

William Gill Mills (1820-1895)

By Richard L. Tolman, Ph. D.

William Gill Mills was a gifted and charismatic individual. He was an excellent speaker and lecturer, a poet and composer, and a self-styled lawyer (there is no evidence that he was trained in the law); he had significant musical gifts as well. He drew people to him wherever he went. He was also a philanderer, fathering a child out-of-wedlock with his ward and probably a second by her mother.

He was born in Ireland and was converted to Mormonism on the Isle of Man in 1841.¹ He served a mission for the Mormons in southern England in 1850 and met his future wife Louisa Sleater in Bath, where her maternal uncle Abraham Marchant was a leader of the Mormons there. The *Marchant Family History* indicates 'Mills was more interested in Louisa than in converting her family and the pair eloped'; this so embittered her parents that they alienated



Figure 1. William Gill Mills, about 1860

¹ Elizabeth L. Nichols, 'Thomas Mills family in Ireland and Isle of Man' online at www.marialouisapickett.homestead.com (May 2011).

themselves from the Mormons from that time.² William and Louisa immigrated to America in 1854 on the ship 'Chimborazo' where William was appointed historian of the company.³ He and Louisa crossed the plains to Utah⁴ in the Milo Andrus Company and were 'sealed' in the Endowment House 25 Apr 1856.⁵ See Figure 1.

During the October 1856 Mormon Church General Conference in Salt Lake City, messengers arrived announcing that the Willie-Handcart Company was stranded in the Rockies and were in danger of perishing in the snow. Conference was immediately adjourned and Brigham Young sent a party with wagons, animals and food to rescue the immigrants. One of the rescuers was William Gill Mills and one of the rescuees was a 20 year old English convert Emily Hill travelling with her sister Julia;⁶ she became Mills plural wife less than a year later.⁷ Emily bore him a daughter Avelina in the fall of 1859. Soon after that the Mills' English friend, Priscilla Clark Pickett (a childhood friend⁸ of Louisa Sleater in Bath) began to live with them in Salt Lake City. Mills later testified at the inquest into Priscilla's death that she lived with him for about a year;⁹

² Allman, Lula. M. and Hazel M. T. Marrott, eds. *'Marchant Family History'* (Orem, Ut: Marchant Fam. Org'n, 1991), p. 18; FHL US/CAN 929.273 M331am.

³ W. G. Mills, 'History of the Chimborazo Emigrating Company' in *'Treasures of Pioneer History'*, 5 (1956): 29-37.

⁴ Mills, William G. search: 'Mormon Pioneer Search' online at www.xmission.com/~nelsonb/pioneer_search3.htm also Journal History 24-Oct-1855, p. 1-13 FHL Film 1259742.

⁵ Louisa Avelina Sleater. Early Church Information File FHL Film 1750,713; also Endowment House Sealings FHL Film 183,394 25 Apr 1856 not paginated.

⁶ Riverton Wyoming Stake, *'Remember the Willie and Martin Handcart Companies and Their Rescuers—Past and Present'* (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1998), 4 and 16.

⁷ Emily Hill entry, 14 June 1857, no. 1232, Endowment House 'Sealings of Couples, Living and by Proxy, 1851-1869,' unpaginated. FHL Film 183,395.

⁸ In the census of 1851 we find Louisa with her family in St. James Parish Bath and Priscilla only a few streets away working in the garment industry (Bath was a center for tailoring and clothes manufacture and the Marchants were prominent tailors in the city); it is likely that the girls came to know one another there and Priscilla probably first encountered the Mormons there through her association with Louisa and through her came to know Wm Gill Mills. They were obviously close as Priscilla named her first two girls Louisa (after Louisa Sleater?). When she arrived in Great Salt Lake City, it was to Wm Gill and Louisa Mills that she turned for help/lodging and stayed with them for 12 months (1859-1860). Later (in 1869) when it was established that Louisa Mills was to be childless, Priscilla gave up her two oldest girls to Louisa to be educated. To be sure a motive was also that a better upbringing was available in Gilroy than in wild Carson City, but this doesn't fully account for a mother giving up 4 yr. old Sarah unless other factors were involved.

