

# Elsie M. Christiansen

Compiled & Written by Jodi B. Kinner  
2012

Elsie M. Christiansen was born in Riverton, Utah on June 24, 1884, to Niels John Christiansen and Ellen Stark (Obituaries, December 25, 1972). She was probably born hearing. The family myth about her deafness is that when Elsie was a child, she was jumping on a bed, playing, and fell off, damaging her eardrums. Her condition was diagnosed as inoperable (Anne Leahy, personal interview with Carol Lenichek, October 27, 2011).

Sources close to Elsie observed that she was very particular about her body and about cleanliness; her quarters were kept very neat. She had a luxurious, full head of hair that came to her waist and which she could coil around her head six times (Anne Leahy, personal interview with Carol Lenichek, October 27, 2011).

In 1906, Elsie enrolled at the Utah School for the Deaf in Ogden, Utah, but only attended for one year. Before enrollment, she probably attended a public school near her home.

During her senior year, in 1907, Elsie joined a girls' basketball team for the school. Her height was an advantage; she was five foot ten. In the same year in 1907, she graduated from USD (Public Documents: State of Utah, Part 2 1907-1908).

Upon graduation, Elsie lived at home in Lents, Oregon (Tenth Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Utah, June 30, 1914). Unlike her two classmates, Mary Woolslayer and Emma Emmertson, who went to the University of Utah, there is nothing in the record to indicate that Elsie also went to college. However, Elsie's family thinks



Elsie M. Christensen  
Donated by Carol Lenichek

that she did go to college (Anne Leahy, personal interview with Carol Lenichek, October 27, 2011).

After Elizabeth DeLong, a Deaf teacher at USD, resigned in 1911 to go into business, she was succeeded by Elsie, a graduate of the high class (Fay, 1911). Elsie became a history and social studies teacher. Perhaps at that time USD did not have a strict requirement that all teachers have a college degree, and a high school diploma was sufficient.

When houseparents became an integral part of the USD, Elsie also became a houseparent at Driggs Hall, a girls' dormitory. Elsie served as an ironing supervisor at the laundry, directing high school girls to iron boys' shirts and pajamas. She was a very strict but fair housemother (Marion West, personal communication, September 30, 2011). Elsie's family remembers her teaching everyone to say "please" and "thank you." She was also a good lipreader (Anne Leahy, personal interview with Carol Lenichek, October 27, 2011).



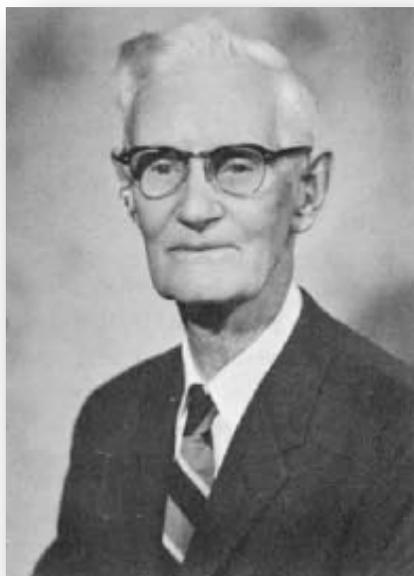
Elsie M. Christiansen in earlier days with some of the girls at the school in Ogden that she loved and cared for. Front row, L to R: Kimiko (Moriyama) Taylor, Irene (Liddle) Bauer, Elaine (Mills) Honey. Middle row, L to R: Mary (Antoinetti) Sanderson, Josie (Feichko) Lutton, Preal Longhurst, Josephine Gertino. Back row, L to R: Marjorie (Hales) Monson, LaVern (Peterson) Burnett, Elsie Christiansen, Lorraine (Whitesides) Welsh, Mildred (Johnson) Lewis.

**The UAD Bulletin, Sumemr 1964**

Elsie served in many capacities at the Ogden Branch for the Deaf (formerly the LDS Branch for the Deaf), the Utah School for the Deaf, and the Utah Association of the Deaf. She was quite capable as a community leader, and she achieved much for Deaf causes.

At the Ogden Branch for the Deaf, Elsie served in many callings and worked closely with Max W. Woodbury, president of the branch. In 1907, while Max was a teacher at the Utah School for the Deaf, he was made assistant superintendent of the Sunday School at the Ogden 4<sup>th</sup> Ward. Elsie was made secretary. In 1911, Max advanced to superintendent of the Sunday School, and Elsie to assistant superintendent. In 1912, Superintendent Woodbury and Assistant Superintendent Christiansen addressed a letter to LDS Church President Joseph F. Smith,

describing the conditions of the Sunday School for the Deaf in the 4<sup>th</sup> Ward and asking that a suitable place of worship be erected solely for the use of the Deaf members.



