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“CHARACTER AND GRIT, . . . DETERMINATION AND FORTITUDE”

R uth Toronto, a beautiful, black-haired baby girl, was born to Albert and Etta on September 1, 1906. They lost her to spinal meningitis at just six months of age, a great tragedy of their early married life. But because of such a sorrowful experience, Albert and Etta were extra grateful and delighted when they welcomed their second child, Wallace Felt Toronto (Wally), into their lives on December 9, 1907.¹ Albert and Etta eventually added seven more children to their family, five boys and two girls: Joseph, born on June 1, 1909; Robert, on April 28, 1911; Lamont, on February 21, 1914; Paul, on December 25, 1917; Helen, on January 19, 1920; Alan, on January 4, 1923; and Norma on June 29, 1926.

Wally enjoyed a typical childhood during the second decade of the twentieth century. One of his favorite activities included going to the movies and watching William S. Hart and Douglas Fairbanks on the big screen. He loved swimming at the Deseret Gym, where

1. Albert Toronto Family Organization, *Story of Albert and Etta Toronto*, 15.

he also learned about woodworking. He frequently went to the gym for “men and boys” nights. All the participants had to go “September Morn style,” which involved going through a long process before getting in the water. They first took a shower and immediately got into a hot steam bath so that they could break a sweat and lay on a palette in the steam room. Finally, they could dive into the pool. Wally took swimming lessons at the gym from Charles Welch, who also became his swimming coach in high school. Church, of course, was always a part of the week’s activities as well. His father, Albert, served in bishoprics for more than twenty-two years as Wally grew up. Wally often resisted going to church. His faithful mother would wisely respond, “You don’t have to go to church, but remember, we would like you to go—we would be happy if you would go.”² And for the most part, Wally went.³

In 1915, when Wally was eight years old, the Torontos acquired a new home on 239 Douglas Street. Wally found there were many nearby conveniences to their new house. A small store was situated just across the alley in the backyard of the home, which was helpful when they needed to get things quickly and easily. Both the chapel and the university were only two blocks away. Every day, the older children walked to the old LDS High School one mile toward the center of town.⁴

Growing up, Wally enjoyed many of the same things as the other children his age. He was fascinated by trains and he watched them come, go, and switch tracks. He also loved eating peanut butter sandwiches at picnics with his cousins in the park. Also like other children, Wally had experiences that were not as enjoyable. Dr. Schofield, the

2. Many primary source materials are used, and these sources regularly have misspellings and unusual punctuation. In an attempt to preserve the integrity and authenticity of these journals and other primary source documents, the original spellings and punctuation are preserved except for typos. Because of the frequency at which these errors occur, *sic* appears infrequently unless needed for clarity.

3. Albert Toronto Family Organization, *Story of Albert and Etta Toronto*, 8–9.

4. Albert Toronto Family Organization, *Story of Albert and Etta Toronto*, 2, 16.

family doctor, often went to the Toronto house in person with plenty of different kinds of medicine to ease whatever illness someone might have. He even performed a tonsillectomy on Wally on the kitchen table.⁵

Wally’s mother was a spiritual person who worked well with her husband, supporting him in his businesses, Church callings, and everything else that he did. Nevertheless, Etta was the disciplinarian of the family, not Albert. As in any typical family, there were times when the children would fuss and argue with each other. Albert’s response would always be something like, “Stop that. Get quiet or go outside and play.” Etta’s reaction, on the other hand, was a different story. For instance, once when she discovered that her boys were repeating some foul stories, she washed their mouths out with strong soap and water to make them “pure” again. She told them that her little practice symbolized how “that which comes out of our mouths must be pure and clean.” But while Etta was good at keeping her children in line, she made sure to let her fun side shine just as easily. She frequently sat down to play with her children and suggested games they loved, like “Cardinal Puff Puff” or “50 cents” or “crossing the plains.” She also taught them fun songs like “Do Your Ears Hang Low?”⁶

The two parents did not always agree with each other on how to discipline their children. When they did disagree, Etta’s attitude was unique. She felt it was good for Albert to know that she was upset with him on occasion. At times, he did not meet her expectations; for instance, he sometimes forgot an anniversary or to call her when he was going to be “exceedingly late” getting home. While she thought disagreement once in a while “was good for him,” he could not stand the thought of her being at odds with him.⁷

On Sundays, Etta always prepared a roast, mashed potatoes, and a chocolate cake or lemon pie. During the years that Albert was in the bishopric, Wally remembered his father bringing extra people home

5. Albert Toronto Family Organization, *Story of Albert and Etta Toronto*, 16.

6. Albert Toronto Family Organization, *Story of Albert and Etta Toronto*, 20, 22.

7. Albert Toronto Family Organization, *Story of Albert and Etta Toronto*, 10.

often, such as visitors to sacrament meeting or new college students, to eat Sunday dinner with the family. The Toronto family was already fairly large, so the food that had been prepared was not always sufficient to satisfy additional guests as well. The Torontos worked out a system of signals and codes to alert family members to be on their guard. Whenever Etta whispered “F. H. B.,” they knew it meant “family, hold back.” Their servings, then, were politely small while the guests could have larger helpings. But even at “F. H. B.” meals, it seemed to Wally that there was always enough food to go around.⁸

