

There appeared an article in the San Juan Record in 2009 about the wives of Benjamin Perkins by Buckley Jensen

GIANTS OF SAN JUAN

In the century between 1850 and 1950, the vast majority of women in the United States toiled in anonymity raising large families and often losing babies at birth or to childhood diseases.

There were none of the conveniences to assist in keeping clothes and homes clean; no Mister Rogers to entertain the kids. There was not much of anything, really, by current standards, except vast distances between small towns and the ever present concern of having enough to eat and keeping the kids alive when accidents or diseases came.

In the wild untamed country that was southeastern Utah they had their faith, music, dancing and each other in the unlikely event that there would be time to enjoy anything after an exhausting day of simply surviving. Very few of these heroic women are immortalized in bronze today along the highways and byways of the American West.

Their husbands are the ones that look down at us from their dashing steeds and heroic poses. It was also their husbands who got most of the ink and credit for taming the West. But our male heroes could never have done it without equally great women in their lives.

Two noble women came to America from Wales in the last half of the 19th Century, shared a husband, brought 22 children into the world, raised 18 of those children to maturity, toiled from daylight until dark virtually every day of their lives and quietly passed into history. They are buried in humble graves on either side of Benjamin Perkins in the Monticello Cemetery.

They would hardly be remembered today, except for the fact that there are thousands of men and women across the world who call these women Grandmother.

Because journals were kept and stories were written, today's generations of grandchildren are inspired by the enormous example of strength, character and integrity woven into the lives of these two beloved Grandmothers.

Here is their story:

MARY ANN WILLIAMS PERKINS

Mary Ann was the older sister of Sarah. She was born on August 27, 1851 at Thanthed, Glamorganshire, Wales to Evan and Mary Davies Williams.

She was the oldest of seven boys and five girls and, as such, she was looked to for comfort from the younger children and expected to help in all the duties of the home.

At age 14, she was baptized into the LDS Church. She led the way and set the example for her family to follow. She had come to know a young man seven years older through church activities. His name was Benjamin Perkins. The day he left for Zion (America) he proposed to her and she accepted. He promised to earn money for her passage to the Salt Lake Valley and she promised to write and wait until he sent for her.

Both were true to that verbal commitment and they were married by Apostle Heber C. Kimball in the endowment house in Salt Lake City on October 4, 1869. They moved to Cedar City and built a home.

In 1879, Ben and Mary Ann were called to make a settlement in the San Juan Country of southeastern Utah. Mary Ann had four small children at the time, but accompanied her husband and survived what

many have since called “the most difficult single pioneering effort in the history of the West.”

Mary Ann said, “We started out in Bluff living in our wagons, which formed a circle for protection until the men got the fort built.”

Life was difficult at best. To make matters worse for Mary Ann, Ben was called to take another wife. He fasted and prayed about it. He spent long hours pondering the problems and consequences that would follow.

Finally he approached Mary Ann and asked her permission to take her sister Sara as his second wife. Mary Ann was shocked and deeply hurt. Even though many of her closest friends lived “the principle” (polygamy), she initially decided that her answer was no! However, after the shock wore off, she realized that she had to do it. She gave her consent, not without reservations and predictions of difficult times ahead. She refused to attend the wedding of her husband and little sister.

Later, her daughter Katherine Perkins Ryan said, “The resigned manner in which mother accepted and lived polygamy reveals a spiritual understanding and a loyalty to her husband and to her God that challenges any outward performance of religion at its best, and imbues one with the desire to emulate the nobleness of her soul. The sacrifices and inner conflicts of her life left a strength of character and self control that fortified her life.”

Albert R. Lyman described his Aunt Mary Ann thusly: “Chastity and modesty formed essential fibers in her refined nature and though she believed and accepted the gospel, her training had been such that the practice of polygamy came as a very great trial.

“We, who have our being from that second marriage are particularly grateful to her, and keenly appreciative of her hard sacrifices which have contributed so generously to our well being.”

The first summer and winter, the family lived in Monticello, their home was an old dirt-roof cellar. Finally Ben finished a two-room cabin. This was their home until Ben built a rock house with five rooms, a basement and an upstairs area. Mary Ann was grateful to finally have a home of her own. The beauty of her home was known far and wide.

Mary Ann’s family reached its limit on June 5, 1893, when she gave birth to little Claude. He, like three of the family before died shortly after birth.

From the journals of her children, we read: “She was a capable and practical nurse and did much to care for the sick in the pioneer communities where trained doctors and nurses were scarce and often unavailable.”

“She was one so dainty, retiring and unassuming that her daily life passed by almost unnoticed, so gently, so effectively and so orderly did she perform her duties.”

“The best and the lowliest ate at her table and the meanest were never turned away. Never did foul or profane words escape her lips. She had a dignity that knew no caste and a quality of soul that money cannot buy, nor education instill.”

“An embodiment of refinement, sympathy and courage. A Lady in purple always, no matter the quality or color of her gown.”

Mary Ann died of a stroke October 12, 1912. Many people, young and old, came long distances to pay honor to her memory. She was buried in Monticello October 14, 1912.

SARAH WILLIAMS PERKINS

Sarah Williams was born at Llantwit Vardre Wales on May 23, 1860 the sixth child of a family of twelve. Her parents gave their children the freedom to join any church they wanted and Sarah grew up a Methodist.

When her family emigrated to America, "My minister was much concerned about my going to Utah. He warned me repeatedly to keep away from the Mormons. He presented me with a Bible and a hymn book to keep me going aright."

The Williams family, less Mary Ann, who had already gone several years earlier, sailed from Liverpool England to America in 1878.

