

Dr. David L. Crowder Oral History Project

Zetha Howarth Smith Armstrong - Life Experiences

By Zetha Howarth Smith Armstrong

March 20, 1980

Box 2 Folder 38

Oral Interview conducted by Joy Chaffin Armstrong

Transcription copied by Alina Mower

November 2005

Brigham Young University- Idaho

JA: What's your full name?

ZA: Zetha Howarth Smith Armstrong.

JA: Where were you born?

ZA: I was born at 352 Hampton Avenue, Salt Lake City, Utah.

JA: When were you born?

ZA: January 3, 1901.

JA: How old are you this year?

ZA: I'm 79 years old.

JA: Would you tell me some of your family background?

ZA: My parents were Hyrum Joseph Smith and Sarah Alice Howarth. My father was born April 27, 1868, Leicester, Leicestershire England and immigrated to Utah in the year 1881. My mother was born October 29, 1870, Millville, Cache, Utah. My Grandparents were Charles Dilke Smith born May 10, 1847, Leicester, England and Mary Ann Dawkins born April 28, 1847, Leicester, England and William Howarth born March 19, 1846, Bury, Lancashire, England and Alice Nuttall July 7, 1848, Tottington, Lancashire, England.

JA: How many brothers are there in your family?

ZA: I have three brothers.

JA: How many sisters are there in your family?

ZA: I have eight sisters.

JA: How many children were in your family totally?

ZA: There was a total of 12 children.

JA: What's the names of all your brothers and sisters?

ZA: Alice Vera, Mary Leona, Virgil Howarth, Venice Elizabeth, Myrle May, Merrill Howarth, Vivian Howarth, Annie Howarth, Kenneth Howarth, Effie Lucile, Afton Iona.

JA: What number are you in your family?

ZA: As you read the above you will notice that I am the 6th child in the family of 12 making me in the middle of the family. It was to my advantage to be in the middle for it seemed like my

older sisters and brother were one family and the younger sisters and two brothers were of a different era. I could easily fit into either group. We were a very close family. My mother and father always seemed so happy each time a new baby was born. One of my father's pet sayings was "Each one gets prettier." One of my duties was to dress my two younger sisters, namely Effie and Afton, each morning before I went to school. They were such darling girls, Afton has very blonde hair and blue eyes and Effie has dark brown hair and hazel eyes. They were only 14 months apart and mother dressed them alike, Mother said she always wanted twins and that was the closest she came to having them.

JA: What kind of things did you do for fun as a young girl?

ZA: When I was a child, radio and television hadn't been invented so we had to make our own entertainment. One evening a week we younger children would get into the clothes closet and dress up in the older ones' clothes and put on shows for mother and dad. Also my older brother, Virgil, would do tricks for us with lights behind a sheet which mother or father would hang up for him. We thought that was really exciting.

ZA: What's some things you remember about your brother and sisters?

ZA: We had an orchard by the side of our house and my brothers Virgil and Merrill would put boards in the branches for us to sit on; then we would string rope from one tree to another, tie a bucket to the rope and send notes back and forth to each other. Oh, what fun that was. We would laugh and try to think up something funny to write on the note or sometimes we would draw pictures. Also mother would bring us our lunch in lard buckets and we would have picnics up in trees. Now we buy lard in cartons, but at that time it came in buckets from one pound to five or ten pounds. Mother always bought the one pound size so we could have them for lunch pails. We also took our lunch to school in these buckets. All the children in our neighborhood did so mother would print our names on the lid of the pail.

JA: Where did you attend your Elementary years?

ZA: My birthday coming in January, I could not start school until the next September, which made me six years and eight months when I started the first grade. The first school was called Summer School, which was on Third East and about Seventh South in Salt Lake City. I attended that school until I was in the third grade. At that time a new school was built called Whittier, and we were transferred to that school; this school being on Third East and south of Thirteenth was closer to our home, but still far enough that we had to carry our lunch. There were no lunch programs in schools during these years.

JA: Can you remember any experiences you had during your Elementary School Years?

ZA: I had some very happy days attending Whittier. As a child I was gifted with the ability to draw pictures quite well. At Thanksgiving and Christmas and all holidays I was privileged to go [to] all the schoolrooms and draw the seasons' pictures on the blackboards like turkeys, Santa Claus, winter scenes, etc. And I really felt quite elated about this talent. We had a school band and had to line up in front of the school, four abreast, and march into school. We all had our

certain place to stand in line. We had to be there promptly at a quarter to nine and the band would start playing a march and we would keep time just like we were in the Army. It was fun and looked beautiful. We all loved it very much. We would march up the steps, go down the hall to our special room and hang up our coats and take our seats. The teacher would give us the signal to stand and salute the flag before the regular class would start. Of course we were like all children of ages in elementary school. Some of us made mistakes and were sent to the hall and if we were too noisy to the principal's office. We didn't have different teachers for each subject, just one teacher for everything.