⁹ "Of the Death of Mrs. Wilford," Daily Appeal, 20 July 1869, page 1, summarizes the testimony and sworn statements of witnesses: Mrs. Lucy Bryant (neighbor), Peter and Edward Moss (Mormon tenant farmers who lived in the back of the ranch house), and Mr. Mills (friend, merchant from Gilroy, Calif.).

from there she ran away to California—possibly when she discovered she was pregnant. After her first husband, George Pickett, died in 1857, Priscilla was married to his older brother William Armstrong Pickett by Brigham Young in Mar 1860.¹⁰ If they ever lived together it was not to be for long. Three months later in June at the time of the 1860 U. S. Census of Great Salt Lake City, she was listed as part of the Mills household.¹¹ Her daughter by her first husband George Pickett, Maria Louisa Pickett, was also living in the Mills household, but her three step-children (children of George by his first wife, Maria Jarvis) were farming in Shambip County with Priscilla's second husband William Armstrong Pickett.¹²

Priscilla had a son, George W. Pickett, born in Placerville, California in Mar 1862¹³ (see body of manuscript, Part 1). William Gill Mills is the probable father of this boy as her husband at the time William Armstrong Pickett is not known to have fathered any children by any of his four wives.¹⁴ At the coroner's inquest into Priscilla's death in 1869, Mills testified that George W. was a son of 'her former husband'.¹⁵

W. G. meanwhile was called on a mission as leader of the Birmingham District (England)¹⁶ and he and Louisa packed up for their mission in England leaving Emily and her daughter behind. Emily called it 'desertion';¹⁷ she eventually divorced Mills and married again having a large

¹⁰ Priscilla Pickett entry, 3 March 1860, no. 2671, Endowment House 'Sealings of Couples, Living and by Proxy, 1851-1869,' unpaginated, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; FHL microfilm 0,183,395.

¹¹ William Mills household, 1860 U.S. census, Great Salt Lake Co., Utah Territory, pop. sch., Great Salt Lake City, Ward 13, p. 191, dwell. 133, fam. 134; NA microfilm M653, roll 1313.

¹² 'Wm A Picket' household, 1860 U.S. census, Shambip Co., Utah Territory, population schedule, Clover Settlement, p. 45, dwelling 4032, family 3008; National Archives (NA) microfilm publication M653, roll 1314.

¹³ Henry Ross household, 1870 U.S. census, Ormsby Co., Nev., pop. sch., Carson City Twp. and post office, p. 10, dwell. 97, fam. 90; and George W. Pickett household, 1900 U.S. census, Washoe Co., Nev., pop. sch., Verdi Precinct, ED 45, sheet 2A, dwell./fam. 31.

¹⁴ 'Biography of Jane Pickett,' typescript, 3 pp., in possession of Patricia A. Miller (Corinne, Utah). Written about 1951, undocumented, and containing errors, the paper is attributed to Annie Pearl (née Barker) Merkley, daughter of Jane (née Pickett) Barker, p. 1.

¹⁵ 'Of the Death of Mrs. Wilford,' Daily Appeal, 20 July 1869, page 1, summarizes the testimony and sworn statements of witnesses: Mrs. Lucy Bryant (neighbor), Peter and Edward Moss (Mormon tenant farmers who lived in the back of the ranch house), and Mr. Mills (friend, merchant from Gilroy, Calif.).

¹⁶ Elwood I. Barker, "Biographical Sketch of William Gill Mills," typescript, 1977, ms A2229, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City.

¹⁷ Augusta Joyce Crocheron, *Representative Women of Deseret: A Book of Biographical Sketches to Accompany the Picture Bearing the Same Title* (Salt Lake City: J. C. Graham, 1884), 82-90 and Carter, *Treasures of Pioneer History*, 6:37-8.

family with Joseph Woodmansee.¹⁸ See Figure 2. Mills was sent back to S. L. C. in 1863 after being excommunicated for adultery (perhaps for adultery with Priscilla, but details of the church court have never been published or released).¹⁹



Figure 2. Emily Hill Woodmansee

After the excommunication W. G. and Louisa left Utah Territory for California where they finally settled in Gilroy, south of San Jose. There they operated a general goods store at the corner of 4th and Main St. Mills became a prominent merchant in town, president of the Gilroy Board of Trustees in 1869²⁰ and the first mayor in 1870.²¹ Priscilla had married again (in 1862) and had three more children in Carson City, Nevada. When her third husband William Wilford died in Jan 1869, she travelled by stagecoach to Gilroy twice to deliver her two oldest daughters (Maria Louisa Pickett, age 12 and Sarah Wilford, age 4) to the Mills with money for their education in California. Shortly after this, Priscilla was murdered (July 1869) by persons

¹⁸ 'Emily Hill Woodmansee' biography online at www.mormonwomenhistory.org/final/biographies (accessed 3 Jun 2011 through 'Lindley Family Tree', tree/1592811 on Ancestry.com).

