

My Great-Grandmother and the Book of Mormon

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For me and my younger brother, religious education came early. It was provided by our wonderful parents and partly by our great-grandmother, a small woman with a big name: Margaret Elizabeth “Pansy” Gordon (formerly Schutt). Her life was long and exciting (1866–1966). She was sent from England with her parents and sister by the Church of England to convert the Native Americans of British Columbia. She survived a shipwreck, traveled by canoe with only Native American men for companions, crossed and recrossed the continent by rail, drove a team of horses from Meadowville, Utah, to Calgary with her babies and parents, and had many other adventures. To us, boys of eight and ten years old, these stories were interesting but so remote and distant that they seemed unreal. Reality was playing backyard softball and building forts. But reality also included our externally imposed religious education.

My brother and I called our great-grandmother “G-G” when she lived with our family in the foothills of Monrovia, California, in the 1950s and 1960s. No one could know her without sensing her passion for the Book of Mormon. But Eric and I knew it by direct and repeated observation. G-G, aided and abetted by our parents, insisted that we report to her small bedroom several times a week to be instructed from the Book of Mormon. She was entirely unmoved by the compelling fact that there were dirt-clod wars to be fought, though perhaps the lemon drops she dispensed as a reward for good behavior betrayed some compassion for our plight. We took turns reading, and she explained as we went along.

G-G's love for the Book of Mormon dates back to the 1885 arrival of a package in the tiny Indian village of Henvey's Inlet along the northern shores of Lake Ontario. Her father had been transferred there to teach school to Indian children, and G-G and her sister Fanny, then eighteen and sixteen, were the only white children in the village. The package had been carried by rail, ship, horseback, and hand from Salt Lake City. It contained a copy of the Book of Mormon and a Latter-day Saint tract called "Spencer's Letters," a discussion between Orson Spencer and a minister. As an outcome of an extended visit with Mormon relatives in Salt Lake City the year before, G-G had been exposed to the Church but not attracted to it. Indeed, she reports that she felt "quite sorry for my Mormon cousins in Salt Lake" and expressed that sentiment in a letter to her cousin Joseph. (Joseph tartly replied that he was a deacon in his church and that no one need feel sorry for *him*.)

However, she began to feel "a strange desire . . . to learn something of Mormonism," proving that the Lord who found Jonah can find anyone anywhere. She resisted, recalling that she "didn't like the idea at all," having been taught that Brigham Young was a "wicked, immoral man." Nevertheless, because there was no one else with whom she could discuss this "strange and insistent urge," she corresponded with another Salt Lake City cousin, asking for something to read about the Church. The cousin sent the package of material. Accompanying it was a letter from her cousin: "If you read this to scorn as you did here, I'll send you no more. If you are interested and want more, I'll send it." What happened next is best told in G-G's own words:

I decided to read the Book of Mormon first. So taking it in hand, I went into my little bedroom and still holding it, knelt down and asked my Father if Mormonism was really true and Joseph Smith a true prophet, to reveal it to me as I read. I sat down and started to read and immediately strange burning thrills went all over my body. At first I was afraid and then a peace came over me and all the while I read those burning electric thrills stayed with me until I laid the book down. The next afternoon, when ready to start reading, I again took the book to my room and again prayed that if it was true, I could be shown clearly. For three weeks I read each day asking the same blessing, not realizing that I had the greatest converter of all to teach me. And every time I picked it up after praying would come those electric burning thrills, which I soon recognized must be part of my teaching. I never mentioned them to the folks. They never knew of the wonderful experiences I was having all to myself or how my Father was teaching me the true gospel. As I neared the end of the book, filled with the wonderful spirit it possesses, I came to the 10th chapter of Moroni, verses 4 & 5:

“And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

“And by the power of the Holy Ghost, ye may know the truth of all things.”

As I read these words, my eyes were fully opened. I gave a shout. I knew then what had been thrilling and burning my whole body. It was the promised spirit which had testified to my soul. Without being told I had done just as Moroni said. I had asked my Father in the name of His son to reveal unto me the truth and he did just that, and I fully knew it. I cannot describe the joy I felt. It was beyond expression. I knew then and have never doubted since that the gospel is true and Joseph Smith a prophet of the Lord.

G-G never wavered from that moment. In later years, she became a sought-after speaker at firesides and sacrament meetings. When in her old age she saw an opportunity to teach her great-grandsons about the Book of Mormon, she did not hesitate. Eric and I, her captive students, can still picture her bent over her scriptures with a magnifying glass that, to our endless amusement, made her nose look huge. Not deterred in her purpose by our teasing nor even by our uncontrollable fit of laughter when first we heard the name “Zeezrom,” G-G persevered. Bit by bit, the Book of Mormon stories made an impression on us.

The impact the book had on us became apparent during sacrament meeting when Eric and I were invited to the pulpit to talk about the Book of Mormon. We cannot remember why we were called up, but some say the scheduled speakers had failed to appear. Others say that G-G herself was the assigned speaker and that she stunned the bishopric by deferring to us. Dad was the bishop, and our uncle, Wayne Barker, was his counselor, which may have had something to do with it as well. What no one disputes is that entirely to our surprise and with no small embarrassment, we were called upon to report what G-G had been teaching us. In a day when Book of Mormon study was neither part of the regular Sunday School curriculum nor required reading at BYU, it was apparently quite a phenomenon that a couple of boys knew it well enough to tell a little about it.

As the older brother, I went first and plowed into the material, telling about the departure from Jerusalem, the retrieval of the brass plates and of Ishmael’s family, the building of the ship, the ocean voyage, and so on. At what I estimated to be the midpoint, I turned the burden over to Eric, who proceeded to tell the rest of the story. G-G

was glowing with pride. So was I, until Uncle Wayne went to the pulpit, acknowledged the talent of our teacher, and then observed that it appeared Eric had read “a little further than Steve.” It wasn’t true! But Eric has never let me forget it. In any event, we always thought we had an inside track on Book of Mormon scholarship.

I have since forgiven my uncle, but I am not yet over the feeling that the Book of Mormon belonged mostly to G-G and, by right of inheritance, to Eric and me. It is difficult to say whether the Book of Mormon found G-G or whether G-G found the Book of Mormon, but it was the start of a lifetime of teaching for a very small woman with a very big name and a testimony to match it.

G-G’s burning testimony of the Book of Mormon is a legacy within our family. I have not yet done justice to the details of her conversion experience, but my children know that this volume of scripture is special to me and that I love reading and teaching it. One of my daughters attributes the rescue of her testimony in a time of deep despair to her reading of the Book of Mormon. It is an anchor in our family.

If I were to identify the principles we learned from our experiences with G-G, something that would help parents who desire to pass their own testimonies on to later generations, the results would be evident. First, parents cannot teach what they don’t know. G-G knew the Book of Mormon was true, but she also knew the content of the Book of Mormon. She could explain the sometimes complicated stories in simple terms. So parents should master the content of the Book of Mormon. Second, children sometimes object to studying the scriptures. When this happens, the best response from parents is, “Nevertheless, we insist.” More will rub off than is anticipated. And lemon drops can help. Third, parents should start early. Supple young minds are able to get a handle on the scriptures, and learning later in life requires more effort.

I cannot promise that anyone’s children will experience the “electric, burning thrills” described by G-G in her journal or that they will become ward celebrities by giving spur-of-the-moment talks in church. But can I promise that a sincere and prayerful study of the Book of Mormon will lead to a testimony? I do not have to; Moroni already did that.