JA: Did you have a favorite teacher? If yes tell about your teacher.

ZA: Two very outstanding teachers to me were Miss Sudheimer 5th grade and Miss Hart 7th grade. Miss Sudheimer had a special way of teaching music. First, she would draw a picture on the blackboard of the piano keys, then she would teach us the notes by saying "do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do," instead of C, D, E, F, etc. Also she would teach us the half step of the black keys and make us sing them this way so we would have both alto and soprano. It sounded different singing the songs by do, re, mi etc. but it taught us to sight read music. It was especially good for everyone in the class because when we were in high school we could go right into the choir and sight read music. My mother was a piano teacher and was so astonished that I came home and could play songs on the piano.

JA: Was there any experience that you remember that was a little unusual that happened when you were a young girl that has changed today?

ZA: During my school days we didn't have electric lights. We lived five blocks south of 9th South in Salt Lake and the electricity wasn't available to us until I was about sixteen. Sounds odd now because that is almost in the business district at this time. We had coal oil lamps in every room in the house. We would all study around the large kitchen table at night and put two or three lamps on the table so the light would be bright. My father would sit at the head of the table and read his newspaper to keep us from playing. He would always be there to help us if we had anything difficult especially in mathematics. We weren't allowed to leave the table until we had our lessons. My father was very good to us, but strict about schooling.

JA: What special moment did you have as a young lady?

ZA: I graduated from the 8th grade in 1915. At the time I attended school, we finished geography in the 7th grade and in our final test we had to draw a map of the world, free hand, put all the capitals in the countries and the industry they were noted for and I drew a perfect map. My parents were very happy about this and I was six feet off the ground for a day or two. My name was in the Deseret News as I was the only student to have a PERFECT paper in all the schools in Salt Lake City. I forgot to tell you that out of all my brothers and sisters I was the only one that was left handed, but this is the kind of praise I received, "And to think she drew a perfect map and with her left hand." I think it was with my father sitting at the head of the table.

JA: Where did you attend high school and [are there] any experiences you had while you were in high school that you would like to share?

ZA: I started at the Salt Lake High School (the only high school in Salt Lake at the time except the Mormon high school which was called the LDS. Institute of Learning and LDS Business College was in connection with this school). I attended the Salt Lake High School from September until Christmas time when I changed to the LDS Business College. World War I came and with men going to war the city was in need of secretaries. At that time women weren't allowed to be bank tellers and there were many jobs needing people trained in bookkeeping. I was trained in the LDS Business College for positions such as these. I had planned to go back to school as soon as the war was over but when [the] Armistice was signed I met the man who was to become my husband.

JA: What's the first position or job that you got that paid real good?

ZA: When I finished the LDS Business College my first position was with an Insurance Company called Selbach, Ins. Co. It was interesting how I obtained this position. I had finished my shorthand test with the speed that was necessary, also the typing test when a man by the name of Tommy Muir came to the school in desperate need of a secretary. My shorthand teacher called me into her office and asked me if I wanted to work for the summer. Of course I was thrilled to be asked. She said that I was the top student at that time and if I wanted the job I could be interviewed by Mr. Muir. He hired me, but I told my first big lie. I wasn't 18 years old as the law required, I was only sixteen. I wanted that job so badly for the summer that I said I was 18. I looked 18 so no one questioned me. We didn't have Social Security then so there was no reason to tell anyone my age even though it bothered me. I continued my education by going to night school at the LDS Business School. This was a very fine position I had, but my father wanted me to work at ZCMI. He had me apply at the first opening for a secretary came by and I was given the position of Secretary to the Manager of the Wholesale Dry goods and Notion Departments. I guess this is the way it was meant to be for me to meet my future husband.

JA: Do you have any experience of what you did when World War I came?

ZA: When the war broke out all the young men in Liberty Ward who joined or were drafted asked me if I would go with them to Patriarch Sperry and take down their Patriarchal Blessings. Of course I was happy to do this and after I had been to Patriarch Sperry's home several times he asked me if I would like him to give me a blessing. I was so happy he asked me because it never dawned on me to have one. Somehow I thought you should be going on a mission or to war to have a blessing. At the time I was going out with a fine young man who I thought I was in love with, but Brother Sperry said in the blessing, "Dear sister you have not met the one you will marry yet but you will meet a fine young man who will take you to the temple." I was amazed because the young man I was going out with was a fine young man. Anyway things just happened that this young man and I drifted apart.

