

## **Zechariah Bruyn Decker, Jr.**

**Born:** 11 March 1850; in Salt Lake City, Salt Lake, Utah

**Died:** 9 March 1939; in Snowflake, Navajo, Arizona

**Married:** Emma Seraphine Smith; on 4 October 1869

**Father:** Zechariah Bruyn Decker, Sr.

**Mother:** Nancy Bean

### **Childhood – Learning to Work Hard**

Born on March 11, 1850, Zechariah Bruyn Decker, Jr., was the first of eleven children born to Zechariah Bruyn Decker, Sr., and Nancy Bean Decker.<sup>i</sup> His father had been a member of the Mormon Battalion, and had successfully mined for gold at Sutter's Mill in California before he came to Utah. He met and married Nancy Bean in Salt Lake City. She already had a daughter, Cornelia, by a previous marriage, but Zechariah Sr. raised her as his own. Not long after little Zechariah Jr.'s birth, the family moved to Parowan as part of the Iron County Mission.

As a small child, Zechariah Jr. was curious and excited about the world around him. He would follow his father around the farm asking endless questions about the farm and about the animals. But even when his legs grew tired, his inquisitive mind did not. He would climb into the back of the wagon, lie down on his back, and talk to the ravens flying overhead, peppering them with more questions and talking to them about the world. When "Zach" was about four years old, his father was helping build the fort at Parowan by hauling dirt with his ox team. Little Zach wanted to help too, and many times became buried in the mounds of dirt that were dumped out of the back of the wagon.

Zach learned work hard from a young age, especially since his father suffered from rheumatism and was often in too poor of health to provide well for his large family. When Zach was just seven years old, he and his brother James were given responsibility for herding sheep during the summer. At age eight, he drove a team of horses to Salt Lake City, taking his mother and grandmother to his aunt's house at Conference time. By age ten, Zach was in charge of harrowing the fields in preparation for planting, which he did as best as even after the ox stepped on his foot one day and would not move for some time! It is told that when about this age, Zach took the family's tithing wheat to the tithing office all on his own. The bishop at the tithing office questioned him as to who would unload the heavy sacks of wheat, to which Zach answered that since he had loaded the wheat, he would unload it as well.<sup>ii</sup>

When Zach was about fourteen years old, his father's health had declined to the point that Zach had to assume full responsibility for the family farm. His brother James, who was three years young, helped as well. But with so much work to do – caring for livestock, planting crops, hauling and chopping wood – Zach had little time for formal education. He spent about three months in the local school learning arithmetic, but did not have much interest in other studies. At age sixteen, he was given the task of herding the Parowan sheep herd of which his father had been given charge.<sup>iii</sup> Zach

spent many years riding the range and had many dangerous experiences recovering stolen animals from both outlaws and local Indians.

As a young man, he was called to be part of a local militia organized to protect the Parowan settlers from hostile Indians. Zach was chosen as a picket guard. During his second week as a guard, he discovered several clues indicating the presence of Indians in the mountains surrounding the Parowan valley. He reported what he had found to his superior officer, who was doubtful of Zach's findings. However, two days later he spotted several Indians stealing horses and raised a warning cry. The militia men raced after the Indians, but were unable to catch them before they escaped into the trees.<sup>iv</sup>

### **Marriage and Call to Colonize**

When he was nineteen years old, Zechariah Jr. married Emma Seraphine Smith. Seraphine, as she was called, was the eldest daughter of Emma Seraphine West and Jesse Smith, who was a younger brother of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Zach and Emma had twelve children together – six boys and six girls. When she was expecting their sixth child, they were called to the San Juan Mission. Zach became part of the initial exploring party who left in April 1879 to begin the task of finding a suitable location for settlement in the Four Corners area.

Not many of Zach's experiences on this first trip are documented, aside from the more general records that have been kept of it, except one. When the group of approximately thirty-five men, women, and children had begun to establish Ft. Montezuma that summer, they tried as best they could to maintain life as they had known it prior to their departure. Regular church services, for example, were held on Sundays in the mornings and evenings. As the fourth of July approached, celebratory services were planned to celebrate Independence Day just as it might have been back home. Elizabeth Harriman, one of two women in the company, collected as many scraps of fabric as could be spared to make an American flag. She even used part of her daughter's blue dress for the stars' background. But the only red fabric to be found was donated by Zach – it was his long underwear. Without his willing contribution, no flag would have waved boldly above their patriotic festivities.<sup>v</sup>

