

THE FIRST CHURCH ROMANCE IN INDEPENDENCE.

BY VIDA ELIZABETH SMITH.

Back from the main road that ran through the wonderfully picturesque hill country of Seneca County, New York, sat an old-fashioned, large, story and a half log house. On all sides of it was evidence of prosperity, thrift, and order. A chilly, cloudy, spring day in 1829 was drawing to a close. From her position in the wide dooryard, a young girl could see the road—suddenly a voice sounded from the open door—“Elizabeth Ann!”

“Yes, mother,” called the soft voice of the girl, “I wanted to see the travelers; they are coming this way.” She turned reluctantly to follow lightly her safe-footed mother, who had come for a moment to her side. Some way she kept those travelers well in mind as she moved about her appointed household evening tasks in the wide, low-ceiled kitchen. For days the roads had been impassable except by horsemen. The March freeze stayed close to the heels of the April rains, and the work of the noonday sun only made matters worse by thawing the cold, wet surface of the soil. The well-defined highways were almost deserted and the full-banked creeks and rivers made cross country ventures very hazardous. So it was a matter of interest to the young to see men journeying on this cold spring evening.

Out in the barnyard where the men and boys were doing the evening work, the interest became greater, for the two horsemen had turned into the lane toward the hospitable-looking home.

A sturdy young man turned from the work near the barn and opened the old-fashioned gate, telling the men to ride in. From a low, log outbuilding, another youth came, carrying

corn,—he stopped and gave an exclamation of genuine pleasure as he hurried to clasp hands with the leading, and elder of the two men. “This,” said the traveler, “is Samuel Smith, and this Samuel, is the friend of whom I have so often spoken: David Whitmer.” The fine eyed open-faced German greeted the young man named Smith, who replied, “Mr. Cowdery gave me so much news of you people that I felt eager to be here.” Smilingly he met the earnest and quiet welcoming of this low-spoken, clean, German family, with their generous-hearted father, who said, “You are welcome, young man. We enjoyed your parents’ short stay with us. Come in to supper.”

As the men moved toward the house young Cowdery and his friend David lingered a little behind the rest, talking earnestly in low tones, Cowdery doing the most of the talking, the eyes more than the lips of his friend David questioning him now and then.

Inside the kitchen, wide and low, with rough-hewn rafters and deep, small-paned windows, a long table was spread with hearty, appetizing viands. Oliver Cowdery was greeted with every evidence of pleasure by the motherly, staid woman, whom the hearty father presented to Samuel Smith as his wife. There was no mistaking the warm-hearted welcome given to this young man, Oliver Cowdery, who moved with quick familiarity to the corner where wooden pegs, set orderly in the logs—made place for caps and coats. Already two damp buckskin coats hung there and three homemade caps of wool. Deftly lifting one cap from a certain peg to another lower down, young Cowdery remarked, “I believe this is my domain,” and hung his own mud-spattered coat and woolen cap on the preempted peg. A low voice spoke from the chimney corner, and there was a saucy note in the sound, “So it was *you* I saw riding on the muddy highway?”

And stooping the young man looked into the flushed face,

“And it was *you*, Miss Elizabeth Ann, that I saw watching for *me*.” She handed him a dish of smoking potatoes she had been taking from the ashes, and sprang to her feet—“Not watching for *you*; just thinking it might be Indians.”

The advent of travelers in this frontier man’s home seemed to occasion no flurry, no change in routine. The extra plate seemed always laid, the circle about the hearth was warm and elastic, widening for the passing guest, closing again affectionately for their beloved own people. There was grave and dignified demeanor at the table. The older people asking the young stranger of his honored parents, and the others telling pleasant bits of neighborhood news to the young friend, who had dwelt first in their midst as a teacher of a district school. Suddenly the elder Whitmer asked, “Your school closed, Oliver?”

“Yes, sir; yesterday. I am going now with Mr. Smith to visit his brother Joseph.”

“The highways are too bad for such a journey now—postpone for a time further travel, and visit with us.”

