



A Spiritual Commencement

Sister Mary Norby
1893 - 1996

"Looking back over a century, I praise the way the Lord has led me day by day. I thank him for the privilege of living through so much of the Laodicean stage of the church, and feasting on the Harvest Message from the Lord through Br. Russell, 'that faithful and wise servant.'"

These are the words of Sr. Mary Norby as she approached her 102nd birthday. Little more than a year later, on Sunday, July 14, she finished her consecrated course of 88 years at Pinellas Park, Florida where she lived, with her daughter and son-in-law Ruth and Tom Maillard since her husband Br. Leon's, death October, 1976.

Sr. Mary may well have been the last saint living in our time, whose experience spanned the last years of Br. Russell's ministry, and all the years since to the present time. The brethren of her consecrated generation came in close contact with the spirit of our Present Lord in their association with his Messenger. These seem to have caught, and emitted an influence that those receiving it, could but faintly transmit to others. Her light having gone out, leaves the world a darker place. But only until "the Sun of righteousness arises with healing in his wings!"

Memories of the Early Years

In 1995 Sr. Norby shared some of her early memories in the Truth for a video taping, which are included here in her own words.

I was born April 23rd, 1893, in McGregor, Iowa, a beautiful little town on the bluffs of the Mississippi River. My father Alvah Rogers was a school teacher. My mother Kittie Blackburn Rogers was a seamstress. They both attended the Methodist church where my father was superintendent of the Sunday school and mother was the church organist.

Father Finds the Truth

In 1893 my father received Volume I from Br. Charles Jordan who owned the general store. When my father began reading The Divine Plan of the Ages, he continued reading way into the night and by the time he finished the chapter "Natures Distinct," he realized he had found the Truth. Of course, he immediately withdrew from the Methodist church.

My mother never accepted the Truth. My father used Zion's Glad Songs as the music book for the school where he taught and each day opened class with a scripture verse. In those days even the text books used Bible verses for teaching grammar and other lessons.

As a child I loved to read. I read Scripture Studies Volume I when I was nine. My brother, two sisters and I attended a non-denominational Sunday school where we learned the Bible stories and memorized scriptures and hymns. I always had a strong feeling for the Lord and his Word. This was probably increased by the fact that my mother was ill for a number of years and spent much time in the hospital. My mother died when I was 13.

Several years earlier we had moved to Farmersburg, Iowa. Shortly after my mother's death, my older sister, Jennie, who had already consecrated, was given the opportunity to go to Chicago, where she took a business course and got an office job. She was in the Chicago class with the Copelands, Morehouses, and Fosses in those early years. I consecrated in 1908 at age 15.

Meets Br. Russell

My sister Jennie sent money so my father, younger sister and I could each attend a convention. My turn came in 1912 and I went to the convention in Pertle Springs, Missouri. It was my first opportunity to be immersed. Br. Russell gave the baptism talk. I remember another talk he gave where he illustrated proper self-esteem. First he walked across the stage showing lack of confidence. Then he walked back showing too much self-confidence, and then he re-crossed the stage showing proper dignity, bearing and self-esteem...I returned home with well over a hundred names in my Manna.

A letter my father wrote is in the Reprints, page 4449. Many of the pilgrims stopped at our little town and we were given the use of the town hall without charge. My father organized what he called "Reading Circles" using Volume I. They were held in the banker's home. At least four brethren came into the Truth through these efforts and personal witness.

One of my special memories was the privilege of going to Chicago and hearing at least 10 talks by Br. Barton. I was with a group of young people who followed him as he spoke in the various suburbs.

Father Dies — Mary Leaves

Early in 1915 we had three parts of the Photo Drama shown in our town and a finale lecture given by a visiting speaker. Shortly after that, my father made a trip by train to see his brother in western Iowa. On the way home he got into a heated discussion with a Lutheran minister. During the night he had a stroke. Jennie came from Chicago the next day and when he died the following day, her first words were "He's in glory!"

After leaving school teaching, my father had been the postmaster in Farmersburg, and I was the assistant. I stayed there until October but wanted to move to where there was a class. About the same time, Sr. Adele Oelke had been told she would have to choose between her job at the family dry goods store in Farmersburg and "her religion." She chose the Truth. Sr. Oelke and I went to Madison, Wisconsin where my younger sister's in-laws, Br. and Sr. Sargent, lived. We were richly blessed in our study and fellowship in the Madison class. In addition to testimony meetings, we had prayer meetings where we would all kneel in prayer. In between the prayers that were given, we would sing a verse of Hymn 145 (Keep thou my way, O Lord). One brother had a roadster and Sr. Oelke and I would sometimes go to and from meeting standing on the running board, she on one side and I on the other.

These were the World War I years. The lard and beans saved for "the time of trouble" were put to good use along with the flour purchased at a fire sale. When Br. Russell died we were not too shocked — we expected that all the church would be taken soon. I recall we hid some of our books in the cupboard and that several brethren were put in prison during the war. We left the Society in 1918 over their stand on the war bond issue and other changes.

To St. Paul and Marriage

A few years later, the Sargents, with whom I had been living, moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, and I went along with them. We met with a small class of about 12 in Minneapolis which included Br. Leon Norby and his parents. Br. Leon and I were married January 1, 1926. In the late 20's quite a large number of brethren left the Society and we joined together with them.

During the 30's we had the privilege of attending several of the Pittsburgh Reunion Conventions. A theme of the 40's was "Reviving the work in the midst of the years." From 1947 to 1953 Br. Leon and I had the privilege of working at The Dawn. Our years of association with the brethren in the Northeast hold many precious memories. Br. Leon finished his course October 30, 1976.

Her Daughter's Testimony

Since then I have been living with my daughter and son-in-law, Ruth and Tom Maillard, in Florida. I thank the Lord for the continued lessons, blessings and privileges of fellowship with the brethren. My physical strength and memory are failing, but I pray that I will never forget the Abrahamic promise, the Corresponding Price and God's Four Attributes. Through all the years I have rejoiced in God's attributes of Wisdom, Justice, Love and Power so beautifully revealed in the Divine Plan of the Ages.

An Exhortation

Now I have difficulty remembering what I read, but what I learned in earlier years is more fixed in my memory. My advice to anybody younger is to fill their minds with the good things of the Truth because they are going to need them when eyesight and health go. After Jesus fed the 5000, the apostles gathered up 12 baskets of bread he had blessed and broken, and each apostle had his knapsack full. Br. Russell drew the lesson that we should be preparing for the future and put into our hearts those things we will need later. Dear brethren, I urge you to use your time, talents, privileges and opportunities so you can look back with joy and not with regret.

I send my deepest love in Christ, dear brethren, with my prayers on your behalf. "God be with you till we meet again." Sr. Mary Norby.

On Sunday, July 14th, [1996] the Lord called mother home. She died peacefully in her sleep. The words of Reprint 4054 are a special blessing—"So Moses the servant of the Lord died, according to the word of the Lord." In the Hebrew language, the expression 'according to the word of the Lord' would literally be by the mouth of the Lord. Jewish rabbis have given this a poetic term and would say, by the kiss of the Lord.' Thus we have the picture of a father kissing his child to sleep.

At 5:30 that morning, mother called me and asked, When am I being born?' Later at 7:30, she said, 'Am I being born? Is it time to be born?' I did not think much about it at the time, but the words became very meaningful. After her 103rd birthday in April, I had often mentioned that I knew it would be her hope that her next birthday would be her spiritual birthday in Zion. Later that morning she read the Manna, and wrote out the text. At about 10:15, I got her back to bed, and left for the meeting.

Though her exact time of death is not known. I like to think it was at the time when we were singing Hymn 117 at the close of our study: 'I'm a pilgrim and I'm a stranger...do not detain me, for I am going to where life's waters are ever flowing.' I thank the Lord that her long pilgrimage and her pain and infirmities are all over. I rejoice in the hope that was her joy and strength for the 88 years of her consecrated life.

My deepest thanks to all of you for your love, prayers, and encouragement which cheered her pathway. Truly, sweet perfume from the alabaster boxes of your hearts. With love in the precious eternal bonds of Christ." Sr. Ruth Maillard.

"...Ruth saw to the needs of her mother Mary, with such tenderness, it was as though she were caring for our Lord himself..." said Sr. Barbara Wilford of Hendersonville, North Carolina in her testimony before reading the foregoing at the Indiana-Ohio Convention on July 27 [1996] .

A memorial service was conducted on July 20 [1996] by Brs. Joseph Mitchka and Herman Hummel, both elders in her class at Clearwater.