JA: What happened after World War I?

ZA: I was working at ZCMI and the flu broke out so the traveling men couldn't go on their territories and the orders had to come in by mail. That created a situation so all the secretaries of the different departments had to come in by mail. That created a situation so all the secretaries of

the different departments had to be in the main office to take the orders off the mail for each of the departments.

JA: How did you meet Grandfather?

ZA: James Armstrong had just returned from the Navy and was working as the Secretary of the Wholesale Hardware Department, and he came in the office to write up the hardware orders and I was there to write up the dry goods orders and we met. We hadn't been in conversation but a few minutes when he said, "I hope you are going to be home Sunday for I am coming down to see you." I went home and called all my friends I could think of to come over Sunday just in case he did come so he wouldn't think I was waiting for him. Sure enough he came and we must have known each other in the other world because electricity that was in the air was something. He came to see me every evening, I do believe, and I was there waiting. Now my parents could see way beyond what we could so my father took things into his hands.

JA: What's one of your most embarrassing moments?

ZA: Behind my back my Dad, who was the assistant manager of the Dry Goods Department went to James Armstrong and said, "What are your intentions towards my daughter?" James replied, "Well, if she will say YES I would like to marry her," this all behind my back. That night Jim told me the story—if there had just been a little hole in the ground I could have slipped in it. That night Jim said, "Your dad said there was just one thing more. 'If you marry her you will have to take her to the TEMPLE.'" We had been keeping steady company for about seven months now. During this time, I had been operated on for Appendicitis and had my teeth fixed and I told him I would have to pay all these bills before I could get married. That night he went to my doctors and paid all my bills. He came to see me the next day and said, "Here are your receipts, now you don't have any more excuses."

JA: Did Grandfather have to ask your dad for your hand?

ZA: Yes, my father had taken a trip to Idaho with the toy line to the stores, which he did once a year. This was in July and I said, "You will have to wait until papa comes home so you can ask him." Jim sat down and wrote a letter to my father telling him he had met all the requirements and papa sent him an air mail special delivery letter back (which my husband still has) giving him his consent. Jim then gave me a beautiful diamond, which I still wear and the date was set for October 14, 1920. We had been married just eleven months when our first baby, a beautiful little girl, was born but she died in the birth. It was sad because we looked forward to having a baby. It was nearly four years after that before we were able to have another baby, but we had a beautiful boy whom we named James Albert and nearly four years after him we had another beautiful boy whom we named Richard Merrill. We have enjoyed our sons and their families.

JA: Do you have a special spiritual experience you would like to share for others to hear?

ZA: My husband got interested in genealogy, but I'm sure it was from losing our first baby and knowing that if we live righteously she will be with us someday. We found in looking up the genealogy that my husband's mother and father hadn't been sealed in the temple. This we had to

do. We started working with his brothers and sisters and I had the privilege of seeing my husband sealed to his mother and father and all his family sealed to their mother. This was such a spiritual experience. It seemed like it was all planned to be this way.

JA: What's been a family tradition that has continued to today?

ZA: On my husband's birthday, which is April 2nd we all try to get together each year at our home.

JA: What are your children doing now?

ZA: My son James Albert is a very talented teacher and at present teaching Physical Education and Science at Blackfoot, Idaho. Richard Merrill is a physician and surgeon residing at Visalia, California with offices in Farmersville, California. Our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren are so very special to us.

JA: What are some of your talents?

ZA: As a young girl I was privileged to take singing lessons for about three years, piano lessons for a short time, and a few art classes. I have been on programs for the American Legion, was on KSL radio and Leola Scott and I sang many duets for the program written by Afton Dale about the history of Idaho. This was a fun project for Leola and I because we sang songs like "A Bird in a Gilded Cage," which was written many years ago, up to the songs popular at the time the program was presented. My father always said, "Zetha is a jack of all trades, master of none!" this was a standing joke in the family. I never knew when I was sixteen to nineteen when I would be called upon to do something at the last minute because my father was the bishop. He was set apart to be the first bishop of Liberty Ward in Salt Lake City when I was seven. He held that position for many years.

JA: What's some church positions you have held?

