

## Church Activity Growing Up

Interviewer: Lara Anderson (granddaughter), 3/11/24

John C. Elsey

I think my dad really has quite an amazing story, and I've written it, and it's posted on Family Search under memories of Phil Elsey.

My dad was born in 1904—lived and grew up in a little community in northern Utah—Willard, Utah, kind of a small, mostly a farming area, I think. I'm gonna see dad one of these first days, I hope, and I got a lot of questions to ask him about growing up and what was it like and that sort of thing. But basically, I understand he—they didn't have schooling beyond eighth grade in that place.

So after eighth grade, he stopped going to school. I don't know quite what he did for the next little while, but he was kind of always mechanically-minded and read somewhere or heard that General Electric was hiring all the electrical engineers that they could find. This was in 1925 and dad decided that's what he wanted to do. They would be working in Schenectady, New York. So he went to Salt Lake. I think he boarded with somebody, I'm not quite sure what that arrangement was. He went to West High School when he was 21. It'd be interesting to be a high schooler at 21, but he finished out three years and went to the University of Utah, and there pursued an engineering degree. I think he graduated first in his class in 1932. But 1932 was the middle of the depression, and General Electric was not hiring any engineers at that time. And so, he didn't get a job, and he worked—I'm not quite sure what he did after graduation. He ended up working for the state of Utah as a surveyor, and surveyed a lot of roads. And then, when the war broke out, somehow he became a machinist and worked in the Salt Lake Small Arms Plant from 1942 till the end of the war as a machinist. Then somehow, again I don't know the connection, he ended up at the University of Utah with the experiment station. So that's where he spent the rest of his career, actually. He retired from there.

But church-wise, I don't know exactly what he did when he was younger. But when he married my mother, they married in the Salt Lake Temple, but I don't think they were active at all. They didn't really attend church, and I don't remember, as a boy, going to church. I never went to Primary. We would go to Sunday School occasionally, but under duress. My mother—I remember arguing with my mother about going to Sunday school. She would say, "You need to go," And I'd say, "But you're not going." "Well. . ."

But anyway, when dad was at the University of Utah, he was around some people who were really staunch church members. He knew Henry Eyring, which is the famous scientist. And I remember going up and, I think, we went swimming one time with him. But Dad knew him. He knew George R Hill, who became a General Authority for a while and a number of other people who were good church members. And I think dad's thinking was something like, "These guys are pretty smart. And if they think there's a lot in the church, and they're so devoted, maybe I oughta look into it."

And so, I think he did. I think that was his thinking. But anyway, he looked into the church and became so excited about it. And essentially converted himself when he was about 43, I guess, at the time, And we started going to church. I was 12 at the time, and I remember I was ordained a deacon. And they said, "Well, as a deacon, you'll have to pass the sacrament in Sacrament Meeting." And I said, "What's Sacrament Meeting?" We just didn't know. I didn't know. But we soon learned, and it became a great factor in dad's life. He just could not get enough of the church, and it became the greatest thing in his life.

He always wanted to serve a mission, but his health didn't permit that in the end. But I remember him, we would talk about this and he said, "You know, what if I had gotten that job in Schenectady as an engineer and had moved to Schenectady?" He said, "I may never have been involved in the church. That would be the worst thing to happen." He said, "I feel like I've lost 20 years of my life by not being involved." And so what turned out maybe to be a big disappointment in 1932 when he couldn't get a job, turned out to be a great blessing, which he recognized and was grateful for later in his life.

Lara

So how did your dad's activity influence your mom or affect your mom?

John C. Elsey

Well, mom and dad were—like I said—married in the temple, and I'm not sure about my mother's youth and activity in the church. I remember she grew up on the Avenues, and in the wintertime they'd go sledding there. And on Sunday, there were kids out sledding, and mom's mother wouldn't let her go out and sled and my mother would tell her mother, "Well, all the other kids are out there." And her mother would say, "I am not raising the other children."

