

KERR, MARION JOSEPH

WRITTEN BY MARY ELLEN KERR GEE

Marion Joseph Kerr was born 6 November 1861, in Richmond, Cache County, Utah, son of Robert Marion Kerr and Nancy Jane Rawlins, daughter of Joseph Sharp Rawlins and Mary Frost. They were among the first families to settle in Richmond. Their home was a carpet covered wagon box where Marion Joseph, their first child was born.

The Indians were troublesome. The young father often stood guard; a bullet-marked hat was kept many years as a souvenir. A dugout replaced the wagon box. Later a six room two-story house, which still stands (1959). This was a home where family and friends were always welcome. The children and grandchildren shared many adventures in the large barn, the orchard, the farm and surrounding hills. When the east wind roared down the nearby canyon everyone hurried to the rock cellar built under a hill.

Joseph's boyhood days were typical of those pioneer times. School in the winter, long hours of labor on the farm or in the canyon. All was not work however. There were sports of skill and daring. "Joe" Kerr or "Curly" as he was called, was the first to take any suggestion. No horse was too wild for him to ride. On one occasion he was thrown and severely injured. One eye was displaced and lay out on his cheek. Through the faith and prayers of family and friends he fully recovered.

Early in life he assumed the responsibility of taking care of the family while grandfather was on a mission in Texas.

These isolated pioneers had to provide their own entertainment. Father participated in musicals, debates and dramas.

At the age of nineteen he married Ella Rebecca Merrill, age seventeen, daughter of Marriner Wood Merrill and Cyrene Standley. They became the parents of ten children; Mary, Joseph "Jody", Ivin, Robert, Alta, Vera, Cyrene born in Richmond and Ella, Elda, and Wynona born in Ora, Fremont County, Idaho.

Their Richmond home was a two-story brick house surrounded by an orchard of apples, pears, plums, peaches, and apricots. A spring of cold water was piped to the house.

Mother took care of a colony of bees. There was great excitement when they swarmed and also when the honey was taken from the hives.

After the birth of their third child, Ivin, the young parents decided that father should attend the university of Utah. Joseph L. Rawlins, an uncle, Utah's first representative in congress, also first senator, offered to help the ambitious young man. After two terms he was called home on account of grandfather's death. From that time on he gave assistance to his mother and the children.

With grandfather Rawlins he engaged for a time in railroading and contracting at the Jordan narrows. Later the farms at Richmond and Fairview occupied his attention. Here "Jody", at a very early age, assumed much responsibility, as did each child, according to their age.

As the oldest I was permitted to accompany father to his debates, musicals, and home dramatic plays. He chose to be the villain or a black-faced comedian song and dance man, accompanying himself on the banjo or accordion. Only in "East Lynn" did he play the role of the lover. I often heard mother giving him his cues after the children were in bed.

Among my earliest memories I see "Jody" setting in a horse-collar in the corner while a group of friends danced to the music of father's accordion.

Many times when I grew tired of rocking baby brothers in the cradle I would ask a visitor to do so. Mother's advice was often sought by the lovelorn young folks who gladly took over my task.

Again I see myself, Jody and Ivin sitting on the table picking out all the raisins in a large pan of mincemeat. No chastisement followed.

There were periods of illness in the home, one especially serious, mother was in bed with a new baby, Alta, four of us children were very ill with scarlet fever. Father went from bed to bed, being both nurse and doctor.

On one occasion mother was ill and father did the washing and hung the clothes helter-skelter on the line. A friend who was passing came in and said, "I know Ella is ill because "Joe" hung the clothes out." When father was ill with malaria Dr. Snow drove from Logan to attend him.

In sickness or in health our parents carried on. Church work was not neglected. Sunday School and meeting on the Sabbath, fast meeting on Thursday at 2 p.m. once a month. Horses were taken from the work in the fields, young and old attended the meeting.

