
AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF ELIZA DANA GIBBS

Maurine Carr Ward

Eliza Dana Gibbs was born April 14, 1813 in the township of Watertown, Jefferson, New York to Francis Dana and Huldah Root. When she was seven, her father moved the family to a farm in Hammond, St. Lawrence County, New York.

When Eliza was about twenty years old, she joined the Methodist Church, as her mother also belonged to that faith, but after two or three years, Eliza left the church. She could not accept the Methodist doctrine of eternal punishment, and began to pray day and night, almost unceasingly, for the Lord to give her a testimony that there was a God and a hereafter. In this anxious state of mind, Eliza became very ill. She became extremely distressed as she lay in bed thinking she was going to die and contemplating what life would be like. Finally one night, a beautiful vision opened up to her where she was able to glimpse the beauties of eternity, as she later wrote. A personage ministered to her, casting away all of Eliza's doubts and fears, leaving only a peaceful calmness. Shortly afterward, Eliza was introduced to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. To her delight, the doctrines of this church agreed with the beliefs in her heart.

... In the latter part of the winter of the year 1837, a young man--a boy rather, for he was not more than seventeen or eighteen years of age--came from Canada to father's and wanted to hire out. Being in the winter father had very little for hired help to do, but the Lord opened his heart to hire him and the same evening he let us know he was a Mormon.

He was the first Mormon, or Latter Day Saint I had seen, and of course knew nothing about their faith, but as soon as he began to

preach his doctrine I perceived it was bible doctrine and as he progressed in explaining his faith, I also discovered that the principles he taught were the same I had adopted, and I told him it was useless to preach that doctrine to me for I already believed it.

I had always been a great bible reader from a child, having read the New Testament through seven times by course and the Old Testament once, besides a great amount of casual reading, but for some time previous I had perused the Scriptures with a new zeal or motive for knowledge and had prayed earnestly to be directed to the truth, and the Lord heard and answered my prayers and enlightened my mind and led me to an understanding of those principles which I afterwards learned were taught by the Latter Day Saints. So between this young Latter Day Saint and myself there existed no chance for an argument. As for Joseph Smith and the book of Mormon I knew nothing about them only what he told us so I had nothing to say about them. The name of this young man was Elijah Austin. I don't think he remained with us over a month. . . .

The next winter in 1837 there was quite a company of the Saints came over from Canada and stopped in Hammond until spring, enroute for Missouri. Elders John E. Page and James Blakesly were among the number. They held meetings in a schoolhouse opposite to [my] Brother Charles. Charles and wife, sister Mary and myself attended the meetings. Charles and wife soon believed and were baptized. Mary and myself believed and embraced the gospel a few days after. This was about the first of April.

The week before we were baptized brother George and a Mr. Copland who had taught school the previous winter in the aforesaid schoolhouse came over to fathers, Mr. Copland to bid us goodbye as he was going to start for home. they both exerted all the influence they could to change our minds and induce us to give up the idea, told us we would be despised, that all our friends would be ashamed of us, etc., etc. When George saw that such arguments had no weight with us, he told us it would kill Mother, she surely would not survive the disgrace. . . . I told him if our joining the Mormons would kill her she would have to die, that I was fully convinced that the doctrine of the Latter Day Saints was the truth and that it was my duty to embrace it, that I should do so and leave Mother in the hands of God.

My father did not belong to any church and did not oppose us, neither did brother James. James was a believer but never obeyed. He took his clothes at one time and started for baptism but business prevented him at that time and he never started again. . . . I had always implicitly obeyed Mother and it sorely grieved me to cause her pain. Nothing but a sense of duty would have influenced me to have caused her trouble. Both my sister and myself dearly loved our Mother and we went forth into the waters of baptism with aching hearts.

