

MAREN KJIRSTINE JOHANSEN (or Larsen)

Born: May 7, 1849 in Denmark

Age: 7

Hunt Wagon Company

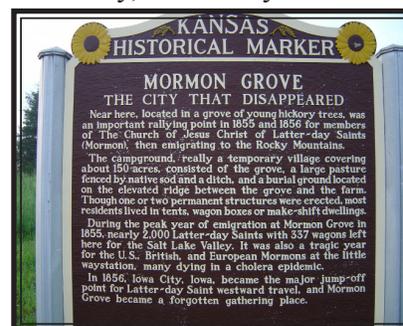


Maren was born in Oudrup, Aalborg, Denmark, the eighth of nine children born to Johanne Kirstine Laustsen and Johan Larsen. Two children died in infancy in Denmark. Maren became known in America as Mary Christina Johnson. (It was customary in Denmark for the children to add “sen” or “datter” to the father’s first name and then take that as their surname.) Maren’s father was a prosperous farmer, owning large farmlands, cattle, sheep, fine horses and barns. The family also ran a tavern and an inn. Sometimes travelers would stay two or three weeks at a time. Some of the wealthier travelers expected their pipes cleaned, filled and lighted. The younger children would do this job. The children also assisted at harvest time and had fond memories of carrying midmorning and afternoon refreshments to the harvest hands, and tossing food to the eager ducks and geese on the pond.

The missionaries first brought the gospel to Denmark in 1850. They visited the Johan Larsen family in 1853. The Larsens belonged to the Lutheran faith at that time. Mary’s family embraced the teachings and joined the Church in 1853. During the year that followed, the Larsens sold their property and belongings, mostly at auction, and made preparations to sail to America to be with the Saints in Zion. Some relatives of the Larsens were very bitter about their change of religion and plans to emigrate. They tried fruitlessly to change the Larsens’ minds. Mary’s thirteen-year-old brother, Lars Christian, also did not want to emigrate. An uncle hid Lars away, thinking Lars’s parents would change their minds if they could not find the boy. Johan and Johanne became desperate as the time for sailing drew near and they still had not found Lars. After praying about what to do, they received peace and comfort, knowing that the boy would be cared for and treated kindly, and that they should follow through with their plans.

The Larsens left Denmark on November 24, 1854, with their six children: Anne “Catherine” Cecelia (18), Lars “Elias” (15), Christian (11), “Ane” Kirstine (8), “Maren” Kjirstine (5), and Niels (2). Their ship became frozen in the ice for a time on the shores of Norway, but finally arrived at Liverpool, England, on Christmas day. On January 9, 1855, they began their journey to America on the ship *Nesmith*. It is reported that many of their goods were stolen by the crew members on this sailing vessel. The *Nesmith* arrived at New Orleans on February 23, 1855. The immigrants traveled up the Mississippi River by boat to the Missouri River, and then to Mormon Grove, near Atchison, Kansas.

Mary’s father had given money from the sale of his properties to other emigrants who were needy and he now had very little. The family started to homestead a piece of land, living in a dugout for shelter. Johan found work for a dollar a day, but this was not enough to develop the land. The family worked hard, but struggled to survive. Cholera was prevalent in this area of the country. Johan and little Niels became very sick and died. Another convert from Denmark, Jens C. Neilsen, to whom Johan had taught the gospel wrote: “Wednesday, November 7, Died Brother Johann Larsen. cause, the chills and fever. November 8, 1855, He was put in a coffin and buried November 8th at the same burial ground [at Mormon Grove]. ... November 25, 1855, Sunday meeting and in the evening held auction on some things - Johann Larsen’s clothing and Brother Brabands’¹ who recently died, and the proceeds was turned into the branch fund for to help the poor. ... December 10, 1855, I made door for Widow Larsen. ... December 17, 1855, I made for an oxen and finished it the 19th, and commencing to learn J. Larsen’s children to read.”



¹ This is Peter Bravandt of Denmark. His 18-year-old daughter, Emma Bravandt, emigrated in 1856 with the Willie handcart company.