I recall seeing father and his young companion Joseph F. Merrill set out on horseback to visit their scattered ward teachers district. This was the beginning of church responsibilities for the youth who became an apostle. He often paid public tribute to father for his early training.

There are pleasant memories of those long ago days. Father had a beautiful tenor voice and taught us many of the sings he loved to sing. Whenever I hear "I will take you home Kathleen" it recalls precious memories and in fancy I hear father's voice. Jody and Ivin gave us a concert before they went to sleep every night. Robert and I were the upstairs audience. No doubt father and mother downstairs enjoyed it all.

Stories of hunter's paradise near St. Anthony, Idaho inspired father and a number of friends to investigate. They were not disappointed. Deer and elk in great number roamed the virgin territory. They found not only a delightful hunting ground but saw an unconquered agricultural region. Result: the next spring (1894) these men filed on homesteads near the present sight of Ashton, Fremont County, Idaho. In April 1895, father, Jody, and Ivin took the stock and machinery and drove to the new home. The journey taking many days. In May, mother and five children (Mary the oldest - fourteen), with household furniture made the trip to market lake by train. Here they were met by father, Jody, and Ivin with wagons to take them to the new homestead. It was a great change from the comfortable brick home to the two-room log cabin.

But with undaunted courage mother worked early and late to make a pleasant home. She was not satisfied with the rough logs and pine-poles ceiling. Several coats of "white wash" on the walls and "factory" on the ceiling made the Kerr home quite a novelty. People came for miles to take note and to hear the organ.

A branch of the church (Arcadia) was organized with father as presiding elder. Later bishop of the Ora ward so named when a post office was established. Mother appointed postmistress.

Though few in number, members of the church attended service, which were held in the Kerr home. Father taught the older group and led the singing, mother the young children. Mary played the organ. An interesting feature of these gatherings, everyone expected to stay for dinner. With true western hospitality they were made welcome. The dishes were washed, the table set again and again.

The home was the gathering place not only for church services but also for dances on the rough floor. While father and others furnished the music, organ and harmonicas. For an old time celebration July, twenty-four, 1895, a long bowery was built on the south side of the house. A typical program was given by old and young. This was only the beginning of their "home-made" entertainment. A choir and a male quartet encouraged an interest in music. Father directed an amateur play, which was also presented in a neighboring town.

One of the first concerns of the parents was a school. There was no county district so a tuition school was held. William E. Gee was one of the early teachers and he took fence posts for his pay. There were times when the snow was four feet deep, there were no roads. Teachers and children went to school on skis. The mail was brought in by dog team or snowshoes. Winters were long and cold. Often the snow would drift until the houses and other buildings were completely covered and it would be necessary to "shovel out."

Despite all this the men folk made regular trips to the timber for fuel and building material. Hunting trips were filled with excitement and adventure. Game was plentiful and supplied meat as well as furs for robes and greatcoats.

This was a community where the spirit of brotherhood and friendship prevailed, when old and young joined all the social gatherings. Simple pleasures added richness to the lives of these sturdy folk.

With the passing of time the log church gave place to a frame building.

Father built a nine-room two-story house, the first in the valley to have plumbing and electric lights. The hospitality of the home was extended to all who came—friends or strangers. When the Kerr dinner bell sounded its clarion call for the workers in distant fields, neighbors or passersby would frequently saunter in with

the laconic remark, "We know you always have plenty for a few more, so we invited ourselves to dinner." often there would be twenty seated at the long table.

Father's interests were not confined to this small settlement. He took a lively interest in politics and was known as "Fremont County's war horse." a gold watch bearing that inscription was presented to him. When Idaho's senator Fred T. Dubois succeeded in having the "Mormon" voters disfranchised M. J. Kerr toured the state, lifting his voice in fiery protest against such injustice. Others joined in the fight and the nefarious act was repealed.

During world war one he was appointed commissioner of labor of the state of Idaho. He was called to Washington a number of times to confer with president Woodrow Wilson.

