

BIOGRAPHY of Wallace B. & Orson Spencer

THE EARLY YEARS

KANAB

So many times along the road of life we see the light in other's windows and contemplate what lies within. Often we judge from the magnificence of the structure that all is well for those who dwell inside. Then beyond the bend comes into view a smaller, modest home where lights shine less brightly. We assume life within is meager or less desirable with a lesser joy. This is not always true. So often we view life through outward images when the true and lasting pictures of life are found within.

Every home has "hidden windows" whose scenes reveal the secrets of life. One of these might be a common, dusty photo album lying on the shelf, or an old trunk full of pictures and memorabilia of former days. Its outward appearance, whether expensive leather, quilted calico, or faded cardboard, is really far less important than the secrets it holds. Sealed within its cover, hazy reflections of the past become brighter, and the pictures, letters, and other long forgotten bits of information piece together a clearer view of life from within that home.

We search through the treasure and slowly turn back the pages of time. Frame by frame, we see beyond the inscriptions below, and leaf through the memories of small and simple things that make us who we are. Step with us from the mundane of today into the magic of the pasta bright summer day with the hillside in full bloom. Delicate blue bells and masses of flaming paintbrush dot the foothills in the early morning sun. Over the hill we hear the laughter of two little boys, Orson and Wallace, pulling a little red wagon.

Orson Burnham Spencer was born at the family home in Kanab, Utah on April 15, 1918 to Ivie May Burnham Spencer and Joseph Gurnsey Spencer. He was named for his great grandfather, Orson Spencer, who was a stalwart in the Church, a great missionary and educator. However, his mother said she liked the name

because to her it said "our son". He was blessed and given the name by his father on June 2, 1918. Two and a half years later, December 3, 1920 another baby boy brightened the home of this little family. He was named Wallace Burnham Spencer in honor of his mother's father, Wallace Clinton Burnham.

When Wallace grew and learned to walk and talk, Orson felt the need for a new baby in the family, so at Christmastime, he asked his mother for a baby doll, one that could sleep and say "Mama", and his mother wisely saw that Santa left one. When he was nearly five years old, he was watching his mother sew baby clothes and she told him that a baby was coming to live with them. This time he coaxed for a baby girl so that he could help dress her in a pretty dress with a bow in the back. Then on March 30, 1923 a little baby came to bless the home the third time and make complete this little family. She was named Ann Spencer.

Wallace's father, Joseph Gurnsey Brown Spencer, lovingly know as Gurn, was born in Kanab, Utah on June 29, 1881 to Persis Ann Brown and Howard Orson Spencer. He died April 17, 1928. Although he never had the opportunity for an outlined course of study, he achieved a great deal. He acted as a school teacher, set up a printing press and edited a paper, "The Clipper" for several years, acted as county clerk, attorney, and civil engineer. He was very public minded, anxious and willing to do anything for progress and improvement.

His mother, Ivie Mae Burnham Spencer was born in Richmond, Utah, May 13, 1891 to Wallace Clinton Burnham and Anna Christina Hansen. She died Nov 22, 1926 in a diabetic coma. After graduating from Utah Agricultural College with a teacher's degree in home economics, she went to Kanab to teach school. Here she met and fell in love with Gurn Spencer. They were married in the Logan temple on June 27, 1917.

Summer's magic filled sunny days in Kanab. Orson and Wallace were inseparable and the bond strengthened as they grew. As granaries filled with ripened grain, wagons filled with meadow hay -- these were days for playing with make-believe horses and cattle made of dry bones, and wagons and carts made of empty sardine cans, times for hide and seek when the goal post was on the south porch of the red brick house, days for pushing hoops made from iron bands of broken wagon wheels. Digging tunnels in the sand banks along the wash, playing stick horses, herding cows along the roadside on a sleepy summer afternoon and bringing them home for milking and returning them to the pasture the next morning.¹

¹Taken from notes dictated by Orson Spencer to his wife, Olga, before his death.

