

## Peter and Harriet Emily (Decker) Mickelsen

### **Peter Mickelsen**

Born: October 23 1858

Died: April 25 April 1888

Parents: Rasmus Mikkelsen & Ane Neilsen

Married: Harriet Emily Decker, January 8, 1879  
Ida Mary Dalton, March 2, 1883

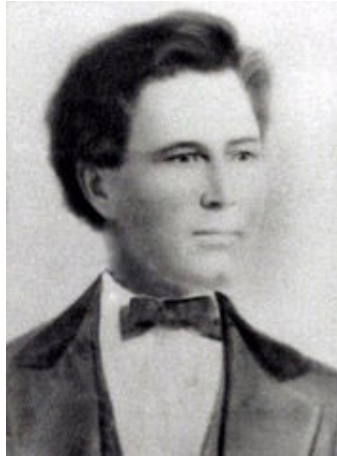
### **Harriet Emily Decker**

Born: January 4, 1861

Died: August 12, 1937

Parents: Zechariah Decker & Nancy Bean

Married: Peter Mickelson January 8, 1879  
John Cornelius Gilleland May 5, 1897



### **Peter's Origins**

Rasmus Mikkelsen was born in Brussereup, Denmark in 1819 and married Ane Neilsen born in Sonder, Denmark in 1825. They were married in 1848 and accepted the gospel in 1851 as a young married couple. They were encouraged to go to America so they could live among the church members, where it would be easier to practice their religion, and to help build up Zion. The 1849 constitution of Denmark granted freedom of religion but the minds of the people changed very slowly and the Church was not readily accepted among their neighbors.

It was not easy to leave the land of their birth, and all they knew and loved. They left behind two tiny graves, babies who died not long after they were born. Their fourth child died at sea as they were coming to America in the year 1851. The tiny body was wrapped carefully and lowered over the side of the ship, "The Monarch of the Sea." Of the four children born to them in Denmark, only their second son Niels survived to arrive in America with his parents.

There are few details of this family, but all pioneer families sacrificed much when they accepted the gospel. They raised a large family, as records show that they had six more children when they settled in southern Utah.

In 1850 a call was sent to 100 members of the church to form the Iron County Mission in Parowan and Cedar City. Family History records tell us that Ane gave birth to a daughter in Cedar City in 1855 so it seems this family went right to Cedar City, after they landed in America.

Their 7th child was a son named Peter, born 23 October 1858 in Parowan, Iron county, Utah. He was baptized a member of the church in 1869 when he was 11 years old.

### **Harriet's Origins**

Harriet's parents were Zachariah Bruyn Decker and Nancy Bean. Zachariah was born June 22, 1817 in Shawangunk, Ulster, New York. He became a convert to the church in Illinois in 1840 after receiving a Book of Mormon as a gift from a friend. Zachariah was a member of the Mormon Battalion. He was one of the 500 men who answered the call of United States

President James K. Polk. The prophet Brigham Young encouraged them to join, telling them it was their patriotic duty. No protection was offered the Saints while they were being so bitterly persecuted, but they were given the call to protect the United States. The Mormon Battalion marched 2,000 miles, the longest march in the history of the United States military.

Harriet's mother, Nancy Bean, had an interesting and complicated life. She was born 14 Dec 1826 in West Troy, Missouri. Nancy and her parents were converted to the church while her family lived in Quincy, Illinois. The citizens of Quincy had given refuge to homeless LDS church members who were exiled from Missouri and they were converted by Alexander Williams, one of the young exiles. Alexander Williams was a uneducated Elder, and went to school with the Bean children, who befriended him and brought him home to meet their parents. He shared the gospel with the Bean family and other residents of the neighborhood, much to the chagrin of local ministers. Those members of the family who were old enough were baptized in May of 1841.

Thomas Williams was a school teacher, who was boarding with the family, and Sept. 4, 1842 he and Nancy were married. He did not accept the gospel, and left Nancy, taking their little daughter, Nancy Elizabeth, with him. Mother and daughter did not see one another again, until the daughter was a grown woman. The Bean family moved to Nauvoo, and lived through the joyful as well as tragic times. They contributed much of the money from the sale of their property in Quincy to the building of the Nauvoo Temple. On November 4, 1844, Nancy married John D. Lee in the Nauvoo Temple and this marriage was also an unhappy union. They had a baby girl Jan 15, 1846, and the marriage ended in a divorce. Nancy crossed the plains with her baby daughter, Cornelia Lee. Nancy traveled in the Brigham Young Company and arrived in the Salt Lake Valley in 1848 when she was 21 years old She met and married Zachariah, March 6, 1849, and this marriage was a long and happy one. Zachariah raised Cornelia Lee as though she were his own. In 1850 the Iron Mission opened in Parowan, and the family became one of the founding families in the area. It was said of Zachariah that his life was always a force for good. He served in the town and the church in many important ways. He was the town constable and one of the presidents of the Seventy's. In 1869 he was called to serve a mission to the Eastern states. The United Order was practiced in Parowan from 1873 to 1876. As his responsibility during the times of the United Order, Zachariah was the superintendent of the "West Field". Harriet Emily, was born in Parowan, January 4, 1861. She was the seventh child of the eleven children born to Zachariah and Nancy.

