

The Vindication of Elizabeth Bell

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Historical Essay

I never knew Elizabeth Bell, but I knew someone very much like her—someone else who bore her burdens in silence, whose trophies of victory after a long battle were the friendship and admiration of her daughters. That woman was my mother. Maybe it was for her sake or for historical accuracy or perhaps, just out of fury that I set out to vindicate Elizabeth Bell, my enigmatic Great Grandmother.

Too soon after my mother's death in 1976, I received in the mail an invitation to contribute ten dollars to her family organization, the purpose of which was to help finance the publication of the McMullin family history. Still engulfed in my personal sorrow, I mailed the check, interested in anything that might help to mend the bonds so recently broken between me and my best friends.

About three months had lapsed between my mother's death and the day I received the forty-page document entitled "The McMullin Story", which document had been dispensed to the descendants of the twenty children of my Great Grandfather, Albert Eals McMullin and his two wives, Nancy Jane Ross and Elizabeth Ferguson Bell. I immediately drew up in the story and followed the McMullin family with intensity as they fled the poverty and deprivation of the Great Potato Famine of Ireland in 1718: through their migration to the Fox Islands, Maine, their conversions to the Mormon religion, and on to Utah.

Volumes have been written about pride in pioneer stock by today's Utahns, but my feelings turned from pride to rage as I read the section of the story dealing with my Great Grandmother, a plural wife. I suddenly felt like an illegitimate child! I had read of dissent among plural wives and their families in the early days of the church, I knew of the polygamy in my own family but suddenly, four generations later, I was experiencing an eighty-year old by-product of that dissent. I was face to face with "history" as written by a granddaughter of the "legal wife" in a polygamous family; setting forth for posterity my questionable background! When I read the account of "Aunt Nancy Jane's" longsuffering patience with her husband's second wife, a young girl called upon by her spiritual leaders to engage in plural marriage, I was not surprised at the antagonism between their decedents. Aunt Nancy Jane was a sainted Mormon woman called to make a major sacrifice, doing so without a qualm. Elizabeth became a wanton woman with a brood of intolerable children, among whom was one sniveling son, my Grandfather! No where in the history was there mention of the lonely existence of a young girl raised in a polygamous household only to be asked to marry into the same lifestyle of hard work and sacrifice. Nowhere was there given any consideration to the devotion I knew had existed by Albert McMullin for his second family.

I almost beat myself to the telephone to question my mother's sister, who had subscribed to the McMullin story only upon my insistence. My immediate concern was whether or not the feelings of anger I was experiencing were legitimate or whether they were just a continuation of my mourning.

Wounds from a childhood of ridicule and criticism for having been born to Willy McMullin, a polygamist brat, were about to be reopened. The crucial blow came when my Aunt read the following paragraph about her own father:

"Aunt Lizzie's only son, William, did not like "teaming." He was no asset to the freighting business although, like the women of both families, he lived off the income from the family business. Bryant Ross was most impressed, even as a young man with the extreme patience and understanding his father had for their half-brother. In those days boys rarely failed to work into a family business."

The feud was on! The correspondence that followed between me and my "half second cousin, once removed" proved to be the cause of much anxiety among family members' but after much research, I was eventually asked to write a "late submission" to the family history. In June, 1977, all subscribers received copies of retractions and amended pages to the history, along with my account of Elizabeth Bell. Following, in essence, was my attempt to shed some light on the "other" McMullin family and on the noble woman who in fact was twice vindicated for a life of loneliness and persecution. It is said among family members that after eighteen years of widowhood, about twenty years after Elizabeth's death, Aunt Nancy Jane at her death in 1936 said of their mutual husband, "I'm ready to go now, Lizzy's had him to herself long enough!"