Family life in Kanab in the family home brings many happy memories. The red brick house was quite a large one for those days, and well it needed to be, for Orson's family shared the home with his father's brother, Uncle Homer, and his wife, Aunt Clara, and their growing family of five children, and Grandmother Brown, a queenly woman who was Orson and Wallace and Ann's great-grandmother. The home was purchased by Joseph Gurnsey Brown for his wife, Harriet, (Grandma Brown) in 1894 from John Rider. Harriet said that the thing she loved most about the house was the large deep basement with rock walls, white-washed interior and dirt floors that could be wet down each morning making a cool place to keep milk, butter and other foods. After Joseph Gurnsey died, Harriet's two grandsons, Homer and Gurn, and their wives and families moved into the home with her. Orson's grandmother, Harriet, moved her things into a large east bedroom on the front of the house. Here she spent her old age sewing, reading, and visiting friends and relatives, coming out for meals and visits with grandchildren and great grandchildren. Orson spoke of his Grandmother Brown in loving terms. She passed away at the age of 93 after Orson and Wallace had moved to Yost.

Clara, Homer, and their family occupied the west part of the home, while Orson's family had the northeast bedroom and the middle living-dining room. From the living-dining room, a stairway led to the upstairs bedrooms where the children slept. The floors were covered with braided scatter rugs. There was a large fireplace in one end of the living room which provided heat. Then, of course, there was the coal and wood range in the kitchen and it became Orson's chore to see that there was ample wood behind the stove in the wood box.

When we asked Aunt Edna what they did for fun as children, she said, "Oh mostly ran around yelling." And there must have been plenty of noise between the two families. Wallace tagged Orson like he was his shadow. He was more aggressive than Orson and when there was any trouble between the families, Wallace usually got the blame. In fact, he earned many a spanking from Aunt Clara when he got her children in trouble.

Pleasant memories of their childhood include frequent visits to Uncle Neff Hamblin and Aunt Linda at Hamblin's goat farm at Johnson, south of Kanab. Linda was really their mother's cousin, but everyone always affectionately called her "Aunt Linda".

There were also frequent visits with their father's sister, Aunt Bessie, but she moved from Kanab when they were still very young. All these relatives were such special people in their young lives and showed them such never-ending love.

Another page turns, revealing . . . sun bleached and barefooted young Orson on the end of a rope tied to his blind father, and Wallace, two years younger,

crying to go too.

Yes, indeed, summers in Kanab were barefoot, happy days. Orson was very much attached to his father. Before his father's blindness, Orson recalled going with him on a surveying trip above Three Lakes where he remembered his father driving stakes. He ran ahead and asked his father, "Do you think I can run fast enough to outrun a rattlesnake?" He recalled walking the flume from Three Lakes to Kanab and helping his father clean out the rocks and brush. He also remembered going with Gurn to Cave Lake to get cattle and camping overnight.

When his father's health began deteriorating because of a brain tumor and his joints were tortured by arthritis, he needed the support gained by holding someone's hand, even a child's. He hardly ever left the house without Orson. Orson went with him when he went surveying, ran through the alfalfa fields after him herding sheep. Because he was gradually losing his sight, Orson became his father's eyes as he was tied to him with a rope to lead the way.

When fall came and it was time for school, his mother took the little family to LeVan where she went to teach school. Orson was now old enough for first grade. Gurn, too ill to go, remained in Kanab in the care of his dear sister, Nabbie Mace. It wasn't until they returned to Kanab for Christmas that Orson realized that his father was really blind.

The little family spent a year and a half in LeVan. Orson spent part of his second year of school there. Then when his father's health became so very bad, Ivie obtained a job teaching in Kanab and moved back so she could help take care of him.

