



SNOWFLAKE GIRL

Louise Larson Comish

I grew up in Snowflake, which lies in desert country in Arizona, altitude 5600 feet. Alof Larson and May Hunt, my parents, were among the early arrivals to this pioneer settlement, named for Erastus Snow and William J. Flake who in 1878 exchanged 500 head of cattle for 300 acres of land and proceeded to lay out the town. The gardens and farm lands were irrigated by the clear waters of Silver Creek. By the turn of the century, when this story begins, Snowflake had grown to a population of 700. Alof and May, who had married in 1881, now had a family of seven sons and two daughters. I was one of the youngest.

I was a tow headed, barefoot youngster dressed in a plain little dress of heavy shirting and a pair of bloomers, slipping out of the blazing summer sunshine into the rustling green world of corn, moving down the row, careful that an outstretched corn leaf did not saw across my face. I was looking at the fat ears, and when I found one made extra fat by a protuberance on its side, I knew I had found a small sucker ear and carefully removed it.

Seated on the damp sand in the bottom of the furrow, I peeled off the corn husks until the newly formed little ear lay unveiled in my hand, trailing its pale green silk in a sheen of beauty. This was my corn doll. I made a bed of the husks in a choice spot among the corn stalks and decorated this little bower with Michaelmas daisies. But if I left the doll in its nest overnight and came the next day, there was almost always disappointment, for the little fairy doll would be withered and dry.

Another doll was an overgrown crook neck summer squash whose eyes, nose and mouth I had outlined by pushing straight pins into beaded lines. This doll wore a long baby dress that had seen better days, and was wrapped in a square of muslin, a flour sack that had been ripped open and the advertisement washed off. This golden squash doll cuddled in my arms; I had picked it for its shape.

Another doll was a bundle of stiff, dry rattling weeds, tied with a length of binder twine I had found in the straw stack back of the corral. I pulled the weeds up from the ground, shook the dirt from the white threadlike roots, packed the plants close together and tied them tightly. The roots made a nice looking head of hair. The branches made a bushy skirt so stiff the doll could stand alone. It had no face: that was left to the imagination.

This doll was a big sister to the vegetable baby in swaddling clothes. I played with them down by the gooseberry bushes in a cleared place outlined with stones, or else I kept house in the corn bin when it was empty.

We also made dolls of the large white trumpet blossoms of the Jimson weed which we found along the banks of the wash and among the sand dunes. Fitting several together, one inside the other, made a ruffled skirt that would stand alone. We arranged our graceful white dolls, which stood eight inches tall, on a smooth sandy place like fancy ladies at a ball. Little straight sticks pushed into the sand were their partners.

When I was nine years old, I went on a trip with the folks to the new settlement of Hunt. Father, mother, Evan, Wayne and I were in the wagon. The first day we got as far as Concho Flat and here we camped. So far as I could see there was not a drop of water in this wide empty place, but father knew that down in the bottom of a deep gully there was a spot called "the seeps." I went with him when he took the team down to drink. We found a large, heavy wooden packing box turned upside down in the gully. Pa removed the box, revealing a pool of clear water, cool and sweet. First we each had a big drink from the cup we had with us. How good it tasted! Then we filled two buckets to take back to camp. Now the horses drank. They souped up the greater part of what remained of the water, and then we replaced the box cover. By morning there would be a fresh supply and all evidence of our having disturbed the spot would have disappeared.

The next day we arrived at Hunt and received a warm welcome from Aunt Ida Udall and her family. The youngsters in this settlement had devised a game fashioned after the life of their elders. This was cattle country, so the children played with flocks and herds. Some of their toy livestock were in corrals neatly fenced with little cedar twigs. Some were scattered out on the plain, which was a smooth stretch of sand in the bottom of a small draw. All the stock was white. Each little animal was the vertebra from some deceased calf, sheep, or other animal whose skeleton had been picked by vultures, cleaned by ants and bleached by sunshine. I recall with what amazement I viewed this spread.

