

# Riverton Yesterdays



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A Monthly Newsletter of Oldtime Stuff about Riverton, Utah

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My Father Was a Polygamist:  
Memories of Viola Nokes Dowdy  
and Marie Densley Bills

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## My Father Was a Polygamist: Viola Nokes Dowdy

[Note: Mel Bashore interviewed Viola Nokes Dowdy on 18 September 1986.]

Mel: Who was your father?

Viola: Charles Mormon Nokes. His first wife was Caroline Hamilton — a lovely woman. We just loved her. My mother was Sarah Elizabeth Ann

I guess you can fall in love with a dozen women, can't you?

Shores Nokes. She came from North Carolina to marry my dad. He went down [there] on a mission. He talked her into marrying him because he had Aunt Cal [at] home. He had two daughters, Caroline and Matilda, and when he went on a mission, he left them [at] home. He fell in love with my mother. I guess you can fall in love with a dozen women, can't you?

Mel: That's what they say. A woman can marry just one man, but men seem to be able to fall in love with a bunch of women. When were you born?

Viola: My birthday is the 6<sup>th</sup> of May 1901. I'm up there. I'm 85. But nobody believes it [when I talk] on the telephone.

Mel: How long did you live in Riverton?

Viola: I left it to get married when I was 17 years old. I married Ammon Levorson, just before he went into the service. He was a Draper man. I had 17 years living in Riverton [from 1901 to 1918]. I was on the farm most of the time — in the apple orchard. We had quite a time there.

Mel: What are your earliest memories?

Viola: I'll tell you the funniest thing. I loved the water. I was only two years old, but I'd go down to the ditch. There was a very small bridge there — just a board across there. It was way away from the house. I'd go down there and crawl on that and I could see a face in the water. I wanted that face to come out and play with me. I would talk to it and smile. It would smile back. I was

happy as a lark. That happened three different times. My mother came down and got me and threw me in the water. She just pushed me in the water and that broke me from going down across the ditch. She had to do something because I might have drowned. I was only two.

Mel: Was this your dad's irrigation ditch?

Viola: Yes. A great big deep one. It came out of the rock dam. We had 28 acres of ground there. He donated the cemetery to Riverton — all but 2 lots. He kept those for our family. He donated 10 acres of cemetery. It was the end of his apple orchard. The only ones that is buried there is my mother and father and Aunt Cal.

Mel: What are your other memories before you went to school?

Viola: I was still little — running around in the yard. There was a great big, long weasel — come after chickens. I thought it was a bear. "Momma! There's a bear after the chickens!" She came out.

She only had eleven children. I guess she'd have had more if he could have caught her.

When it saw her, it stood up and looked at her. Then it run into the old shanty. Later they caught it in a trap. That old chicken was sure running. [At that time], I was just a little older than two. I didn't go to school until I was six. They had to burn the school house down to get me out of the seventh grade. There was one thing I couldn't take — that was arithmetic. I could do times this and times that, but division was French to me. I'm part French anyway. We're Scotch-Irish and French. My mother had a little boy — Stanley. He was just a little feller. While she was rocking him and singing to him, I'd rock in a chair, too. He was six years younger than me. She only had eleven children. I guess she'd have had more if he could have caught her. Aunt Cal was a Hamilton from Mill Creek. Tom Hamilton married Annie Madsen the very day I married my husband, Ammon, on August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1918, in Riverton. Tom Hamilton married Annie Madsen the same night. She was a lovely person. Tom's first wife was very lovely. Of course, I was just a little girl. Aunt Cal was Tom and Reub Hamilton's aunt — legally.

Mel: Did your Dad go on a mission during the time of polygamy?

Viola: I think it was polygamy time — and I hate it! Don't you? I lived through it, but it's not right. Some men can treat their wives right, but my Dad didn't. He treated Mother — she was easy-going — we had to stand on our good behavior anytime because he was so strict.

Mel: Did he favor the other family?

Viola: Yes. He favored the other family because she'd have knocked his head off if he wouldn't have. He wasn't too bad to us, but he was very strict with us. We had to work out in the field.

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Mel: Was he as strict with the children in the other family as he seemed to be with the children in your family?