The codes were not restricted to mealtime. After dinner, the children often marched off to the front room, leaving Etta to clean up all by herself. But all it took was a look on her face expressing deep disappointment that indicated, “You don’t care.” The children shamefully received the nonverbal message and returned to the kitchen to clean up. Even then, they made the chore fun by creating a relay race with the dirty dishes. They first ran from the dining room, through the pantry, and back to the kitchen. Then they washed and dried the dishes. Then the real fun began. They tossed the dishes across the room to one another until every dish sat in its proper place. Despite the elaborate relay system, they surprisingly dropped and broke very few dishes.⁹

As a child in the 1910s, Wally witnessed the dawning of the electric age. The Toronto kitchen would eventually boast one of the first electric automatic dishwashers ever to be sold. But it was not made very well. After too much use, the mechanism wore out. It was not a complete loss, however; the children got to return to their exciting dish-cleaning relay race. The dishwasher remained in place even though it did not work. Because it was part of the sink and drain board, the Torontos never took it out. Apart from the short-lived dishwasher, Etta also experienced the wonder of going from a wood range to an electric one. She was thoroughly pleased by how quickly the stove

8. Albert Toronto Family Organization, *Story of Albert and Etta Toronto*, 36.

9. Albert Toronto Family Organization, *Story of Albert and Etta Toronto*, 23.

heated up and by how much cleaner her kitchen stayed because the smoke no longer clung to the walls.¹⁰

For the Torontos, one of the most special times of the year was Christmas. Although they did not always have a lot of presents to open, they were all delighted in what they received, oohing and aahing at each gift, even if it was simply “a tiny little red and white striped sock, filled with pennies or nickels.” On occasion, some of their Felt cousins visited the Toronto home on Christmas day, bringing gifts of their own that were more fun and expensive than those the Toronto children had received. Nonetheless, the Felt cousins often wished that their Christmas morning had been as much fun as the one at the Toronto house, even though their cousins had received less.¹¹

As Wally matured, he became the “leader of the pack” amongst his cousins, siblings, and the neighborhood kids.¹² Wally was a very well-proportioned teenager who stood out among other swimmers on the high school swim team. He had a great capacity for swallowing air and could stay underwater for quite a while. He once entered a Boy Scout swimming contest at the Deseret Gym. When he dove off the bank, everybody cheered on to see if he could endure the length of the gym pool. He did not make it to the end, but the way he hung on for so long impressed the onlookers. Those watching “could tell there was character and grit and determination [and] fortitude. And it had an influence . . . on all the . . . 13 and 14-year-old youngsters” watching him. Wally was “a great example, . . . the right example.” The sense of responsibility and perseverance he developed during high school stayed with him throughout his life. He was elected student body president of the high school in 1927 and president of the senior class.¹³

10. Albert Toronto Family Organization, *Story of Albert and Etta Toronto*, 35.

11. Albert Toronto Family Organization, *Story of Albert and Etta Toronto*, 18, 35.

12. Carma Toronto, interview by Daniel Toronto, February 26, 2004, Salt Lake City, transcription in author’s possession, 2–3.

13. Albert Toronto Family Organization, *Story of Albert and Etta Toronto*, 64, 65.

Wally was a tease. He was full of fun and always had a prank up his sleeve. He and his brothers loved playing tricks on anyone and everyone. They once went back and forth down the street where they lived and streamed a roll of toilet paper across the road. As the cars drove by, the drivers had no choice but to drive through the toilet paper. Another prank Wally once did as a teenager was using electricity to shock chickens. They also enjoyed pranking the family livestock. Wally, perhaps more than once, tied a clothing line wire across two poles. He then hooked up a battery to the wire using jumper cables, hoping the chickens would perch on it. The boys sat and waited in anticipation to see what would happen. Wally wanted only to scare the bird, but instead, as an unsuspecting chicken moved to perch there, it was electrocuted.¹⁴

One story became legendary in the neighborhood. Close to the Toronto home, the trolley tracks meandered along South Temple and rounded up a hill between South Temple and the top of Second South. Wally had the bright idea of spreading suet grease along the tracks on the hill. He and his “followers” hid out of sight and waited until a trolley came their way, watching as it rounded the corner. All of a sudden, the train got stuck on the grease, leaving the poor conductor confused as he tried to figure out what was wrong.¹⁵

Wally—a future mission president—greased tracks, electrocuted hens, and frustrated many a driver using toilet paper. Amidst all of his tricks, though, he emerged as a leader who could get others to follow him. In the next decade, he would guide an entire nation of converts.¹⁶

14. Judy Richards, interview by David Toronto, Salt Lake City, transcription in possession of David Toronto, 1.

15. Carma Toronto interview, February 26, 2004, 3.

16. Carma Toronto interview, February 26, 2004, 3.

3 IMMERSING HIMSELF IN BOHEMIAN LIFE

In the 1920s, serving as a full-time missionary was an exception for young LDS men, not a rule. One had to be asked to serve a mission by his priesthood leaders. Unlike today, a young Latter-day Saint did not just decide to go; rather, others made the decision. In the summer of 1928, Wallace F. Toronto received a letter from Box B (the address of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) calling him to serve in the German-Austrian Mission. And so, Wally, in the great tradition of his grandfather, Joseph, and his father, Albert, accepted the call to serve as a missionary.

Typical of many missionaries, Wally left a girlfriend at home. Her name was Dolores. The two had been dating for some time before Wally received his call. They agreed to write each other often once he entered the mission field in Germany. Saying goodbye was not easy.

Wally arrived in October of 1928, at the mission headquarters in Dresden.¹ Like his father, he found that

1. Joseph Young Toronto, *Forever and Ever: The Life History of Joseph Young Toronto*, ed. Shannon Toronto (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1996), 47.