

THE RELIEF SOCIETY IS NOT ONLY TO RELIEVE THE POOR, BUT TO SAVE SOULS.

Joseph Smith

BELLE SPAFFORD: A SKETCH

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In 1945, while Belle Spafford was serving as a counselor in the general Relief Society presidency, a rumor circulated that Church auxiliaries would be reorganized and that future presidents would serve a specified term of five years. When Sister Spafford was called into the office of President J. Reuben Clark, Jr., she expected to be released. To her surprise she was called to be the new president. Recalling the rumor, she asked if she could expect to serve a five-year term. President Clark looked down at her over the rims of his eyeglasses and replied: "You may not last that long, Sister."

"Last" she has. Under Presidents Heber J. Grant, George Albert Smith, David O. McKay, and Joseph Fielding Smith, she has served twenty-six years, longer than any president before her. Yet as an individual she is not well known in the Church. Women who have read Emma Rae McKay's advice on rearing children or experimented with Jessie Evans Smith's 90-minute bread would find it difficult to name anything specific about Sister Spafford. When in the summer of 1968 I was asked to do a research paper on her, I knew little more about her than her name. I soon discovered that it was easier to document her achievements as an administrator than compose a personal portrait. I read back volumes of the *Relief Society Magazine*, interviewed general board members and one general authority, and spoke with Sister Spafford and her son Earl. She was understandably reluctant to talk about herself; those I interviewed were very protective of her privacy, yet some glimpses of her as a woman emerged.

She was born Belle Smith, 8 October 1895, in Salt Lake City, months after the death of her father. She graduated from Latter-day Saints High School and from the two-year Normal School at the University of Utah in 1914. For the next seven years she taught school in Salt Lake City and Provo and for awhile was grade supervisor at Brigham Young University Training School. In 1921 she married Willis Earl Spafford, a young insurance salesman from a prominent Provo family.

Although she quit work to raise her two children, she has in many ways remained a teacher. Her son Earl tells of receiving one of his own letters by return mail with a dangling participle marked in red by his mother. As a grandmother she holds "Scholar Night" two evenings each week. One at a time her grandchildren are invited to eat dinner with her and spend some hours reading, preparing a talk, or studying some subject of their choice.

Her sessions with the general board, as with her grandchildren, are



sparked with humor. Hulda Parker Young tells how pressures and problems lift as Sister Spafford begins board meetings with the words: "I had the most interesting experience yesterday —." She is known for her quick wit and sense of humor. At a women's club luncheon she began her address only to have loud pop music ring through the inter-com. No one seemed to know where to turn it off. When it stopped she began again. So did the music. When this happened the third time, there was such a look of distress on the face of the conducting officer that Sister Spafford said: "Don't let this trouble you. I'm used to giving musical readings; many people prefer them, so I will just go on."

She is also known for her stories, many of which feature her Scotch grandmother, a woman who, though devoted to the Church, drank a cup of tea with her bowl of oats each morning of her life until at the age of eighty she became "converted" to the Word of Wisdom.

As a young woman, Belle Spafford had to be “converted” to Relief Society. When in 1926 she moved from Provo to Salt Lake City, she began to look for something to enrich her home duties and was pleased to be asked to join a literary club. When the visiting teachers called with an invitation to Relief Society, she told them she preferred to join the club as it seemed to have much to offer. Although she had always been active in the church, she was not interested in Relief Society; like many young women of the time, she considered it an “old women’s organization.” When one of the teachers explained in detail the program, she remembered the devotion of her own mother to the Society and accepted the offer of her visitors to call for her the following Tuesday. She was soon called to leadership positions in Belvedere Ward and Grant Stake and in 1935 was appointed to the general board.

In nearly forty years of service she has been involved in every aspect of the work, from doing research for *A Centenary Of Relief Society* to organizing an international chorus of Singing Mothers. In a telephone interview, Dr. Rex Skidmore shared with me his insight into a little known aspect of her responsibilities. As director of the society’s social service and child welfare agencies in Utah, Arizona, Nevada, and Idaho, she has been determined to guarantee a professionally trained staff. For more than twenty years she has worked with the Department of Social Work at the University of Utah, providing staff and space for the training of students. In 1957, she was awarded Honorary Life Membership in the Utah State Conference of Social Work and is currently a special lecturer for the School of Social Work at the University of Utah.

Probably few women in the Church realize that as President she has also represented the Relief Society in the National Council of Women. Early in her term, she became very discouraged with the Council and told President George Albert Smith she thought they should withdraw membership because “we aren’t getting anything out of it.” President Smith considered for a moment and then replied: “Sister Spafford, we didn’t send you to the National Council of Women just to see what the Relief Society could get out of it. What are you putting into it? I’d like to see you go back there and make a real contribution.” From 1948-1956 she served as Second Vice-President and from 1956-1962 as a member of the Executive Committee. In October 1968 she became the first Latter-day Saint President of this organization of 35 million women.

One of Belle Spafford’s favorite scriptures is from Ecclesiastes: “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.” She has lived by that, as by the maxim of her Scotch mother: “An eighth of an inch makes a difference, especially if it’s at the end of the nose.”