¹⁹ 'Notice—,' *Millennial Star: Official Organ of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Great Britain*, Manchester, England, 16 May 1863, 25:314; FHL microfilm 1,402,731.

²⁰ *History of Santa Clara County, California* (San Francisco: Alley, Bowen, 1881), 285.

²¹ Patricia Baldwin Escamilla, *A Short History of Gilroy California* (Gilroy: City of Gilroy Historical Museum, 1997), 17.

unknown for the balance of her insurance money; W. G. travelled to Carson to testify²² at the inquest into her death and provided many details about their long term friendship.

Priscilla's children were then orphans and wards of the state of Nevada. The estate and guardianship files in Carson City contain copies of many letters to W.G. requesting him to return the two girls to Nevada.²³ In the early 1870's the Mills family left California to return to Utah Territory; they had a house north of South Temple Street in the 1874 directory²⁴ and were also running a store in the mining town of Alta. William G. Mills and wife Louisa ran this store until it burned down in the great Alta fire of 1878.²⁵ In 1875, when Maria Louisa was 19, she became pregnant by Mills; the baby, Mannie Pickett, was born early in 1876 in Granite (south of Great Salt Lake City).²⁶ Maria Louisa took up residence with her cousin Elizabeth Pickett Tolman in Tooele, who had always been a good friend to her.²⁷ Within another two years Elizabeth became a sister wife as well since Maria Louisa became a plural wife of Cyrus Ammon Tolman.²⁸

Through his whole adult life, William G. Mills produced a constant stream of poems many of which were published, e.g. his poem at the death of U. S. Grant in 1885.²⁹ During his early life he also composed a number of hymns that survived him and became a part of the Latter-day Saint (Mormon) hymnbook. When he read a poem at the Alta 4th of July celebration in 1875 he was introduced as 'the Poet of the Day'.³⁰ After the Alta period he sustained himself at least partially through lecturing in Nevada and Arizona as a Methodist minister.³¹ He returned to

²² "Of the Death of Mrs. Wilford," Daily Appeal, 20 July 1869, page 1, summarizes the testimony and sworn statements of witnesses: Mrs. Lucy Bryant (neighbor), Peter and Edward Moss (Mormon tenant farmers who lived in the back of the ranch house), and Mr. Mills (friend, merchant from Gilroy, Calif.).

²³ Estate and Guardianship of Heirs of Priscilla Wilford, Deceased, Ormsby Co., Nevada Estate and Guardianship Files, docket 1779.

²⁴ E. L. Sloan, comp., *Gazetteer of Utah and Salt Lake City Directory* (Salt Lake City: Salt Lake Herald, 1874), 252.

²⁵ Hubert H. Bancroft, *History of Utah* (San Francisco: History Company, 1890), 699.

²⁶ Read, "Louisa Read Autobiographical Sketch," in *L.D.S. Individual Histories, Idaho*, 2:258-59.

²⁷ "Biography of Jane Pickett," 1.

²⁸ Read, "Louisa Read Autobiographical Sketch," in *L.D.S. Individual Histories, Idaho*, 2:258.

²⁹ The Salt Lake Tribune, July 28, 1886 online at www.genealogybank.com (May 10, 2011).

³⁰ The Salt Lake Tribune, July 10, 1875 online at www.genealogybank.com (May 10, 2011).

³¹ "William Gill Mills, father of Mannie Pickett," Maria Louisa Pickett Family Website: (http://marialouisapickett.homestead.com/files/william_g._mills_history.htm: accessed 23 October 2006).

England in 1893 to visit the graves of his parents on the Isle of Man and died in Salt Lake City in 1895.³²



Figure 3. William Gill Mills and Avelina Sleater Mills, about 1880

Also in the Barker biography, *vide supra*, is a part of an autobiographical sketch prepared by W. G. Mills for the American Publisher's Association, Chicago, IL dated 6 Nov 1894:

I came to America in 1855, and visited England twice since. Have edited several papers and one magazine, was a preacher and lecturer for years. Was the first mayor of Gilroy, California; Justice of the Peace several terms in Utah; was merchandizing in Illinois, California and Utah; never conceited enough to publish a volume of my poems, of which I've writtten some hundreds, and translations from Greek and Latin Poets (my versification). Some of my writing have appeared in the Manx Sun; Manx Liberal; Millennial Star, Liverpool; Family Herald, London; Salt Lake Tribune; Salt Lake Herald; Deseret News, Salt Lake; Godey's Lady's Book; Tullidge's Magazine. From the 'Weekley Budget' London I received two prizes for the best poems open to competitors in Great Britain and Ireland. My effusions have appeared in Manx and English newspapers since my fourteenth year. Occupation:

³² Elwood I. Barker, "Biographical Sketch of William Gill Mills," typescript, 1977, MSS A 2229, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City.