Viola: That great big red brick home was Aunt Cal's home [13211 South 1700 West]. Then there was a road that went down to the cemetery. My mother's house was this big, white brick home [13083 South 1700 West]. That was my mother's home. When she married Dad in that polygamy thing — she come clear from North Carolina to here. Dad had got home from his mission. I don't know whether she had to live in that little log house in the orchard or not. It was in the early apple orchard that they had over there. I think Mother had to stay in the same house as Aunt Cal until they built her a little two-room brick home where the big one is now. He went to North Carolina and converted her [my mother] that polygamy was good. It was a mistake, but we wouldn't have got here if it hadn't been for that. Dad was quite strict, but he wasn't mean to us. We had to stand around a bit.

Mel: Weren't most fathers strict during those times?

Viola: At that time, all the polygamous fathers were strict.

[to be continued]



## My Father Was a Polygamist: Marie Densley Bills

[Note: Evelyn Dreyer interviewed Marie Densley Bills on 24 November 1986.]

Marie: My father was Daniel Densley, Jr. [1858-1930]. My mother was Elizabeth Ann Morris Butterfield Densley [1861-1931]. I was one of thirteen children. I was born at home and have spent my lifetime here in Riverton. [I was] born January 21, 1900. I married Cyrus Bills, June 25, 1924. I went to school in a one-room building where all ages attended. My Father seen the need of [having] a larger building for recreation purposes. In 18[93], he built a brick building at what is now 12600 South on Redwood Road, northeast corner. It was called the Commercial Building. It was a two-story building with an amusement hall and hardwood dance floors. It was the largest in the "country." People came from miles around. My Father was quite well-to-do, so he married two other women, [and] supported and raised 34 children.

Evelyn: How old were you when you started school?

Marie: I was nine years old. We had a lot of sickness at home. There wasn't enough room at the old schoolhouse and that's why we had to go to the Commercial Building.

My brother, Gordon, had scarlet fever. We was quarantined in. Mr. Barton was my [seventh grade] teacher. He come there [to our house] and we all come to the door. He says, "If you come back to school, I know you'll pass. You'll be promoted." I guess I was promoted to the 8th grade, if I'd have went back. I didn't go to the Jordan [High] School. There was four different classes in that one room down at the Commercial Building. We didn't have any convenience [restroom] down there. Just like it was at home, we had to outside to the restrooms. We learned how to read and write there. We never went to the store. We always raised our own stuff. Mother always had a good garden. We used to have to get water out of the ditch and let it settle so we could use it before we got a well. My father had a big pumphouse — a three-story building.

My Father was quite well-to-do, so he married two other women, [and] supported and raised 34 children.

My sister's friends used to come there — Erma Battison, for one. We'd go around that big barrel. There was steps that we could crawl around and look in the water in the big barrel. We used to get a lot of bird's nests around there. My sister and I had a playhouse on the second floor. We had our dolls there. On the first floor was Mother's wash house. She had a cook stove in there and a boiler, and one of those benches that she had two tubs on, that she did her washing in. She always boiled her clothes. We got the irrigation water first, but we didn't have it piped to the house. We had to go out to the back yard to get it. We had to pump it. Sometimes the pump wouldn't work. It seemed like on a windy day it would work better. It was a windmill type. They'd come from all over to get water from us. Different ones come with a cart with a barrel on it to get water when I was just small. They'd come from Herriman, South Jordan, Bluffdale to get water from the pump that had a windmill. Later on, he had twin brothers and Uncle Aaron Densley built a three story pump house at his place. Crane's got one too, later on. We had a big family and we all did a lot of work.

Every Thanks-giving, I remember how we used to go up to Bluffdale in the bob sleigh. We all used to get in that sleigh and sing all the Thanksgiving songs.

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Bluffdale was a long  
ways away.

We thought that Bluffdale was a long ways away. . . . We'd always visit around to all the relatives. . . . I lived in my Mother's home [for] seven years after we married. My Father got real bad [health] and Mother couldn't hear him [when he'd call for] what he wanted. Mother couldn't take care of him so they took him over to Aunt Lib's, over to his third wife. They paid her for taking care of him. He broke his hip. They built a chicken coop in the back of the house. He was fixing the lights up at the top and fell. That's how he broke his hip. . . My job was cleaning the lamps. . . . My Mother saved her money to have electricity brought in. My Father had the other places [homes for his two polygamous families]. They felt so bad that they couldn't have electricity, so they had it put in. We had a long cord in the pantry. We pulled the string to turn the light on. It shocked me [once]. It scared me and I never would turn that light on any more. I told them all about it and they found out that the water was leaking on the top of the house. The water was coming down to the ceiling and they had to fix it. It

give me a shock.

