

## Walter Joshua and Elizabeth Kenney Stevens

### Walter Joshua Stevens

**Born:** 21 December 1856 at Pleasant Grove, Utah

**Died:** 26 August 1912 at Pacheco, Mexico

**Parents:** Walter Stevens and Abigail Holman

**Marriage:** Elizabeth Kenney, 25 September 1879  
Sarah Ellis Hawley<sup>i</sup>

### Elizabeth Kenney

**Born:** 21 January 1863 at Deseret, Utah

**Died:** 7 November 1948 at Blanding, Utah

**Parents:** John Kenney and Phebe Alden

### Walter's Heritage and Childhood

Walter Joshua Stevens, (who went by Joshua), was born 21 December 1856 to Walter and Abigail Stevens in a small adobe house located in Pleasant Grove, Utah. He was the second child born to the couple, though their first baby passed away at just three months of age. The two-room home in which they lived had a basement that was used for meetings, school and occasionally dancing.<sup>ii</sup>

Joshua's parents were faithful Latter-Day Saints who had traveled West in 1850. His mother's family had joined the Church in 1832 and had migrated with the Saints to Kirtland and then Nauvoo, from whence they were driven in 1846. Her father, Joshua Sawyer Holman, had died from illness brought on by his work overseeing the building of bridges across the Sweet Water River as the Saints moved from Illinois to Iowa. Three years later Abigail's mother and two of her siblings died of cholera, leaving her orphaned at age 13. She and her two older brothers and sister-in-law made the trip to Utah while Abigail was still sick with cholera.<sup>iii</sup>

Joshua's paternal grandparents were likewise people of courage and fortitude. William Stevens had been baptized into the LDS Church in June 1837. He moved his family to Nauvoo where they subsequently experienced the turmoil that erupted there in the mid-1840s. They came to Utah in 1850 and settled in Pleasant Grove near a spring that became known as Stevens Spring.<sup>iv</sup> William met and married Abigail Holman in 1854 when she was just 18 years of age.

The Stevens family did not stay long in their little adobe house in Pleasant Grove, however. By 1859 the family had moved to Holden, Utah to be closer to Joshua's grandparents, who had moved there previously. They lived a hard-working pioneer life in Holden. To earn extra income, Joshua's mother carded wool and sewed clothing, such as buckskin gloves. She became the Relief Society President around 1870, and Joshua's father, Walter, served many years as the Presiding Elder of the Holden Branch beginning in 1861.<sup>v</sup>

The hard-working examples of Joshua's parents rubbed off on him; he was ambitious and well prepared to accomplish whatever task might present itself before him. Eager to attend college, Joshua worked building the Saint George Temple in order to earn tuition money for himself and his brother, David Alma, to attend BYU. They were students there in the years just prior to their calls to the San Juan Mission (1877 and 1878).<sup>vi</sup>

### **Honeymooning through Hole-in-the-Rock**

Joshua Stevens and Elizabeth Kenney were sweethearts before he and his brother, David Alma, were called to the San Juan Mission. Joshua and Elizabeth had already made plans to marry, but had decided that Elizabeth should spend a year in sewing school first. However, Joshua's call to the San Juan quickly changed all that. He was advised to marry before he left, so on 25 September 1879 Joshua and Elizabeth were sealed in the Salt Lake Endowment house. They departed for Southern Utah shortly thereafter and essentially spent their honeymoon on the journey through Hole-in-the-Rock.<sup>vii</sup>

Platte D. Lyman's journal notes that he met up with Joshua and Alma just outside of Escalante on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1879. Roswell Stevens, a Martin Company handcart pioneer and uncle to the two boys, was also with them. A few days later, Lyman wrote that he and Joshua spent the day at 40 mile spring after having traveled around for a couple of days in search of adequate water and feed for their horses.<sup>viii</sup> Joshua and Elizabeth made their camp right at the Hole-in-the-Rock, and as preparations began to build a hole down the tight crevice, Joshua was right in the thick of things. He and his brother Alma worked tirelessly helping to make the venture a success. According to his daughter, Emma Stevens Palmer, Joshua was the one who put eleven-year-old Charlie Walton over the cliff's edge by rope to drill holes for blasting powder. She also recalled being told by both Kumen Jones and her father that he was "the daredevil that took down the first wagon" once the road was finished.<sup>ix</sup>

As the wagon train progressed in its journey and was faced by ever more daunting terrain to cross, Joshua was always to be found helping where he could. When the steep slopes of Clay Hill and San Juan Hill loomed above them, Joshua was there helping others bring their wagons up the treacherous rocks.<sup>x</sup> Several landmarks of the time were named after him – such as Joshua Trail, Stevens Pasture, and Joshua Park.<sup>xi</sup>