At home we played many games, but One-Ol'-Cat was our favorite ball game. A battered old tin pan hung on a high board fence at a height where a well pitched ball would bring forth a loud clang from the pan. This simple gong did away with the catcher and umpire. If the ball was thrown hard, it would bounce off the fence and back to the pitcher. If the pitched ball sounded the gong, it meant a strike. Only one base was used. The batter, on a hit, ran to base and back, announcing his arrival at home base by banging the pan with the bat. If the pitcher could get the ball and throw it to the pan ahead of the runner, the sound of the gong announced that the runner was out.

The Larsons, in the winter, gathered of an evening around the fire-place and mother read aloud to us. Her fingers kept her steel knitting needles clicking even while she read. The book or magazine was propped up where the light from the coal oil lamp fell on the page. A child stood ready to turn a leaf once mother indicated she had read it. Sometimes she would say, "I'll have to stop while I turn the heel of the sock." Or she might say,

"I'll have to stop while I finish the toe, because I will have to count the stitches." This was a good time to ask questions, parch some corn, or replenish the fire.

Sometimes we worked on carpet rags. All wornout clothing had been washed and put into the ragbag, and when time permitted it was torn into inch-wide strips. Small hands could do the tearing, once mother had ripped up a garment and clipped it along the edge to the desired width. We earned five cents for every ball weighing one pound, but it took time to sew enough rags together to create a ball six inches in diameter. The rule for color in sewing rags was that every third rag must be black or some other dark color. Some people could afford to hire their rags sewed by the ladies of the Relief Society, who always kept their fingers busy sewing while they listened to the lesson at their meeting each Thursday afternoon.

On the walls of our front room were enlarged likenesses of beloved ancestors. Lois Pratt Hunt, my maternal grandmother, held the place of honor. Lace curtains, freshly ironed, crisp and stiff, hung at the two front windows. In front of the window near the fireplace stood the sewing machine. It was here, on the leaf of the machine, that mother did much of the writing in the extensive journal that occupied her spare moments, and recorded a literal history of life as lived in our little town.

The kitchen was attached to the front room. Against the west wall of the kitchen stood the big flour bin which held several hundred pounds of flour. A third of the top was flat, the rest was a lid that shut down at an angle. Fitted under the flat top was a shelf on which mother kept her flour sifter, rolling pin, breadboard and biscuit pan. These implements saw frequent use, for almost always we had buttermilk biscuits for breakfast.

In front of the cupboard stood the table. All meals were eaten here. Mother sat at the end of the table nearest the stove, father beside her, then came the big boys. The small children slid onto a bench between the table and the north wall.

The kitchen was not lined, so a 2 x 4 extended along the wall just above our heads. On this plank a small shelf was attached to hold the squat coal oil (kerosene) lamp that provided light on dark days and evenings. Midway in the north wall was a one-sash window, companion to the one by the stove. Sunny days were the rule in this land of little rain, so our kitchen wasn't dark. Besides, there was a screened door at each end to admit both light and air.

Between the table and the stove stood the water bench. It was a low one that held two water buckets, a wash basin and a soap dish. These buckets were filled at the well, not far from the kitchen door.* Never did we have running water in our home. On a narrow shelf above the bench was kept the dipper we drank from. After using it, one put it back on the shelf, turned down, so no water stood in it to leave a lime deposit. If one could not drink all the water taken in the dipper, that left over was poured into the wash basin, not back into the bucket.

*Mother voiced one fear of the well. She was afraid that some morning when not fully awake, she might be drawing water and unthinkingly yawn, and her highly prized dentures, thus loosened, would fall into the depths of the well!

When I was half past three years old, father bought a fine range for the kitchen, paying \$71 for it. "That seems an enormous price!" Mother notes in her journal. This was a big event in our household. It was a Home Comfort, and attached to the left side was a copper tank that held more than five gallons of water. This was considered a wealth of hot water for family baths and other uses. The oven door let down instead of swinging open. This made a place to sit and warm one's back, a place to rest cold feet, a place to put pans of bread to rise.

It took a lot of bread to feed the Larsons. Mother baked several times a week, large fat loaves of salt rising bread. The big pan she used held six loaves. It was good bread and was especially tasty in milk. Our usual evening meal was a bowl of bread and milk. Salt rising bread spread with butter and topped with honey or sorghum made mighty good eating, and still does in my opinion. The honey was taken from our own bees and father made the sorghum. The butter was also a home product. Many homes had butter only occasionally. We were never without it.