“It would be a pleasure to stay in this home for days, and to visit in the neighborhood, but I feel something urging me to hasten. I feel impatient at every delay. It is good to see you again, though.” Although he spoke easily and courteously to his host, his spirit seemed always near the quiet young friend called David, who sat at his side.

Suddenly his eyes rested for just a moment on the white, downcast lids of the demure little Elizabeth, giving such close attention to her plate, as suddenly she lifted her eyes and a swift smile crossed her fresh young face, and the grave face of Cowdery responded with as fleeting a smile. As the men moved away to the other end of the room to talk in little groups the women swiftly and without clatter or confusion cleared away the table and washed the dishes. One glance into the house and many indications of more than ordinary culture and

refinement in this family were displayed. The few books were of deep and refining nature, showing the readers to be students and thinkers. The conversation was chaste, earnest, simple, and pleasant, such as springs from pure and honest hearts. When at last the circle settled around the fireplace, they could hear the steady downpour of the April rain, and the young travelers were again importuned to bide over the next few days, or until the roads were better which, judging from the sounds on the roof, would not be soon.

Perhaps the young brother of Joseph Smith might have lingered here, but not so young Cowdery. His firm lips came together in a straight line as he murmured: "No; I must go on. There is something impelling me. I must go at once."

The frank eyes of the schoolgirl met the determined eyes above the stern line of lips and lingered there just a moment again, but it was long enough for the severity of the eyes to be melted and the line across the lips to break into soft curves. Then David and Oliver withdrew and talked long into the night.

It was a gray, chilly mist that waited for the young travelers next morning. As they sat at the wide table spread with plain, bounteous fare—young Oliver looked suddenly at Elizabeth and a puzzled expression crossed his face. The young schoolgirl had wrapped her braids about her head, and it gave her an unexpected, unexplainably changed look.

His eyes followed her, as in obedience to her mother's orders she moved quickly about in the dim morning light. He had not thought that putting up in smooth bands those long, girlish braids would give her *that* look. After he was mounted for the journey he turned back to the kitchen door where she stood, and bending toward her held out his hand with a little feeling of strangeness; but her face lifted to his with the old, swift smile, which he always answered. She laid her hand in his, and listened for him to say in the way no other one

ever had, "Elizabeth Ann," and "Good-bye." It was not long after that rainy springtime visit of Oliver Cowdery and Samuel Smith to the Whitmer home that the honest-eyed young David had a long letter from the young schoolteacher telling of the safe arrival of himself and Samuel Smith at the home of Joseph Smith. It was the meeting of two strangers looked upon from a conventional standpoint, but to the young men whose hands clasped in that first meeting it was the hour of destiny.

"I have been expecting you, for I was assured the Lord would send some one to me, and I know you are the man." The wide, blue eyes that always held something like a smile in their depths looked full into the calmness of the young teacher's. Six feet and more stood the young prophet—broad of shoulder, long of limb, and quick of movement as a panther, while his new friend stood more slender, not so tall, but straight and clean and dignified, a look of questioning in his eye:

"I have come to help do this work of the Lord. I felt it in my bones and told your mother, that I must help in this work that seems so mysterious, so wonderful."

A tall, slender, young woman came to the open door and greeted Samuel Smith with pleasant welcome and eager questions regarding Father and Mother Smith. With a quick, boyish movement the young prophet sprang up the steps, "Emma," and his voice had a peculiarly softened note, "here is the scribe. Come, Mr. Cowdery, meet my wife," and young Cowdery touched the slender hand extended to him, and looked into a pair of direct, dark-hazel eyes, which seemed to see his soul, without giving him any uneasiness. The voice that bade him welcome was low, clear, and had a little sound that made one feel like the thing she suggested was the proper thing to do. The little home he entered was neat and inviting. In its atmosphere one felt free, restful, and comfortable. The

meal waiting there was delicious in flavor and possessed what in people would be called individuality.