**Max W. Woodbury**  
**The UAD Bulletin, Winter 1967**

Another letter followed, containing the signature of many of the older Deaf members who wished for a place to worship of their own. Additionally, Max and Elsie made two appointments with the Presidency of the Church in which matters were discussed. The request was granted (Ogden Branch for the Deaf Historical Record Book 1941 – 1945).

After President Smith dedicated the Ogden Branch for the Deaf, it was organized and made into an independent branch of the Ogden Stake on February 14, 1917. Max was sustained as branch president and Elsie as branch clerk and secretary (Ogden Branch for the Deaf Historical Record Book 1941 – 1945; Historical Events and Persons Involved Branch for the Deaf – Compiled February 11, 1992).

Elsie also served as president of the Young Ladies Mutual Improvement Association. She was outstanding in her work as a leader and teacher. She served 13 years as president of the YLMIA (from 1917 to 1930), and 28 years as a class teacher and branch clerk (from 1917 until 1945). As a branch clerk, Elsie had excellent writing skills. She was the first and only Deaf woman who ever served as a branch clerk. Her records were very carefully and neatly kept, and her handwriting was clear. Whenever information was desired, she was



**Ogden Branch for the Deaf**

always able and willing to give it (Ogden Branch for the Deaf Historical Record Book 1941 – 1945).

Outside of the Ogden Branch, Elsie served as second vice-president for the Utah Association of the Deaf from 1920 to 1923. In 1923, she became first vice-president and continued her service until 1926.

In 1920, Elsie served as assistant to Arthur Wenger, who was director of theater for the Utah School for the Deaf. The Park Literary Society at the school presented the most ambitious and successful theatrical production ever attempted by Deaf students. The play “The House of Rimmon” was based on a Biblical theme. It was given once in the school chapel and repeated at East High School in Salt Lake City on request. No admission was charged. The performance won great applause from the audience. The play gave the public a better understanding of Deaf people’s capabilities (White, *The Silent Worker*, June 1920; Wenger, *The Silent Worker*, January 1921; UAD Bulletin, Summer 1964).



**"The House of Rimmon" Play in 1920  
The UAD Bulletin, Summer 1964**

Sources close to Elsie mentioned that she bought a black car in 1934. She couldn't drive, however, so a Deaf man by the name of Ezra Christensen, who had a facial disfigurement, became her driver. (A niece recalls the man's name as "Ethan," but it is believed to be "Ezra Christensen," judging from some photos.) While living in Ogden, Ezra drove her to Salt Lake City to visit her mother on occasion. The two were friends. (Anne Leahy, personal interview with Carol Lenichek, October 27, 2011).

During the mid 1950s, Elsie retired from the Utah School for the Deaf. She lived in Salt Lake City with her sister (probably Olive) and attended the Salt Lake Branch for the Deaf on 700 South and 800 East (Marion West, personal communication, September 30, 2011). The property records indicate that Elsie might have purchased the family home in Rose Park with her sister Olive. It was located at 1149 South 200 West in Salt Lake City. It later was razed to build a highway (Anne Leahy, personal interview with Carol Lenichek, October 27, 2011).

In 1961, Elsie was selected as an interviewer in the Salt Lake area by executive directors of the State of Utah Department of Welfare with the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation on behalf of Utah Association of the Deaf. In fall 1961, she went to each Deaf individual's door that was 55 years old or older to have them complete a questionnaire for the Study of the Aged Deaf of Utah. She was chauffeured by another Deaf woman by the name of Kate Keeley. State, federal and private agencies spent thousands of dollars to study the problems of the aged and aging, but none before had considered the Deaf as a separate group with peculiar problems. UAD asked that this group participate in this pioneer study as well (Sanderson, *UAD Bulletin*, Fall 1961).



**Elsie M. Christensen,  
1907 Utah School for the Deaf Senior  
The Utah Eagle, June 6, 1907**

Elsie never married. According to Elsie's sister, Elsie was very refined. She never dated because she didn't feel she completely belonged in the Deaf world. She didn't feel she could marry a hearing man either because her identity was "half and half" (Anne Leahy, personal interview with Carol Lenicsek, October 27, 2011).

Last, it was a family memory that when visiting Aunt Elsie, she would often serve them fresh, cold milk and peaches (Anne Leahy, personal interview with Carol Lenicsek, October 27, 2011).

At the age of 88, Elsie passed away of natural causes in a nursing home in Salt Lake City on December 23, 1972 (Obituaries, December 25, 1972).

## Notes

Carol Lenichek, interview by Anne Leahy, October 27, 2011.

Marion West, e-mail message to Jodi B. Kinner, September 30, 2011.

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