Attorney, Solicitor and Literatus. My hair is grey (was brown) my eyes are dark grey, Height 5 ft. 8 In. and weight 170 pounds.

W. G. Mills received some of his training at King William's College, Castletown, I. O. M. He was a Custom House Officer, Ramsey; then Chief Clerk for the Steam Packet company. . ."

Generation A

1. **William Gill Mills**, born 18 Dec 1822 in Ardglass, County Down, Ireland;³³ died 24 May 1895 at Salt Lake City and was buried 26 May 1895 at Mt. Olivet Cemetery, Salt Lake City³⁴ son of Thomas and Jane (née Gill) Mills.³⁵ He married 1 Oct 1851 at Clifton, Gloucestershire (1) **Louisa Avalina Sleater**,³⁶ born 22 Dec 1832 at Sligo, Ireland, daughter of Robert and Mary (née Marchant) Sleater.³⁷ Louisa died 30 Jan 1926 at Salt Lake City, Salt Lake, Utah.³⁸ They had no children.³⁹

William married 14 Jan 1857 at Salt Lake City, Salt Lake, Utah (2) **Emily Hill** as a plural wife.⁴⁰ Emily was born 24 Mar 1836 at Warminster, Wiltshire, England daughter of Thomas and

³³ For his birth, see William Gill Mills entry, 14 June 1857, no. 1233, Endowment House "Sealings of Couples, Living and by Proxy, 1851-1869," unpaginated. FHL Film 183,395.

³⁴ Utah Cemetery Inventory. Database, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City, UT, USA online at Ancestry.com (accessed 3 June 2011).

³⁵ Elwood I. Barker, "Biographical Sketch of William Gill Mills," typescript, 1977, ms A2229, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City; digital transcription by Roger Porter, "William Gill Mills, father of Mannie Pickett," Maria Louisa Pickett Family Website: (http://marialouisapickett.homestead.com/files/william_g._mills_history.htm : accessed 23 October 2006) and Elizabeth L. Nichols, 'Thomas Mills family in Ireland and Isle of Man' online at www.marialouisapickett.homestead.com (May 2011).

³⁶ Mill-Sleater certification of marriage, Clifton Dist., Fourth Quarter 1851, 11:453, England and Wales Civil Registration, General Register Office, London, U.K.

³⁷ Allman, Lula. M. and Hazel M. T. Marrott, eds. 'Marchant Family History' (Orem, Ut: Marchant Fam. Org'n, 1991), p. 63; FHL US/CAN 929.273 M331am and Robert Sleater household, 1851 English census, Somersetshire, Bath St. James Parish, Bath Registration Dist., Abbey Subdist., ED 1a, Folio 36, Household 365, p. 65.

³⁸ Louisa Mills obituary, Deseret News, Salt Lake City, 30 January 1926, section 2, page 26, col. 5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ William Gill Mills entry, 14 June 1857, no. 1233, Endowment House "Sealings of Couples, Living and by Proxy, 1851-1869," unpaginated FHL Film 183,395.

Elizabeth (née Slade) Hill;⁴¹ died 19 Oct 1906 at Salt Lake City, Salt Lake, Utah.⁴² A convert to Mormonism in her teens in England, Emily (at age 20) was a survivor of the Willie Handcart Company, which was stranded and rescued in the Rocky Mountains of Wyoming in the winter of 1856; William was one of the rescuers.⁴³ When William was called in 1860 to head the Birmingham, England Mission for the Mormon Church. He took wife Louisa with him and left Emily behind. Emily was bitter after Wm Gill Mills 'deserted'⁴⁴ (Emily's word) her; he told her he would not be returning to Salt Lake City. After a divorce Emily married 7 May 1864 (2) **Joseph Woodmansee**⁴⁵ and raised a large family. She became the noted poetess E. H. Woodmansee later in her life.⁴⁶ In 1863 Mills was excommunicated⁴⁷ for adultery by a church court in Birmingham.

William was a possible father⁴⁸ of a son of unknown paternity, George W. Pickett, by the friend of his youth (3) **Priscilla Clark**. When Priscilla was murdered in Carson City Nevada in 1869, William became the ward in Gilroy, California, for two of Priscilla's girls, Maria Louisa and Sarah.⁴⁹ He had an out-of-wedlock son Mannie Pickett (in 1876) with his ward and Priscilla's daughter (4) **Maria Louisa Pickett** (see body of manuscript for details).