So, apparently. . . I just don't know what mom's involvement was. But they did get married in the temple. President David O. McKay married them. But mom encouraged us to go to church, although she didn't and dad didn't until I was about 12. But then she got very involved and very supportive, and we always went. We always had a blessing on the food, family prayer. . . We did not have Family Home Evening, which I wish we would have had. In fact, we asked about that, Ken and I, but we just didn't do it. But mom served faithfully in lots of capacities. She served in the Relief Society as a counselor, and she said, "I can be a counselor—I could never be the president though." But she did serve as president of the Relief Society for several years, and she was a devoted member. Looking forward to talking with her about things.

Lara

Did you see your peers before you started going to church? Were you ever influenced by them?

John C. Elsey

Not really. It was my dad. Mainly. I never went to Seminary, I didn't know what it was. I know some of the other kids would go to seminary—we had release time at South High School, but nobody asked me about going, and I didn't really know what it was, and I didn't go. But I did go at the University of Utah. I made it a point to go to Institute, and I took a class at the institute every quarter I was at the U. And I did graduate from the institute but not from seminary.

Lara

What was the structure like when you were going to church? Was it Sacrament Meeting on Sunday? And then during the week you had other classes?

John C. Elsey

Yeah. They had that. Well, they had a separate Priesthood meeting and Sunday School and Sacrament Meeting on Sunday, and Primary and Relief Society was during the week, and mutual was during the week as well.

Lara

Were you able to attend those meetings with your dad?

John C. Elsey

Yeah. I remember we would go to General Conference. I would go with him and some of the people from his work, and we'd go to the Salt Lake Tabernacle on Saturday for Priesthood Meeting, and anybody could go in those days. But we'd get there two hours early to get in to get a seat. So we sat for two hours on those benches before the meeting. But at least we could go. It's not restricted like it is now.

Lara

Do you remember any point where you were curious or you were wondering why your dad was suddenly making you go to church? Or did you always just feel like it was the right thing to do?

John C. Elsey

That's a good question. I remember thinking about life before we got active in the church and afterward, and it was so much better after we got involved in the church. Not that my parents were bad before. They were very, very good. But life just became much better when we had the gospel and knew something about who we were and what we could expect and who God was and what we have. I remember thinking it was like coming out of darkness into light when we did that. We, like I said, I used to hunt a lot with my dad. We would hunt on Sundays—pheasants. But then after he got involved in the church, we didn't hunt anymore on Sundays. We always made sure we were home and went to church on Sundays. But I do remember, it made a big difference to me personally, and I felt personally much happier and more secure when we were involved in the church, And I got thinking, "I'm happiest when I keep the commandments—when I try and do what's right, I'm happiest." I remember thinking about that, then and now,

Lara

Do you have a favorite Book of Mormon story?

John C. Elsey

Yeah, I'd read it a couple of times (before my mission) because dad was just a scholar. I mean he would read the scriptures, he would read other books, and we would talk about them. He would say, "Look at this!" I remember, "Look at this one! It says here in the Doctrine and Covenants. . ." I think primarily in the 132nd section, I remember when it talked about eternal marriage and having that possibility forever.

I remember one experience I had when I was young that I still remember very vividly. When we moved from Brigham City, I was new in the neighborhood. I was seven years old and played with the kids and wanted to have friends, but it seemed to me that if I had friends they would come, they would break my toys. If I didn't let them play with my toys then they weren't my friends. So I thought, "What am I going to do? If I want to be friends though, they break my toys, but if I don't let them, then they won't be my friends." I was really bothered by that. And I remember I prayed about that. It really is a funny little story for a little seven-year-old kid. And, It really bothered me, but as I prayed about that, I heard in my mind just like someone spoke the words and said, "A true friend won't want to break your toys." And I thought, "That's right! They won't want to do that!" And it just was. . . Well, it was clear as bells that those are the words that were in my mind. And it just brought relief, and I thought I won't worry about it anymore. It was great. I've always remembered that as a kind, tender mercy from the Heavenly Father.