Close by on the banks of Chippewa bay, in which we were immersed, stood a large house, in which several families of the Saints had taken up a temporary residence until spring, thither we repaired to change our clothing and receive confirmation. Elder John E. Page officiated in the ordinances. As soon as I was confirmed the comforter in very truth rested upon me, insomuch, it would not have disturbed me had the whole world been arrayed against me. My trouble and anxiety in regard to Mother and all else was swallowed up in a heavenly peace. Soon after this Mother returned home and was taken sick. I was somewhat fearful that brother's prediction would be verified. She was confined to her bed for two or three weeks; but the Lord raised her up for a better end. When she began to recover she began searching the bible for scripture to confound our faith, but instead of

that she converted herself to the truth and the ensuing summer she obeyed the gospel herself.

That spring, Charles sold his farm, intending to go to Missouri, but instead took his family to Oneida County New York. Eventually, Eliza and Mary and their mother moved there with them. James married a Mormon woman and stayed on the homestead with his father. Three years later, George and his family moved to Nauvoo, Illinois. Mary and her husband, Benjamin Hawkins, moved to Lockport, Niagra County, taking Mary and her mother along. After they moved there, two or three elders came in the area and organized a small branch of the Church. One of the young men who joined at that time was William Gibbs, the son of Josiah Gibbs and Ruth Williams. William and Eliza were married on April 16, 1844, and a few days later the extended family started for Nauvoo.

When we got within one hundred and eighty miles of Nauvoo the roads were so fearfully bad we stopped four weeks for them to improve. While there we received news of the death of the prophet Joseph. Notwithstanding we had none of us ever seen him it cast such a gloom over our minds that it seemed to blight all our future prospects.

In a few days, however, we journeyed on, but when we arrived at Nauvoo it was not the Nauvoo we had anticipated; all was gloom and sadness, and as time passed on sorrow and distress seemed to mark us for their particular victims. It was not long before I was stricken down with the fever that prevailed there but was soon raised up through the administration of apostle Orson Pratt. I was in excruciating agony with the fever in my head. It felt as though it lay near a scorching hot fire; and before Brother Pratt lifted his hands from my head the pain and fever were all gone and returned no more. Soon after, Sister Mary was laid low by the fell-destroyer and after two weeks of severe suffering she bade farewell to this sphere of sin and sorrow. While she was sick, William was also stricken down and confined to his bed for three weeks. After Mary's death the care of her family devolved on me, but the care of the babe was of short duration, for it died in about a month after her mother, a sweet little angel too beautiful for this wicked world. The other one, Eliza Ann, we kept and raised.

After William got well he went to work on the temple and continued there through the winter. In the spring he went to work in Knewel's Knight's flouring mill. He was a carpenter by trade, but very little of that work was done in Nauvoo at that time as the people were preparing to leave. He continued to work in the mill until the forepart of August when he was taken down again with the prevailing scourge of the place--the fever, and while he was sick and senseless not seeming to know anyone or anything, the period arrived, August 27, [1845] when I gave birth to a son. Those were days long to be remembered, as indeed were all the days of Nauvoo, filled up with bitter trials and deep sorrow and mourning, but the Lord strengthened us to struggle through, as he did many others. We named our son after his two grandfathers, Josiah Francis.

In the fall the mob commenced to drive the Saints from their settlements in the country, burning their houses and grain and shooting down their cattle and stock of all kinds. They fled to Nauvoo for refuge and shelter until every house was filled to overflowing. The house we lived in was owned by a man who lived in the country and wanted the house. There was not a house or room, worthy the name, to be rented for any price and we had to take shelter in a place that was little more than a shelter. It was clapboarded on the outside but not plastered inside and the clapboards were so old and warped that we could stick our hands through between the boards all around the sides of the house.

Mother was quite aged and she had to sit in the big arm chair, wrapped in a bed quilt and hold Josiah close to the fire to keep from freezing, still our situation was better than those poor wanderers on the bleak prairies who left their comfortable homes in the tempestuous and stormy month of February [1846] and crossed the Mississippi on the ice to seek new homes amid the savages of the rocky deserts with no shelter save tents and wagon covers.

Eliza's brother Charles and family were among the first to leave Nauvoo that February. In May, William went to nearby Bonepart to work in a flour mill. When he returned for his family, he was informed by a non-Mormon friend that he would be arrested in the morning

if he didn't leave. Consequently, during the night William went back to the ferry and across the Mississippi River to safety in Montrose. Eliza was left alone to move her family to join him. From there, they journeyed on to Bonepart, twenty-five miles from Nauvoo, and found a couple of rooms with several other families of Saints.

William worked in the mill until January. Mob action and violence had grown worse during the winter months. Mormons were arrested on the pretense of theft. The justice of the peace in nearby Farmington told his people that he would commit every Mormon they would bring before them, and he kept his word. The arrested Saints were then sent to Keodawqua jail, a log building with large cracks between the logs, and placed in irons in the cold room.

William was one of these unfortunates whom these malicious demons had selected on whom to vent their hellish rage; notwithstanding he had been steady all the time at the mill, had not lost a day. He was arrested on the first day of January and was held in confinement eight weeks. I visited him twice the forepart of his confinement. I was then taken sick and brought to the verge of the grave.

After two months, William was freed, through the assistance of two honest lawyers. He was asked to return to work at the mill, but Eliza says they decided to leave for Mt. Pisgah. There they met her brother Charles' family in destitute circumstances; he was away on a mission back east. William and Eliza shared their supplies with the other family, but soon that was gone and they lived the rest of the winter on corn bread and cold water, as did other Saints there. All of the family, including Eliza's mother, were sick that winter.

Throughout the next few years, William and Eliza moved from Mt. Pisgah up the Coon river to work in a saw mill, then on to Alden, Illinois where William worked as a carpenter and did some farming. During this time Eliza gave birth to Mary Amanda in 1849, Imogene Josephene in 1850, and Medora Victoria in 1854. Eliza's mother passed away in 1851, at eighty-six years of age. During all of this time, William tried to earn the money necessary to take his family to the Salt Lake Valley.

In 1857, brother Charles was finishing up a mission in England. He wrote that he wanted William's family to meet him in Iowa City and travel west with

him. When William and Eliza arrived there, the company had left without them, so they joined a Danish company of Saints, none of whom spoke English. In Council Bluffs, William and Eliza joined with another company under captain William Young. They arrived in Salt Lake City on September 25, 1857.

Eliza's days of wandering were not over, however. After living in a rented house in Salt Lake until spring, William moved the family to Santaquin, then back to Salt Lake where they ran a boarding house. Eliza's niece, Eliza Ann, married a man named Wesley S. Trescott, who had been living in the boarding house and had been converted to the Mormon faith. William and Wesley purchased a piece of land in the Fourteenth Ward in Salt Lake and each built a house.

... I was quite happy and contented to get into a house we could call home. But my peace and quiet was of short duration. Mr. Trescott was a tanner by trade and Bishop Thomas Calaster of Fillmore (being acquainted with him), wrote to him requesting him to come and take charge of the Fillmore tannery. He accepted the offer and in a short time moved his wife. This was a source of much disquietude. It left me very lonely ... but it was not long before Mr. Trescott prevailed with William to move there (to Fillmore) also.

... We were getting our place fixed up with fruit trees and small fruit shrubbery, strawberries, etc. We were getting along fine when William decided to move to Fillmore. It came very near laying me in a sickbed, but my influence was without avail, so I tried to make the best of it and comfort myself with the reflection that I would be with Eliza Ann again and enjoy her society, which reconciled me in a great measure to the move.

We sold our place for a mere trifle compared with its real value and invested our interests in Fillmore. This was in the last of the year 1863, December 25th. We remained with Mr. Trescott and wife about two weeks, then rented two rooms in William King's house. In February 11, 1864, Eliza Ann gave birth to a daughter, and died in a few hours after--thus leaving me desolate and forlorn, nearly heart-broken, in a strange land, a place that was repugnant to me from the first and much more so always after the death of Eliza Ann.

Later William and Eliza moved to Deseret, Millard County, Utah, where Eliza died in February 1900. She wrote this autobiography in 1890, while living in Deseret.