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Maren's brother, Lars, was hidden in this home as his family left Denmark. Lars eventually owned this home. His brother, Christian returned to Denmark on a mission, 1896-98. He enjoyed visiting with Lars, but Lars was not interested in the Church. Anna L. Knudsen, Lars's great-granddaughter, is a member of the Church. She has been to Utah to meet her relatives. (Photo courtesy Anna Knudsen.)

Johanne was also very sick, and not recovering. The Elders advised her to let her children go ahead to the Valley with other companies that were preparing to cross the plains. Catherine had already gone the previous summer and was in Utah preparing the way for her family. Elias and Christian found employment for awhile and then traveled with the A.O. Smoot Company in late 1856. Nine-year-old Ane stayed to care for her mother and came to Utah later. Mary, now six years old, was sent to Florence, Nebraska, to the care of an older English couple, John and Mary Ennion. Johanne had given Mary warm clothing, a feather mattress and bed covers for her journey.

One night when Ane was alone with her mother, Johanne passed away. Little Ane crossed the river in the morning to get friends to take care of the burial. Elias and Christian were not far away at the time of their mother's death, but did not know of it until after she was buried. The five children were now left to fulfill the dreams of their parents in Zion.

Mary and her new guardians joined with the Hunt wagon company in Florence, Nebraska, in August of 1856. This company had previously departed from Iowa City, Iowa, and was following closely with the Martin handcart company. Mary eventually faced more trials due to lack of food and warm clothing, early winter storms and other delays. Mary suffered severe frostbite when the cold weather came. Excerpts from her account, published in the *Deseret Evening News*, 29 June 1897, pg. 8, record Mary's great courage and faith, as well as a remarkable attitude: "I am a living witness of those memorable days. My father and mother both died on the Missouri river, at Mormon Grove. ... My lot fell with unfeeling guardians. The summer following my parents' death, ... we started with our handcarts for Salt Lake City, under command of Captain Hunt. As soon as President Brigham Young learned that there were companies on the road, he started teams and supplies to meet us. [We] camped at the two old log cabins on the other side of Devil's Gate. I was a 7 year-old orphan, without a relative near. My guardians were careless and unfeeling, and perhaps I was a child that did not complain; but, however, when we arrived at those old log cabins my feet were found to be frozen very badly. While there they were thawed out and turned black. The rest of the way I was taken care of by kind friends; all was done that was possible under the circumstances, but my feet both dropped off before we got to the city, which was in December, if I remember correctly. My legs were amputated above the ankles, and then at the knees. My two brothers had reached Salt Lake City in November. How well do I remember our meeting. I told them not to cry so, for I would have my feet again when I got to heaven. I have walked on my knees for forty years; during that time I have had three operations performed at the knees, the last one by Dr. Seymour B. Young, a young man[,] a year ago last November. I was married in 1868 [to Elijah Parsons]. I am the mother of seven children, four sons and three daughters, five of whom are now living. The family I came with soon left the Church and returned East. [Signed] MARY C. JOHNSON PARSONS"

A young woman in the Hunt company, Ann Malin, was one of the "kind friends" spoken of by Mary. After leaving Devil's Gate, Ann was assigned to go as a nurse with the "ambulance" or "sick" wagons. Ann reported in her journal of Mary's frozen feet literally falling off as the wagon jolted along. Ann couldn't bear to see Mary's feet hurt any more, so she carried Mary in her arms and walked alongside the wagon, many times in deep snow. (See Ann Malin in *Tell My Story, Too*.)

Upon reaching the Salt Lake Valley, Mary was taken into the home of Brigham Young. He called Dr. Washington F. Anderson to continue caring for her legs. They did not heal properly and the doctor had to remove both legs just below the kneecaps. Mary remained with the Young family until May of 1857, when Mary's sister, Catherine, was located in Spanish Fork. Catherine was married to Jeppe Sorensen. Jeppe recorded: "My wife gave birth to a daughter on May 5, 1857. I find myself now, by the grace of God, in possession of a larger family because, at the same time, my wife's younger eight-year-old sister arrived on May 7. She had lost both of her legs which had been amputated just below the knees. I, being called to stand at the head of a family, have a great mission."