### **Hole in the Rock**

Zach returned from the exploring expedition in the fall, collected his family and more provisions, and joined the main group of San Juan pioneers at the Hole-in-the-Rock. He helped with the blasting of the rocks and building of the road down the "slanticular" canyon.<sup>vi</sup> When it came time for him to take his wagons down the "Hole," Zach hooked them together with a large tree tied to the back. He then locked the back wheels of the wagons, and hitched his six horses to the front. Almost as soon as the horses began their descent, the braking mechanism in the hind wagon gave out, and Zach had to drive the horses down at a run to keep up with the momentum of the wagon. One of the horses fell and was dragged along, becoming badly injured. Seraphine and the children did their best to make it down the "Hole" on foot. Much to her dismay, she realized she had left the baby asleep in the back of one of the wagons. She screamed to Zach to

stop, but it was too late, the wagons were already careening down the slope. Amazingly, the baby slept peacefully through the wild and dangerous ride.<sup>vii</sup>

One night, Zach and a companion returned along the trail to find those who were following behind the wagons herding cattle and horses. They found them just in time to avoid a potential tragedy. The cattlemen had reached a watering hole prepared by the exploring company the previous year, only to find it in the possession of local Indians. The Indians refused to grant them access to it, which angered the pioneers. They managed to tie the Indian chief (named Pecone) to a wagon wheel and then proceeded to water their stock. Incensed, Indian warriors were gathering in preparation for a fight. Zach was able to diffuse the situation by immediately releasing the chief, speaking to him kindly in his native tongue, and then giving him one of the best steers as compensation. The chief acknowledge Zach as a “wise counselor” and called off his warriors. Zach and the cattlemen rode hard that night to put as many miles as possible between them and the Indians.<sup>viii</sup>

Trouble with Indians continued to plague Zach after he reached Montezuma Creek. He and his father had brought some blooded race horses with them to the San Juan. One Sunday as he was heading towards home after Sunday School, Zach saw Indians heading toward his place from a distance. His four oldest children were with him at the time, riding on the frame of the wagon as the wagon box had been removed. Zach told his children to hold on tight and then raced his horses home just in time to get his gun out of the house before the Indians arrived. That night he dreamed that the Indians would steal his and his father’s horses. Upon waking, he saddled his horse and rode to his father’s house to warn him. They discovered that the horses had indeed been driven away by the Indians. They found them nearly thirty miles up-river in the possession of four Indians who were just across the river from a larger Indian camp. The Indians in the camp spotted Zach and tried to warn the horse-thieves, but their cries merely served to distract them from Zach who was then able to take them by surprise and recover his horses.<sup>ix</sup>

## **Arizona**

In the summer of 1881, Zach moved his family to Snowflake, Arizona. Initially he worked for a grading company, until one afternoon he angered his employer. The man ordered Zach to leave but Zach refused, as he had not been fully paid, and instead sat down to eat the meal that was provided with him for his work. The man yelled and cursed at him, but Zach calmly finished his meal. Then he asked to be paid for the work he had done. The man refused, to which Zach replied, ““You’ll feed me and my teams and pay us wages from the time I started on this job until I get paid in full.””<sup>x</sup> Realizing that Zach would not back down, his employer gave him an invoice to present to the contractor for full payment. The contractor was impressed with Zach’s gumption and hired him on the spot to haul supplies. It turned out to be a better job than the one he had just lost.

In 1884, Zach leased some sheep from a man named William Flake. He set his oldest sons to work helping him care for the sheep about fifteen miles outside of Snowflake.

The next year, however, the Aztec Land and Cattle Company obtained some of that land which had once been part of a government railroad grant. The Aztec cattlemen brought in scores of Texas long-horned cattle that made grazing sparse for Zach's sheep. They tried to force local shepherders and cattlemen to move their herds to the east side of snowflake, but Zach refused. He maintained that the Aztec men were only legally entitled to forty acres of land on either side of the railroad line. To complicate matters, the presence of so many cattle and sheep in the area invited the presence of cattle rustlers, horse thieves and outlaws, in addition to the Aztec employees who were often men of low character. Zach's determination not to be bullied made him a prime target for their threats and unlawful activities. He had many experiences where his life was in danger as he protected his sheep. Finally, in 1886, Zach decided to trade his sheep for property in Snowflake where he could establish a farm and be away from the outlaws.

As luck would have it, however, Zach's trouble with outlaws was not over yet. The next year, Zach had a run in with a man named Jim Stott, who had been heard to say that he would kill Zach Decker if ever given the chance. His chance came one night when Zach stopped at Stott's ranch in search of his prize gray mare. The mare was missing, and Zach suspected Stott had stolen her and her colt. Zach spent the night at Stott's, and when Stott left before breakfast the next morning and headed for the range, Zach followed at length behind. He tracked them for several miles out on to the neighboring Indian Reservation, where he soon found the mare and colt, but no Stott. He could tell by the tracks that Stott was already doubling back towards home. So after collecting his animals, Decker likewise returned to Stott's ranch, where Stott greeted him cordially and inquired where he had found his animals. "Right where you left them, Stott," was Zach's reply. When Stott was asked why he did not shoot Zach when he had the chance, Stott replied that "he had too much respect for Decker's gun." About a year later, Stott was among a group of three men hanged by a band of vigilantes.<sup>xi</sup>