The journey had been hard, for a certain insistence in the character of Oliver Cowdery made him push any project hard to its finish; and in this case he was impelled by that distinct psychical force that made him feel he was needed immediately, and he wanted to fathom this thing for which he was needed. Immediately there was a pleasant flow of conversation. It was like the meeting of friends between whom the shadow of the world had laid since they were born, and in two days they were deep in the work of translating the wonderful plates and writing them into the beautiful history called the Book of Mormon.

Eager as was young Cowdery to do this work, he yet found time to write to his friend David Whitmer, at Fayette, New York. "Ah!" he writes, "these are days never to be forgotten. I know certainly that Joseph Smith has a record of people that inhabited this continent, and that the plates that we are translating from give a complete history of these people."

These letters were read to the assembled household at the Whitmer farm, and the matter of the golden plates and the angel's visit were discussed with gravity and seriousness due such things from these sober-minded, religiously trained people.

The summer was coming now; sweet June laid fingers warm and soft on long furrows and sweet, wet meadows, and life throbbed and sprang up at the touch. At the Whitmer farm there were busy scenes. A pile of plaster of paris stood waiting to be sown over the unfertilized field, and in another part of the farm the plowman had turned soft, loose folds of earth up in smooth, chocolate-colored ribbons until the plowshare shone with beauty from the caressing friction. It was standing between the plow handles, his homemade straw hat, plaited and shaped by his mother's hands pushed back from

his frank boyish face, that David Whitmer read a missive brought to him by the bright-eyed baby sister, Elizabeth Ann, one warm day. The girl hurried across the fields, for she also carried a cool, old-fashioned drink for the beloved brother.

As the young man read a puzzled look came into his eyes. Here was something unusual, the people were threatening to destroy the life of the young prophet, and take from him those wonderful treasures. They had not known this until entering upon their work one day, instead of seeing the words of the book before their waiting eyes, there appeared a command to write to this David Whitmer and have him come for them and carry them to Fayette, where the work of translating might be continued and concluded without disturbing features. Slowly Elizabeth walked across the field and meadow through the wood-lot to the house. There seemed such need for David to go. She wished he might at once. A new sort of feeling crept into her heart, a fear for the young school-teacher—what if—but the busy mother called, “Come, child; make haste; there is much to do.” It was on the girl’s tongue to tell her mother what David had read to her from the letter she had so cheerfully offered to carry to him, but a sudden shyness came to her tongue and she silently went to her work. It was in the evening that the matter was all made plain to the family, and the father, and other boys, tried to see the way clear to meet this demand.

Before the evening prayers were said even, it was decided that if the field waiting the sowing could be hurried David should go. The hours of toil that followed seemed under a charm. Like some marvelous legend, the story was ever afterward told of the field magically spread with fertilizer and the upturned loam of the field that lay warm and damp from the first black tuck to the last—not yet dry—and the field all plowed, and planted.

It was with a thankful heart that Elizabeth listened to the last faint sound of the departing wagon, and running swiftly to a hidden corner, she fell on her knees, and bending her face almost to the earth, she prayed for the happy and successful return of her brother and the guests. Not so the mother. Her hands were already weary, and as she thought of this further addition to her household she grew a little rebellious; but it was not for long. She knew not the meaning of the word *inhospitable*, and she had her blessing.

Ordinarily this trip across the line into Pennsylvania would take several days. Following part of the way the old road, once but an Indian trail, then rattling over the new road, the German youth left the rushing river far behind, and was well on his way before the sun was far above the hills; the roads lay smooth and grassy, not like the road that led along these same highways a few short weeks ago, when his friends traveled them.

It seemed pleasant and good now, but he felt a subcurrent of haste that he could not define, as choosing first this divergence then that from the old road, he hurried along. With the thrill of marvel, he met his friend Cowdery and Joseph Smith, who had come to meet him, knowing all the time just where he was at every stage of the way since he left home.

They drove up to the little Smith home, ready for the early dinner that awaited them, and then his friend said in his smooth, genial way—

“David, did you not know you cut the time almost in half? You made an extraordinary trip.”