Brigham Young continued to look after Mary's welfare. When she was about fifteen years old, President Young had a special sewing machine designed for her that she could operate without her feet. Mary learned to sew for others who appreciated her ambition to support herself. Customers gave her a great deal of business and paid her liberally.

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Photo by Jolene Allphin, 2012. Mary's cabin is no longer there. An exact replica was built by her great-grandson, Kent Parsons, deceased, in Monroe, Utah. There is a spring that still flows into a trough close by the front door.

When Mary was 19 years old, she met a young Englishman by the name of Elijah Parsons. Elijah was kind to Mary and assisted her in participating with other young people. They fell in love and were married in the Endowment House on January 11, 1869. Elijah was a mason and plasterer by trade and also a school teacher, having received a good education. He also kept books for local merchants. They lived in Salt Lake, Richfield, Cedar Grove, Grass Valley and then Koosharem, Utah, where they first purchased a piece of land to raise feed for their chickens and cow. Here they built a small cabin. They later moved into town which was two miles away.

Mary was said to never miss a church meeting or a singing practice. If she had work in town on a Saturday, she stayed overnight with friends. She walked on her knees to her meetings, but was nearly always given a ride home. Sometimes her knees became so sore that she would tie gunnysacks on them for a little more protection. The men in town would save their old boots for Mary. She would cut off the heel part, then sew the front opening shut, and she said they made the perfect "shoes" for the stubs of her legs. Mary also took a small chair, cut the legs down, and used it as a "crutch." She could sit down and rest whenever she wanted to. Mary sometimes worked shearing sheep for George Rust. She became so fast and proficient at this work, that the men who worked for Rust wanted him to let her go. Elijah was not skilled or successful at farming and could not find other work in Koosharem. He was eventually required to return to Salt Lake in order to make money for his family's support. Elijah returned to Koosharem after Mary's death.

Mary's oldest child, Arthur, served a mission to the Southern and Northern States from 1898 to 1900. When he returned, he and his two younger brothers built a new home for Mary. Arthur paid for the home. Mary's children wrote of her: "Mary always radiated cheerfulness and no matter how ill she was she tried to tell a humorous story. She had an encouraging word for everyone. [Mary] lived in poverty herself, but was ready to share her last crust with her neighbor. Many times she sat carding wool, spinning yarn, or knitting stockings into the late hours of the night. She sold her work to help support her family. During the last years of her life she endured intense suffering. [She had asthma, was swollen with dropsy, and needed a major operation.] As long as she was able to be propped up in bed she would knit stockings which she sold, and it was her desire that the money should be added to the amount she had put away to help meet her funeral expenses when she should pass beyond the veil. She also made quilts and did wash for other families. She was known to walk for two miles on her knees to help someone in need. Being well-versed in the doctrines of the Church, she taught her children the gospel, which is lovingly remembered by them. Many times she remarked, "I am sure that I shall have my feet and legs after the resurrection."

Mary died of pneumonia at noon on November 7, 1910, in Koosharem, Utah. Years later, her son, Will, was in a Richfield hospital, close to death himself. When his family came to visit him one day, he told them, "I don't need to worry now about dying or what the future holds for me, because my mother has been here to see me. She looked as she used to except she was taller and had her feet and legs." Descendants of the surviving orphans of Johan and Johanne Larsen have said that their parents never even hinted at bitterness for their emigration experiences: "They all radiated faith, cheerfulness and courage to the last days of their [lives]."

Maren Kjirstine & daughter, Hannah



Ane Kjirstine



Ane Catherine



Elias



Christian



Sources: Daughters of Utah Pioneers history files; A History of Sevier County, by M. Guy Bishop; "Diary of Jens C. Nielsen," copy from Church Family History library; letters and pictures from Anna Lise Knudsen, great-granddaughter of Lars Christian Johansen, Viborg, Denmark, March 2, 2005; "Elijah Parsons," by Wendell Parsons; Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel website; "Diary of Jeppe Sorensen," translations by Arliss W. Jensen, 1961, and N.P. Rasmussen, 1939; "Journal of Elijah Parsons," courtesy R. Kent Parsons, along with volumes of information and research. (Kent is the great-grandson of Maren and Elijah Parsons.); Ann Malin family histories.