### **New Mexico**

After their arrival in Bluff, the wagon company members drew lots to decide who would settle there, and who would continue on to settle farther upriver. As luck would have it, Joshua drew a number to stay, while his brother Alma drew a number to leave. Without a second thought, Joshua promptly returned his number to the hat in Platte D. Lyman's hand and made the decision to move on in company with his brother. They journeyed to Fruitland, New Mexico, which was Native America reservation land at the time. Elizabeth gave birth to little Phebe a few months they arrived. Phebe was the first white child born in Fruitland.<sup>xii</sup>

Joshua built a dam in the river after they arrived, and succeeded in producing a plentiful harvest of melons, cabbage, and wheat.<sup>xiii</sup> Within a few years, Joshua had established orchards there from trees he brought back from Utah. He also dug a large canal for irrigation and did a little mining on his property. In 1880 his father's family joined him and his brother in Fruitland. His father, Walter Stevens, established a small trading post with the local Indians, and his mother, Abigail, was set apart by Brigham Young to be a mid-wife in the area.<sup>xiv</sup>

The Church called members from St. Joseph, Arizona, to help colonize Fruitland, and after enough members were living there, a ward was organized. Joshua was called to be the First Counselor in the Bishopric, and his brother David Alma to be the Ward Clerk. They were ordained in the brickyard at Durango, Colorado, by Apostle Francis M. Lyman.<sup>xv</sup>

### **Outlaw Trouble**

From about 1886 to 1891, Joshua Stevens and his family moved back to the Bluff area due to outlaw troubles in New Mexico. Outlaw gangs were threatening to drive the Mormons back to Missouri, and they began to push people off their land. The farms of Johnny Allan and Charlie Bigler were taken over by the outlaw gangs, who then headed to Joshua Stevens' place, not realizing Joshua was in the fields nearby threshing wheat. It was seven o'clock in the morning when the news reached Joshua out in the fields. He and his brothers "knelt and prayed that if they met the outlaws, they would be protected, and wouldn't have to shed blood."<sup>xvi</sup>

They caught up with the outlaws at their camp, and courageously Joshua confronted them about stealing other people's property. A scuffle ensued, and some of the outlaws got on their horses and went for more help. As they returned, gun shots were fired and Alma's wrist was shattered by a bullet. He dropped his gun momentarily, but managed to lift it up with his toe and fire it with his wounded hand. As more shots rang out Alma was shot again the hip, and one of the outlaws fell face first into the fire.<sup>xvii</sup> He had been shot through the back of the head.

Joshua was accused of killing the man and was taken to trial. The judge, however, found him not-guilty, stating that the evidence showed the fatal bullet came from the gun of one of the dead man's friends. After the trial, Joshua was tipped off that the outlaw gang was planning to ambush him on his way back home. He was advised to take an alternate route, which he did, and on his second day out he noticed tracks indicating he was being followed by three or four men. He found where the men were camped in a walled canyon and noticed their guns propped up against the rocky wall, away from where they were sitting by the campfire. Fearlessly, Joshua rode right up to their fire, placing himself between them and their guns. He told them his name was Thompson and that he was out looking for his race horses. He politely asked if he could join them for supper and camp with them through the night. Over dinner the men told him they were a new posse called in to the area to find and kill a man named Joshua Stevens, who they believed would be hard to take alive. Unafraid, Joshua camped with them until the early morning hours, when he even went so far as to put their coffee on the fire

for them before he saddled up and left. Reportedly, after he was gone, the men realized who he was and decided that someone so brave was no killer after all.<sup>xviii</sup>

### **Life in Mexico**

Joshua Stevens eventually decided to move his family to Mexico after life in Fruitland became so unsettled and dangerous. The family first stopped in Diaz, and then traveled to Dublan, where baby Alden was born. (The road getting there was so rocky and the wagon bounced so hard upon it, that Elizabeth, who was pregnant with Alden, found it easier to walk than to ride for all those miles). Not long after they reached Dublan, Joshua was called by the Church to go to the mountain settlement of Hop Valley, and take charge of the Church's cattle there. So during the warm summer months the Stevens Family tended cattle and made cheese, but in the winter they would return to Colonia Juarez so the children could attend school.<sup>xix</sup>

Several years later, Joshua Stevens was called to take over the school in the settlement of Garcia. He was a good teacher who enjoyed the kids. But he did not stay there for more than a few years. He bought a ranch in Pacheco and moved his family there where they again planted orchards and grew blackberries, potatoes, corn and sugarcane. From the sugarcane they made molasses that they sold. In addition to farming, Joshua did some mining in the mountains by his home, as well as a lot of work for the railroad that was being built. Through this he had contact with a railroad commissary from whom he would purchase bolts of cloth, food, supplies and even sugar cubes – a treat his children enjoyed and his wife used to make blackberry preserves. All in all, Joshua was a good provider and his family enjoyed a happy life in Pacheco.<sup>xx</sup>

### **Tragedy Strikes**

Political revolution in Mexico in the early 1900's cast a deep shadow on their happiness, however. In July of 1912, the Mormon pioneer day celebrations being held in Pacheco were overrun by radical "Red Flaggers," rebels who followed the Mexican revolutionary Pascual Orozco in opposition to government leader Francisco Madero. When the Stevens family attended their church meetings the following Sunday, they learned that the rebels had attacked Colonia Juarez earlier in the week, and were reportedly headed toward Pacheco. It was advised that all the women and children be sent by train to El Paso on Tuesday.<sup>xxi</sup>

When Tuesday came, the Stevens women were all packed and ready to go, despite torrential rains that threatened to inhibit their escape. But at the last minute Elizabeth refused to leave Joshua and her boys. She had had a dream of leaving and in it, Joshua never followed after her. So strong was her feeling of foreboding because of the dream, she simply told Joshua she could not leave him.<sup>xxii</sup> So the family decided to hide out in a three-room dugout near their home that was used for storing blasting powder. They thought it would only be a matter of weeks before they could safely move back home and their other neighbors would return. However, shortly after they moved into the dugout, word came that church leaders were urging all the men and boys to leave Pacheco as well. Political tensions within the region had quickly intensified and

violence was escalating. But again, the Stevens family decided to just wait things out rather than leave. It was a dangerous time. The rebels searched the surrounding hills for them with an army of a thousand men, for they had heard that a family was hiding out there. But after a few days of fruitless searching, the army pressed on.<sup>xxiii</sup>

For three weeks the Stevens family lived in the dugout. The river was nearby and at night they cooked bread on its banks where they could safely put out the coals without smoke. They ate cheese, molasses and jelly brought from home. To pass the time, Joshua told his family stories about his life in San Juan and the murder trial in New Mexico that he had been involved in. He and his boys kept watch on their ranch from a distance during the daytime. Once they fired shots at rebel gangs who were attempting to ransack it, but they could not stop them from destroying much of their property. Joshua and Elizabeth's feather bed was destroyed and the pigs let out into the potato patch.<sup>xxiv</sup> But at least their home was not set fire to, as was Bishop Steiner's home nearby.<sup>xxv</sup> After three weeks had passed, however, the family decided to move back home. Joshua was given papers by a Mexican official stating it was okay for the family to stay in Mexico.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The next day the family got up early and began putting their farm back in order. It was a sunny Monday morning. Two of the older girls, Ella and Abbie, went to pick blackberries. As they worked, they saw two Mexican men emerge from the sugarcane fields nearby with a little dog trailing them. The dog noticed the girls and barked at them, and at once the men saw them. They started making their way towards the girls. Not wanting appear afraid, the girls kept picking berries until they reached the road, and then hurried home to tell the family about the men. Joshua was working in the potato fields at the time, so one of the younger girls ran to tell him the news. He returned home for his shotgun, and then left the house to go see what the Mexicans wanted. Ella and Emma decided to go out and pick more berries near where their father was with the men.

The girls saw the Mexicans coming out of the trees with their father behind them. Joshua had shown the men the papers he had been given by the local official, but the men merely laughed at them. He ordered them to leave his property and began escorting them away. Suddenly, one of the Mexicans turned and stabbed Joshua with his knife. He cried out to Emma, who he had seen in the berry bushes. Then he grabbed for his gun at the same time the Mexican who had stabbed him did. As they fought for control of the gun, the trigger went off, shooting the other Mexican. Then the one holding the gun with Joshua stepped backwards and fell into a ditch where he was pinned down by the weight of Joshua's body falling on top of him. Emma and Ella reached them just at that moment. Emma grabbed the Mexican's hand and tried to pry his knife away from him, as she could see he was trying to stab at Joshua again. Meanwhile Ella freed the gun from between their bodies. As she did so, Joshua's body rolled off of the Mexican, who then grabbed for Emma. The girls fought him off – Emma with a stick and Ella with the butt of the gun – until he was on his feet. Then he turned and walked away without even looking back to where the comrade he had accidentally shot was slowly dying under a nearby oak tree.

Emma and Ella carried Joshua's limp and bloody body to the house and laid him on the bed, believing that he had fainted from loss of blood. Not wanting their mother to see their father in that condition, they shuffled Elizabeth into another room. Then they sent their brother Dan for their neighbor, Harl Johnson, who had just returned from Morelos the night before. He pronounced Joshua dead. Stunned, the girls cleaned and washed his body, keeping Elizabeth away so she could remember Joshua the way he had been that morning before the tragedy occurred.

