

FRANCES STRONG HELMAN: HER CONVERSION STORY IN HER OWN WORDS

As shared with Strong family members in Utah

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Transcribed from a tape by Florie Fullmer

Frances Strong Helman (b. 1903) was a much beloved family member who lived her whole life in Pennsylvania. She is a descendant of John Strong, a younger brother of Jacob. She was a serious worker in genealogy in Pennsylvania for our Strong family, but even more so for many, many others. She came into contact with Harriet Speirs, our beloved family genealogist who lived in Utah and who did so much from Salt Lake City to further our Strong family history. Through that association, Frances came to Utah to share what she had discovered about the Strong's. To her we owe many of the wonderful stories that have come down about our ancestors. This is her conversion story in her own words.

Well, I first became interested and learned that there was a family in the West through correspondence Hannah Helman (the daughter of Samuel Helman who was the son of Michael Helman and Catherine Strong: Catherine was the daughter of our Michael and Hannah May Reed Strong) had received from Harriet Speirs. And I copied everything she had but I didn't write to her, and then we were making a trip west and looking at the map and my husband said, Say, don't you know some relatives out here in Salt Lake City. I said, well, there's Harriet Speirs, and he said write to her and tell her we hope to go through Salt Lake City, and we'll stop over and say hello and then the rest is up to her. So, I wrote her and by return mail from her came a letter that said Oh, at long last I have found some of John and Polly Strong's family and from that time on I would probably say for two years anyway, there was seldom more than two weeks went by where I didn't have a letter from Harriet or Harriet would have one from me. And then came the day when they had a society meeting, and they had treasury money, and they decided they would like to have someone come from the East who would tell them all the background stories of the Strong family, and they thought that I would be the one to send for. They would give me \$100 toward my transportation if I would just come; I could stay as long as I liked; travel any way I wished; bring anybody I wanted with me, and when I got here everything would be free. Well, my husband said you can go and stay two months as far as I am concerned. We arranged to take the children down to my mother with the girl who did our babysitting and helped with the housecleaning. I had my \$100 so I bought a hat for a dollar and a dress for two something and had my husband's watch for time and took off for Salt Lake. I almost lost my purse, a man thought I was asleep and leaned over my shoulder and reached down for the purse but it was real rough and the instant his fingers touched my wrist I hiked up on the purse and he got out of his seat behind me and moved to the back of the bus. But nothing really happened so I still had the money that was left over from that \$100, the hat and the dress and \$61 for bus fare that I had spent out of the \$100. Someone said, oh we would have given you more, but I wouldn't ask for any more. When I got to Salt Lake it was the beginning of the Covered Wagon Days and the newspapers were filled with pioneer stories and I just love that sort of thing and I made up my mind I had heard many things in my hometown and from people I talk with about things that the Mormons did. They still practice polygamy, they knew that they did. Why one man told my husband he worked for a picture company that enlarged portraits and he had enlarged the portrait of a man and his three wives and he delivered it and how proud that family was of their picture. And finally I said, well when I come home I'll know. I made up my mind to go to everything I could.

First I stayed in the Speirs home and then I went over to Alvin and Ida Strong's home. There I attended Sunday School. I thought I heard many special things they discussed that the general public didn't hear. I didn't know exactly how I was going to get around that, but Uncle Art said, you may go with me to the small classes or you may stay in the class with Earn and then I'll show you the chapel, I want you to see what the boy scouts are doing, and so forth; so I stayed with the group and Uncle Earn and

then finally they sent the ladies over to the chapel for something. I don't know what they called it, and I thought, now I'll hear and I almost broke a leg getting over there and you know what they talked about, Louisa May Alcott, and I learned things about Louisa M. Alcott that day I'd never heard before, and still remember. When I got home Beth Strong said, do you know what the men were talking about, and the young people that were there were in classes, the boys in a class of their own and the girls were in another one. Do you know what they were talking about? And I said, I have no idea and she said characters that are outstanding, that made an effort in courage and their work that would be an example for us today. I found out that this goes on all the time. I stayed so long in walking over to the chapel and learning about these things that they were coming from Alvin's home to take me back and I was also told that if you didn't go to church by the time church was out there was someone there to find out exactly where you'd been, and why you weren't at church. Well, Ida insisted on staying home and preparing a nice dinner for us and I said please don't stay on my account and she said oh no, I want to Frances. I often do this. Al Norton's coming with his young lady and Diana and her husband will be here and we'll have a real nice dinner. I said, now you are sure you want to do this? And she said yes. Well, shortly after they came to see where I was, I got back and dinner was served, nobody had come yet to see where Ida had been that morning and we had the dinner and after it was cleared up we went for a ride somewhere and got back from that ride and no one had come yet to find out why she hadn't been to Sunday School that day, but we did go to Sacrament meeting and I learned that that is a meeting you always expect a member to attend.

I read the Book of Mormon, that is a portion, Harriet gave it to me and she said, now Frances, do read 3rd Nephi and I was interested and, of course, I thought the Bible teaching where Christ said I have other sheep who are not of this fold, and then I could see the whole section and the visit to this continent. I signed the register in the Information Center and the next summer after I got home, two missionaries came to see us and we bought a Book of Mormon and I compared that Book of Mormon with the Bible, back and forward, and back and forward, and I had read the tracts that I had taken home and I was especially taken with Ben Rich's tract, the Friendly Discussion, and I still give that to people who know very little about the Mormons. Finally after two years I felt I was ready to become a member of the church and I told my husband that I was getting arrangements made to be baptized in Pittsburgh and he said, after being quiet for a little bit, said You know, I would rather you wouldn't do that. He said you would likely be ostracized by your neighbors and they would be unkind to the children and I know that would make you real unhappy. If you were in the West where there are a lot of Mormons and you were to have people of your own kind all around you then I would say go ahead, but as it is you would be the only one here and I am afraid it might be a little rough for you. Think it over, and if you must do it, go ahead, but I would rather you didn't. So, of course, I believed in family unity and you weren't going to stir up your family by doing something that your husband would rather you didn't do, he was the head of the household so I didn't become baptized a member of the church at that time. I thought some way, somehow, sometime it is going to happen. I didn't know that I would lose my husband for awhile in death before it would happen, but he passed away in 1965 and immediately there were people from the church visiting me and the missionaries came. One friend I had in town was a radio announcer and I went to meetings that they were holding for investigators in their house and she said, oh we're going to move and we won't see anybody baptized and I said well, how soon could you be baptized or do you have special times you do this, and she said no, if anybody is ready, I think they could arrange for it most any time within reason and a man came down from Harrisburg to interview me and a young fellow, a missionary, came in one day and said, say, when are you going to join the church, and I said, all in good time my boy, all in good time. I made up my mind now I am going to do this right away and a short time later I was baptized. That was in November, 1966. But when my husband said if I were in the West where there were plenty of Mormons around, my own kind, and then I wondered over and over again, why when I felt so deeply about this why oh why did I wait, and then I knew and I still know I am conceited enough to

think that I was placed in the East to collect the genealogy for the people in the West who couldn't get it near as easily as I could and I sent it to you. I feel that was why I was in the East and I know that is why I am still in the East and there is work for me to do there.