William and Louisa (Sleater) Mills had no children.

⁴¹ 'Emily Hill Woodmansee' biography online at www.mormonwomenhistory.org/final/biographies (accessed 3 Jun 2011 through 'Lindley Family Tree', tree/1592811 on Ancestry.com).

⁴² Bureau of Vital Statistics. Utah Death Index, 1905-1951. Salt Lake City, UT, USA: Utah Department of Health online at Ancestry.com (accessed 3 Jun 2011).

⁴³ Riverton Wyoming Stake, Remember the Willie and Martin Handcart Companies and Their Rescuers—Past and Present (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1998), 4 and 16.

⁴⁴ 'Emily Hill Woodmansee' biography online at www.mormonwomenhistory.org/final/biographies (accessed 3 Jun 2011 through 'Lindley Family Tree', tree/1592811 on Ancestry.com) and C. I. Corbett, 'Julia and Emily' in *Treasures of Pioneer History*, 6 (1956): 37-39, FHL 979.2 H2ca V.6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Augusta Joyce Crocheron, *Representative Women of Deseret: A Book of Biographical Sketches to Accompany the Picture Bearing the Same Title* (Salt Lake City: J. C. Graham, 1884), 82-90. Carter, *Treasures of Pioneer History*, 6:37-8; see also Lamoreaux, Edith Ivins 'Sweet Singers of Zion: Life Sketches of Emily Hill Woodmansee and Julia Hill Ivins', *The Relief Society Magazine*, Vol. VIII, No. 10 (Oct. 1921), pp. 562-570.

⁴⁷ 'Notice—,' *Millennial Star: Official Organ of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Great Britain*, Manchester, England, 16 May 1863, 25:314; FHL microfilm 1,402,731.

⁴⁸ George W. Pickett was conceived in either June 1860 or 1861, (see discussion in body of manuscript, Part 1); Mills was available for one of those dates.

⁴⁹ "Of the Death of Mrs. Wilford," *Daily Appeal*, 20 July 1869, page 1, summarizes the testimony and sworn statements of witnesses: Mrs. Lucy Bryant (neighbor), Peter and Edward Moss (Mormon tenant farmers who lived in the back of the ranch house), and Mr. Mills (friend, merchant from Gilroy, Calif.).

William and Emily (Hill) Mills had a daughter:

- 2 i. **AVELINA (DEAN) MILLS**, born 18 Oct 1859 at Salt Lake City, Salt Lake, Utah; died 7 Mar 1920 at Colonia Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico. She married **John Harrie Saville**; he was born 32 Jul 1858 at Bishops-Stortford, Hertford, England and died 2 Apr 1908 at Honolulu, Honolulu, Hawaii.⁵⁰ [4 children]

William and Maria Louisa Pickett had a son:

- 3 i. **MANNY PICKETT**, born 4 Jan 1876 in Granite, Salt Lake, Utah;⁵¹ died in an auto accident 5 Oct 1963 Caliente, Lincoln, Nevada; buried at Burley, Cassia, Idaho.⁵² He married 24 Dec 1896 at Salt Lake City, Salt Lake, Utah **Dora Lenora Briggs** born 19 Oct 1877 at Flagpond, Unicoi, Tennessee daughter of Bulo Lee and Susan (née Gentry) Briggs. She died 13 Jul 1956 at Declo, Cassia, Idaho.⁵³ [8 children]

⁵⁰ William G. Mills family record, "Family Group Records Collection, Patrons Section, 1962-1979, Millet-Neef, alphabetical by husband, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; FHL Film 1124,021; also William G. Mills household, 1860 U.S. census, Great Salt Lake Co., Utah Territory, pop. sch., Great Salt Lake City, Ward 13, p. 191, dwell. 133, fam. 134.

⁵¹ Manny Picket card, Missionary Record Index, 1830-1971, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Historical Department; FHL microfilm 1,913,095; also, Violet Exeter Pickett, comp., Mannie Pickett–Dora Lenora Briggs family group sheet, "Family Group Records Collection, Patrons Section, 1962-1979," alphabetical by husband, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; FHL microfilm 0,598,891.

⁵² Mannie Picket death certificate, no. 63-2451 (1963), Nev. Office of Vital Statistics, Carson City.

⁵³ Pickett-Briggs marriage record (1967), Cassia Co. Marriage Records 1A:22.