Their mother was an excellent manager, a home economics major no less. She spent her summers when school was out filling the larder. The cellar was always full of canned fruits and vegetables, fresh and tender. The children's clothes were always washed and mended. In fact, she sewed and made many of them. Besides this, she was a good teacher and she talked to her children many times about important things. From Orson's own story, written when he was a lad of twelve, we read, "I want to go as far as I can in school. My mother always wanted me to get a college education at least. She always said that there were big things for me to accomplish in this world."

Orson was baptized in Kanab on April 11, 1926 by Delmar Robinson and confirmed a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints that same day by William Swagg.

Orson describes this event in his own words as follows: "The man who baptized me worked in Shield's Blacksmith Shop across the street from the new church

where the baptismal font was. They made bricks for the new church right on the site. They had a hand mill, put mud and straw in and formed it into bricks which were set in the sun to dry. I often watched Mr. Robinson make horse shoes and iron hoops for wagon wheels too. Mr. Robinson came over to the church in his blacksmithing clothes, high-top lace boots and knee pants. He walked into the font with clothes on and baptized me. I wore a pair of bib overalls. I remember how cold it was, and how warm when they confirmed me and said, "Receive the Holy Ghost."

The following November, Orson's family experienced a devastating shock. On November 22, 1926, Ivie May Spencer died suddenly in a diabetic coma. Orson was eight years old and Wallace would turn six the following month. Apparently their mother was involved in serving a banquet at the school and had been working very hard. For some reason, she was out of insulin and by the time the insulin arrived from Salt Lake City, it was too late.

Perhaps the children, still very young, did not realize the impact of the event upon their lives, but their father, Gurn, was deeply saddened. A note about the funeral mentions that he was carried into the chapel and placed in a rocking chair in front of the coffin where he wept bitter tears.

Needless to say, the sudden death of their mother, and the uncertainty of life necessitated by their father's blindness and ill health brought changes into the lives of this little family. The next year and a half was spent moving from place to place where relatives had room and heart enough for two little boys, a baby girl, and a sick father.

After their mother's death, their mother's sister Aunt Edna, took Ann - then two and a half years of age to live with her. She had never married and was a school teacher in the Box Elder County School District - teaching at that time in Tremonton, Utah. Their father, Gurn, remained in Kanab with his sister Nabbie Mace, where he remained until his death. He would have liked to have had the boys remain there with him so he could hear them even though he couldn't see them, but this was an impossibility since Aunt Nabbie had her hands full caring for Gurn and her own family. So, although the children did not live there, they visited frequently.

Orson and Wallace went to Johnson with Aunt Linda, then back to Kanab with Aunt Vira and Uncle Clair Ford. Aunt Vira was their mother's youngest sister. They must have stayed much of the remainder of the school year at the Ford home. Aunt Vira had a growing family too, and so the little boys had a good time with their cousins, some near their same age, and Aunt Vira made them feel wanted. They sometimes, of course, were a torment to Uncle Clair. He did not have the patience with their pranks. Orson's notes mentions one of these instances. He said they had received a BB gun (probably for Christmas)

and one day when Uncle Clair was using the outhouse, they amused themselves pelting it with BB's. Uncle Clair was furious!!

These were tough times, even for kids. Aunt Edna was their guardian angel much of the time in that she was always on hand to see that they had the necessary clothes to keep them warm and half way presentable. When she came to Kanab for their mother's funeral, she took Orson and Wallace shopping and bought enough clothes for a year. After school was out in the spring of 1927, they were sent to Glendale in Long Valley to stay with Uncle Carlin Spencer and Aunt Lydia. Carlin was a half brother to their father. They had a large family and were also poor so the clothes they took with them did not last long. Aunt Lydia's heart was big and she took in every little urchin that came her way and shared their clothes with them and members of her family. It was first up, first served. When Orson complained to his father about this, Gurn wisely advised him to wear his clothes to bed. Orson and Wallace took this advice as often as possible.

YOST

In the fall of 1927, when Orson was nine years old, and Wallace then six, left Kanab, their childhood home, their sick father, and the relatives they had known and loved all their lives to go and make their home with strangers. Arrangements were made for them to go as far as Ogden in Thel Bowman's mail truck - that seemed like a very long way in a very big truck! At Ogden they were put on the Bamburger train, destination - Brigham City.