Do you suspect that this eager-hearted, talented young teacher ever let the vision of the little schoolgirl cross his mind as he contemplated the return to that hospitable German home, set in the midst of the glorious hills of Seneca County? May be he did, but it was just as a part of the warm, pleasant

atmosphere of that home that his mind's eye beheld her sweet, fresh face, and soft, fine hair, woven into the picture as sunlight is part of an hour, or as a rose is part of a garden. Howbeit he was glad to go, and as they journeyed towards the lakes and hills there appeared a stranger by the roadside, a pleasant, kindly man with a small knapsack on his back. He greeted the travelers and was asked to ride, but he said, "No, I am going to Cumorah," and with some slight comment on the warmth of the day they separated. David saw a look pass between young Cowdery and the prophet, but not until later did he learn that this was the messenger to whom Joseph Smith had given up the plates, until he was again ready to translate from them. "And where is Cumorah?" he asked after a few moments' silence.

"The hill where the records or plates were kept," he was told, and that opened the way for further conversation, and he learned many things. The usual time was taken on the return trip, the travelers spending the nights at inns along the way. The days were beautiful and the company congenial, and the subject of converse new and full of interest, but there were relieved hearts in the comfortable story and a half log house in old Fayette the night they reached the farm. And some way the voice of the dear teacher didn't sound through the room half often enough for little Elizabeth, whose braids were decorously hanging in their schoolgirl place.

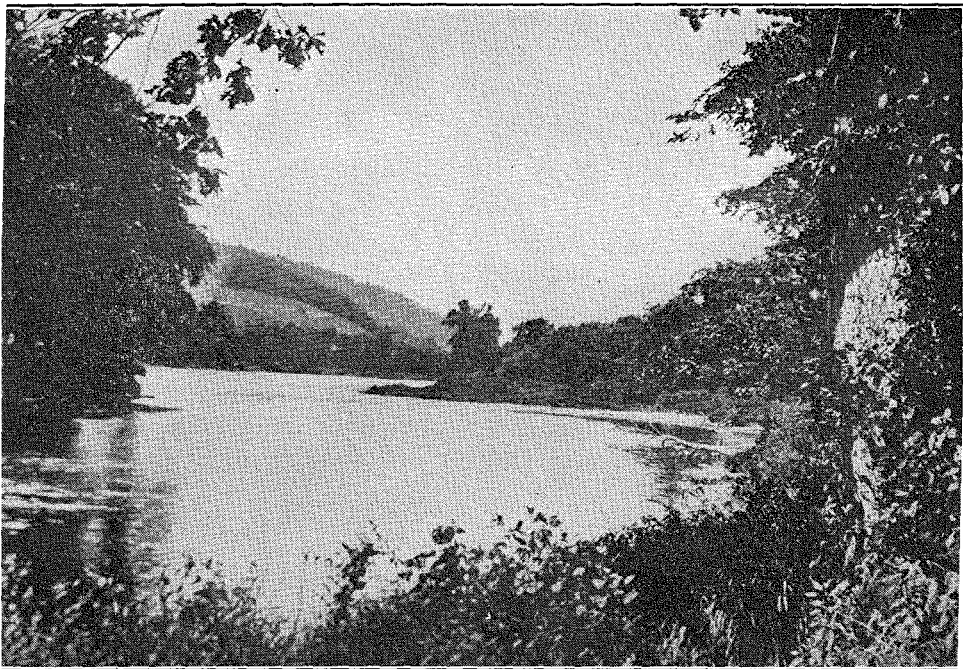
The days that followed were strangely wonderful. Up in the quiet loft room, whose window overlooked the glad, summer hills, a wonderful story was being unfolded. Silently the household routine moved on its well-ordered, ceaseless way. The sunny-hearted, cheery-voiced young prophet had won the love of these noble-minded, hospitable people, and now his tall, straight, young wife was also their guest, and her deft, young hands, with their tapering fingers, lent ready and capable

help to any branch of the household work, and her dignified and refined manners won an honored place in their midst. Some days the little upper chamber would seem very sacred indeed to the busy little girl, and sometimes when her brother went up the loft steps and took the pen and sat down to the little table she knew what would happen. The almost tireless scribe would rest. She was often down under the trees, busy with little household finger work, but she knew the crisp, even step on the grass, and waited to hear it moving her way.

"Tired?" she would ask, and with the wonder of this new dispensation still in his eyes, he would lie on the soft, warm earth, near to the busy girl, and tell over and over the wonderful scene in the wilderness when with the new-found friend Joseph he had prayed for understanding of the scripture with a vague uncertainty of ordinances and the powers of administration; then he would rise, and pacing slowly or quickly as his mood moved him, he would go over the marvelous visitation; that glorious meeting with John the Baptist; and into the listening ears of the girl he would pour the thrilling story of the touch of those angelic hands, when upon him was placed the right to administer the sacred things of God, and then, as the days went by, and new and yet more wonderful things opened to the visions of the workers in the loft of the old farmhouse, his heart sprang to his tongue, and without restraint his hopes and fears and longings were told to Elizabeth in tones unwontedly soft and deep, for when "the heart is on the tongue, ah then," "The world bows to the words of men." And when the gentle audience is one, always one, and that one with her "heart in her ears," there is but one sequel to the tale. Softly the summer lay around the busy farmhouse. Now and again the waters of the beautiful Lake Seneca were rippled by a baptism. In some of the wonderfully enchanting little coves on her shores, small bands of low-voiced, earnest-hearted people knelt in prayer and stood to sing praises.

Deep and still lay the waters of the lake that never froze over, and one day, somewhere upon the banks of the beautiful Susquehanna River south of the magnificent hills on whose bosom it slept, there came to Oliver Cowdery and Joseph Smith a higher, more wonderful priesthood.

In the schoolhouse near to the Whitmer farm, the gentle-



On the banks of the beautiful Susquehanna.

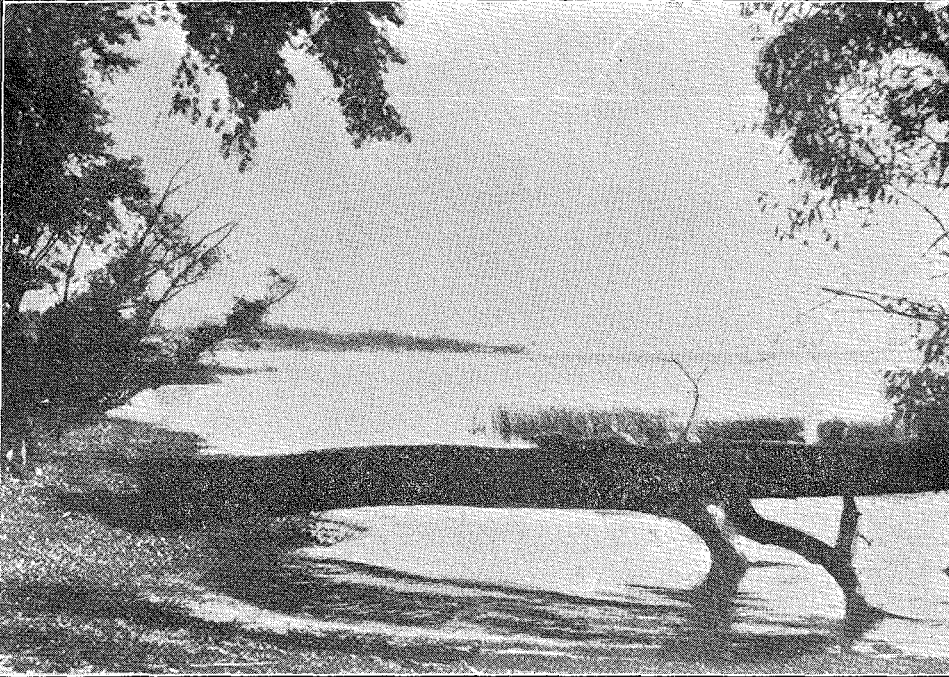
mannered man, who had mingled among this people as a pedagogue a few years ago, appeared now with the new-fledged powers of a minister and taught from the Scriptures old things that sounded strange to the ears of men. If his first sermon was more finished and more carefully rounded out than his friends had thought possible, on that day when the great living room at the Whitmer home held the congregation,

