

Flora and I

Equal Partners in the Work of the Lord



Left: Flora Amussen and Ezra Taft Benson in their younger years. Right: Flora and Ezra enjoying a day with their six children.





As we learn of the supportive, loving partnership that President Ezra Taft Benson enjoyed with his wife, Flora, we gain a deeper understanding of his ministry.

By Aaron L. West

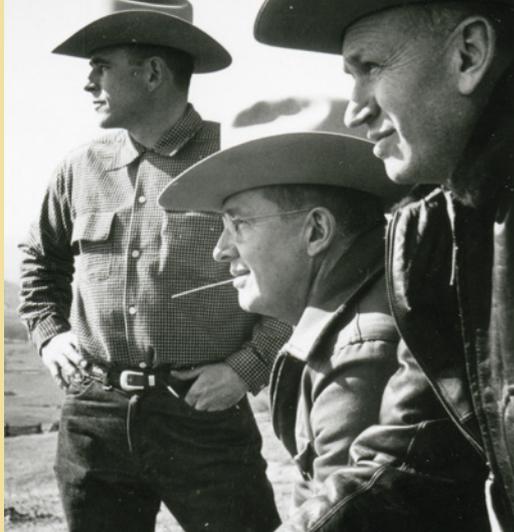
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Sometimes, if we listen closely, a short phrase can be as powerful as a sermon. Such was the case on November 11, 1985. The phrase was “Flora and I.” President Ezra Taft Benson (1899–1994) read those words as part of a prepared statement for news reporters the day after he was set apart as President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) had died six days earlier, leaving President Benson as the senior Apostle.

President Benson and his wife, Flora, had been together when they received word of President Kimball’s passing, and they “immediately dropped to their knees” in prayer.¹ Now, in the first paragraph of the statement that would be published throughout the world, President Benson again placed himself beside Flora. He said: “This is a day I have not anticipated. My wife, Flora, and I have prayed continually that President Kimball’s days would be prolonged on this earth and another miracle performed on his behalf. Now that the Lord has spoken, we will do our best, under his guiding direction, to move the work forward in the earth.”²

After 59 years of marriage, the phrase “Flora and I” came naturally to President Benson. And when he said, “we will do our best, under his guiding direction, to move the work forward,” he did not use the word *we* to refer to himself and the other General Authorities, although he certainly would be united with them. In this statement, the Church’s prophet, seer, and revelator spoke of being united with his wife in the work of the Lord.

To read about how farm life shaped Ezra Taft Benson's character, see *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Ezra Taft Benson*, pages 2–5.



Clockwise from top: Ezra Taft Benson with other farmers; Ezra, second from the left, with his mother and siblings; Ezra's parents, George T. Benson and Sarah Dunkley Benson.



And why wouldn't he? He and Flora had been united in the Lord's work for almost six decades. While many aspects of their life had changed over the years, their partnership had been a constant source of strength for both of them.

This year the course of study for Relief Society sisters and Melchizedek Priesthood holders includes an opportunity to learn from President Ezra Taft Benson. As you study his teachings, you may feel inclined to learn about his character. This article provides a few glimpses into his life and ministry, through the perspective of his wife, Flora Amussen Benson. All chapter and page numbers in the article refer to *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Ezra Taft Benson*.

"I'd Like to Marry a Farmer"

In the fall of 1920, 21-year-old Ezra Taft Benson traveled from his family's farm in Whitney, Idaho, USA, to Logan, Utah, where he enrolled at the Utah Agricultural College (now Utah State University). One day when he was with some friends on the school's

campus, a young woman stole his attention. He later recalled:

"We were out by the dairy barns when a young woman—very attractive and beautiful—drove by in her little car on her way to the dairy to get some milk. As the boys waved at her, she waved back. I said, 'Who is that girl?' They said 'That's Flora Amussen.'

"I told them, 'You know, I've just had the impression I'm going to marry her.'"

Ezra's friends were amused by this announcement. They said, "She's too popular for a farm boy." His response? "That makes it all the more interesting."³

Ezra's friends couldn't have been more wrong in their judgment of Flora Amussen. Since her teenage years, she had seen something special in men who worked the land. One day when her mother, Barbara, told her "that she could not attain the highest degree of glory without celestial marriage, Flora replied, perhaps naively but with some insight, 'Then I want to marry a poor man materially, but rich spiritually, so we can get what we get together.' After a pause she added, 'I'd like to marry a farmer.'"⁴

Flora and Ezra met later in 1920, and their friendship soon became courtship. In Ezra Taft Benson, Flora found a young man who had begun to accumulate the spiritual riches she valued so much. And as she must have expected, the roots of his spiritual strength went deep into the soil of his family's farm.

Working Together to Put God First

Just when Flora and Ezra were beginning to grow closer to each other, they learned that they would be separated for two years. Ezra received a call to serve in the British Mission.

To read accounts of Ezra Taft Benson's service as a full-time missionary, see pages 9–10 and 103–4 in the manual. To read about his service in post-World War II Europe during his apostleship, see pages 17–21, 54–55, 69–70, 264, and 268.