### **Marriage**

When Peter was 20 years old he married 18 year old Harriet Emily Decker in the St. George Temple, Jan 8, 1879. Their first baby son, Don Alvin Mickelsen, was born in Parowan, 12 October 1879.

### **Hole-in-the-Rock**

In the fall 1878 Church Officials began calling families to a settlement mission in the Four Corners area of the state. Peter and Harriet were chosen to be among the 230 people to help in the settlement of that area. Harriet was prepared to live in the wagon train and the wilderness for 6 weeks with her newborn son.

Harriet's father and five of her brothers and some of their families were also preparing to go. Her husband's sister, Anna Mickelsen Decker and family were also a part of the group.

Scouts had traveled the route they were expecting to take. As they prepared to go, it was suggested they take a different route from the one they had planned to travel. They were told there was a much shorter way, and that it was foolishness to take the longer route. And so the plans for the wagon train were changed right before they left.

The San Juan Mission was formed to help protect the south eastern part of the Utah Territory from some very dangerous elements. It was an isolated area, perfect as a hide out for the many bank and train robbers, cattle rustlers and other criminals that were found there. Also the Church leaders had a desire to help the warlike, destitute Native-American's find a more peaceful and prosperous way of life. There was farm and pasture land, and the church leaders hoped that area could be settled while land was still available.

Elizabeth (Mickelsen) Decker, Peter's sister, wrote about her experience: "We crossed the river on the 1st of Feb. all safe; was not half as scared as we thought we'd be, it was the easiest part of our journey. Coming down the hole in the rock to get to the river was ten times as bad. If you ever come this way it will scare you to death to look down it. It is about a mile from the top down to the river and it is almost strait down, the cliffs on each side are five hundred ft. high, and there is just room enough for a wagon to go down. It nearly scared me to death. The first wagon I saw go down, put the brake on and rough locked the hind wheels and had a big rope fastened to the wagon and about ten men holding back on it and then they went down like they would smash everything. I'll never forget that day. When we was walking down Willie looked back and cried and asked me how we would get back" home. (<http://holeintherock.info/TakeThePlunge/down16.htm>)

Their expected six week journey became a six month ordeal of unbelievable misery. The trek became known as the "The Hole in the Rock." and it is known as the most difficult trek ever undertaken by Mormon pioneers. It was a terrible, wind-whipped area of slick rocks, as slick and round as apples. The only way they could get their wagons through the canyon was to widen a crack with hand tools and black powder. They worked in three different teams, and finally by January of 1880 they had chiseled an 1,800 feet long road just wide enough to get the wagons through. They chained the back wheels of the heavily loaded wagons so they would not lose control of the wagons. One man would drive a wagon and as many as 10 men would walk behind it to keep it from plunging down the canyon. The women and children walked.

### **Bluff Utah**

Peter and his young wife were completely unprepared to spend six months living in a covered wagon with their tiny baby son, but miraculously they survived and set up housekeeping in Bluff, Utah, which was also home to vicious outlaws, wild animals, hostile Native-Americans and a land that was almost impossible to farm. The pioneers built 40 to 50 one room cabins closely together in a large square to form a fort to offer A year later, May 13, 1881 Harriet gave birth to a second son, Peter Adelbert, and 18 months later, Oct 13, 1882, her third son, Joseph Rasmus was born in Bluff.

Peter and Harriet were faithful to their beliefs, and Peter entered into a plural marriage, marrying Ida Mary Dalton in the St. George Temple March 2, 1883. Ida was one of the twin daughters born in Parowan to Edward and Mary Dalton.

In February of 1884 both of Peter's wives gave birth to new babies. Ethel Gertrude was born 19 February to Harriet, and on the 27th of February Ida had a son named Edward Meeks Mickelsen. Many challenges had come to Peter and his young family, and more were ahead. Farming in the tiny valley was next to impossible as the farmers were flooded out time and time again. Inside some of the homes, the clay and sand stood two feet deep. The outlaws had become more daring and there was no noticeable improvement among the Native American's as a group. Three times they asked their leaders to release them from the mission.

