

VERA WHITE POHLMAN: A Personal History

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Vera White Pohlman was born September 9, 1899 on a large ranch in Starr Valley, Nevada. She was delivered by her mother with the nervous help of a young girl who helped her around the house. Vera remembers her mother saying that "the girl just kept coming in and wringing her hands and going out again." Her father had taken the horse and buggy to get the doctor but she was born long before they returned. She was the second born of three sisters and three brothers. When she was three her family moved to Salt Lake County in Utah where she has lived ever since.

Vera was raised in a pioneer home built by her grandfather which was on a one hundred sixty acre plot. Since they had no plumbing they got their water from a creek which ran in their back yard. In the winter, her father had to break a hole in the ice to dip the water. They had an outhouse on the other side of the creek. The house had no electricity so they used oil lamps to light the rooms. The first machine they had was a sewing machine. They also purchased a washing machine, that had a handle for turning the agitator. They used it outside except in extreme cold. They raised their food and sold extra

butter and eggs at area stores. For recreation the kids played run sheep run, baseball, and various other games. The family had no musical instruments. Vera's mother made most of the family's clothes. One time, an Armenian peddler stopped at the house. Vera's mother bought five dresses from him which all fit Vera. This was very different from other years in which she would wear one wool dress all winter with aprons to keep it clean.

Vera's family celebrated holidays such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, and the Fourth of July. They never had a Christmas tree but they had beautiful tall evergreens in their yard. One year, they didn't have enough money for presents for everyone. The other kids in the community did not believe her when she said she hadn't gotten anything for Christmas.

Vera attended a two room, red brick, public school until she was thirteen. The school housed grades one through eight and had ten to twelve students per grade. Although she wanted to, Vera did not attend high school because her mother needed her at home. In addition, high school was not compulsory at that time. However, this did not mark the end of her formal schooling. The summer she was fourteen, Vera attended school at the L.D.S. Business College. She had to attend during the summer because this was the only time her brothers and sisters would be home to help her mother. To get to school she had to walk a mile and a half to ride the street car into town. Vera recalls that the principal of the college rode his bicycle around the communities recruiting eighth grade graduates for the school.

She attended the college for two summers. After the second summer she tried to find a job through an employment agency. There was only one problem, they could not refer her to a job until she was sixteen.

Vera got her first job in a lawyer's office when she was sixteen. She was paid the princely sum of one dollar per week for full time secretarial work. This was just the first of many jobs she has held in her industrious life. She worked there for about a year. She then took a secretarial job for the National Biscuit Company where she also worked for about a year. When she turned eighteen she took the civil service examination and was offered a job which she took with the Department of Agriculture. She worked there until the office was moved to Tacoma, Washington in 1920. At that time, she had her choice of three jobs. One was with the federal government in statistics and another with the newly formed Utah State Tax Commission. Her third choice, the one she chose, was with the L.D.S. Relief Society. Years later she realized she would have been much better off financially if she had taken the job at the tax commission for the man who offered her the job was the commissioner in that office for decades. At this time, Vera's parents sold their property and moved to Utah County. She was forced to take an apartment in Salt Lake City. She was the first applicant and had her choice of all the rooms in an apartment at the Beehive house, formerly the official residence of the presidents of the L.D.S. church. She lived there for five years and paid rent of about sixty dollars per month. Her job with the relief society paid about \$125 per month. She worked there for twelve years, until 1932, doing

research and typing for Amy Brown Lyman, the General Secretary of the L.D.S. Relief Society.

On August 24, 1925, Vera married Fransi Pohlman. She met him when she worked for National Biscuit Company where he worked as a bookkeeper. Before they were married he took a job as an accountant for the Union Pacific Railroad. He worked there until 1932 when he was layed off because they railroad consolidated their offices in Omaha, Nebraska. About the time this happened the federal government allocated money for an emergency relief fund because of the depression. Vera then left the relief society and began work for the Salt Lake County. Before then, government allocation relief from the county was virtually nonexistent. While doing research, Vera found that old age benefits were only one or two dollars per month or the people were sent to the poor farm.

Because of the depression, Francis was out of work for three years. During this time, he stayed at home and took care of the two daughters they had while Vera worked.

