

A SHORT LIFE SKETCH OF MARCHEN (MARTHA) BENDTSEN

Written by her Son
Joseph G. Nelson
April 1947
Logan, Utah

Marchen (or Martha) Bendtsen was born January 19, 1833, in Tårnby (sometimes written Taarnby in English), Copenhagen, Denmark. Her parents, Bendt Nielsen and Ane Swendsen, were descendants of those Holland colonists brought to Denmark at the King's request to do gardening for the Royalty, and were given the little island of Amager, now a part of Copenhagen. Connecting this island with Copenhagen was a causeway, over which mother went weekly to visit her parents, brothers and sisters. She worked in Copenhagen for a lady, receiving the sum of \$24.00 for a year's work.

On one of these visits to her loved ones she carried with her a small pitcher of cream—kept back from the cat's portion. Martha thought, "How nice this cream will taste in mother's coffee!" But her mother refused to use the "purloined" cream, much to Martha's chagrin, who never dreamed this little act could be called dishonest!

Mother's father, Bendt Nielsen, looked like Abraham O. Smoot, once president of Utah Stake, so mother told us. Bendt served as night-watchman for forty years in his own village of Tårnby, on Amager Island. He must have been an honored officer to have held this important position for so many years. His duty was to call out each hour thusly: "(Two) o'clock and all is well!" He also called out the condition of the weather. His only weapon of defense was a stick, armed on the end with spikes.

At dawn of day he retired to his home to rest and sleep for a few hours, after which he went fishing in a boat and seined a red spotted fish called "rød spetter." These grandmother would dress and carry to the market with the vegetables and fruits in season. Mother said there was one cherry tree on the home plot, but the children never got a cherry—all had to go to market to help buy the essentials.

Martha heard and accepted the Gospel message in the early years of its introduction into Denmark under Apostle Erastus Snow. She was baptized in water from which had to be cut two feet of ice to perform the ordinance. A cold beginning, but compensated for by the spiritual glow from within!

She hastened to carry the glad tidings to her loved ones, but O what a disappointment she met! Her mother all but disowned her, crying, "Our Marta is lost! She has joined those awful Mormons!" She left and went back to Copenhagen. Little Peter ran after her crying, "O Marta, come back! She turned and said to him, "Never mind, Peter, you will come to America, also."

All the family subsequently came, except the parents, who remained until death released them. For four years mother had been an intimate friend of a young man named Nielsen. He was placed in charge of the company of Saints, among whom was Marchen Bendtsen, who were to sail for

America. Nielsen was Presiding Elder and naturally felt the dignity of his position and doubtless was vain over his little prospective wife, for she “was good to look upon.” They, with other couples, were to have been married on ship-board. He insisted on Martha wearing her one and only nice dress on that unclean ship. She refused. He said, “We are to be married today, you know!” Her reply was, “Do you think it will come to that?”

Upon such a trifle hung the destiny of a tribe or nation! He turned upon his aristocratic heel and that very day married an English woman with whom he had become acquainted.

Spitefully, Nielsen presented his wife to Martha, who remarked, “You may marry her, but she will never have children!” This proved a truth; they had no children. With a sore heart but undaunted faith in God’s providence, Marchen came on—not alone, for God was with her!

For six weeks the sailing ship was tossed to and fro, finally landing in America at a place where the Saints were fitted out for the journey across the plains. A well-to-do family cared for Martha, and in exchange she helped with the children and milked their cow at night and in the mornings. She told how the milk was placed in a covered bucket and hung on the wagon bows. By nightfall the joggling had churned a small pat of butter.

A tame horse was provided for her to ride. This animal would lie down while Martha mounted. Thus, she came safely to Salt Lake City. From here the Saints were sent to different settlements and mother’s lot fell in with a family which went to Goshen.

Here she learned of a young man named Lars Nielsen. Their mutual friend spoke to each of the virtues of the other. He needed a wife—she a husband. She asked this friend but one question: “Is he honorable and a true Latter-day Saint?” Upon being assured he was all this, she said, “I will marry him.” Thus, without romance, Marchen Bendtsen became the wife of Lars Nielsen in the fall of 1859, the ceremony being performed by Phineas Cook, then Presiding Elder of Goshen. From this union were born six children: Emma, Nels Lars, Joseph, Anne Marie, Martha (Mattie), and Ephraim.

The tragic death of little Ephraim by drowning was a life-long sorrow to mother.