School had already started, so Aunt Edna, the only person they knew in this new world was teaching school in Tremonton and would not return to Brigham City until the weekend. It had been arranged that they should stay with Aunt Christa, their mother's oldest sister until Aunt Edna returned. But before the week was out, Aunt Edna received an SOS from Aunt Christa saying, "Come as soon as possible." It seems that the boys had never lived near a railroad track and had seldom seen a train before. They were so fascinated by the train that went past Aunt Christa's house that she could not keep them off the railroad tracks and she was ready to have a nervous breakdown.

The weekend came and with it Aunt Edna to cart them off to Yost where there were no trains! This was to be their permanent home. Their new parents - Aunt LaRue and Uncle Hazel Yates. Aunt LaRue was Ivie's sister and as recently married as the previous June! A lovely ending to a honeymoon! Nevertheless, they welcomed them. They didn't have a lot in material things - but they had a lot of love that went a long way.

Grandpa Burnham took them as far as Kelton in his pick-up truck. This was a little scary too as they hardly knew Grandpa Burnham. At Kelton they met the

mail truck to Yost and the mailman was none other than Uncle Hazel. He seemed a stern man, with no extra words to spare and they were really scared. But no doubt, when they arrived at Yost their fears were immediately alleviated by Aunt LaRue's hospitality. I can see it now! She must have immediately spread the table with all they could eat. She often spoke of their atrocious manners when they first came to her. I guess they had been used to getting their share while they could.

At first it was agreed between Aunt Edna and Aunt LaRue that Aunt LaRue would provide them with a home and loving care, and Aunt Edna would provide the material things they needed. So, first of all, she bought a bed, a wardrobe and a trunk full of much needed clothes. This arrangement continued until they were old enough and able to do enough work on the ranch to pay their way. However, Uncle Hazel was very fair. He taught them to work but also shared the profit with them, whether it was a wiener pig from the litter or a calf or two.

The following April, after their arrival in Yost, they received word from Kanab that their father had died. By the time word came the funeral was already over.

The first day of school after their arrival in Yost was an adventure they never forgot. Aunt LaRue dressed both of them up like Little Lord Fontleroy. Since it was quite a way to school, nearly all the children in Yost rode horses. The horse they rode was bridled - but it is not clear if there was a saddle. They were lifted on. Wallace barely able to straddle the horse's back. (This was his first day in first grade). They both had their hands full with the reins and brand new lunch bucket and thermos bottle. How proud! However this ecstasy was short lived. They hadn't gone far when the horse shied at a passing Model T Ford and they were both ditched. It didn't really hurt either one of them, except their feelings. but the thermos bottle and lunch bucket were badly shaken up. The two Little Lord Fontleroy's got up out of the dust to brush each other off and dry each other's tears.

Years cured this malady too. There came a day when any old nag could not ditch either of them, and Wallace especially became adept at riding and roping. Orson did not excel in cow-punching as readily.

When Orson got his first pair of horn-rimmed glasses, Wallace playfully named him Hoot. (These were the days of Hoot Gibson cowboy fame.) The name stuck all through school. Wallace still used it after Orson was married. Orson, in turn, called him Shorty.

Those were the good old days! A three-room school at Yost was their seat of learning through the tenth grade. Wallace was still Orson's closest friend

through all those years. Being the most aggressive, he stood on the sidelines and cheered when Orson got in a fight, and when he could see Orson was getting licked - he stepped in and finished it off.

A pot-bellied stove in front of the schoolroom cooked anyone who stood near it, or froze those a few feet away. As a result, the teacher usually stood in front of the stove to warm her back. Orson and his school chums found they could really make her move in a hurry if they sprinkled a little cayenne pepper on the floor in front of the stove. Oh, those fumes!

During these grade school years in Yost, another member came into the family.

