

Afton Curtis Burdett

Compiled & Written by Jodi B. Kinner
2012

Afton Curtis Burdett was born on September 14, 1914, in Ferron City in Emery County, Utah, the first child and only daughter of Guy A. Curtis and Agnes Rasmussen. As a young child, she contracted an infection in her ears, which caused permanent deafness. Her parents took her Salt Lake City for medical treatment, but at that time there was little doctors could do. In 1920 when Afton was six years old, the family moved to Ogden so that Afton could attend the Utah School for the Deaf. She lived at school in the dormitory, but the family was always close by.

Afton was an apt student and a quick learner. In addition to reading, arithmetic, and signing, she studied ballet. She later taught others the art of dancing. She became efficient with tools in Manual Training class and as she progressed, she made herself a beautiful cedar chest (A Family Remembered: The Family of Hans Peter Rasmussen and Anna Maria Andersen).



Afton Curtis, 1933 Utah School
for the Deaf Senior

After graduating from USD in 1933, Afton attended Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C. She was inspired to go to the college when she dropped off her friend and classmate Delores Atkinson at the airport to go off to Gallaudet. Afton wrote in the *Utah Eagle* magazine, "She is my best pal who has helped me in many ways during our school days." Her teachers and friends had also encouraged her to go to Gallaudet (The Utah Eagle, 1933). Once there, she worked as a maid to the college president, Percival Hall, for several months (Ronald & Joyanne Burdett, personal communication, October 27, 2011).

While at Gallaudet, Afton renewed her acquaintance with Kenneth C. Burdett, whom she had known at USD. They soon became a steady couple (A Family Remembered: The Family of Hans Peter Rasmussen and Anna Maria Andersen). Afton was in her freshman year and Kenneth was a senior. With Kenneth's graduation from Gallaudet in 1934, Afton returned to Utah to join him rather than continue with her own studies at Gallaudet. These were also the years of the Great Depression, and Afton's family could not afford to support her tuition fees any longer (Ronald & Joyanne Burdett, personal communication, October 27, 2011).



Afton in 1945

On July 29, 1936, they were married at the Ogden Branch for the Deaf of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the first couple to marry there. The marriage was later sealed in the Salt Lake Temple on September 5, 1941. They had two children:

JoAnn (hearing) in August 1945; and Ronald (Deaf) in September 1947 (Gallaudet University Alumni Cards, 1866-1957; The Utahan Yearbook, 1974; Obituary of Kenneth C. Burdett; Ronald & Joyanne Burdett, personal communication, October 27, 2011). As Ronald grew, his parents discovered he had some difficulty hearing due to an earlier bout with influenza (A Family Remembered: The Family of Hans Peter Rasmussen and Anna Maria Andersen).



Afton & Kenneth, marriage ceremony at the Ogden Branch for the Deaf, July 29, 1936

At age five, Ronald ("Ron") enrolled at USD. During his junior year, he and his classmate, Celia May (Laramie) Baldwin, a daughter of George and Dora Laramie successfully passed their entrance exams for Gallaudet College and departed for the college in 1965.

The two would enter as prep students, for what would have been their senior year in high school (The UAD Bulletin, Fall 1966). He graduated from Gallaudet College in 1970 majoring in computer studies and accounting and obtained a master's degree in special education and rehabilitation from California State University, Northridge. He became successful in his careers. Over the years, he had served as Dean of Deaf Studies and Special Services at Ohlone College, as president of the California Association for Postsecondary Education and Disability, as division director of the Southern Utah Deaf and Hard of Hearing Division and as the Vice President of Community Relations of the Sorenson Communications, Inc. (UAD Bulletin, March 2006).



Ronald C. Burdett
Photo courtesy of Sorenson
Communication Inc.

Ron's wife, Joyanne K. Rasmus attended the California School for the Deaf in Berkeley, and later Gallaudet College, where she was quite active, notably with the Junior National Association of the Deaf and the sorority Phi Kappa Zeta (UAD Bulletin, Winter 1970). She received her Bachelor of Science degree in library studies in 1970. Soon after, she married Ron of Ogden,



Joyanne and Ronald
UAD Bulletin, Winter 1970

Utah, who had also graduated from Gallaudet. After completing her masters in special education and vocational rehabilitation at CSUN, Northridge, she joined the faculty at the California School for the Deaf where she served as a teacher and a librarian for 30 years. During this period, she joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Outside of Joyanne's job, she was also involved in various professional workshops, training and

lectures. She has taught American Sign Language, American Deaf culture and American Deaf history at colleges and universities for more than 20 years. She also has held many offices in various professional associations. She and Ron are the parents of two children Regy, born in 1978, and Jonalda, born in 1980 (Joyanne Burdett, personal communication, May 5, 2012).