After father’s death, mother married Jens Jorgen Jensen for “Time,” and by whom she had two sons, John and James B., who automatically become my father’s sons. We love and honor them as such.

The fall that father left us we had no harvest! Mother went to our good Bishop, William. B. Price, and told him the condition: “We have a dry cow, will you take her in exchange for flour?” He did do, and I well remember how joyfully we children danced around when the five seamless sacks of flour were stacked in the kitchen! The cow died that winter and so was a total loss to the Bishop, aside from the blessings promised to those “who visit the widow and the orphan in their distress.” God bless his memory!

Mother’s frugality and ability to cope with all adverse conditions is without precedence. She trusted in our Father in Heaven, Who had promised her through Patriarch Isaac Morley that, “If you keep God’s commandments, neither you nor your children will ever lack for bread.” This promise has been verified completely. She worked hard always and was blessed with fairly good health.

Every spring she went to the shearing pens and took wool for her pay. This she spun into yarn and wove into cloth, coloring some as she needed it for clothing.

I recall the time when my brother Nels had a suit of clothes made entirely by mother, from the native wool to the finished suit. This he wore to the B. Y. Academy, walking the entire distance

of 40 miles from Provo to Goshen. He was jeered at by the other students who wore “store clothes,” and made such remarks as: “where’d you get that suit?” Calmly, indignantly, he answered, “I didn’t get it where you got yours!”

Incidentally, Nels was in school for only a few weeks when Dr. Karl G. Maeser recognized his ability and appointed him as instructor to the very boys who had made fun of his home-made suit. He continued to succeed until he became head of the English Department, a position he held for many years.

At a certain time of the year mother took us children into the hills to burn grease-wood, the ashes of which were carefully sacked and carried home. These were placed in a large kettle, which was filled with water. After the mixture was vigorously stirred it was allowed to settle. The resulting clear water served as lye and with grease added made our soap. Candles were made by pouring melted tallow into molds, which had been “strung” with cotton thread. These, when cold, served for years as our only source of lights.

After the grain had been harvested, mother would go into the fields to glean the grain heads, putting them into sacks and carrying them home on her back. When these were threshed, the grain afforded feed for her chickens—the eggs went to buy the needed groceries.

Christine Steinhavn (Christiansen) was a Royal midwife in Denmark and a neighbor to us in Goshen. She helped mother at the birth of all her children. When Christine became too feeble to longer serve in this capacity, mother took up the work and brought many, many babes into the world. She waited on each mother daily for two weeks, getting not to exceed \$2.50 a case. Even this small sum was given, not charged!

During a severe scourge of diphtheria in the town (scarcely a family escaping) and with no modern preventatives nor curatives, people were frightened to go near the sick but mother had this faith: “If I go and help these people in distress, the Lord will protect my own from the disease.” She took all precautions possible, changing her clothes in an outer shed, and her prayer was answered—none of us took the disease!

When I received serious injury to my hand at the time of that fearful ride down the mountainside (recorded in my own life sketch), Mrs. Steinhavn and mother were my only doctors. Mother had dressed the hand in soft cloth and to ease the pain I held it over a few live coals kept in the stove. One night this cloth caught fire! Mother jumped to my rescue, grabbed the blazing mass with both hands, forgetting self to save her boy! Her poor hands were terribly burned, but she only thought of others! This was typical of her all through her life.

In 1888-1889 we boys built an adobe house and furnished it with a few needed comforts for our mother, but she lived in it only a few years when fire destroyed it and she was forced to make her home with her daughter, Annie.

She was made as comfortable as possible under dear Annie’s tender care until May 5, 1914, when she passed to her reward. She was buried in Goshen cemetery, a simple stone marking her earthly resting place. Emma’s boys kindly care for the grave.¹

I know that she has gone to the Paradise of God, for I have seen her in her glory!! A well-earned

¹Lola Nelson also told us that Martha is buried in her daughter Anne’s family plot in the Goshen Cemetery. Lola was also responsible for raising funds from family donations to pay for perpetual care for the plot.

reward of a faithful wife, mother, and public servant! May we, her children and grandchildren, cherish her memory and make her daily prayer be realized! With her six orphan children (two later sons) kneeling with her, she prayed thus in her native tongue: “Kere Fader som boner I Hemmlen,” “give me strength and protect my life, that I may bring up these children to be ‘god borne!’”