Shortly after the government allocation, the amount of work increased so much the office was moved from building to building. The people who wanted money would sometimes get mad and throw furniture around. The relief they meted out was mostly food and commodities. Vera was appointed in charge of the business office which had about twenty girls working on case records. Vera recalls that she was forced to make jobs for people who had friends in the government. Because of the politics involved, the relief director, a professional social worker, resigned from the post. After her resignation, the

post was filled by a succession of political appointees. During January, 1934, Vera was given notice that she was fired. She was given no reason for dismissal but figured that someone with a powerful friend wanted her job. She had been out of work about a week when she was asked to apply for a job in a new state organization to oversee the county welfare offices. She received the job but never worked for the person she was hired to work for. Instead, she was borrowed by the Department of Research and Statistics and never returned to her original position. In this office she had to write and get a report published for the 1934 State Legislature. In 1935, she was sent to San Francisco, to help write another report, where she remained for two months. She communicated with her family only by letter because long distance telephone was not popularly accepted at that time. She was paid two hundred dollars per month for these two months. She used the extra money to pay a seven hundred dollar credit account she had accrued at ZCMI. There were no credit cards and she was not charged any interest on this account. In fact, she said they would usually give customers a discount when the account was paid off.

Also in 1935 the state was organizing the Social Welfare department. Vera applied for and was given the job of Director of Research and Statistics in this department. During this time, the Welfare department had offices in such places as bankrupt banks, and even in ticket windows of theatres.

Vera felt that the rest of the L.D.S. community she *lived* in thought she was a unfit mother because she went to work every day. In fact, the general attitude was exemplified in

a bill considered by the 1939 Utah State Legislature. The bill would have prohibited married women from working. The bill was proposed by a political appointee. He had gotten sick and the state had hired his wife to work while he was sick. When he recovered, the state wanted to keep his wife and let him go. In response, he proposed the bill. It did not pass, but the legislature did pass a resolution recommending that all departments in the state not employ married women. At this time, Vera was preparing another report for the legislature and was promised she would not be fired because of this resolution. However, after the report was sent to the printer, she was notified of her firing. She and a good friend, who was also fired, composed two questions to be asked of the State Attorney General by the Duchesne County Welfare department. These questions were concerned with the legality of the resolution. Vera was surprised to see the Attorney General's response on the front page of the newspaper. He declared the practice unconstitutional. So their jobs, along with other married women's jobs, were saved. This did not mean Vera planned to stay employed there however. A short time after this incident she resigned and took the position of General Secretary of the Relief Society of the L.D.S. Church. This was on January 1, 1940. Again she was in the position of compiling information and planning, as the Relief Society was preparing for it's one hundredth anniversary.

When World War II started she was in San Francisco and recalls that they had ordered blackouts of the city but yet Alcatraz was lit up like a birthday cake. Many of the events

planned for the 100 year anniversary were cancelled because of the war. Vera left the Relief Society again in 1945 when the president of the organization resigned. She then took the position of Volunteer Specialist with the Utah State Office of Price Administration. She organized the volunteers in each community so they could check on rents and prices and help with the rationing. She worked for the O.P.A. for two years. After the O.P.A. closed, Vera was unable to find a job because of her age. She was told by a man at the Utah State Employment Agency "there is not a thing I can do for you, nobody will look at this application." So, for the first time since she was sixteen, Vera was without a job. She stayed home for five years taking care of her family. She made clothes for the family. Vera was asked to join the Women's State Legislative Council. She joined and was a delegate for thirty years. In 1952 she was approached to take a job in the office for the promotion of savings bonds. She took the job doing secretarial work for the women's volunteer program. She only worked part-time. During her stay, the 50 year anniversary of savings bonds came up. She helped to organize a celebration at the Hotel Utah. At this celebration she got to meet Mary Pickford who had been the chairman of the Liberty Bond drive for the government. Vera then went to work full time for the savings bond department. After a short period she was advised that their budget was being cut and they would lose her. So she applied for another job in another government agency and got that job where she stayed for two years. She got tired of the situation at that job so she went to work for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).



She worked there for eleven years in which she devised all of their procedures and methods. Vera was now reaching retirement age and planned to retire at age seventy. However, her son-in-law approached her about working for him, so she resigned from the BLM when she was sixty-nine and started to work for him. In 1972, her son-in-law made another work association and did not require Vera's help. In that same year, her daughter opened a small gift shop named "The Gifted Touch". She employed Vera to do all of the bookwork and inventories, which Vera did in her home. Over the years, situations changed and Vera assumed all responsibilities of the shop which is now named "Grandma Veras".

Throughout her entire life, Vera has never owned a car, even though she occasionally drove one. She has accomplished more in one lifetime than most people could accomplish in many lifetimes, fulfilling the roles of wife and mother while working. She has been a pioneer of her day in that she was able to witness and participate in the opening of many new state and federal organizations. She accomplished all this in a day and age when women were discouraged from taking the lead in such matters. Vera continues to be an active participant in both community affairs and the work force.