As the seasons came and went, the interior of the kitchen grew more dingy. Mother decided that the three frame walls should be papered. The solid log wall of the original cabin always received a whitewash every time the front room did. Regular wallpaper was out of the question, because of cost and unavailability. Hard cash was not easy to come by. Legal tender of that sort was hoarded to pay taxes. Most transactions were an exchange of eggs, corn, beans and hay for supplies we did not raise ourselves.

What would we use for paper? Fresh issues of the *Deseret News!* This semi-weekly publication was put out by the Mormon Church in Salt Lake City. It was read by the faithful to keep in touch with the world and local events as well as to receive the latest instructions from headquarters.

I was designated the paper hanger, though not more than a child. It seems to me that my sister Ellen would have nothing to do with the undertaking, since it outraged her sense of the fitness of things.

Conscientiously I cut out, fitted and pasted, using plain flour and water for paste. Clean pieces of newspaper, fitted neatly between and over 2 x 4's did indeed give the kitchen a fresh appearance.

This redecorating did more than freshen up the place. Now there was something to catch the eye of a mooning youngster, chewing food at mealtime, or warming shins by the stove. Stray bits of information were always being read aloud from the wall.

On winter evenings when night closed in early and we children sat around the table after supper, we often made a game of finding words on the wall. Whenever I lounged against the flour bin, this verse was directly before my eyes:

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

I read it over and over. Each time it sounded better. It gave me a feeling of having struck something of real value. I read it aloud to mother and told her I liked it.

Mother was a well read woman. This was her response as I remember it: "Yes, Melissa, that is real nice. It was written by one of the greatest

writers that ever lived, William Shakespeare. When you get further in school you will learn about this man and the plays he wrote.”

Each time I have read *Hamlet* since, Polonius’ speech calls to my mind a gangling, barelegged youngster reading lines from a newspaper pasted on a kitchen wall.

Every week there was the washing and the ironing. Rain water would have even a big help to mother, for the water from our well was heavily impregnated with lime, a fact not hinted at in its sparkling clearness. One funster said of it, “This water is so hard it rattles when poured into a glass.” To cut this hardness and make the water more effective as a cleaning agent, the top was cut from the can of lye and the wrapper removed, then mother just swished the can around in the wash boiler until the water felt slick. This was enough to cause a precipitation of the lime. It would rise to the top as the water got hot, forming a grey scum a half-inch thick. This was carefully skimmed off with a dipper before soap cut into bits was added to make suds.

So long as the weather permitted, the washing was done in the yard under the sweet apple tree. On a bench stood the two wooden tubs, one to suds in, one to rinse in. When we children came home for lunch on Wednesday, if school was in session, we would put water from the well in the two tubs and fill the wash boiler on the old stove. Sunshine would take the chill off the water in the tubs and a fire in the stove would heat the boiler. Mother would have the washing under way by the time our classes for the afternoon were over and we came home to help.

Mother washed on Wednesday and ironed on Friday. She ironed on a pad made from an old blue army blanket folded four times and covered with an old sheet. This she spread on the kitchen table. She used three sad irons that she handled with a thick pad, like a pot holder, to keep her hand from being blistered by the heat. The irons were kept hot in a sort of tray that fitted down close to the fire when the front lids were removed from the kitchen stove.

She changed irons often, which meant frequent trips between table and stove and also meant keeping a steady fire going. We tested the iron’s heat with a wet finger. A sharp sizz meant a hot iron.

When Ellen and I were old enough to iron, three more irons were acquired. They had detachable wooden handles that required no pad. We also got an ironing board. When we returned from school on Friday, mother would be ironing and then we could take over and finish the job.

Mother always kept Thursday free for Relief Society meeting which convened at two p.m. the year around. She served as President of the Snowflake Relief Society for sixteen years, having received her appointment when I was a baby.