few guessed how often it had fallen on the still summer air as he talked with Elizabeth Ann. Maybe he was unconscious of the gracious training that came to him through the sympathetic listening of this grave, sweet child. Sometimes after the schoolhouse further away was opened to the telling of the old story of redemption and the new story of the Book of Mormon, he rode on her own horse with little Elizabeth, sitting back of him after the old-time way to and from the meeting. With the perfect freedom of friendship of childhood, she put one round arm across his side, and her brown, dimpled hand lay on his arm. Not once—in all the anxious weeks when his friends sat to hear and stood to counsel with him, did he find a more anxious listener, or more critical counselor than his schoolgirl.

From him *she* learned of baptism, and when he stood in the blue water of Seneca Lake baptizing, close by the picturesque little glen growing so familiar to those early ministers, there was a softer look in his glowing eyes, when Elizabeth, from her place by her father's side, came with down-cast lids and steady, even step to the water's edge.

He took the girlish hand and led her into the deep water, pausing to tuck the hem of the homespun, home-dyed dress into the softly lapping water. For miles the lake lay blue and majestic under the soft sky. Just once the girl lifted her eyes to the deep eyes above her, that was when the classic head of Cowdery bent close to hers and his hands clasped more firmly her soft, warm ones; then she looked into his eyes and smiled, and he smiled too ere he raised his slender, scholarly hand in solemn and soft-toned invocation for this beautiful and youthful offering to obedience. When the cool waters had been broken by the going down and coming up of the round young body, as he stood for a moment wiping the water from the smooth face and waiting for the trembling

limbs to be calm and sure, she lifted her eyes to his again, and again that flitting smile which his own grave face involuntarily answered. There was possibly no more beautiful ordinance than this one of baptism in these beautiful parts of God's great world, although a rare and more æsthetic charm lay in the solemn rite of confirmation. To many this ordinance



Seneca Lake.

“Lay blue and majestic under the soft sky.”

seemed new and mysterious, but to those who had longed and waited for this ancient order of holy rites, it was a long-cherished dream come true. The actuality of this hope long deferred, and the meeting together for this purpose of confirmation, by laying on of hands was a season of rich, deep, spiritual emotion. The glory of God was in their midst, and

their minds grew clear and their understandings were opened. Under such conditions they drew into closer friendships and the desire to tell the world of mankind of these glorious possibilities led them forth to speak of the marvelous work where-soever they could—but if it gave them fire for lights in the “*torch* of the messenger,” it gave also oil and fire in the *heart* of the messenger, and they grew in knowledge of all things whatsoever things were good and honorable.

Young Cowdery, with others, went forth from these scenes of joyful learning, a messenger to a sin-darkened people. That was a hazardous undertaking, into a far and wild country, but the prayers of a determined and unflinching people were buoyed and braced for its success. These were promoters of a rich and glorious system, based on an old and safe foundation. They were a people born of the blood of patriots and bred in New England’s hardening, purifying principles of truth and toil, and trust in God. If the heart of the little German lass lay heavy in her breast she was frank to pray, “God bless our missionaries to the Lamanites,” when the little band met for prayer meetings, and glad to testify in her low, fresh voice that God had blessed her too with his Spirit; but in her “silences apart” the full, even tenor of her public prayer was broken, and one name fell soft, almost as her tears, as she prayed for that mission to the Indians. She recalled the hours of steady writing, writing of the teacher; she recalled the long discussion of the earnest-voiced brethren; then came to her mind the wonderful day when Joseph Smith and Martin Harris, her beloved brother David, and “the teacher” had come back from that long four hours in the holy of holies in the wildwood. She liked that memory. How their faces glowed and how the voice of the Spirit filled the low, wide room as they told that they had seen the plates, seen the angel. She could see the glowing face of the prophet’s mother,

the gentle, calm face of his father. Her own mother had sat very near to her, but she felt her softly crying. She too had had her blessing.