They made the journey to Salt Lake City from England in the unheard of time of 23 days: 12 on the ship, and 11 days on the train. They traveled by wagon from Salt Lake to Cedar City and were reunited with Mary Ann and Ben. Sarah was still a member of the Methodist Church at that time, but because there was only one church to go to in Cedar City, she soon became involved in church affairs there and later joined the LDS Church.

When Ben and Mary Ann were called to go to San Juan in 1879, Sarah was talked into going along to drive a team and help Mary Ann care for four young children. She enjoyed the trip despite danger and the hardship.

As Bluff was settled and Ben was asked to take another wife, he asked Sarah to be his second wife.

Sarah later wrote, "My parents were dead against the idea. My father told me that he would rather bury me than see me go into the principal (polygamy). My parents told me that should I enter therein I would never be allowed to come home again".

Nevertheless, on October 28, 1881, Benjamin Perkins and Sarah Williams were married in the St. George Temple. Sarah tried again and again to visit her parents but the door was always shut in her face. "Hard as all this was to bear, I felt in my soul that I had made no mistake and that they would be made to see they were wrong." It was some time, however, before Sarah's parents softened their attitude toward her.

Sarah had five children born to her while living in Bluff. She was alone much of the time. She took in washing and worked long hours in the garden to provide the little ones with food to eat.

"I cannot think of those days of severe trials without recalling the many kind acts of helpfulness from so many of my friends, chief among them our Bishop Jens Nielson, who was ever solicitous of our welfare.

"One of the most trying times came when my twin girls were born. They weighed at birth two and one-half pounds and three pounds. For nine months we despaired of their lives. Our lights were never out and for weeks at a time I never had my clothes off to sleep," Sarah later wrote.

"Many were the trying times we had with the Indians. Not only would they pilfer and steal, but would threaten our lives if we did not give them what they asked for. Once I had an Indian boy chop some wood, promising bread for his work. When he finished, he refused the bread and demanded money. I had no money to give him.

He left in a rage and returned with his father, who was a Ute Chief named Mancos Jim. I explained the situation to the father, but he said, 'My son no lie' and demanded money. When I could not meet their demands they threatened to come back when I was asleep and burn my house and my papooses."

Once, as Sarah sat in Church in Bluff a sudden feeling came to her so strong she quickly left the building and hurried home. All her children were with her at Church, and she had no idea what would be going on at home but she arrived and found an Indian in the act of carrying off the little food she had.

Her children's Christmases were difficult. Sometimes there was nothing to give them for gifts. One year she was able to secure enough yarn to knit each of her children a pair of stockings.

"I worked for hours each night after they had gone to sleep and was so pleased that they would each have a gift on Christmas morning. When I had them all knitted, I washed them and hung them out to dry. When no one was looking one of my dusky neighbors helped himself to every pair and my children had nothing that Christmas."

In 1907, her husband decided it would be best if both families were in Monticello. "Accordingly, we were required to establish ourselves in a new home at Monticello. It was a trial for me to leave my dear friends in Bluff. The people there had been so near and dear to me."

Sarah's large family moved from place to place in Monticello until Mary Ann died. Sarah moved into the big rock home Ben had built for Mary Ann.

Those early years in Monticello were wrought with many problems common to frontier towns. The children attended school in a two-room log building in which eight grades were taught by two teachers. The school house also served as the Church and the amusement hall.

Later in 1885, a brick schoolhouse was built. In 1916 five acres of land were purchased from Ben Perkins on Main Street on which the large brick school building was built in 1936. (Where the old school stood is today Veteran's Memorial Park.)

Gladys Perkins Lyman, wife of Albert R. Lyman and the daughter of Sarah Perkins, recalls the following about her mother: "as far back in my life as I can remember, Mother seemed to be very much in tune with the infinite and had many spiritual manifestations. I recall that in the early spring of 1899, as we were preparing for morning prayer, Mother said, 'We will get bad news today.' That was before telephones and the mail was brought on horseback. Later that day, mail brought the news of the death of Mary Davies Williams, my mother's mother."

Gladys continued, "When the Decker family got diphtheria and the whole town was in great anxiety for them, as Mother arose one morning she said, 'One of the Decker family passed away last night. We will hear about it as soon as people are up and stirring.'

"And sure enough, one of their children had died in the night. Mother told us of other deaths and disasters that had befallen people, before any news of the events could have reached us by mortal means."

Death came to this remarkable little woman on June 30, 1943. Daniel B. Perkins, a son of her sister Mary Ann, spoke at the funeral and said. "I think, never before in my life, have I attempted to visualize the life of an individual that seems to have been more complete than Sarah Williams Perkins." She was buried in Monticello on July 2, 1943 next to her husband and sister.

Sarah Williams Perkins had 10 adult children who bore her 60 grandchildren. Forty-four of the 60 grandchildren bore her a total of 235 great grandchildren. Assuming each of her great great grandchildren added four children to her posterity she would have had 940 great-great-great grandchildren.

If those 940 each have three children, (and many of the ones I know have much larger families) Sarah

will have 2,820 great-great-great-great-grandchildren in the fifth generation bringing her down-line to a total of 3,865.

Then add Mary Ann's posterity, which was only slightly smaller than Sarah's and Ben Perkins would likely have over 5,000 descendants in his direct down-line today.

Add in all the in-laws that have been grafted in to the Perkins family through marriage, and the total in a little more than a century becomes absolutely stunning... probably more than the combined populations of Monticello and Blanding, and Bluff combined.

There are no bronze statues built to the memory of these two noble pioneer woman who were so instrumental in the settlement and the building up of San Juan County. But, imagine, if you can, the mansions they have earned in a higher sphere.

So the leaves and the snows continue to fall over the graves wherein lie the mortal remains of those humble Welsh immigrants who endured to the end. The quality of their lives stand tall today as magnificent monuments left to all of us, to their church and to their God.