Most of the older children did errands to help Mother with her duties in this capacity and in due time I helped her too. One of my earliest recollections is of being in a Relief Society meeting in the little brick building that abounded with needles and thread, thimbles, quilting frames, carpet rags and seats with cushions on them. The Stake President, Sister West, was there with her young son. We two youngsters sat on the floor behind our

mothers' chairs. We tried to sew carpet rags as everyone else was doing. I could thread the needle but I could not make a knot on the end of my thread. The lad, being somewhat older, proceeded to show me how to wrap the thread around the end of a finger, roll it with the thumb and draw it to a knot. He made a masterful, though dingy, knot. And I had learned how.

Going to ring the bell to remind the dear women that it was Relief Society day was a big assignment for a little girl, and it was spooky. One went into the big church house to do it. On a weekday it seemed especially large, empty and full of echoes. I remember that Aunt Sarah's Frances went with me one time for moral support. It took our combined strength to open the large door. Then we crept up the stairs to the gallery where the bell rope hung. The first few swings of the clapper were jerky, but then we got the rhythm of it. As the deep-toned dong-ding-dong sounded, we were proud that we were able to send the summons.

As a small child I was eager to learn to read. I could pick out words in the newspaper while still young enough to enjoy sitting on mother's lap, for I recall how she held up the *Deseret News* so I could point out to her the words I knew.

I learned my letters before I entered school. They are not imprinted on my mind as a line of perfectly written capitals and small letters as one sees them at the top of the front blackboard in a schoolroom. Instead, my mind pictures them as they appeared on a child's set of blocks. The first sixteen letters are in rows of four each, the remaining ones straggling off in an odd way, since they were on the reverse side of the blocks and not in order.

A B C D
E F G H
I J K L
M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z &

Starting to school was a big occasion, not only because I was eligible to go with the older children in answer to the deep toned bell, but because there was a change in centuries! Even the youngsters talked about how it was going to be hard to remember to write 1900 instead of 1899.

When the first day of school arrived in the fall, it was sunny and warm. I was wearing shoes and stockings in honor of the occasion. My blond hair was braided so tight I could hardly grin.

Always I had worn bobbed hair, but Mother had promised that I could have braids when I went to school. We had been working at it during the summer. It was too short to do much with, but by braiding a bit of store string into the front braids, they could be made to reach to the back two. These in turn were so short they stuck out like little thumbs on either side of my head. Nonetheless, I had braids and I was happy.

Ellen was piloting me to school, not that I didn't know the way, but I had always hidden behind her in new situations. Aunt Sarah's Ita joined us and Aunt Belle's Charles came across the street to walk with us. We met other children as we made our way to the schoolhouse near the Church.

This rustic building in which school was held was known as the Old Relief Society Hall. It was built in 1881, three years after the founding of

Snowflake, with funds raised by the town women. In addition to being their meeting house, it was a recreation hall, a frame addition having been built onto it to serve as a stage for local dramatics. Various Church auxiliary organizations also convened here. In 1889 the Snowflake Stake Academy came into existence and the ladies of the Relief Society gave this building to the Stake to house the classes in higher learning. Later, when the Academy had a building of its own, the primary grades used this log house. And this is where I started school. As beginners, my class must have been one of the last to start school in this rather primitive structure. It was torn down soon after 1900 to make way for the Social Hall that was erected on this site.

In due course of time I passed through the various grades. I looked forward with happy anticipation to entering high school. The large building erected by the Church to house the Snowflake Stake Academy stood up on the hill on the street running south from the Larson home, a walk of three blocks. With its three stories, it looked imposing. The upper windows offered a commanding view of the town and its surroundings.

One local girl entered the freshman class with me, but I did not lack for other girl associates for this was a Stake school and students from all the surrounding towns attended it. Lydia Savage from Woodruff, Ada Peterson from Pinedale and I made a happy trio.

I went to Woodruff, I recall, for a little visit with Lydia, and was made to feel right at home by her folks. We girls created ourselves new print dresses cut by the popular princess pattern. Ruth Savage, an older sister, helped us fit them. Mine was blue and I was much pleased with it. We put to practical use the lessons learned in our class in freshman sewing.

The water used in the homes in Woodruff was dipped from the irrigation ditch, its source the Little Colorado River. A flash flood caused it to be red with silt. To settle it, a little milk was poured into a bucketful of water. This was the first time I had seen this done. The result was not sparkling water, but when poured into a glass it was a bit foggy instead of red.

