

HERITAGE

Tales of the Trail

by Jerry Rushford

In 1924, when she was 80 years old, Arabella "Belle" Fulton responded to the pleas of her children and grandchildren and began writing the colorful story of her adventuresome life. She wrote in longhand in between working in her garden and looking after her chickens and turkeys. Belle persevered in the task of recording her memories off and on for six years, completing the manuscript in 1930 at age 86.

When Belle died at the age of 90, there were several copies of her story circulating among family members, but it would be another 31 years before the manuscript was published. In 1965, 35 years after her death, her memoirs were published in a limited edition of 500 copies. This 378-page hardback was entitled *Tales of the Trail*. One of her grandsons, Lee Nickell of Pateros, Washington, sent me a copy of this rare book when he heard that I was writing a history of Churches of Christ and Christian Churches in Washington Territory.

Arabella Clemens was born in Boone County, Missouri, on January 23, 1844. When she was 16 years old her mother died, and when she was 20 she left her father behind and joined a wagon train on May 5, 1864 that was bound for Oregon. The journey across the rugged Oregon Trail was perilous, but by September 25 the wagons had arrived safely at the little settlement of Boise in Idaho Territory. Most of the wagons continued on to Oregon, but Belle was among a small group of travelers who decided to settle in Boise. She secured a job working in the only hotel in the village.

It was in Boise that Belle soon met Frank Fulton, her future husband. He

was 33 years old and she was 20. Their courtship was brief. They were married on November 24, 1864 – just two months after Belle had arrived in Boise. The Fultons settled on a ranch west of Boise near where the town of Star, Idaho, is located today.



Arabella "Belle" Fulton
1844-1934

In the winter of 1866-67, when she was pregnant with her second child, Belle borrowed a Bible from a neighbor and began to read it. She was interested in knowing more about Christianity, but there were no preachers in their valley, and it seemed unlikely that a church could be established in such a sparsely

settled area.

Then, in November of 1869, the situation dramatically changed. A little over two months after Belle had safely delivered her third child, a Christian preacher on horseback showed up at their front door. His name was M. Boli, and he had traveled from Walla Walla in Washington Territory. Belle referred to him as "a follower of Alexander Campbell who was a noted reformer of that day." He explained that he had not been sent by any missionary or denominational organization, but was financing his own way.

In *Tales of the Trail*, written many years later, Belle recalled:

As we usually entertained any stranger who came into the country, our place was recommended to him as one at which he might stop. He arrived on horseback, with a pair of saddle bags slung across the saddle. In them he carried a Bible, a dozen or so hymn books, and a change of linen. The latter was in need

of washing, for he had been on the road a long time, having stopped and preached in the Payette Valley. But it was not linen, as I learned when I washed it. It was mostly woolen such as everybody usually wore for underwear. His wearing apparel was not of very good quality, and was much worn, and he had long unkempt hair and beard. But in those days we never judged a man by his outward appearance. He told my husband his business, and asked for accommodations. Frank told him that we would be glad to keep him a few days, and that we would be glad to have him preach at the schoolhouse.



Frank and Arabella Fulton (seated in the center) surrounded by their children.

On Sunday morning "most of the people of the settlement gathered at the schoolhouse" to hear M. Boli begin his gospel meeting. "The back-woods look of the preacher may have occasioned some disappointment," Belle recalled, "but he was a vigorous speaker, and he presented his doctrine with a firmness of conviction that aroused the interest of his congregation." As the meeting progressed, Belle became the first convert. "After hearing a few of his sermons," Belle wrote, "I decided to become a Christian; so when the invitation was given, I went

forward and gave the preacher my hand, in token of my willingness to be baptized." When she was in her 80s, Belle remembered clearly how this event had shaped the course of her life, and wrote:

The day for the baptizing was set in late November, and the weather was pretty cold. The little stream was covered with ice which had to be broken. I went down into the cold water and was "buried with my Savior in the watery grave, arising with Him to a newness of life," with the consciousness that my past sins were all forgiven, and a hope of Life Eternal which is promised to all who remain faithful to Christ Jesus.

I have always considered this the most important event in my life. It has helped me to shape my own life and the lives of my family on higher and nobler principles, thereby laying the foundation for happy and useful lives.

A few years later my husband came into the Church, and as our children grew older we saw them, too, gathered into the fold. We found the influence of the Church to be a great help to us in rearing our children. It helped them to overcome unworthy impulses and desires, to build up strong characters, and become useful citizens

As I look back from this chaotic age of skepticism, I feel that I made no mistake in bringing my children up in the Church . . . Their general uprightness has always been a great satisfaction to me, and I attribute it to the influence of the Church in their early bringing up.

As Belle relived the memory of her conversion to Christ, she wrote: "I am pretty sure I was the first person ever baptized in the Boise Valley." M. Boli returned to their settlement at the end of

December and preached for two more weeks. Several were baptized into Christ and "a little church of about thirty members" was organized in January 1870. Today, a sign in front of Star Christian Church affirms that it was organized in 1870 and that it is the oldest Christian Church in Idaho.

In the spring of 1884, the Fultons moved to Washington Territory. They bought a farm 12 miles northeast of Ellensburg near Coleman Creek. They were members of the Christian Church in Ellensburg, and they "contributed generously" to the construction of the church building in 1887. When Frank died in 1896 his funeral was held in this building, and he was buried in the cemetery in Ellensburg.



Arabella Fulton at age 86 when she completed *Tales of the Trail*.



Frank and Arabella Fulton are buried near their children in Ellensburg, Washington.



Frank and Arabella Fulton "contributed generously" to the construction of the Christian Church in Ellensburg, Washington, in 1887.

Frank and Belle Fulton were married for 32 years and they reared four sons and six daughters. Their oldest child, Joseph

Lee Fulton, became a gospel preacher and served Churches of Christ in Washington and California. Their youngest child, Jacquelyn, married a gospel preacher named David F. Nickell who had studied under David Lipscomb at Nashville Bible School in Tennessee. David also preached for Churches of Christ in Washington and California.

After the death of her husband, Belle moved to the Methow Valley in Okanogan County to be near some of her children. She was an active member of the Church of Christ in Twisp, Washington, for many years where she listened proudly to the preaching of her oldest son, Lee Fulton. When she visited her youngest daughter in Pateros, Washington, she listened with equal pride to the

preaching of her son-in-law, David F. Nickell, at the Pateros Church of Christ.

Belle outlived her husband by 38 years. In her 80s she took up her pen and began the laborious process of bequeathing her memories to the next generation. *Tales of the Trail* is an inspiring story of what Belle called "the small part we played in the great melodrama of the

West, in building it up and making it habitable." Belle died at the age of 90 on July 29, 1934 at the home of her daughter, Della, near the old Fulton place at Ellensburg, Washington. She was laid to rest beside her husband, Frank, and several of their children.

The cause of Christ was planted in the American Northwest by pioneering families like the Fultons. Today, many of their grandchildren, great grandchildren, and great great grandchildren are active members of Churches of Christ and Christian Churches in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho.