

Elizabeth Gill Jensen: Long Walk to a New Land

Elizabeth Gill was born in Durham, in northern England, in 1852. When Elizabeth was a young girl, the Gills decided to seek their fortunes in America. This was despite the fact that the United States was at the time in the tumultuous early stages of the Civil War. The family of seven took sail for New York in a rough crossing that took over six weeks to complete.



Ox Teams in a Wagon Train

After arriving, they gathered provisions and set about the great trek to the open spaces in the West, heading for Salt Lake City in 1862. The Gills and another family shared a wagon, and loaded it with all of their supplies. This meant that the men and the older children in the family had no room to ride inside, and were required to walk along the wagon in all weathers, keeping pace with the team of oxen. Ten-year-old Elizabeth walked across the country, up to 15 miles a day for six months along the 2200-mile journey. Meals were generally bacon and biscuits, with occasional variety when game was available. She mentioned having “a pickle now and then as a precaution against scurvy.”

There were other dangers along the journey as well. The wagon train had to halt for the passing of great bison herds. There were furious storms, with heavy rain or lightning, and sometimes with hail “the size of a hen’s egg to a lemon or peach.” The rain soaked the ground and created mud, which mired the teams, until the hot sun came back to blister them again. Nights saw the wagons circled, in fear of attacks that never came, though the settlers saw Indians regularly. Another danger surfaced with each river that needed crossing; the train lost several wagons when teams encountered quicksand.

The Gill family was happy to arrive in Salt Lake City, but their arrival coincided with a difficult period for the city. There were serious food shortages, and rations were often even shorter than those they had on the trail. The Gills decided to move on to an area known as Cash Valley, in what would become southeastern Idaho. It was there where Elizabeth Gill met and married Christian Jensen in 1869 when she was seventeen. They had seven children, though one did not survive. In 1885, the Jensens saw opportunities in Butte, and the family decided to move.

The trip to Butte was by ox team again, and took the family twelve days to complete. Christian got work in a mill. The family moved briefly to the Bitterroot Valley, but returned to Butte in 1888. Christian then started working in one of the mines, and the family settled down for good.

Though Christian died in 1896, Elizabeth Jensen lived to be 98, still living in Butte, where she said that the lights “burn brighter than lights do anywhere else.” At the time of her death, she was known as “Granny” to all. This especially included her large family, which included her six children, 32 grandchildren, 60 great-grandchildren, and 34 great-great-grandchildren.

Sources:

Montana Standard, “Elizabeth Jensen, 98, Pioneer of Butte, Is Dead”, August 2, 1951

Montana Standard, “Williamsburg Pioneer Recalls Joys, Hazards of Trek Across Plains to Salt Lake City and Idaho in 1862” by Frank Quinn, May 12, 1946

Photo Credit:

Public domain