

# Willmirth Margaret Greer

*By William N. Greer*

In DeKalb County, Georgia on November 18, 1824, Willmirth Margaret was born the second child of Nathaniel Hunt Greer and Nancy Ann Terry Roberts. Shortly before her third birthday, the family moved to Troup County bordering the Cherokee lands across the Chattahoochee. At age 12 and a half, she brought to Texas childhood memories of several years spent in the verdant hills of Chambers County, Alabama.

After 2 years of Texas frontier life, Willmirth met Edward Wallace East, an enterprising young man from Tennessee. Bold and pioneering, he had served the new republic for 1 year as a Texas Ranger. Although she was not yet 15 and he was 10 years her senior, they were married by her father (as a Justice of the Peace) on October 2, 1839. For his Ranger service, Ed had received a bounty warrant for 1280 acres, but the young couple deferred land acquisition and chose to live on her parents' Washington County property. Among other jobs, Ed helped Nathaniel hunt Greer with his postal contracts.

Willmirth gave birth to their first-born, Sarah Maria Texana, in 1840. With his new family responsibilities, Ed explored religious issues and in 1842 became a Campbellite, an early name of what would later be called Disciples of Christ. (One wonders if other members of the Greer and East households joined the new religion.)

The next year Willmirth gave birth to a son, William, and in 1845 to another girl. The second girl (name unknown) was sickly and died in 1847. Then in 1848, Ed and Willmirth had another, stronger child which they named Nancy. And in the early summer of 1850, Mary Ann was born. On October 28, 1853, twin girls were born: Mira Caroline and Julia, the last children to be born on Texas soil.

By 1852, the Greer and East households had relocated near Port Sullivan and that summer they first heard Mormonism preached. A year later, Ed and Willmirth were baptized into the new religion on July 22, 1853. Eventually the Easts were re-baptized on August 12, 1854 as both families felt a growing urge to gather in Zion with their spiritual counterparts. In the early morning of September 11, 1854, Willmirth experienced the gift of tongues, an event witnessed by many kith and kin. For the remainder of her life, she would demonstrate an extraordinary faith and devotion to her religious community, remarkably so in the face of what was to happen on the trek across the plains.

By early June the Greers and Easts had assembled with hundreds of others at Mormon Grove near Atchison, KS in preparation for the journey to Utah. On the 15th, they headed for the Platte River where the Mormon Trail pointed the way to the Rockies. On the 18th, cholera broke out and the first deaths occurred. The next day Willmirth lost her four-year old daughter, Mary Ann, to the dreaded disease. By then the company would have been in Brown County, KS. Three days later cholera took Willmirth's little brother John, and her father two days after that. By June 27, the migrants had reached Marshall County, KS where on that date the Easts' eldest son William was lost to the disease; he was 12. The wagons rolled on, trying to outdistance death, but in

Thayer County, NE on July 4, holiday festivities were replaced by more funerals, including that of Willmirth's seven-year old daughter Nancy.

After the wagon train arrived in Salt Lake City, Ed East (as company clerk) would record, "This closes one of the most arduous journeys ever experienced by the Mormons but few of the incidents of the journey are recorded on account of the cares which were upon me & which were greatly increased by sickness, cholera, measles." The last disease Ed mentioned, measles, would provide a final torment upon his anguished family. Julia, one of their twins contracted the measles as the company arrived in Utah. She lingered for a few weeks, but finally died on November 3 and was buried in the Salt Lake City Cemetery, the last victim of the doomed 3rd Migrating Company. At the close of 1855, only 2 of the East's 7 children were alive. Their oldest daughter Sarah was to wed Seth M. Blair, Nathaniel Hunt Greer's business partner who had led the wagons west.

After the terrible effects of the cholera, the Easts increased their family in Salt Lake City. On October 12, 1856, Willmirth gave birth to their son, Edward Martin. And on December 30, 1859 another son, Joseph Fielding, was born. Another daughter, Martha, was born December 27, 1862, but she lived less than a week, dying of the croup New Year's Day, 1863. That tragic loss was followed by another, final one when the Easts surviving twin, Mira Caroline, died "of inflammation" on September 17, 1863.

In the spring of 1864, Ed East took a second (plural) wife, Emma Lundberg. Their union was "sealed" on March 5. Two years later Willmirth was delivered of her last child, Thomas Nathaniel, on November 17, 1866. Then in January of 1870, Emma East gave birth to a daughter named Emma. No further record has been found of Emma and her little namesake.

Despite the agony of the plains crossing, the Easts' faith remained intact — even as most of Willmirth's family returned to Texas without her in the spring of 1856. On October 6, 1856, Ed was ordained a Mormon priest and in the fall of 1869 would go on a mission to the "Southern States." In Salt Lake City, Ed served as County Clerk for 14 years and helped lay the foundation of the great Salt Lake Temple while Willmirth taught school, wrote poetry, and did church work. In October of 1875, both Ed and Willmirth were sent on a mission to Texas enabling her to see her family for the first time since before the Civil War. When the Easts moved to Arizona, Willmirth served as the first President of the Relief Society both in Apache County (1877-1883), and in Graham County (1883-1898).

Death came suddenly for Ed East on May 29, 1884 when he collapsed in his chair while reading the morning newspaper. Willmirth continued her steadfast service to church and community before relinquishing her duties in 1898 due to failing health. Her passing on March 31, 1902 was mourned by many grateful citizens and close friends of Pima, Arizona where she had lived since 1883.