The 1887 proved to be one of change for Zach. It began with a solar eclipse on New Year's Day, which he witnessed with awe and wonder just as the sun began to dawn. During the course of the year, the shadow of darkness passed over Zach's life just as the moon had briefly blocked out the sun that first morning. He had sold his land in Snowflake and purchased a share in the Shumway grist mill with a farm nearby. He moved his family there, and while Seraphine home-schooled the children, Zach ran the mill. All seemed to be going well for the family until autumn came and several in the Decker household, including Zach, contracted diphtheria. Four of the children died within a week of each other, though Zach's life was spared. It was a sad time for the family during which their faith in the Lord was tested and strengthened. In total, Zach and Seraphine were the parents of twelve children, the last being born on 16 September 1892. They fittingly named him Silas Smith after the leader of the San Juan Mission that had brought them south in the first place.

Just before the birth of little Silas, Zach moved his family back to Snowflake so the older children could attend formal schooling. They lived on forty acres in the settlement of Taylor, just outside Snowflake. On January 5, 1894, Zach was ordained to the office of

High Priest and set apart to be the bishop of the Taylor Ward by Brigham Young, Jr.<sup>xii</sup> Though it was a calling he had never desired or sought after, he willingly accepted it and served faithfully for sixteen years.

Once, during his tenure as the bishop, he and some friends had gone out on a wild horse round up. Among the horses they had caught was a high-spirited stallion that none of the men dared to try and ride except Zach, who after some coaxing by his companions, mounted the wild horse. Immediately the stallion began to buck and kick and pitch, trying hard to throw Zach. He stayed on the horse as best he could, only to find that once he was finally off it, he had lost more than just his hat! His knife, keys, coins and other items from his pockets were scattered all over the ground, and his spurs were turned around over the insteps of his feet. It had been a wild ride that left his friends highly entertained.<sup>xiii</sup>

### **Later Years**

Zach's beloved wife, Seraphine, died of breast cancer in 1909.<sup>xiv</sup> At the time of her passing, they still had two teenage children living at home. In 1915 Zach married Carilena Closcius (Lena), but sadly she also died of cancer only seven years later. For the next seventeen years Zach lived mostly alone, being too independently minded to live with any of his children. He spent a few winters in Mesa doing temple work, but then returned home to Snowflake. He became quite lonely and discontented in his final years of life, especially after his hearing became impaired and it was difficult for him to converse well with others. He died 9 March 1939, just two days before his eighty-ninth birthday.<sup>xv</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> Zechariah Jr. was actually Nancy Bean's third baby. She had been previously married twice – once to a school master named Thomas Williams, and later to John D. Lee as a plural wife. Her daughter by Thomas Williams was kept by him when she fled his home in fear of her life. Her daughter by John D. Lee, called Cornelia, was raised by Zechariah Bruyn Decker, Sr., as his own. See Fern Ellis, *Our Decker Forefathers*, Mancos, CO: F.D. Ellis, 1989), 24-28.

<sup>ii</sup> Francine Decker Holt, "History of Zechariah Bruyn Decker, Jr. and Emma Serphine Smith," unpublished history from the files of the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, Salt Lake City, UT.

<sup>iii</sup> Francine Decker Holt's account states that Zechariah Jr. was herding cattle, not sheep. 2.

<sup>iv</sup> Louis A. Decker, "Brief Sketch of the Life of Zechariah Bruyn Decker, Jr., son of Zachariah Bruyn Decker and Nancy Bean," unpublished history available in the LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT, 2.

<sup>v</sup> This anecdote is related by George Hobbs in his narrative of the first exploring party found in the "San Juan Stake History" available at LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT. Also noted in David E. Miller, *Hole-in-the-Rock: An Epic in the Colonization of the Great American West* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1966), 29.

<sup>vi</sup> Francine Decker Holt, 3.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*; Louis A. Decker, 2-3.

<sup>ix</sup> Francine Decker Holt, 3-4; Louis A. Decker 3-4.

<sup>x</sup> Louis A. Decker, 5.

<sup>xi</sup> Louis A. Decker, 8-9; Francine Decker Holt, 5.

<sup>xii</sup> Francine Decker Holt, "History of Zechariah Bruyn Decker, Jr. and Emma Serphine Smith," unpublished history from the files of the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, Salt Lake City, UT.

<sup>xiii</sup> Louis A. Decker, 12.

<sup>xiv</sup> Louis A. Decker notes that Seraphine died 27 December 1909. This date is also given in a life-history of Emma Seraphine Decker written by her daughter Daphne. However, Daphne's daughter Francine Decker Holt records her grandmother's death as being 30 December 1910.

<sup>xv</sup> Louis A. Decker, 11-12.