

## **Mission**

Interviewer: Sara Harding (granddaughter), 3/28/24

John C. Elsey

We talked with the bishop and he said, yeah, there was another man in our ward who was married when he left on his mission and he'd just come back. So the bishop said, yeah, that'd be fine.

Sara

Was it more common to go unmarried, to go on a mission when you were unmarried or married?

John C. Elsey

Yeah, so it was much more common. Not normal to be married.

Sara

So cuz I always thought that you guys got married and then you got called to go on a mission. Okay Okay

John C. Elsey

Actually, like I said, we talked to the bishop. He said, that's fine. So we got married in December. And then we took a small apartment in the ward in a basement apartment. And then when I finished up that year and put my papers in, we went to see the stake president, who was Franklin Murdock of Murdock Travel.

And he knew a lot of the brethren. And when we saw him, he said, oh, they're not sending married missionaries anymore. I said, what?

Sara

No!

John C. Elsey

He said, no, they're not. They had too many problems. And they're not sending them.

And I said, well, if I'd known that, I wouldn't have gotten married.

Sara

Yeah.

John C. Elsey

He said, well, we can turn the papers in, but I don't think they're sending, so we'll see.

Sara

How old were you?

John C. Elsey

I was 20.

Sara

You were 20.

John C. Elsey

1956. I was 21. I just turned 21 in May of 1956 and graduated. I had an interview with, in those days, I think

called missionaries, an interview with the General Authority before the call was issued.

It was Richard L. Evans, who was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, that Liana and I went to. We talked and he said, well, we're not sending. I said, like I said, if I'd known that, I wouldn't have gotten married.

If Liana was okay with all that. He says, well, I'll turn it in. We'll see. I did get a call. I went to Virginia, North Carolina. Liana moved back with my parents. All the time I was gone, she was living with my parents.

As I remember, I got in the mission field. There was one elder that came out about three months after me, and he was the last married one that I knew of. Well, that's not totally true, because there was a doctor who had a bunch of kids, but he really wanted to serve a mission.

So they called him on a six -month mission. I didn't know him. I had never met him in the mission field.

Sara

You think you wanted to leave as kids? Take a six -month vacation?

John C. Elsey

I don't know. He only stayed six months and then he went home.

Sara

And how long were you out?

John C. Elsey

I was out two years.

Sara

Was that the standard time to be out was...

John C. Elsey

If you were going to an English -speaking country or maybe a native speaker, it was two years. If you were going foreign and had to learn a language, it was two and a half years, except for Japan, which was three years.

Sara

Really?

John C. Elsey

So they didn't have any language training at that time, so you just went to the mission field and learned the language once you got there.

Sara

Were most missionaries, had they graduated from college like you had?

John C. Elsey

No

Sara

Were they older or was there a minimum age you had to be?

John C. Elsey

Yeah, 19.

Sara

You had to be 19, okay.

John C. Elsey

I think that was the age. It was during the draft, though, during the Korean War, or at least that was just over with ahead of this, but the draft was still in effect. And they were limiting it to, I think, just one elder per ward per year.

I took our quota for that year. I think that was...yeah I think it was like one missionary per ward per year. So I went to Virginia, North Carolina. So...and Liana wrote every day, every single day for two years. I wrote every other day.

We got together after two years.

Sara

Yeah. Okay. So you said you had always wanted to serve a mission from when you were little or because your dad was not active when you were very young, right?

Yeah, Dad got active when I was 12 or so. So we'd been active, and he was really enthusiastic about the gospel, so we were very much into the church from the time I was 12 or 13.

Sara

And then when they, did they mail you your mission call? How did your call come?

Mine, I got it by telephone.

Sara

Oh, really?

John C. Elsey

I think I got a letter in the mail. Okay. But I did get a phone call. And I don't remember why, particularly. But I remember getting a phone call and talking to a woman who told me what my assignment was.

Sara

Okay, how, what was your response when she said you were getting your mission call? Since you were not sure if you were gonna get your mission call.

John C. Elsey

For some reason I thought, I always thought I was getting a call. For some reason, I don't know why I felt that. I was relieved it was not a foreign mission because I didn't want to be gone two and a half years.

Sara

Well, I don't know, you probably would have liked learning a language though, huh?

John C. Elsey

It could have been.

Sara

Yeah.

John C. Elsey

I remember the bishop saying, you know, if you learn a foreign language, you go to a foreign country, you get the advantage of the culture of a different group of people, you learn the language, but after six months, you're lucky if you can carry on that conversation with a two -year -old.

Because if you go to an English -speaking mission, you hit the ground running, you know what you're doing.

