

## The Grave of Leah Maria Edwards

by Randy Brown

I first became aware of the possible existence of this grave many years ago, when I found in the files of trail historian Paul Henderson a slip of paper with a short notation that read: "L. M. Edwards, 1861, grave in Simpson's Hollow, visited during a tour of the Lincoln County Historical Society, 1970, from Karen Buck [of LaBarge, Wyoming]." I found this note about the year 1986, and sometime later I spent a long, hot afternoon searching unsuccessfully for the grave in that historic hollow located about fifteen miles southwest of Farson, Wyoming. Later I asked Karen if she could remember where the grave could be found, but she had no recollection of its exact location, and there the matter stood for many years thereafter. It seemed to be a case of a grave lost and found, but then lost again, something I had encountered many times when researching trail graves.

In September of 2001, I received a call from Terry Del Bene of the Rock Springs BLM who told me that a grave had been discovered near Simpson's Hollow by Bill Lehr, a science teacher at the middle school in Big Piney. I surprised Terry by asking him if it was the grave of L. M. Edwards. I don't remember if Terry knew the identity of the grave at that time, since he had not yet seen it himself, but he gave me Lehr's phone number. In a few weeks I met Lehr at the Hollow, and he took me to the grave which proved to be the one I had been looking for. Bill had found it by turning over rocks in his search for scorpions. One large, flat, stone had an inscription that clearly read, "L. M. EDWARDS, AGED 4 YEARS, 1861." The neat block letters looked as if they had been carved by a professional stone cutter, with the "4" inscribed backwards. Many more flat sandstone slabs covered the grave.

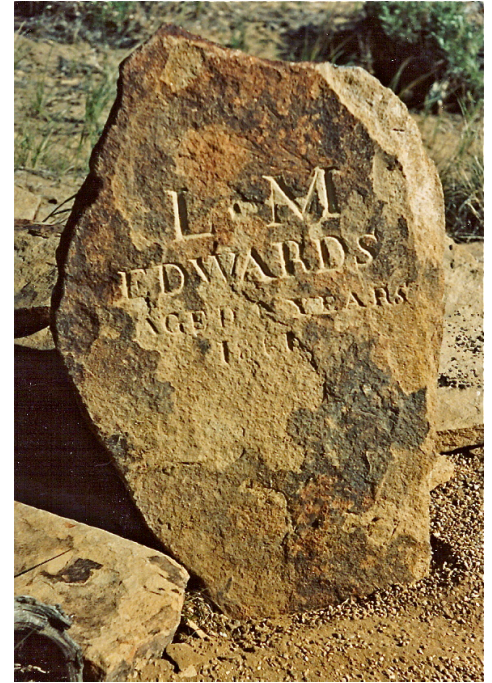
The grave is located in a side branch of Simpson's Hollow, and sometimes called Corral Hollow, near the Big Sandy River, about a half mile from the Hollow proper. There is evidence of vehicle traffic nearby, but miraculously, the grave remains undisturbed, exactly as the Edwards family left it on that sad day in 1861.

I sent an inquiry to Mel Bashore, research librarian at the LDS Church Library in Salt Lake City, and it didn't take him long to find something about the family of L. M. Edwards. According to Mel, 1861 is not a good year for Mormon Trail documentation, and rosters for eight Church companies are nonexistent, affecting about 1,500 emigrants. However, a family by the name of Edwards can be found on a manifest for the ship Manchester chartered by the Mormon British Mission for people who had paid money to sail to America on the first leg of the journey to Salt Lake. This is what it said: "John Edwards (age 40, laborer), Eleanor C. (age 30, wife), John E. (age 7). Eleanor M. (age 6), Leah M. (age 3), William C. (age infant)." They were from North Wales, with their residence listed as "near the Wesleyan Chapel, Abergele, Denbighshire."

A letter from a researcher in Wales revealed more information. A marriage record for John Edwards and Eleanor Charlotte Waylett shows that they were wed February 15, 1850, at St. Asaph, the Anglican Church diocese, in the village of Llanddulas, a few miles west of Abergele on the north coast of Wales. Here they are found in the 1851 census with John listed as age 33, occupation, "joiner," born in Denbighshire. The 1861 census record for Abergele has John Edwards, age 45, rather than the 40 found in the manifest, with his occupation listed as "Ag Lab," agricultural laborer. Other than a discrepancy in the age of John Jr., 8 instead of 7, the names and ages of the children as recorded in the census match what is found in the manifest. It must have been shortly after the census was taken that the Edwards family left for Liverpool. John Edwards had taken a loan from the church's Perpetual Emigrating Fund Company for the amount of \$136.67 with which he planned to finance his family's emigration to Utah.