Standing back near the door she saw yet the relieved look on the composed face of Emma Smith. She could never forget the sanctified look of her brother David's face, but etched into her brain like the deep cutting of a cameo, was the face of the teacher. His eyes were like deep wells of light, and she could hear yet the soft movement of paper and quill as the testimony of the three witnesses was being prepared; and then again came the sound of discussion and the constant search for the right, until all were satisfied. Nor could she forget that auspicious hour when the church was organized in her own home. She saw in fancy the departing guests with the manuscript of the wonderful book, and heard over and over the stories of persecution—the sworn efforts of men to rob the world of this wonderful treasure, and as she went to and fro about her daily toil with these things in her mind, she grew into ways of soberness and dignity and combed out the braided hair into soft waves over her pink ears, and fastened it securely with comb and pins.

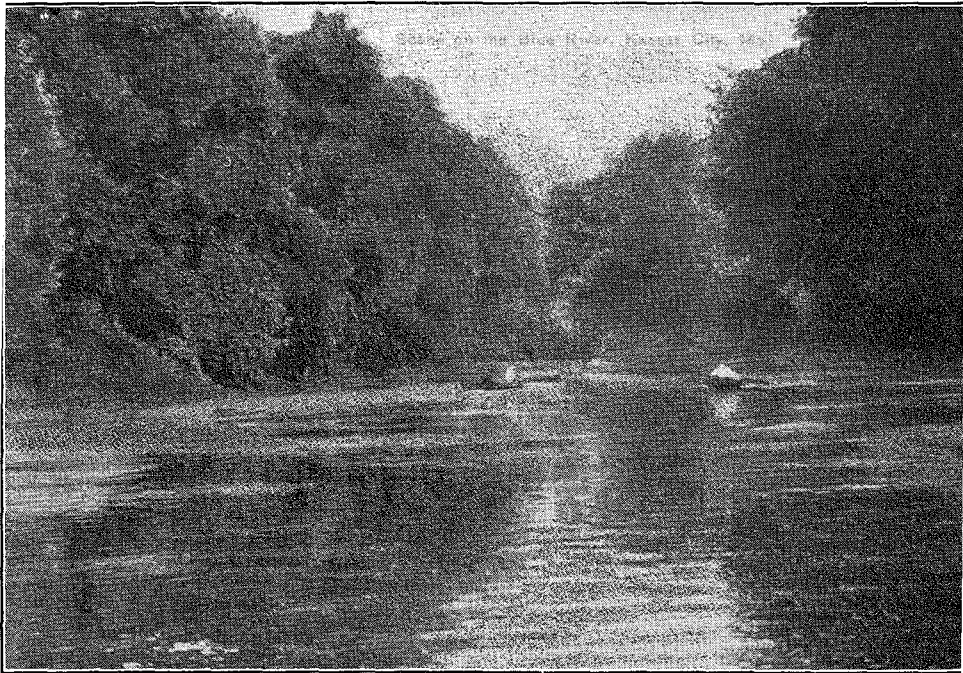
She listened with tightly clasped hands to the letters that came from the missionaries. And then one day she traveled with her people away from the lakes and the hills of her childhood home to the place of rendezvous for the westward moving hosts—western Ohio. Perhaps the infrequent messages she had from the teacher, fluent and rich and beautiful in word and diction, would have led her long before to the west, but she could not. The spirit goes ever, ever far ahead of the body. If the onward moving forces of this great spiritual awakening to freedom and light was bearing on its current the love destinies of these two lives, they swept graciously, on with the current and set no rudder against the waves.