Sara

Yeah. That's true.

okay I'm gonna pause for a second.... then what do you want to tell about your mission?

John C. Elsey

Well, I went to Virginia, North Carolina, served two years, a bunch of different companions. Didn't really have a lot of success. Our door approach was interesting. It was the South. The people were really nice.

We only worked in the white areas, not intentionally missing the black areas.

Sara

I didn't even think about that.

John C. Elsey

The priesthood was not available to the blacks at that time, and I don't know, we... we're never instructed not to teach them, but we were told that if we knocked on the door, and a black person came to the door, you just ask if the lady of the house was there, and they'd say no, or these people were, I think in every case that I met, they were in the house, and they were a domestic or helping or something like that, they were not the owners of the house.

Sara

Oh, okay. And where the area, the neighborhoods were all segregated?

John C. Elsey

I guess, but I don't really remember, knowing black areas or white areas, we were generally, we plodded it door to door, it was in the better areas in the city.

Sara

What was your door approach though?

John C. Elsey

The door approach was interesting. The South is Virginia's South, there's a lot of Bible Belt. So our door approach was, good morning, we're ministers, we come to call on you and take a step towards the door. People would say, oh, okay, come in.

And we would get in lots of houses. One morning we were out at 9 o'clock and by noon we've been in just three houses. We've given lessons in all three of those houses. But the people were very friendly and polite, but not a lot of interest, at least that we managed to meet with.

I was surprised on my mission because being the Bible Belt, I thought there'd be a lot of Bible back and forth, talking about, arguing (you don't want to), but talking about different verses in the Bible.

But I found generally that people just didn't think about religion. They just weren't interested.

Sara

So it's more like maybe a cultural thing then I lived thing?

John C. Elsey

I think so, yeah. The social thing to do was to go to church. I remember the first lesson was that we would teach about the Godhead, about God being separate from the Son and the Holy Ghost and having a body of flesh and bones.

And we would teach that. People would say, oh, I believe that. I remember one lady, we said that, and she said, well, I believe that. And I said, oh, on the lesson, it said your church teaches that God doesn't have a body of flesh and bones, that three are in one.

And we put that on the flannel board. And that would be pretty offensive, but that's the way the lesson was. And that's what we did. But when we talk about the Father and the Son being separate, God have a body, we're made in His image and likeness, people will say, oh, I believe that.

And I said, I remember one lady, I said, well, I don't want to tell you what your church teaches, but why don't you ask your minister about what they feel? And we went back later and she said, you were right.

We don't believe that. I don't know that we got very far beyond that.

Sara

Yeah. What was most people's hang up then? Or with the church? Was it that it was too much of a lifestyle commitment? Or...

John C. Elsey

They just weren't interested in religion. They didn't think about it. We were out tracking one time with other elders, and we were each split up, and then we got back to the car. We had a car the whole time.

We got back to the car, and then this other elder said, we've found the answers. And we walked down this door, this one man said, ah, religion. They said, "I pay my minister \$75 a year. He takes care of it for me. I don't want to be bothered. I don't want to talk about it."

That was so typical that people just didn't think about religion. They hadn't read the Bible a lot, at least they hadn't thought about a lot of it. That was the one big takeaway from my mission.

I thought we'd be doing a lot of discussions in the Bible, but it was not because people just didn't think about it, didn't want to talk about it.

Sara

Yeah. Did you have anyone that you did teach who became a member of the church?

John C. Elsey

Not really, there was one woman, older woman, that I taught and baptized. There were some children that we taught and baptized. But I spent a long time in the office. I was the mission secretary.

Sara

Mmm.

John C. Elsey

And I spent a lot of time there when I was working at the temple about too long ago, one of the missionaries, one of the brothers that came in said, you're John Elsey, you met my train when I came into the mission field.

Sara

Oh, cool.

John C. Elsey

And so he remembered me, but I had a hard time remembering him. But he remembered me as the one who met the train and took the new elders back to the mission home. And did some orientation and whatnot.

Sara

Yeah.

John C. Elsey

Oh, that's awesome.

Sara

Did you have a favorite companion that you had?

John C. Elsey

Yeah, I did. I had some good companions, several. Some that were not so good. Well, they were okay. Well, one of them wanted to go home. He was in real pain. But, yeah, I did have a couple.

Sara

Do you have any good, not good, but do you have any, like, funny mission stories or experiences or...

John C. Elsey

Well, one time I remember, I was with Vern Curtis, who was one of my favorites. He became a regional rep, I think, or mission president later. But we had this old Pontiac, I think it was. The missionaries had cars, and we owned them ourselves.

We bought the cars, and so they're old clunkers for the most part.

Sara

Wait, like you guys spent your money to buy the cars?