ZA: While my father was bishop I was the Secretary of Sunday School for a while. We moved to Price, Utah for a few years and I was a Primary Teacher again. We moved to Idaho Falls in 1932 and again I taught Primary. I have really enjoyed all my church callings that I have had. I believe the one I enjoyed the best was Homemaking Councilor in Relief Society. I also enjoyed the many years being a visiting teacher. At the present, I am head of reporting ten districts to the Secretary each month. Over the years I have done many Temple Endowments and hope to have the privilege of doing many, many more.

JA: What's been the most important and rewarding position you have had?

ZA: The most important positions, namely: wife, mother, homemaker, and grandmother.

JA: What are the names of all the places you have worked?

ZA: I have worked since I was sixteen in many positions from Secretary, PBX operator, Saleslady, and finally Manager in a ladies Ready-to-Wear shop.

JA: What happened when World War II came?

ZA: I went back to work when World War II came. My oldest son, James went to the service and my younger son, Richard, was in high school. Again extra help was needed down town in the businesses. I worked as a saleslady in a store called Cinderella shop, owned by Leo LeVine, as a secretary at the LDS Hospital, and then I was asked to manage a store called Ann's Apparel.

JA: When did you go into retirement?

ZA: I quit work and retired at the age of sixty-two and again I was asked to work in the Primary, which I happily accepted.

JA: After retirement what did you do to keep busy and special experience or moment you may have had?

ZA: I hadn't been in the primary very long when the bishop asked me to be the Work Director Counselor in the Relief Society. I said, "Bishop Heilesen, I would rather stay in the Primary for a while, I just became acquainted with the girls so I can remember all their names." The Bishop said, "Okay, but I will have to talk it over with Sister Robertson, she asked for you." The next night he came over again and said, "Sister Armstrong, Sister Robertson and I knelt down in prayer last night, and your name was the only one that came to each of us." Of course I apologized to the bishop for questioning him. I enjoyed that position above all. I really felt needed. You have to plan so many things for the different ages of the Sisters. We were informed that we couldn't have any more bazaars. I realized how important the lessons in art would be to me I had in my earlier years. The bishop's counselor, Richard Williams, set me apart. It was a beautiful blessing—I remember so well he told me two or three times to "Pray always and I would be inspired in the work." It wasn't long until the ward, Fifth Ward, was dissolved. This left an empty spot in my heart. We were put in the Second Ward. I was sad but for only a week. The president sister Lucille Painter came promptly and asked me to be the same councilor to her. This time I didn't ask any questions, I was so happy. Now we could go ahead with all the work I had planned. It was Christmas time and we made choir girls, calendars, wire baskets, shoe bags, wreaths, and so many things. We had our last Bazaar and were able to hand the bishop a sum of money, when it was time to have the bishop handle these matters.

JA: Now would you tell me a couple of stories that you had as you were growing up that you would like to share?

ZA: Well, here's two stories I remember. My husband's father was seventy when Jim and I were married. He and I were really good friends right from the first. My husband was a Traveling Salesman and was away from home for three weeks at a time. I was a very nervous person so, my husband being the youngest member of the family and all the other brothers and sisters married, we lived with them for a few years. He and I would sit on the front porch while his mother was doing different things she liked to do. At these times his Father would tell me "Tall"

hunting stories and they were so interesting. I had never been hunting so I believed them regardless of how wild they were. This made for a good friendship. My husband's father had a mustache and Jim said he had never seen his father without a mustache. I got the wildest notion to have him shave it off. After a few weeks I persuaded him to do this just to see how he would look. You can imagine how his upper lip would look after having a mustache for all his life from the time he was old enough to shave. When my husband came home from one of his trips he took one look at his father and just had a fit. We all had a good laugh. His mother was backing me up all the time, but my husband was upset so his Father let his mustache grow in again. I had my fun but didn't try anything like that again.

I remember when James Albert was a baby just three months old, my husband took us fishing in Huntington Canyon, Utah. While we were sleeping a cloudburst came. It was terrible. The whole mountain came washing down bringing mud and rocks weighing tons, covering the road. The mud was up to our knees and both our cars were under mud and water. The Lord was surely watching over us because our tents were the only objects that didn't get covered with mud. We were with another couple and they also had a little baby. We had no way to call for help so decided to make a sling around our neck and take turns carrying the babies and walk out. The towns' people started out looking for anyone who was caught in the flood and were we thankful when we saw them coming as we were completely exhausted. They opened the road with teams of horses and scrapers and then pulled our cars out of the mud. We were now able to return home thankful to be alive.