

Rejoicing with Her Ancestors

Descendant of settler families reminisces about Draper's past

By Heidi Lewis

Church News contributor

Published: Saturday, Feb. 14, 2009

A walk with Virginia Lewis through the small cemetery in Draper, Utah, is more than reminiscing — it's a history lesson. Sister Lewis, who is 103, will take your arm and lead you up and down the neatly trimmed rows telling you stories of her pioneer ancestors buried there, mostly people she knew personally. Beyond the trees lining the cemetery, the new Draper Utah Temple sits on the hillside overlooking the south end of the Salt Lake Valley. Sister Lewis recently attended the temple open house and believes her ancestors would be pleased.



Virginia Lewis stands in front of new Draper Utah Temple.

Photo by Heidi Lewis

Sister Lewis is the oldest living descendant of two prominent Draper pioneer families. Her maternal grandfather, John Fitzgerald, was just 6 years old when he crossed the plains with Brigham Young's first wagon company. His father, Perry Fitzgerald, was a wagon captain and helped raise the first flag on Ensign Peak. Her paternal grandfather, Absalom Wamsley Smith, settled in Draper after the early Saints were driven from Nauvoo, Ill. He served in the first bishopric of the Draper Ward under Bishop Isaac M. Stewart, his brother-in-law. Both were friends of the Prophet Joseph Smith. The Fitzgerald and Smith families were among the initial group sent to settle what was then called South Willow Creek.



Portrait of Virginia Lewis while a student at BYU.

"Both my parents grew up in the old fort," Sister Lewis recalls. "The early settlers would be thrilled that their hard efforts bringing in irrigation and settling Draper have created such a great community."

Now a booming suburb of Salt Lake City, it is hard to imagine the small farming and ranching town of Sister Lewis's youth. She is the youngest of 10 children and her father, Heber Absalom Smith, owned a large sheep ranch north of Pioneer Road.

"We would climb the hillside where the temple now stands and pack a picnic," she said. "My father would run his sheep there."



Virginia Lewis presents a gift during a traditional Thai wedding in the mid-1960s while serving as Relief Society president.

Photo courtesy of Virginia Lewis

She is the oldest descendant of two pioneer families who helped establish the city of Draper, where a new temple will soon be dedicated. Sister Lewis also remembers digging up sego lily bulbs, which grew abundantly on the sandy hillside above her home. "They're OK if you don't mind shaking off a little dirt," she explained. "They taste a little like a potato, only more sweet and solid." Her pioneer ancestors were introduced to sego lily bulbs as a valuable food source when they entered the Salt Lake Valley. To be a "bulb eater" meant you were one of the original settlers. Sister Lewis was pleased to see depictions of the sego lily carved into the woodwork and woven in the delicate carpet patterns throughout the Draper Utah Temple.



While in Thailand, Sister Lewis accompanied wives of General Authorities on tour in November 1966.
Photo courtesy Virginia Lewis

Looking to her ancestors as a pattern to follow throughout life, Sister Lewis has taken her pioneering spirit across the globe. Her husband, Rulon D. Lewis, worked as a soil scientist for the United States Department of Agriculture. They lived in Africa and Thailand where he taught people how to more efficiently plant crops. In Bangkok Sister Lewis served as the country's first Relief Society president. After her husband passed away in the mid-1960s she settled in Orem, Utah, where she lives today as a member of the Orchard 1st Ward. She has worked as a tour guide on Temple Square and served in the [Provo Utah Temple](#) for 15 years. Sister Lewis believes the key to her longevity is to always look forward with faith.

Since the announcement of the Draper Utah Temple, Sister Lewis has been watching its progress with anticipation. "My mother and father were married in the Endowment House. They used to go pretty regular to the Salt Lake Temple with a horse and buggy," she said. "They never dreamed there would be a temple in Draper."

During her tour of the temple Sister Lewis marveled at the craftsmanship. "I was amazed with the beautiful wood that came from Africa where I lived for two years," she said. "The temple makes Draper

more beautiful. A temple always is a blessing for the community which it is in, for peace and success for the people living there."

Sister Lewis will be attending one of the dedication ceremonies in March. Some of her ancestral photos will also be placed in the temple's time capsule. "Maybe this is what I lived for," she said, "to rejoice with my parents and ancestors. I feel certain that they will be right there alongside me."