The Edwards family cannot be found on any of the extant 1861 Mormon wagon train company rosters, nor are they mentioned in any of the Mormon diaries for that year. However, the Leah M. Edwards, age 3, of the ship's manifest and the 1861 census record is very likely the L. M. Edwards, age 4, who is buried in Simpson's Hollow.

Eleanor Charlotte (Waylett) Edwards, Leah's mother, was born in the Lambeth district of London in 1827. A record of her baptism dated December 7 still exists in the records of the Church of St. John the Evangelist in Lambeth. Later census records misstate her actual age. She would have been 33 when she emigrated in 1861 rather than 30 as stated in the census and ship's manifest of that year. Eleanor Charlotte's mother was Welsh-born Eleanor Maria (Owens) Waylett. Her father was John P. (Providence or Percival) born in England in 1795. He was an actor/comedian and is described in family accounts as being a "thoroughly objectionable, unworthy, and unpopular personage" and may still have been married to another woman when he married Eleanor Marie Owens. When he died in 1841, Eleanor Maria and their six children





*Leah Maria Waylett, cousin and namesake of Leah Maria Edwards (from a Waylett family website)*

moved back to Llanddulas, her hometown in Wales, where her parents still lived. There, Eleanor Charlotte Waylett grew up, and early in 1850 at age 22, she and John Edwards were married.

At some point, at least three of the Wayletts became Mormons. Eleanor Charlotte's brother, William H. Waylett, came to Salt Lake City over the trail in 1853, their sister, Ann Deborah Parry, in 1854. There are conflicting records stating that Bernard Parry, Ann's husband, died either "on the plains" in May, 1854, or at Winter Quarters in September of the same year. Leah Maria Edwards was probably named after her cousin, Leah Maria Waylett, daughter of William and Sarah Waylett, who was born in Salt Lake in 1855.

The journey of the John Edwards family can in part be determined from a memoir written by returning missionary William Jeffries. The SS City of Manchester, captained by Mr. Trask, with its 379 Mormon immigrants, left Liverpool, England, on April 16, 1861. On board were presidents C. C. Rich, Amasa M. Lyman, and George Q. Cannon who organized the company under President Claudius V. Spencer. The Atlantic crossing took twenty-eight days with the ship arriving in New York City, where they found "the war spirit rife" with Castle Garden, the immigration center, occupied by the military. The Civil War had begun on April 12, a few days before the ship left Liverpool. From New York, the company took the railroad to St. Joseph, Missouri. Jeffries states that for the latter part of their trip they took a steamboat up the Missouri River to Florence (Omaha), Nebraska, and there they camped for seven or eight weeks organizing the companies while they waited for the arrival of the out and back trains which would take them to "the valley."

The Mormon immigrants who sailed on the Manchester traveled in at least four overland companies, those of Cannon, Duncan, Horne, and Young, with the Welsh contingent in three of these, though only seven Welsh families can definitely be linked with a particular company. Four of these families traveled with the Duncan company, but the only fatality reported in Captain Duncan's excellent diary is that of Anne Jane John, the 8 month old baby of David and Mary John from Wales, who died August 20th when they were on the Sweetwater River near Devil's Gate in Wyoming. No deaths are reported during the days the Duncan company traveled along the Big Sandy where Leah Edwards is buried.

It seems most likely that the Edwards family were members of the Joseph W. Young company. According to teamster Zeb Jacobs, the Young outfit, with its large contingent of Welsh and English converts, left Florence on July 12. Jacobs was the only diarist in this company, and the only trail deaths he mentions, a woman and two children, all unnamed, occurred near the Elkhorn River, Nebraska, on July 13. However, the company traveled in two divisions, one led by Ansel Harmon, the other by Heber P. Kimball. Jacobs was with the Harmon division for most of the way, but on August 30 he left the company with Young and traveled on ahead to overtake some forward companies, so unfortunately, when the Harmon and Kimball divisions reached the Big Sandy, Jacobs was not with them. If the John Edwards family were members of one of these divisions, there was no known diarist present to record the death of Leah Marie Edwards.

None of the later accounts are detailed enough to allow us to determine the exact date the Harmon and Kimball divisions of the Young company reached Simpson's Hollow, but it must have been about the second week of September when they camped for the night near the Big Sandy, and four-year old Leah Edwards died. We don't know what caused her death. Deaths in the Mormon trains of the 1860s, principally from disease, were all too common.

The Young company reached Salt Lake City on September 23, the last Church train to arrive that year.

The subsequent history of the Edwards family is for the most part a mystery. John Edwards can be found in the Perpetual Emigrating Fund's ledger book as having paid \$80 toward his debt on November 24, 1862, and again in 1868, when he paid \$32.23. The last time he or any of his family appear in LDS records is in 1877, when it is noted that, with interest, he still owed the PEF \$65.72. The John Edwards family cannot be found in the 1870 census, and except for the existence of her rock covered grave, nothing more is known about Leah Maria Edwards or her family.