John C. Elsey

Yes. We owned the car.

Sara

Oh. OK.

John C. Elsey

So, but I bought a Ford, a 53 Ford, I think I paid \$700 or \$800, I can't remember, \$500 for it was all, but not a lot, but anyway, Vern had this old Pontiac and we were, it was a funeral, and we were the, we'd put it on as the ministers, so we were the lead car in the funeral procession, and the cemetery was way out in the country, and they said, be careful, you don't make, make sure you don't miss the turnoffs, and so we had lead car, 20 cars

behind us, we missed the turnoffs, had to go back.

Another time in that same area, Jacksonville, North Carolina, we, it was the 4th of January or something like that, early in January, and we were tracting, and the policeman, or somebody reported us to the police, and the police came out, and they were nice, they wanted us to go to the police station though, which we did, and they fingerprinted us.

Sara

Why?

John C. Elsey

I don't know. We didn't enjoy it.

Sara

You looked like you were up to mischief?

John C. Elsey

I guess. But, you know, they didn't arrest us or say any bad. And I remember looking over on the police register, and there was an entry that said something like "stills closed today", where they distill alcohol and they, moonshine.

And it said "stills closed today". It was like seven or eight. There was more stills that had been closed than the days of that year. It was like the 4th of January and there were seven or eight stills that had been closed.

That was kind of funny.

Sara

That is funny. Um, okay, so you guys bought your own car. What other things like have changed from when you were a missionary to like how missionaries serve now?

John C. Elsey

Well, when we went, we had to wear hats.

Sara

You had to wear a hat? Really?

John C. Elsey

We wore hats. Yeah. I could not, I have a large head. And it's hard to find one that fits. So when I went out, I did not have a hat when I left Salt Lake.

When I got to, off the train in Roanoke, Virginia, the mission secretary met us, and all the other elders had hats. But I didn't. So he took me hat hunting. We must have gone to five or ten stores before we found one that I could kind of stretch into place.

So we had hats. Anytime we left the apartment, we had to wear our coat and coat and tie. Okay. So in the summertime, in a hot summer day, you were in a coat and tie, knocking on a door with a white siding, sun coming off and hitting your face, sweat dripping, and you're knocking and talking at the doors.

That was... not very fun

Sara

Yeah, not very fun.

Mavis L. Elsey  
Tell them about the eggs

John C. Elsey  
The eggs?

Mavis L. Elsey  
Yes, the scrambled eggs- barely cooked.

John C. Elsey  
Oh. Yeah, okay. One of the assignments I had was another elder and I were asked by the mission president to visit the people in the isolated areas of the mission, like the Hill Country of Virginia and North Carolina, and also on the coast.

There were a lot of people were isolated, and we left for two months, we were gone. Generally, we were just gone trying to find the people in the area we had a list, and we just stayed with the people.

They generally put us up. I think we only spent two nights in a motel in the 60 days, but these people would put us up, and we had beds. In those days, we slept in a double bed, two elders. Even in our apartments, we had just a double bed, but I understand they don't do that at all.

Sara  
Probably not, no.

John C. Elsey  
I think they must insist on twin beds, but anyway, people were good. They gave us the best that they had, but often, it was the same thing, which was eggs barely fried, grits, some milk, and biscuits.

I remember one time, I had 10 straight meals, breakfast, lunch, and dinner, of eggs, grits, biscuits, and milk. I had a hard time after that handling fried eggs.

Sara  
ever again.

John C. Elsey  
Well, it took a long time before I really wanted a fried egg again.

Sara  
That's pretty funny, actually. What were the biggest things that you learned from your mission? What do you think strengthened your testimony the most?

John C. Elsey  
The thing I learned was that the gospel was a way to live. It provides happiness, joy, satisfaction. And I thought, nobody can serve a mission and never leave the church. Unfortunately, that's not true.

But I came back. I had a testimony before. I mean I wanted to go, even though I could not have, because I was married and had an excuse. But I really wanted to go. I wanted the experience of a mission, and I was just totally convinced that the church was true.



I wanted my life in the church.

Sara

That's cool. Do you feel like that sacrifice of serving your mission how has that how did that change your life and bless your life?

John C. Elsey

Well, you know, I've always thought, people talk about sacrifices for the church, sacrifice of a mission, sacrifice, paying tithe. I've never regarded that as a sacrifice. I really thought of it just as a better choice, a better thing to do.

I mean, what better way than to serve a mission or to pay tithing or be chaste, to keep the word of wisdom? I mean, that's no sacrifice at all, that's a blessing and a way to be. I guess I never felt there was a sacrifice with the Gospel, just a better way to live, better opportunity, better use of time.