Following the severe floods of 1884 that destroyed their irrigation ditch, crops and houses: "The people of the mission were reluctant to report again to the Church leaders that the task was too hard, but they were distressed, afflicted, at the end of their resources. They reported the condition of affairs as they stood, and devoted themselves to saving what they could from the wreck of the flood while they awaited the expected permission to look for places to make peaceful homes beyond this disordered borderland. They believed that they could find in any direction a country better adapted to human habitation than this sand-bed in the midst of ten thousand thieves. Joseph F. Smith and Erastus Snow of the General Authorities made the long trip from Salt Lake City to inspect again the important outpost. They gazed with amazement at the havoc of the flood. They heard about thieves, desperadoes; remoteness of isolation with no roads on which to get out; they heard of the festering of nature's elements always ready to explode on short notice at this unsheltered end of the trail. They showed their sympathetic comprehension of all these things, yet when they spoke to the people assembled in the old log meeting house, they said in substance. "We love you for the heroic part you have taken; you have made a wonderful beginning towards a most important work; and if it is no more than you can endure, we release you with our blessings to go, but we cannot give up this essential post. Those who go will be blessed, but those who stay will be doubly blessed." [i]

### **On to Manassa Colorado**

A few of the families who were living in Bluff did leave. Some went to Arizona, and some were called to go to the San Luis Valley in Southern Colorado to teach and help church converts from Georgia learn to farm. Peter and Harriet went to Manassa, Colorado, in the San Luis Valley, by covered wagon. Their son Peter Adelbert passed away in Manassa of scarlet fever. He died Dec 28, 1884. Since that same year both of Peter's wives had given birth in Bluff, it can be assumed they went to Manassa the summer of 1884. Anna Mae, the last child of Peter and Harriet was born in Manassa March 25, 1886.

Manassa was a tiny community in the San Luis Valley and was being built up by Saints from the the Southern States. These converts had no experience in farming or living in such a cold and barren country. Members of the church were being sent from Utah to help the new converts adjust to the living and farming conditions. Peter and Harriet had a great deal of experience living in barren country.

### **Peter's Death**

It is unknown when Ida and her son went to the valley in Colorado, but according to family lore, Ida persuaded Peter to leave Manassa, and take her and their son, Edward, to live in Globe, Arizona. His son, Joseph Rasmus, was about 5 or 6 at the time, and the family story is

told of little Rasmus, running behind the wagon, crying and begging his father not to leave. But Peter did leave, and Harriet was left alone with 4 small children. The family probably did not see their father and husband again until he was buried in the Manassa Cemetery in 1888.

Peter had long been plagued by ill health and suffered from kidney disease. He became a mail carrier in Arizona, and soon died of kidney failure in Hackberry, Arizona. He was only 29 ½ years old. He left two widows, one in Arizona and one in Colorado, and five fatherless children. The oldest son was 11, his youngest child, Anna Mae, was two.

### **Harriet and Ida Remarry**

Harriet was a hard worker and struggled a great deal to raise her little children. Nine years after Peter's death, John Vernell Gilleland, a very hungry man, walked down the railroad track into the town of Manassa. Harriet offered to feed him. At age 36 Harriet married the man she assisted. They had two sons, John Vernell Gilleland, born the 16 of Sept 1898 in Sanford Colorado, and Cornelius Gilleland born 6 May 1900 in Manassa, Colorado.



Peter's second wife Ida remarried sixteen years later, to Joseph Booth McDonald, but they had no children. She died in St. George in 1921.

In her later years Harriet, lived with one or both of her sons from her second marriage. She died in Manassa at the age of 76. She stayed busy all the time, helping with family and chores about the home.

Harriet was a hard worker and struggled a great deal to raise her little children.

*Notes by the author Bonnie Trower Brantley:*

*Harriet's son, Joseph Rasmus, my grandfather, married Adella Haynie. They had three children. His youngest daughter was my mother, Lorna Vivian Mickelsen. When my mother was almost 4 years old, her mother died. Lorna was sent to live with Harriet, her 52 year old grandmother. The other children stayed with their father. This must have been somewhat of a trial for Harriet, after all the difficulties she had lived through, to become mother to her little granddaughter. Lorna lived several years with her grandmother, a short time in the caboose of a train. Harriet's second husband worked for the railroad, and they traveled with him for some time. By the age of 10, Lorna was back with her father and his new wife and children.*

*It appears that Harriet was a woman concerned for family all of her life. I have copies of a few letters written by her to my mother expressing love and concern for my mother and her children. The letters were written about everyday life and things such as missing canning jars, a coat for a great-grandchild and having only green wood to burn.*

*I never knew my great grandmother, but am so grateful to have been able to learn of her life. I never heard much about her as a child, and was amazed to*

*find out that she was a part of the "Hole in the Rock" expedition. If someone else had not written that history I would have never known about my brave and noble great-grandmother, Harriet Emily Decker Mickelsen Gilleland.*

*As far as is known, there is no record written by her, and that is unfortunate, as she had a very colorful, historical life and ancestry. This history is put together by reading family records, family groups sheets and histories.*

*If they had stayed in Bluff, in what ways would they have been doubly blessed? It makes one wonder, doesn't it?*

i. A serialized story of the Bluff/San Juan Mission by Albert R. Lyman.  
Published in the Improvement Era between October 1948 and March 1950.  
Chapter 11 <http://www.hirf.org/history-hist-firingline-11.asp>