In September 1910 my second year of high school work started off with very high hopes. During the summer, a new addition was completed to the Academy building. This provided a large assembly room, a library and an additional classroom. I could hardly wait to avail myself of the opportunities offered. I had never used a library of any kind.

My pals from the nearby towns returned. More new fields of study opened to me — geometry, general history, rhetoric and more sewing and cooking. I was very happy. Then tragedy struck! The Academy building burned!

We had used it with the new facilities less than two months. I stood in the street by our house in the chill of early morning and watched the flames roaring across the roof of the beloved school. It seemed that all my hope for the future was going up in smoke, this 24th day of October at 3:30 a.m. There was no water up on that hill. There was no fire fighting equipment in the town. Nothing could be done to save the building.

Back in my bed I shook with nervous chill and cold dry sobs, while this wail ran through my mind: "What will we do? What will we do?"

I had not taken into account the resourcefulness of the pioneer leaders of the community. They had faced trying times before. Undaunted they

attacked this problem. Most everything was saved from the lower floors by the fast work of eager helpers.

Over the weekend, workers took the desks, books, equipment, etc. down to the Church and the large Social Hall, and classrooms were set up in those two buildings. Sewing machines went to the Relief Society hall, cooking equipment to a nearby residence. The science laboratory and woodworking shop were housed in the dance hall above Flake's Store.

Work began immediately on a new school building. A few rooms in the basement of this were finished so that some classes could use them by my senior year, but I never attended school in the completed building made of rich-colored hewn stone that now graces Academy Hill.

To me my sophomore year was a busy, happy, profitable one. Perhaps the outstanding experience I had was playing the part of an Irish washer-woman in the school play, entitled "The Merry Cobbler," a comedy, directed by a member of the faculty.

Standing in the wings on opening night, waiting for my cue, I was a plumpish middle-aged female with a touseled mop of stiff red hair. I was plenty scared, but with a pillow fore and aft to round out my spare frame, no agitation was visible. I was to enter and bump into the cobbler. This I did, but with more vigor than the script called for. It was a collision. I sat down hard. The audience roared. I stood up. The roar grew louder. The back of my dress had caught under my rear pillow. The laughter finally died down and we got on with the play. It was so well received that the director decided to put it on the stage in Winslow. I found the following account in Mother's journal:

May 1, 1911. J. G. Barrett took the play, *The Merry Cobbler* down the country. Evan, Louise, Jennie, Thalia, Lafayette and Ethel of the cousins were in it. Also members of the band went. Had a May Day dinner on the rocks this side of Holbrook. Went to Winslow on the train. Had the time of our lives, stayed at a big hotel.

The last two sentences are no overstatement. Never had I ridden on a train. Never before had I stayed in a hotel.

The fall of 1911 I began what I thought would be my last year in high school, for at that time the Snowflake Stake Academy was a three-year school. The authorities realized that more schooling should be provided and a movement for a fourth year of instruction was being agitated.

It was in the fall of 1911 that Newel H. Comish joined the staff of the Academy. I registered for his class in English Literature. He was a hard task master. You came to his class prepared or you got no grade worth recording. My grades were good. I enjoyed school work and put in a lot of time with my books. But I managed to have time to be president of my class, teach the junior girls in the Young Ladies Mutual Improvement Association, take part in the school play, go stepping with young galahads, and even have a few dates with the new teacher.

In the fall of 1912 a fourth year of high school work was offered at the Academy. Students were urged to register for this additional training. A fee of \$25 was asked to help defray expenses. The response was a bit disappointing, only six students signed up for the work: Iris Flake, Nellie Flake,

Lydia Savage, Ernest Shumway, Albert Smith, Louise Larson. Lydia left school to be married before the end of the school year.

I worked at my books conscientiously, though romance was playing a rather big role in my life. Newel Comish was a regular caller at the Larson home.

My graduation from high school was somewhat overshadowed by my coming marriage. I will give you mother's report of it:

1913. April 23. Louise's class graduated at night, her speech, as president, was *The Mormon Ideal*, our view in regard to education. She, Ernest Shumway and Albert Smith were the four year high school graduates. Iris and Nellie Flake finished in Domestic Art and Science.

