

HISTORICAL SKETCH OF BENGT NELSON

Mormonism brought many thousands of converts from the poverty and want of the overcrowded Old World to the poverty with opportunity to dig out that was early day Utah. Most of those emigrants, stimulated by the spirit of the people and the leadership of the Church, built comfortable homes as fast as they could, developed farms, acquired property and livestock and became independent and happy. They became the best type of citizens that any country can have, sturdy, honest, thrifty, industrious, steadfast, Bengt Nelson was one of these.

Bengt was born in Lomma, Sweden September 28, 1834. He came of sturdy, honest stock. The family were Lutherans. The father was not a very religious man but the mother was very devout. She read the Bible daily aloud to her family and taught her children prayer and all the Christian virtues.

The Nelson family was poor and the old father slaved early and late to keep the wolf from their door. He rented a small farm for which he paid three full days' work out of every week in the year as rental. Then he did his own work early and late and hired out during the usual working hours of the three days that were left to increase the family's meager income. He was a strong and willing worker and always had employment at the top wages, which in all his life never exceeded twenty cents a day. When the boy Bengt was ten years of age he was hired out to herd swine at five cents a day, and a year later he went from farm to farm threshing grain with a flail at ten cents a day, and that was considered good wages.

In his early teens the boy went to live with his mother's brother, a building contractor in Malmo, Sweden, to learn the mason trade. He liked the work, was ambitious to learn and soon became a master tradesman. At eighteen he left his uncle and went into contracting on his own. His first job was building a good sized store, and on this he did a good job and made good money on the contract.

The family home now was in the little village of Terraberga and about that time stories were circulating about a strange new religion from America which the Government was trying to suppress. The newspapers told of its missionaries being arrested and locked up, of forbidden meetings being broken up, and that some of its missionaries had been banished from the country. The stories were causing quite a commotion.

One day Bengt was invited by a friend to attend some conference meetings of the sect in Malmo and he walked fifteen miles to go and hear what the Mormons had to say for themselves. The meetings were held in April 15, 1854 and Bengt sat through them all and listened with keenest interest and surprise. Every word of the sermons and testimonies thrilled him and he knew that he had listened to the true gospel of Jesus Christ. At the close of the conference he walked up and applied for baptism and was granted his wish that evening.

Bengt soon learned what answering his conscience was going to cost. His new found faith seemed so simple and glorious to him that he thought everybody would accept it if only they would listen to its glad message. He went first to his uncle, the man from whom he learned his trade and with whom he had always been such a favorite. The man was shocked. He flew into a rage and drove Bengt away from his home. His father and his sisters, one married and one single, hung their heads in sorrow but said nothing. His friends and companions withdrew from him in cold disdain. He could not understand them and he felt like the world all at once was turning against him.

He read his Bible and the tracts the missionaries had given him and the Lord heard his prayers and comforted him. Then one day his married sister and her husband joined the Church and a little later his younger sister also. Still the good old father listened and said nothing. Persecution grew intense against the family and those that had joined the Church decided to emigrate to Utah.

November 19, 1854 in company with 143 other Scandinavian Saints they bade good-bye to Sweden and set sail for America, the land of their hopes.

Things went badly for them from the start. Rough seas battered their boat so badly that they were transferred to another at Liverpool. Bad weather continued and after several days at sea this boat put back to Liverpool for repairs. The company transferred to a third boat in which they finally reached New Orleans February 23, 1855. A trip up the Mississippi River in a steamboat brought them to Saint Louis where they met Apostle Erastus Snow.

The Nelsons by now had spent all their money and had to drop out of the company of Saints with whom they were traveling. The brother-in-law found work and remained in St. Louis but Bengt and his younger sister, Caroline, on the advice of Erastus Snow, went up the Missouri River to a cooler climate.

At Atchison, Kansas, Bengt got work at his trade. He was sent out at two dollars a day and board to build houses and stables for the government at Fort Kearney. Caroline found work as a housemaid in Atchison. On shipboard Caroline had found another Swedish girl of her own age named Ellen Johnson and the two became fast friends. They had stuck together and at Atchison Ellen too, had taken employment as a housemaid with a family named Saxon. A little girl of the family named Ida was Ellen's special charge. When Ida Saxon grew up she married William McKinley, moved to the White House and became America's first lady.

When at last the Nelsons had accumulated enough means to take up their journey to Utah, Caroline begged Bengt to let Ellen Johnson come with them. It was arranged with Captain Frank Woolley that the girls would cook for the camp and Bengt would pay thirty dollars extra passage money for Ellen's fare. Out on the plain one morning Bengt told the girls he had dreamed in the night that he and Ellen would get married and asked if she thought "such a thing could ever come to pass", "Yes" she said quietly, "it will come to pass and Captain Woolley will perform the ceremony. I had the same dream last night". One week after they reached Salt Lake City the dreams were literally fulfilled.

Leaving Caroline in Salt Lake City with friends, on the advice of President Young, Bengt and his bride of a week joined a company who were coming south to settle Iron County. They arrived in Cedar City late in November, 1856, with all their earthly possessions in two small bundles on their backs. The bishop sent them alone to Iron Springs to herd cattle for the winter. Their only shelter was a dugout in the side of the creek bed. A small recess in the bank served as heater and cook stove. The roof and front enclosure were made of willows and their very scanty bedding was kept up off the damp ground by a few pieces of old lumber. The Indians gave them some bad frights and took all their food supplies a time or two and while Bengt herded the cattle during the day, Ellen sat shuddering and weeping alone in the dungeon that was their home. It was the dreariest winter of their lives, and that was their honeymoon.

In the spring they moved to Cedar City, obtaining a lot in the new townsite, they built a dugout and were the third family to settle in the present city. The people then were living in the old fort. Coming thus early, Bengt found employment at his trade building homes in the new city. He was the only mason here after the big move of 1858, and up to the late 1870's he built every brick and adobe house and every public building in the city. He planned and supervised the building of our fine old tabernacle that many architects praised for its beauty of line and proportion.

In April 1877, Brother Nelson was called to take a mission to his native land. He started at once and served two years in that field. While there he fought out his religious differences with the uncle who had driven him from his home and had the great joy of bringing him and his wife with others of his kinfolk into the Church. Returning home he was chosen a member of the bishopric and was prominent in Church work all the rest of his life.

By thrift, industry and good management he became well-to-do financially, yet spirituality was his dominating characteristic. His life was so circumspect and upright that no one ever thought of questioning his honesty or integrity. In this he became a sort of community standard, and "as honest as Bengt Nelson" was a common saying. Through all his active life he was placed in positions of responsibility and trust in both civic and religious affairs. He was city councilman, city treasurer, president of the **Coop Store**, president of the Cedar Sheep Association, school trustee for many years, president of several field corporations and many lesser positions. He and his faithful wife gave free and ready support to every worthy movement. When he prayed, a listener knew that he was talking to the Lord and that no one else was in his mind.

Dame Fortune dropped a choice plum in the lap of Cedar City when she sent Bengt and Ellen Nelson here to live. They were among the city's most useful ,most faithful, mostexemplary and steadfast citizens and Church members. Sister Nelson died January 10, 1910 and her worthy husband followed her to the great beyond April 22, 1919.

by William R. Palmer

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