Uncle Hazel's niece, Dot Yates, came to live with Aunt LaRue upon the death of her mother. She stayed until she was married in her teens.

Also during this time, Ann was living with Aunt Edna in Brigham City. Family get-togethers were planned as often as possible, especially at Christmas and each summer when Ann came to spend a month in Yost.

When school was out and summer came, they came to love it on the ranch. There was always something to do, be it work or play, and they did plenty of both. They learned to ride and to rope, to brand cattle and milk cows, to drive a team of horses, to take care of newborn calves, bottle feed newborn lambs, run farm machinery, mow hay, cut and haul grain, repair machinery, sharpen the mowing machine knives, and --yes, they sometimes learned to cook, help clean the house, separate the milk and wash the separator, chop and haul wood, haul water for the laundry, and clean the oil lamp chimneys. Each of these skills were learned as they grew and learned to accept responsibility. However, when one of them was needed in the house to help Aunt LaRue, Orson was usually chosen.

They loved to go to the canyon for a picnic, do a little fishing when there was water in the stream up George Creek, take part in baseball tournaments with neighboring teams, or play basketball on church teams. All these activities helped bond them to their family, friends, and neighbors. They love the home in Yost on the ranch. There was no place they would rather be, even as they grew older. Life was not always a bowl of cherries, work was hard and they worked hard when they worked and played hard when they played.

Aunt LaRue, unable to have children of her own, loved the two and did all she could to make them happy, sacrificing much of herself. Meals were nutritious and the dining table piled high. They learned to love her as their mother. She had a good singing voice and I'm sure when they were small, she sang to them as well as read stories to them at bedtime.

When Orson was twelve years old, he was ordained a deacon by Bishop D. Chester

Loveland. This was the beginning of active priesthood participation in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

BRIGHAM CITY

When Orson was in the tenth grade, it was necessary for him to go to Brigham City to attend Box Elder High School. Aunt LaRue and Uncle Hazel had to sacrifice much so that he could do this. The depression and drought had taken it's toll, but sacrifice they would. The first year Aunt LaRue went to Brigham City with the two boys and occupied Aunt Edna's apartment in the rear of Aunt Phene's house. Aunt Edna was away teaching in Tremonton and had Ann with her. She usually came home on weekends. Aunt LaRue also took in one or two other children from Yost who needed a home away from home while they went to school. The next year they stayed again in the same apartment, however, this time Grandpa Burnham's sister, Aunt Vi Thomas stayed with them.

High school days away from Yost were quite a different experience, and I guess Uncle Hazel missed them and their help at home, but again he was willing to sacrifice so they could finish school.

Now they were able to go to a movie (no TV then), something they had never done in their earlier life, and they did this as often as they could get the cash. Girls became important and Orson thought he was in love once at sixteen. It seems the girl's name was LaPreal. Aunt LaRue soon talked him out of that.

Orson graduated from Box Elder High School and the LDS Seminary in the spring of 1936 and somehow scraped enough money together to register at Utah State Agricultural College e in Logan that fall... Wallace, now in high school, remained in Brigham City with Edna. While at school here and up until Orson left on his mission, he lived with another of his mother's sisters, Aunt Louise Skidmore, on 4th North and 2nd East in Logan, Utah. Orson's mother, Ivie, had also lived with Louise and George Skidmore while she was getting her teaching degree. At that time, Aunt Louise was in poor health and so Ivie worked for them while attending school and they paid her tuition and gave her board and room. Now Orson had lived for a time with all five of his mother's living sisters. He had come to love each one.

While at Aunt Louise's, Orson became close to his cousin Ruth who was also attending USAC. They developed a kinship which they both cherished all their lives.

In the fall of 1938, Orson was called to serve a mission in the Canadian Mission, the only mission in Canada at the time with headquarters in Toronto. He served for two years under President David Smith. He returned home in

December 1940 after an honorable release.

by

Olga Spencer

Wife of Orson Spencer