On September 15, 1858, Elizabeth Bell was born in a little house on the corner in Salt Lake City where the new General Office building now stands. Her father, William Bell, and his wife had joined the Church in England, and the last he ever heard from his family as he left to come to Utah was, "We hope you are drowned in the ocean or killed by the Indians before you have a chance to join up with those Mormons."²

Elizabeth was educated in a school founded by Brigham Young for his children. She had a sister, three brothers and a half sister. Her mother, Jane Ferguson Graham, was born in Scotland, and she and her husband, Francis Laidlaw, and three children had begun a migration from their home to the Salt Lake Valley. She arrived a widow with one child.³ And Brigham Young soon arranged for her marriage to William Bell.

William Bell built furniture, some of which is on display in the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers' Museum in Salt Lake City. In answer to a call by Brigham Young for a casket builder, William Bell and his family moved to Heber City in January 1870. It was there that Elizabeth met Albert Eals McMillin. She was eighteen years old when she became his second wife in the St. George Temple, July 25, 1877.⁴

Elizabeth lived at the home of her parents until 1886, when the family moved to Price and then on to Wellington. She described Price to her daughter, Jane Ann or Jenny as she became known, as the most desolate, windy place she had ever see, with not a tree growing in the valley.⁵

Albert had been called as the first Bishop in Wellington, and after the ward house lot was selected, he was given his choice of two lots for homes for his families. Albert spent a day at a time in each home, always mindful of the needs of the other family, especially in times of illness.

By the time Elizabeth moved from Heber to Wellington, she had five small children, Jane Ann, Nellie Bell, Mary Lucille, William Bell and Elizabeth Bell. Albert was hauling freight back and forth between Wellington and Ft. Duchesne when on one occasion, as he was making camp for night near Brock's ranch in Nine Mile, a man in a buggy approached and asked, "Do you know a man by the name of Albert McMullin?" Of course, with the reply being, "Yes, I know him," The man then stated, "Well, I'm looking for him and when I find him, I'm going to see that he goes to the penitentiary for bigamy!" Albert encouraged the man to discontinue his pursuit for the night and to stop and rest until morning. With the dawn, Albert continued on toward Wellington, unloaded his freight and moved Elizabeth and her children to Huntington for refuge. The sheriff went on toward Ft. Duchesne in his search.

In 1888, while the family was living in Huntington, another daughter, Susan Bell was born. Frail Elizabeth, when two years old, died and was buried in Price.

The family moved back to Heber, during which time Elizabeth supported herself and her children by tailoring and dressmaking. She made buckskin gloves for Z.C.M.I. in Salt Lake City. The children all worked to help their mother. Elizabeth's only son, William, began driving a team with his father at the age of twelve. He was so small that he had to stand on the tongue of the wagon in order to bridle the horses. At a young age he owned his own freight outfit and helped to support his mother and the other children.

Sometime after the deaths of the Bells in Heber, Albert moved Elizabeth's family back to Wellington. Two daughters, Althora Bell and Ruby Bell, were born there. The family freight business eventually failed. Albert may have tried to shoulder too much of the financial responsibility of the ward members in Wellington.

Elizabeth's health began to fail as well, and Albert once again moved her and her children back to Heber. She died of breast cancer, March 19, 1906, at the age of forty-eight. She is remembered as a quiet, long suffering woman, who once told her daughter, Jenny, that as a young girl she had brown eyes, but over the years, tears had washed all the color from them. Much of her patience and quiet is manifest in her descendants. So it was with my mother.

Who living today can imagine the burden of a woman sharing her husband with another woman and twenty children; or that of an older woman called upon to watch her husband find a special place in his heart for a young girl and their eight children. Who cannot sympathize with a man in an almost hopeless attempt to provide both the physical and emotional needs of such a family.

But a special and unusual kind of love existed between Albert and Elizabeth. When she was asked about her lot in life as a plural wife, Elizabeth was once known to have said, "I'd rather be the second wife of Albert McMullin than the first wife of any other man I know."

Sources:

1. The McMullin Story, a family history for the McMullin Family Organization, 1977.
2. Personal Journal of William Bell.
3. Obituary of Jane Graham Laidlaw Bell, mother of Elizabeth Bell, Wasatch Wave, Nov. 12, 1987.
4. LDS records.
5. Accounts as told to Elizabeth McMullin Hickman by family members.