Within a matter of hours, some of their old neighbors arrived back in Pacheco, just as Joshua had expected they would within three weeks time. A few of them helped the Stevens family by building a coffin and preparing Joshua's body for the burial. The family, however, did not get to see him buried. They were shipped out of Pacheco early the next morning before a coroner's jury arrived to investigate what had happened. After a few weeks, the family arrived in El Paso, and gradually worked their way back to Holden, Utah, where Elizabeth's parents still lived.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Joshua was fifty-six years old at the time of his death. He was the father fourteen children – two of whom were married by then – and had always enjoyed family life.<sup>xxviii</sup> He was good with animals and had established a successful farm. He was remembered by his daughter, Emma, as being a hard-working, brave, and faithful Latter-Day Saint. She recalled, "Father always said that anything worth doing at all is worth doing right."<sup>xxix</sup> She believed his "life was complete enough" at the time of his death for him to pass on into the next life where he could "maybe do something more important."<sup>xxx</sup> At a funeral service held for him sometime after his death, Emma recalled Brother Spilsbury saying that the "country's better for having had [Joshua] here."<sup>xxxi</sup> Joshua Stevens had made a difference in the lives of many.

*Researched and written for the Hole-in-the-Rock Foundation by:  
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<sup>i</sup> Reference to Sarah Ellis Hawley is found only in Myrl Rowley Day, interview by Ned and Christine Day Young, 19 Feb. 1978, MS 13559 transcript, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT, 2.

<sup>ii</sup> Cheney, Mildred Martin, "Walter Stevens," 2, on file at the Daughters of Utah Pioneers.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, 1-2.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>vi</sup> Shumway, Gary L. and Jessie L. Embry, *Recollections of Emma Stevens Parker*, Interviews on July 20, July 28, September 2, 1973. Copyright Gary L. Shumway, 1980.

<sup>vii</sup> *Recollections of Emma Stevens Parker*, 2; Cornelia Adams Perkins, Marian Gardner Nielsen, and Lenora Butt Jones, *Saga of San Juan* (Monticello, Utah; San Juan County Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1957), 339; *Recollections of Emma Stevens Parker*, 2. There are two biographies of Walter Joshua Stevens in *The Saga of San Juan* – one listed as "Joshua Stevens" and one as "Walter Joshua Stevens." They are the same person.

<sup>viii</sup> Platte D. Lyman Journal, Thursday 20 November 1879 and Tuesday 25 November 1879.

<sup>ix</sup> *Recollections*, 3.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid., 3.

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<sup>xii</sup> Myrl Rowley Day, interview, 3

<sup>xiii</sup> *Recollections*, 9.

<sup>xiv</sup> Cheney, 3.

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, 7. Emma Stevens Parker mentioned seeing this event recorded in her father's brand book.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14. Emma Stevens Parker recalled that Alma came very close to death as a result of his wounds. In fact, the doctor he was taken to in Fort Lewis, Colorado, proclaimed that he would not live. But Elizabeth, his sister-in-law, nursed him patiently for six months, bathing his wounds two or three times a day. After Alma recovered he moved his family to Phoenix, Arizona.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-13.

<sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>xxii</sup> Elizabeth Stevens granddaughter, Myrl Day Young, recalled being told about this dream by her grandmother. In the dream, her grandmother knew she was leaving Mexico with her children but without her husband, Joshua. She and the children came upon a commissary, where they were given food and candy and helped on their way. After Joshua's murder, and she was in reality leaving Mexico alone with her children, her grandmother said "we came to this same little commissary that I had seen in my dream, and they did come out and give the kids peanuts and candy." Myrl Day Young, interview, 16.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Recollections*, 20-25.

<sup>xxiv</sup> According to Myrl Day Young, Alden and Ammon kept watch on the house through binoculars. They saw a group of Mexican boys enter the house and bring the bed outside. Their father was gone at the time so they went down to the house alone, fought with the Mexican boys, and put the bed back in the house. Their actions alerted the locals to the fact that a white family was still living nearby and they came back looking for them. This time, the Mexicans ripped open the feather bed and dumped molasses from the cellar on it. Myrl Day Young, interview, 3.

<sup>xxv</sup> *Recollections*, 25.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Myrl Day Young, interview, 15.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Recollections*, 27-32. Emma's account of her father's murder; Myrl Day Young also spoke of her grandfather's murder in the interview she gave 19 February 1978, 15-16.

<sup>xxviii</sup> *Recollections*, 24.

<sup>xxix</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>xxx</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>xxxi</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.