Mr. Comish sent to Albuquerque for a bouquet of white roses for the Commencement exercises and red carnations for the evening.

She remodeled her last year's graduating dress as she is preparing wedding garments and did not care to use them beforehand.

Another entry in mother's journal:

1913. May 3. Louise left her home and parents to become the wife of Newel H. Comish and live way off in Idaho. The thought I won't have her any more seems terrible, but that seems to be the way of the world. They went in the mail auto. It was a cold, windy day.

We were married in the Salt Lake Temple May 8 and went immediately to Franklin, Idaho, where we lived on the Comish family farm during the summer. The first letter that I wrote home from Idaho was found among mother's papers at the time of her death in 1945:

Franklin, Idaho
May 11, 1913

Dear Ones at Home,

I am now in this beautiful land of the north where cool breezes blow, clear streamlets flow, and all nature is smiling and green. This is indeed a garden spot, well deserving of the name, Cache Valley. Trees; trees, everywhere and grass all over; why the streets here are covered with a thicker carpet of grass than the lawns of Snowflake can boast. Everything is in full blast and garden stuff will soon be on.

We left Salt Lake City at 4:05 p.m. Saturday. Br. Bond was at the station and saw us off. He was on his way home. Mr. Jack Welch (one of Mr. C's classmates) and his girl was on the train, also President Widtsoe of the A.C. I was made acquainted, and felt highly honored. The President asked us to come to Logan and eat with him. (a great thing!)

Arriving here near nine o'clock we were greeted with a generous shower of rice coming from the Comish fraternity. There was his sister Jennie, sisters-in-law Margaret and Bertha, niece, Reata and brothers Joseph, George, Myron, William and brother-in-law Will Robinson.

They were certainly a jolly bunch, but were somewhat surprised at my size, because judging from my picture and Mr. Comish always writing of me as his "little girl," they expected someone very young and small. But they soon got over their surprise, disappointment or pleasure or whatever it was and escorted us with all due honor

to his Mother's home. I was certainly happily surprised in her, because she had been pictured to me as an old lady crippled up with rheumatism. She is well and spry as can be, hasn't any grey hair and very few wrinkles. Her eyes are beautiful brown. She is nice and pleasant and being much like Mother in build, I felt right at home. We had a very jolly party with a nice lunch which ended about 12 with the presentation of a bundle containing a pair of knitted baby shoes, a didy, paper of small safety pins and shirt. It was killing!

I didn't feel a bit bashful among those many strange boys. I knew they were my brothers and in order to get the most out of them, it was up to me to become acquainted. My success was remarkable. They treated me so nice.

Today is Sunday so we went to church. The church house far surpasses ours in everything but size, I believe, and the difference there is small. Mr. Comish gave them a fine talk, occupying all the time. Jennie and Will, also Margaret and George were here to supper, it was just like Sunday night meals at home. I felt like I was at home because they treated me so nice.

Mr. Comish is certainly royal, he treats me like a princess and I am as happy as a king. If ever there was a pair well mated, we consider ourselves as one. We thoroughly understand one another and our greatest delight comes from serving one another. I don't think I will be homesick at all. There is plenty of work, good friends, and bright prospects. And I consider that all one needs to make for happiness.

Now dear mother don't worry about me because these folks treat me just fine and I am delighted with my many brothers, sisters and mother.

You and the boys and all write me good cheery letters and I will be content. My cup of joy will then be full.

Well goodby and much love to you and best wishes to inquiring friends. Will send you a picture some time next week if they prove satisfactory. Happy summer to you,

Yours with love,
Mrs. N. H. Comish
Franklin, Idaho

When the summer of 1914 was over, we went by train to the middle-west where my husband became a graduate student at the University of Chicago. We lived in a room on the fourth floor of a walk-up, a room with one window and a two-burner gas plate. Although the other renters were very kind to us and I was curious about city life and eager to learn. Chicago was teeming with people, just too, too many people, and I used to walk in Jackson Park trying to find solitude. It was a far cry from the great open spaces of Arizona. But that is another story, not yet written.