

# James Bean Decker & Anna Maria Mickelson

## James

**Born:** 25 March, 1853: Parowan, Iron County, Utah

**Died:** 16 December, 1901

**Married:** Anna Marie Mickelsen, July 13, 1874

**Father:** Zachariah Bruyn Decker

**Mother:** Nancy Bean Williams Lee

## Anna

**Born:** 7 April, 1855: Cedar City, Utah

**Died:** 18 May, 1937: Salt Lake City, Utah

**Father:** Rasmus Mickelsen

**Mother:** Ane Nielsen

## James' Early Life

James Bean Decker was born on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1853 in Parowan, Utah. He was the second son and third child of Zechariah and Nancy Decker. Zechariah and Nancy were immigrants to Utah, with Zechariah serving in the Mormon Battalion en route. James' descendants wrote little information down about his early life and experiences in Parowan. Like many children of his time, James' education was infrequent at best, and ceased when he was old enough to help provide. Until his marriage, James farmed with his father and made extra money hauling freight.<sup>i</sup>

## Anna's Early Life

Anna Maria Mickelson was born April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1855 to Rasmus and Ane Mickelsen. Rasmus and Ane were born and raised in Scandinavia and were converted to the Latter-day Saint movement by Erastus Snow. Rasmus quickly threw his energies into his new-found religion and preached extensively to his local community. By 1853 Rasmus and Ane had saved enough to immigrate to the United States. After sailing from Europe, Rasmus and Ane stopped in St. Louis to earn some money before joining a wagon train intended for the Great Basin. The couple arrived in Salt Lake City in 1854, and was immediately sent by Brigham Young to settle in Iron County.

Six months after their arrival, Anna was born. Rasmus and Ane were ill-prepared at first to care for a child in their new environment. According to family recollections, all the couple had to wrap the baby in was "a shawl made from what remained of a tent, after the main portion had been used to make shirts and pants."<sup>ii</sup> The close-knit community in Iron County came together to assist the immigrants. Eventually, one woman gave Rasmus and Ane an old calico skirt, which was used to make several dresses for Anna. Other kind settlers donated milk, as all Ane could afford to feed Anna was water stiffened with a little flour.

After six years, the family moved from Cedar City to the little town of Parowan. Although money was scarce, young Anna was able to attend school periodically.

Family members recalled that she excelled in her class. When Anna was no longer able to attend school, she continued to learn throughout her life. Anna's daughter recalled, "She has always been a great reader, especially of current events, and even now will wait up till twelve reading."<sup>iii</sup> Much of Anna's young adulthood was spent spinning cloth. She spent long hours making fabric for family use, as well as for extra income. One of her favorite pastimes was attending spinning bees, where local women would come together and have spinning contests, followed by recreation.

As Anna grew to maturity, she was well liked in the local community. She loved to sing, and was always a popular choice in local dances.

### **Marriage**

When Anna was 18, she was approached by a young man named James Decker, who had a quieter, more reserved disposition. Initially, Anna was not interested in James, but when she saw him playing the organ in church, Anna knew she should marry him. She was able to overcome James' embarrassment by quickly going to fetch water at the town well whenever James approached. When Anna was 19, and James 21, they were married in the Endowment House in Salt Lake City. They made the long, 300-mile trip in an old freight wagon. When they returned to Parowan they moved into a two room brick house James had built and happily lived there for several years. Two children, Anna and Nancy, were born there.

### **Hole-In-The-Rock Pioneers**

In 1879 Brigham Young called several families to settle San Juan County, and James and Anna Decker quickly responded to the assignment. As the expedition started in November, the pioneers were confident that the trek would only take about six weeks. Because of this, Anna and James were not afraid to leave while Anna was seven months pregnant. On January 3, 1880 Anna gave birth to a baby girl in the harsh frontier weather at Fifty Mile Spring. Since the expedition was over a hundred miles away from a doctor, they had to improvise. The couple's wagon box was lifted off of the axel and placed on the ground, providing a crude shelter from the elements. James then packed snow around the outside of the wagon box to provide even more insulation. In this dismantled wagon, and without the aid of a midwife, Anna gave birth to their third child. They named her Lena Deseret to mark the fact that she had literally been born in the desert of Deseret.

A month after Anna gave birth, the company broke camp and continued on the trek. The passage down the Hole was steep and dangerous. Since the wagons were so prone to tipping, Anna was unable to ride in the wagon. Anna had to help her two oldest girls, while another settler, Jane Walton, carried baby Lena. Although the rest of the journey was trying, James, Anna and their children arrived at the San Juan River area in good health. After six months of travel, they reached Bluff on April 6, 1880.

### **Sheriff of Bluff**

James was elected as the first sheriff of Bluff. This unpaid appointment kept James busy when he was not providing for his family. Periodically, hostility between Indians and whites in Colorado spilled over into the San Juan River area. On one occasion James led a posse of fourteen men who set out to recover stolen horses from a nearby war party of Utes. When confronted, the Indians refused to return the horses that belonged to the San Juan settlers. After several seconds with guns drawn, the Indians returned the settlers' horses when they learned that the settlers were Mormons. Later, that same group of Utes ambushed and killed another posse of Colorado immigrants.