Evelyn: Did you ever travel further than to Herriman, South Jordan, or to Bluffdale?

Marie: We used to go up to Butterfield and Rose Canyons. It was all of our families. We all couldn't get in that bob sleigh. I think each family took turns. There was too many of us to go all at once. Mother would always go see her family. Of course, Father was raised up in Herriman. When he first come from England, he moved to Herriman. . . . He worked for my grandfather Butterfield. . . . We used to always have reunions up to Herriman.

Evelyn: Did your father originally homestead it here in Riverton or did he buy it from someone?

Marie: He paid ten dollars an acre for it. He owned from Nokes' hill — where Cal Nokes lived — down to the Commercial store. He owned all of this land, all the way down to the corner. The Densleys were all close

We'd all have to give him a present of some kind, even if it was only a peanut.

together. I remember my Mother and Father going to my grandfolks in Bluffdale. They'd always meet us at the door. My Father always waited quite awhile before he tied up the team. He'd open the door, at Christmas time, and say, "Christmas gift." It didn't make any difference if we had anything for him or not, but we'd all have to give him a present of some kind, even if it was only a peanut. When we was to Grandma's, she had bare wooden floors. She had a little cook stove on four legs. She had a bench with a tub on there in which she did her washing in that kitchen where we had to go. We had to sit on boxes. My Father used to have a store at first. He had a big round cheese which he took to give to my grandparents. When he give it to them, my grandma saying, "Oh, Dano! That's the best thing you could give me." They eat an awful lot of cheese. Of course, they were older and they didn't eat much meat. . . .

[to be continued]

## Death Notices

Calvin Dansie (75); died in West Jordan; mother was Lillian Dansie; brother of Darrell

## Letters

[I] was born in Ren Howard's home on 124 So. (about 1450 West???). After serving in the Battle of the Bulge in World War II, and a mission (1947-50), [I] married Darlene Hamilton, Aug. 3, 1950, etc., etc. Taught at BYU 29 years. Some may remember I was the president at Riverton Jr. High, etc.

LaMar Berrett, Orem, Utah, 20 September 2001

[Editor's Note: We presume LaMar merely made a little mistake on the address of his birth home. Ren lived at 1443 West 12600 South (not 12400 South). Ren's house was demolished a few years ago and the Hogi Yogi franchise eatery sits on his former house site. LaMar has been away from Riverton too long. We also think there is a lot of information in that "etc., etc." that LaMar is omitting telling us. It may be of interest for our readers to know that 12600 South used to be numbered as 13600 South (we have a 1933 map that designates it so). It's great to have gotten a note from LaMar, who was recently featured in a center-spread article in the *Church News* for his work in publishing a series of books detailing Mormon historic sites. He has also been the recipient of some prestigious awards of late, e.g., Leonard Arrington award from the Mormon History Association and Bureau of Land Management Award from the Wyoming Field Office for his contributions in researching overland trails.

Thanks to Janet Wardle who helped identify some of the teachers in the 1947 Riverton Elementary photo printed in last month's issue and to Dorothy Swofford who identified the students in Jim Seal's 8<sup>th</sup> grade class. Thanks also to Afton Crane for letting us make a copy of Daniel Densley's photograph for this month's issue.]

## Next Issue

My Father Was a Polygamist: Interviews with Viola Nokes Dowdy and Marie Densley Bills (cont.)

**Bricks from the Past: Riverton's Demolished Landmarks**  
Come see a new historical exhibit at Riverton Art Museum at the Crane House. An upstairs room full of large photographs of some of Riverton's buildings that are no more: Riverton dome church, Riverton Poultry/Canning Company, Page-Hansen Store, Charles E. Miller home, Hans B. Jensen home. We have bricks from all these demolished buildings. Yes — we have a brick from the old domed church!





Charles Mormon Nokes



Daniel Densley, Jr.

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Sarah Nokes