How harmonious was the blending of life's beautiful and holy developments in these lives in these few short years. The missionary had returned to the headquarters of the church in the East, well and bounding with happiness and joy in the newly found light. But Oliver Cowdery found the eastern hills less lovely than of yore, and for some reason turned himself eagerly towards Missouri, accepting a church errand to that place again. Missouri, on whose brown hills the little German girl of old Fayette was soon to make her home. Here, close to Independence, then a small, new city of a few unpretentious houses, itself not yet past its first decade, Elizabeth stood in the morning light and dressed her hair in womanly ways, close to her girlish head, and here at twilight she looked away to the east, and dreamed of a wonderful, shining temple, yet to be, on a certain green knoll on the noblest, fairest spot in all Missouri. Nor was the spot less sanctified or less beloved because it had felt the light, firm step of her "teacher." Ah! somewhere on this dedicated spot the soft earth had yielded to the touch of his bended knee, while his voice made hallowed the evening air with prayer. Ah! heart of hearts is the heart of seventeen; it pulsates to wonderful visions, and when the worship of the divine One holds within its all powerful sway the unalloyed love for the one chosen in youth from all humanity, "There falls no shadow in all the night that is not wrapped in love's white light."

It was to such a waiting heart that Oliver Cowdery bowed in this strange, new land, and it was in the simple, rudely built home on the Blue that he took his little friend of the hills of old Fayette, into his arms and she looked up into his eyes with that quaint, fitting smile as he spoke her name.

"Say it again," she said, and the stately, old-fashioned name seemed to melt on his lips as he alone had ever spoken it. "Elizabeth Ann. My Elizabeth Ann!"

And so they were married in beautiful Missouri—the first wedding in the church in Zion. The sweet early romance that had its root and growth in the early church, and the serene, young bride, not yet eighteen until January 22, 1833, did not



On the Blue.

go out of the church history then. From the *Saints' Herald* of February 27, 1892, I read as quoted from the *South West City Leader*:

On Tuesday morning, January 7, at four o'clock a. m., Mrs. Elizabeth Cowdery died at the home of Doctor Charles Johnson, in this city, at the advanced age of 77 years. She was born in New York State, and was a member of one of the early Mormon families, her maiden name being Whitmer. Her husband, Oliver Cowdery, was a man distinguished for his services to the church in the early days of that sect.

On Saturday morning, at 7.30 a. m., forty-eight hours after the death of her mother, Mrs. Doctor Charles Johnson passed away to that bourne whence no terrestrial traveler ever returns. She was born in Kirtland,

Ohio, on August 21, 1835, her maiden name being Maria Louise Cowdery, and came with her parents to Ray County, Missouri. In 1856 she was married to Doctor Charles Johnson, at Richmond, Ray County, and removed to this place with her husband ten years ago, where they have resided since. Mrs. Johnson, although being of retiring disposition, was a genial friend and neighbor to all who knew her, devoted to her husband and household, and to her manifold domestic affairs. She was a believer in the creed of the reformed Mormon church, which renounced polygamy at the time the Mormons went to Salt Lake City, and lived a consistent Christian life in accordance with the teachings that she had been reared in. Our community greatly deplore the loss of these two women whose peculiar qualities commend them to homeloving people everywhere.

Mrs. Johnson was the only living daughter, and the title of valuable lands in Independence and Kansas City were bound up in her during her time, but death has released her family's claim, as she died without issue.

Part of the lands referred to is the Temple Lot, which was long ago deeded to the Cowdery heirs by Bishop Partridge, and by Mrs. Johnson, the last remaining heir of Oliver Cowdery, deeded to the Reorganized Church.

Faithful to the first love of her heart, Elizabeth Ann Cowdery kept the love of the beloved church faith, long after her husband slept, the true, long sleep of all—even the true witness of the Book of Mormon.

Turning the leaves of the little morocco bound Book of Mormon that is highly prized by the Church Historian—I read the date of edition—1837, the printer's name, O. Cowdery and Co., and the testimony of the three witnesses therein with a feeling that it is a bit of actuality from the earliest romance in the Zion of Missouri—for on the dark morocco cover, in golden letters, is the name Elizabeth Ann Cowdery.