Hostile Indians were not the only threats that James dealt with. Rustlers and thieves also caused trouble and made life dangerous. One Sunday in 1886 James was interrupted during church by fellow settler and local cattle rancher, Bill Ball. Several cowboys who had been working on Bill's ranch had stolen his horses and Bill needed help to track them down. James and some other men immediately left church and set out to catch the thieves. Bill rode at the head of the group, confident that his former hired hands would not shoot him. When James and the rest of the posse caught up with the rustlers in a nearby canyon, a gunfight ensued and the thieves shot Bill. James, who was standing right behind Bill, quickly came to his aid. But afraid that his white Sunday shirt would make him a conspicuous target, James took cover behind his horse. The battle continued, and although James' horse was shot several times, the rustlers got away and James escaped unscathed. James spent the night with Bill, but by morning Bill had died. James made it safely back to Bluff, but the rustlers were never caught.

In Bluff, nature posed a more formidable challenge than even rustlers and Indians. James, along with other settlers, was involved in a project to dig a canal in Bluff to bring water to their crops. Several times a year, usually during the spring, the canal would flood and force the settlers to rebuild and replant. Also, as James' son recorded, many of the Bluff settlers had to leave for several months each year to work in Colorado mines to supplement their income.

### **Anna's Service**

Anna was also involved in the community. In addition to doing her own sewing, she made clothes for other settlers and sold her products to supplement James' income. As part of her service to the community, Anna sewed burial clothes for funerals in Bluff. Anna also served in the local church Relief Society as a visiting teacher and later as a councilor to the stake Relief Society president.

### **Community and Church Involvement**

James and Anna were among the few families who stayed in Bluff after Church authorities announced the release San Juan Mission participants. In time, James gave up his farm and took up ranching, an occupation that was much more suited to the areas geography. As more and more settlers switched to ranching, Bluff thrived. This, along with abundant rainfall and good beef prices, allowed James and his family to prosper in Bluff. With economic stability, James became a prominent citizen in the San Juan area. He was called to be the first superintendent of the LDS Sunday School in

Bluff, and soon after was called to hold the same position on a stake level as well. He did his best to magnify his position of teaching and leadership. Once he traveled all the way to Provo to enroll in a Sunday School teaching course offered by Brigham Young University. When he returned home to Bluff, he shared what he had learned with those who served under him in the Sunday School. In civic affairs, James served as county treasurer, county superintendent of schools, and county commissioner for several terms.

Family life was good for the Deckers in Bluff. They lived happily together, although in close quarters—their log home only consisting of two large rooms. James eventually began building “a white stucco house, two stories high, with bays and gables and arched windows to let in the light.”<sup>iv</sup> By this time, James and Anna had eleven children, and had enough money to send the oldest, James Jr., to Brigham Young Academy in Provo. After acquiring an organ for the family, James’ daughters played the music for the local congregation’s Sunday services. James himself directed the choir and two of his daughters, Lena and Jennie, played in the local string quartet. He loved to have his family gather around him in the evenings to sing, one of his favorites hymns being “Love at Home.”

### **The Tragic Results of a Diphtheria Outbreak**

In December of 1901, several of the Decker children fell to diphtheria. On December 15 James Decker succumbed to the disease. In a little over a month, five of the 13 members of Decker family had died of diphtheria. James’ children and grandchildren recorded that the Decker tragedy “made a lasting impression on the community.”<sup>v</sup> After the death of James, Anna and her seven other children were under quarantine with local volunteers taking care of them. Eventually, Anna and her neighbors decided to burn the house to stop the disease from spreading. Anna was able to move into the large brick home that James had nearly completed prior to his death, but the loss of her husband and children was devastating to Anna. The next year just when she thought that nothing else could possibly go wrong, two more of her children died.

### **Anna’s Final Years**

With her husband and oldest son gone, Anna had to go to work herself in order to provide for her large family. For a time she sold bread to the local market store. This worked well until the community store saw her success and opened up a bakery, which took business away from Anna. However, Bluff needed a new postmaster and Anna was given the job. Anna remained in Bluff until her children were grown and had moved away. Eventually she moved to nearby Monticello to live with some of her older children. When World War I broke out, one of Anna’s sons, Claude, volunteered to join the Marines. When Claude told Anna about his decision, she replied, “I don’t blame you, for if I were a young man I would go too.”<sup>vi</sup>

Several years later, Anna moved to Salt Lake City and rented an apartment on Main Street. She spent the last several years of her life volunteering in the temple. Often she would spend her entire day laboring there. On May 16, 1937 Anna passed away; she was 82 years old. She was buried “back home” in Bluff next to James and the

children she had lost to diphtheria. Anna was a faithful pioneer and an example of the rugged qualities that made the Hole-in-the-Rock expedition, and communities like Bluff, prosper. Anna's daughter, Lillian Wood, recorded that although Anna never claimed to have had any "faith-promoting incidents" in her life, "she [felt] ever like saying 'Father, help me as ever to be brave, that I may face the petty cares of life with understanding and self-control, knowing full well that in this world of strife each has her burden, each her trial of the soul.'"<sup>vii</sup>

*Researched and written for the Hole-in-the-Rock Foundation by:  
C.S. M. Jones LLC, Family Heritage Consulting.*

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<sup>i</sup> Rod Decker. "History of James Bean Decker" Rhea Decker Seaberg ed. Unpublished History from the Files of the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1.

<sup>ii</sup> Wood, Lillian D Wood. "Sketch of the Life of Anna M. Decker by Her Daughter." Unpublished History from the Files of the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, Salt Lake City, Utah. 2-3.

<sup>iii</sup> Josephine W. Matis. "Anna Maria Mickelsen Decker." Unpublished History from the Files of the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, Salt Lake City, Utah.

<sup>iv</sup> Decker, 3.

<sup>v</sup> Decker, 5.

<sup>vi</sup> Mathis, 7.

<sup>vii</sup> Wood, 4.