls saved their pennies to buy one. The wife of the superintendent became very much enraged that these "common mill girls" could have paisley shawls and told her husband that if they were able to buy such shawls they were receiving too much money for their work. Consequently they had their wages cut. The shawl, however, was precious, and it came to Utah with her, and today the remnants are prized and preserved by her grand-daughters each of whom has a piece.

The family joined the Church in England. Jemima was the first to immigrate. She was the third child. In 1854 the mother died. In 1855 the father and youngest child, Annie emigrated. The father died and was buried at sea. Annie came on. In 1856 Elizabeth emigrated, leaving Thomas and his family in England.

Grandmother would never talk about the trip across the plains. The story of Martin's Hand Carts is recorded, and the only knowledge we have of the trip comes from those histories. We have heard from others in the company that on one of the nights when so many had died or were dying, one of the men said to Her, "Well, Lizzie, we'll put you in the ground tomorrow." Grandmother rose to the occasion, told him firmly that they would not, and came on. The remark itself seems callous, but they must of necessity have become callous to the terrible things around them. It is typical of her high spirit that she retorted so strongly, and it was perhaps this very remark that made her summon extra courage to go on.

The wagons met them and brought them into the valley, arriving the last day of November. The people here were at church in the Tabernacle when a messenger came up to President Young with the word that the company had arrived. He arose, told the congregations, and dismissed the meeting. Everyone hurried out to meet them. Jemima went too. She peeped under the covers of the wagons to see whether or not Elizabeth had come in. They had heard how so many of those who had been able to get in at all were unable to walk. Finally she found Elizabeth in one of the wagons. Jemima was so overcome that she went behind a tree until she got control of herself enough to speak. The first thing she said to grandmother was, "Can you walk?" Grandmother with her usual spirit replied that she had had a great deal of practice and was quite proficient in it.

Jemima took her to the Lion House where Annie was working. All the women there came out to see her, for they had heard that Annie's sister was coming. They took her in, provided her with a bath and clean clothes and found work for her there. She stayed working there for several years until she married. She was 29 years old at the time of her arrival. She had left England a beautiful young girl, but she arrived a middle aged woman. The trip had added years. Among the few things she was able to bring through was the paisley shawl.

It was while she was working at the Lion House that she met Thomas Higgs, who was also working for President Young. He already had one wife, and Elizabeth Parkes had no desire to marry into polygamy. However, she was not a young woman and finally consented to marry Thomas. We have heard that she had already refused to become the wife of Brigham Young. We have also heard that she married Thomas as a second wife because Brigham Young told him to take another wife and suggested Elizabeth. She was married in 1863. She had three sons: Alpha Jedde, Reynolds, named for Thomas Higgs' mother, Suzannah Reynolds (he died in infancy) and Jesse Brentnall, Jesse being a common Higgs name, and Brentnall taken from her own mother, Mary Brentnall.

Both families lived in the same house, occupying different parts, with the shop run by Thomas Higgs underneath. Brigham Thomas, the son of the first wife, was given the duty of keeping the wood-box filled for the second wife, as well as other small jobs that a young boy could do. He thus spent much time with grandmother, and always loved her and her family. She was invariably kind to all of the family of the first wife, and they all respected and loved her. There seems to have been the best of feeling between the two families.

About 1880 Thomas was called to help build the Manti Temple. Grandmother refused to go with him. She wanted to stay here and put her boys through school. Both of them graduated from the University of Deseret. In order to make her living she took care of the 12th Ward meeting house and of the 12th ward school for several years. Jedde married first. After Jesse married she went to live with him. She stayed there the rest of her life, with the exception of the two years Jesse was in Europe on his mission, and the two or three years she lived after his death. She was adored by her children and her grandchildren. Mother says she never heard her say a cross word to any of the children. She had a special name of affection for each one.

The last few years of her life she lived with Jedde and his family. She died on September 10, 1908, leaving one son and ten grandchildren. Everyone loved her for her gentleness, and admired her for her spirit. She was faithful and true to her family and her church, and even those of us who least knew her, being too young at the time of her death, have received inspiration from her life.