While serving as county commissioner of Fremont County, he gave special attention to the building of reservoirs, canals, bridges and the betterment of conditions in general. His interest in education is evidenced by his liberal support of Ricks College. Nine of his children attended that institution. Ivin and Robert went on to receive degrees from O.A.C. where uncle Dr. W. J. Kerr was president. Six of his daughters taught in county schools. This interest carries on in his children, grandchildren, and great grand children. At the present time (1959), twenty living members of the family hold twenty-six college degrees.

Father was always interested in the activities of his family- debates, dramas, orations, operettas, athletic meets, and scout awards. Whenever possible he made it a point to be present at these events.

Time brought changes. Father was called to be bishop of the new Ashton ward and directed the erection of a chapel. When Yellowstone stake was organized he was chosen second councilor in the presidency. This necessitated his leaving the ranch where the family had lived so many years. Years of rich and varied

experiences, of joys and sorrows, the greatest the death of Jody who became ill while attending the A. C. At Logan, Utah. Later Ella, a schoolteacher.

There were gains and losses in raising cattle, sheep, and hogs. Father's great love was for the land. He rejoiced to see the broad acres of golden grain, which too often was ruined by heavy frosts. Undaunted he planted again and again. Many men were employed on the ranch but father was always the first one up. He would come to the stairway and sing "hail to the brightness of Zion's glad morning." the girls would hurry down to prepare a six o'clock breakfast while he went to the boys room to "line up" the plans for the day. Despite long hours of work the family often gathered around the organ and joined in singing familiar songs.

After the move to St. Anthony, the stake headquarters, Robert and Annie supervised the activities on the farm. Under the leadership of Daniel J. Miller, James E. Fogg, and Marion J. Kerr a commodious and beautiful tabernacle was erected. Father was given general supervision of the work. This building will stand as a monument to these pioneers for many years to come.

As a member of the stake presidency father was closely associated with the church general authorities who were often entertained in his home. Mother was a friendly and gracious hostess and gave them a warm welcome.

Throughout his long life father's devotion to the church was sincere. He was proud of his heritage, often spoke of his close association with grandfather Rawlins. Deemed it a special privilege to sit beside him in the meetings that were held in the Salt Lake Temple. A few days before his death he spoke in M.I.A. meeting also a sacrament service. A worthy example to his children and his children's children. They might well remember some of his mottoes, "You can do it" and "Remember who you are."

The same praise may be truly be given to mother who with loyal devotion stood beside him through joys and sorrows. She too served as officer in ward and stake. She was a ministering angel to the sick, a mother to the lonely and discouraged, extended old-fashioned hospitality to friends and strangers and found pleasure in this service. At the age of seventy-six she passed away at the home at St. Anthony, March 17, 1939, was buried March 20, in the cemetery there. A beautiful service was held in the tabernacle. Many sincere tributes were paid to her for the unselfish service she had given to her family, church, and the many who came to her for aid and encouragement. One of the speakers was her brother Apostle Joseph F. Merrill.

Father remained in the home for a short time. After an illness and surgery he made his home with Robert and Annie in Rexburg, with occasional visits to his children who lived elsewhere. Annie gave him every attention, took him to visit old friends and their funerals. Also to meetings of the "Daughters of Idaho Pioneers" where he occasionally led the singing.

He passed away at their home 17 May 1942, was buried beside mother in St. Anthony cemetery 20 May 1942. The tabernacle was filled to overflowing by his friends who come from far and near to pay tribute for his devotion to church and to the community. Among the speakers was his brother Dr. William J. Kerr, chancellor of higher education for the state of Oregon. A grandson Merrill Gee sang "Rest, Rest for the Weary". Other members of the family participated in the services.

There is something nostalgic about the passing of pioneer days. The world moves on but ever and always the children of these sturdy folk of by-gone years will honor and revere them. The stories of their accomplishments, despite almost unsurmountable obstacles give us faith and courage and add richness to our lives.