

A New Century: A new life

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Screaming in pain, the midwife told her to push again.¹ The baby was coming. Her faithful husband knelt next to her clutching her hand. Time seemed to stand still as the scared father pondered. He wondered what things will be like with their new child. Would she survive or suffer the fate of two of her older siblings?

Thomas Phillip George was this concerned father. Thomas was born May 5th, 1856, in Salt Lake City to his parents Jon and Elizabeth. Both Jon and Elizabeth gave up everything they had in Wales to immigrate to Utah. Thomas moved to Rexburg. It was there he fell in love and married Margaret McKay McMillian on October 4th, 1886.

Thomas was now clutching his wife's hand tightly and doing everything he could to reassure her that things would turn out great. Despite his reassuring words, he too was thinking about that cold February day when they buried their first son William. William was just three years old when he died; part of Thomas was buried that day too. His thoughts went to their second daughter Truth and how she lived for just a single month. She died February. He thought about their next daughter Georgina. She had lived seven months before she passed away in October 1892. Could he take the pain of losing yet another child? His heart reached out to his newest daughter.

In the midst of all these thoughts, he did not give up hope. Their precious Isabella was now five. She was proof that the risk of having children is worth it. What a joy it was to have her in their home. It was hope that carried them that day in August when Leslie came into the world.

He remembered his young bride on their wedding day. He was 30, she was 20. She too was from Utah. Though she now had sweat pouring down her face, she looked even more beautiful to him now. They loved each other and their love sustained each other through each tragedy.²

As tragic as it was to have so many children die so young, it was a sad reality of having children at the turn of the century. Medical practices were primitive in comparison to today's standards. Doctors were few. Midwives helped most pregnant women. A midwife is someone trained to help women through their pregnancies and help give birth. The entire process was done nearly always at home.³ Interesting enough, the practice of having midwives slowed down considerably for nearly a hundred years. Lately it is becoming a more popular practice due to the personal nature of the health care.⁴

Technology to help children and their mothers did not exist. There are even accounts where ovens were used as makeshift incubators for children who were underweight or had a hard time maintaining their body temperature.⁵ Infant deaths were common; the first few years of life were the most critical. Giving birth even now is still considered a miracle.⁶

The turn of the century was a time of great change. There was an excitement with the new century. The world was changing. Sigmund Freud was changing the way the world looked at psychology and development. Henry Ford organized his motor company, and the Peace Conference was held, adopting new rules for war and international relations. The conference was not enough however to prevent the changes that were leading to World War I.

The nation was changing too. US President McKinley had started his second term and was shot and later died from his wounds. Upton Sinclair wrote this controversial piece The Jungle, which exposed just some of the dangers and effects of industrial life.⁷ While the rest of the nation was tackling the problems of big cities, Thomas George was far from them. He had settled in Rexburg Idaho.⁸

Rexburg was changing and expanding with each new settler.⁹ Life was about to change for the George household as well, with their new daughter Leslie.

Thomas asked himself if he was ready to care for another child. The farm had been especially lucrative. He had plans to purchase more land. He did go on a spending spree beginning in 1903 until 1909. It was during this time he spent nearly \$10,000 on land around Rexburg.¹⁰ That translates to over a quarter of a million dollars today.¹¹

There were a lot of opportunities in Rexburg. Since settlers began moving into the area in 1883. Thomas E. Ricks and Henry Flamm came on assignment to settle the Snake River Valley and founded Rexburg. Rexburg began as a place for miners and hunters but soon began to attract settlers from all around to come and farm.¹² Farming was a demanding and dangerous way of life around the turn of the century. Luckily it had been prosperous for Thomas, and he spent the rest of his life farming in the Rexburg/Fremont area.¹³

Thomas and Margaret's lives changed with their new daughter Leslie. The George family grew even more with their two sons Jack and Ray, and one more daughter Margaret. These three children survived to adulthood.¹⁴ Thomas watched even more changes with the upcoming times. World War I began in 1917. Though now too old to participate, he watched the effects it had on the community and from time to time questioned his own family's safety.¹⁵

Thomas' son Ray lived in Madison County and died in 1983. His brother Jack moved to San Diego, California, and died in 1982.¹⁶ Isabelle, his oldest daughter, married and changed her name to Bell Wood. By the time of her father's death she had become a teacher and was well known and loved in the community.

Thomas himself died September 2nd, 1927, and was buried in the Rexburg cemetery September 5^h. He was considered a pioneer to the area. It was written that his funeral had been accompanied with beautiful music.¹⁷ He was 71 when he died, which was well over the national average of 47. His death certificate states that he died of enlarged prostate. His wife Margaret lived to be 100 years old and died in 1965. She now rests next to her husband in the Rexburg Cemetery.¹⁸

- ¹ Personal Interview with Ruth Williams. She is now 87 years old, but she told me about her mother and the experience of having children around the turn of the century.
- ² Familysearch.org. This website gave me all of the names, birth dates and death dates.
- ³ Center for Disease Control Prevention gave me statistics of mortality rates as well as information on having children in 1900.
- ⁴ Conversation with my friend's wife, who recently gave birth with the assistance of a midwife.
- ⁵ Interview with Ruth Williams.
- ⁶ Center for Disease Control Prevention
- ⁷ Infoplease.com. Numerous pages on US and World history from 1900 – 1920.
- ⁸ Rexburg Standard, 1927. Obituary.
- ⁹ Rexburg history online.
- ¹⁰ Purchase records found in the Saint Anthony courthouse. I looked up and added up records from 1903 to 1909 on property that Mr. George had bought.
- ¹¹ Inflation converter, found online.
- ¹² Rexburg history online.
- ¹³ Thomas George's death certificate.
- ¹⁴ Familysearch.org.
- ¹⁵ Infoplease.com.
- ¹⁶ Familysearch.org.
- ¹⁷ Rexburg Standard, 1927. Obituary.
- ¹⁸ Rexburg Cemetery.

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