Afton was interested in many things and had many hobbies. She and Kenneth enjoyed camping with family and friends. A significant amount of time was spent each summer camping as a family in the Jackson Hole/Yellowstone area, enthusiastically fishing, boating, and water skiing on Jackson Lake. Extended family members and friends loved to join the Burdett's at their encampment for a few days whenever possible (Ronald & Joyanne Burdett, personal communication, October 27, 2011).



Afton in 1960

While employed at USD, Afton and Kenneth were houseparents for a year and a half. From 1943 to 1945, Afton worked at the Defense Depot in Ogden as a clerk-typist. She also worked as a substitute teacher at USD where Kenneth taught. (A Family Remembered: The Family of Hans Peter Rasmussen and Anna Maria Andersen).

At USD, Afton first worked as girls' counselor. In 1936, she became actively involved with the Girl Scouts organization. She continued in the capacity of Girl Scout leader for some twenty-four years. She was awarded a scholarship to attend an international workshop for the Girl Scouts Division for the Deaf at the Edith Macy Training School in Pleasantville, New York (A Family Remembered: The Family of Hans Peter Rasmussen and Anna Maria Andersen). In 1952, she taught typing at USD and was a girls' physical education instructor for eight years (Christopulos, Utah Eagle, October 1960). She also taught home economics and shorthand (Ronald & Joyanne Burdett, personal communication, October 27, 2011).

Afton was also president and teacher of the YLMIA, and teacher of Sunday School and Relief Society at the Ogden Branch for the Deaf (Christopulos, *The Utah Eagle*, October 1960).

While employed at USD, Afton very much wanted to teach the core subjects of English and history but couldn't qualify to teach them without a bachelor's degree. Thus, while teaching the auxiliary classes at USD and raising two children, she decided to return to college. She enrolled at Weber State College (later renamed Weber State University) where, in 1956, she became the first Deaf student to receive an Associate of Science degree. After completing her degree, she continued her education at Utah State University. She was the first Deaf person at USU to complete a bachelor's degree, which she did with honors. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Elementary Education with an English minor on June 6, 1959. Kenneth supported her throughout this effort by taking over much of the household responsibilities (with the help of their children) and by taking on a printing job at night, which helped pay Afton's tuition (Gallaudet University Alumni Cards, 1866-1959; Tegeder, *The Utah Eagle*, October 1959; A Family Remembered: The Family of Hans Peter Rasmussen and Anna Maria Andersen; Ronald Burdett, personal communication, May 13, 2009).

With her degree in hand, Afton looked forward to the teaching career she had been seeking. However, soon after her graduation, she experienced fatigue and shortness of breath. Seeking help from her doctor, she found that a valve in her heart was defective, possibly as a result of a bout with rheumatic fever in her youth. It was determined that she needed open heart surgery to correct the situation. She was operated that May in Salt Lake City. The operation was successful, and after a few months of recovery, she felt better than she had for years. The following summer, however, just a year after graduation, Afton experienced an irregularity of the heartbeat. Despite medication to correct it, she died on August 23, 1960, at her home in Ogden. She was 45 (A Family Remembered: The Family of Hans Peter Rasmussen and Anna Maria Andersen; Ronald & Joyanne Burdett, personal communication, October 27, 2011). Funeral services were held August 26 at the Larkin Chapel, conducted by President Max W. Woodbury of the Ogden Branch for the Deaf (Christopulos, *The Utah Eagle*, October 1960).

Afton was well loved and had many admirers. In addition, she was a highly respected

teacher, and her accomplishments with her students were forever felt (Christopoulos, Utah Eagle October 1960). Celia May (Laramie) Baldwin, a former USD student, remembers her as one of those teachers who attracted students like bees to honey. When Celia May was in 8th grade, she



Afton and Kenneth, 1954

and her classmates would sneak into Afton's high school classroom after school just to chat. She would pause whatever she was doing and give them her undivided attention. Celia described Afton as having a positive perspective of life in general. She motivated her students to do well in junior high and repeatedly told them that it would not be long before they would begin high school. At that time, there were no Deaf teachers below ninth grade. Being 8th graders, they anticipated being in her typing and physical education classes the following year, especially her Girl Scout division. Celia May added, "Little did we know

that we would never have the opportunity to have that great teacher, as she left us unexpectedly when school began the following fall of 1960" (Celia May Baldwin, personal communication, March 20, 2012).

Despite Afton's life being cut short, her example of persistence and determination in gaining her education was a victory. The Afton Burdett Memorial contribution to the Arthur Wenger Scholarship Fund (later renamed the Ned C. Wheeler Scholarship Foundation for the Deaf) was set up to express the Deaf community's appreciation for her life-long contribution to the field of deaf education (UAD Bulletin, Fall 1960).

Notes

Celia May Baldwin, e-mail message to Jodi B. Kinner, March 20, 2012.

Joyanne Burdett, e-mail message to Jodi B. Kinner, May 5, 2012.

Ronald Burdett, e-mail message to Jodi B. Kinner, May 13, 2009.

Ronald & Joyanne Burdett, e-mail message to Jodi B. Kinner, October 27, 2011.

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