He and Flora were excited about his opportunity to serve, and they “talked about their relationship. They wanted their friendship to continue, but they also recognized the need for Ezra to be a devoted missionary. ‘Before I left, Flora and I had decided to write [letters] only once a month,’ he said. ‘We also decided that our letters would be of encouragement, confidence and news. We did just that.’”⁵

In approaching the mission call this way, they exemplified a truth Ezra would teach the Saints many years later: “When we put God first, all other things fall into their proper place or drop out of our lives. Our love of the Lord will govern the claims for our affection, the demands on our time, the interests we pursue, and the order of our priorities.”⁶

As Ezra approached the end of his mission, he and Flora looked forward to seeing each other. But Flora “did more than anticipate the immediate prospect of spending time with him. She truly looked forward—to his future and his potential. . . . She was happy with Ezra’s apparent desire to settle on the family farm in Whitney, Idaho. However, she felt that he needed to finish his education first.”⁷ In her effort to help him do so, she joined him in putting God first. Less than a year after he returned from his mission, she surprised him by telling him that she was going to serve a mission herself. To learn more about her decision, see pages 10–11.

A Diamond in the Rough

Flora and Ezra were sealed in the Salt Lake Temple on September 10, 1926. Despite Ezra’s innate goodness and his success in school, “some people continued to question Flora’s judgment. They did not understand



Top: Young Ezra Taft Benson, before receiving a mission call. Above and right: As an Apostle he helped serve the people in post-World War II Europe.

why someone so accomplished, wealthy, and popular would settle for a farm boy. But she continued to say that she had ‘always wanted to marry a farmer.’ Ezra ‘was practical, sensible and solid,’ she said. And, she observed, ‘He was sweet to his parents, and I knew if he respected them, he’d respect me.’ She recognized that he was ‘a diamond in the rough,’ and she said, ‘I am going to do all within my power to help him be known and felt for good, not only in this little community but for the entire world to know him.’”⁸

With this vision of her husband’s potential, Flora happily went wherever they needed to go to provide for their children and serve the Church, their community, and their nation. This sometimes required her to live a simpler life than she had been accustomed to, but she embraced the challenge.

For example, on their wedding day, “the only festivity . . . was a breakfast for family and friends. After the breakfast, the new



Elder Ezra Taft Benson served as U.S. secretary of agriculture while also serving as an Apostle. To read about these responsibilities, see pages 21–25 and 47–48.



Top: President Benson among the Saints. Left and above: Serving as United States secretary of agriculture.

couple left immediately in their Model T Ford pickup truck for Ames, Iowa,” where Ezra would pursue a master’s degree in agricultural economics. “Along the way, they spent eight nights in a leaky tent. When they arrived in Ames, they rented an apartment one block from the college campus. The apartment was small, and the Bensons shared the space with a large family of cockroaches, but Ezra said that ‘it soon looked like the coziest little cottage one could ever imagine.’”⁹

As Ezra became more “diamond” and less “rough,” he became increasingly more involved in service outside the home. This led to a refining process for Flora as well. When he was away she sometimes struggled with loneliness and discouragement. But she loved being a wife and mother, and she expressed gratitude for her husband’s goodness and for his devotion to the family. To learn more about Flora and Ezra’s early marriage and parenthood, see pages 12–15.

Two Life-Changing Phone Calls

On July 27, 1943, Flora received a phone call from her husband. He was in Salt Lake City, Utah, preparing to return from a business trip with their son Reed. She was at their home near Washington, D.C., about 2,000 miles (3,200 km) away. After a sleepless night full of prayer and tears, he telephoned to let her know that the previous day he had been called to serve as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

The news did not surprise Flora. She “had had a strong impression that something of magnitude would happen on [her husband’s] trip.”¹⁰ She expressed confidence in Ezra, and her words had a calming effect on him. He later recalled: “It was reassuring to talk to her. She has always shown more faith in me than I have myself.”¹¹

Even though Flora had confidence in her husband, she knew he could not fulfill his calling alone—he needed support from his family and strength from heaven. At one general conference, a whispered message demonstrated Flora’s love for her husband and her understanding of his reliance on the Lord (see pages 48–49).

Flora received another life-changing phone call from her husband on November 24, 1952. This time he was visiting the Washington, D.C., area, and she was at their home in Salt Lake City. Dwight D. Eisenhower, who would soon begin his service as president of the United States, had just asked Elder Benson to serve as his secretary of agriculture, a high-ranking position that would require great sacrifice and dedication. Elder Benson accepted the position, having been counseled to do so by the President of



the Church, David O. McKay (1873–1970).

When Elder Benson told Flora that President-Elect Eisenhower had offered him a position and that he had accepted, she replied, “I knew he would. And I knew you would accept.” She acknowledged that it would be difficult for the family but added, “It seems to be God’s will.”¹²

Elder Benson served as secretary of agriculture for eight years. During that time, the family endured periods of separation, and Elder Benson had to deal with the criticism and adulation that often accompany public service. The Bensons received great opportunities. For example, Elder Benson once took Flora and their daughters Beverly and Bonnie on a four-week trip in which he worked to establish trade relations with 12 different countries (see pages 181–82). An invitation from a news reporter led to a unique missionary experience for the family (see page 24).



Equal Instruments in the Hands of the Lord

Like all Presidents of the Church, Ezra Taft Benson was foreordained for his calling. But on his own he could not have fulfilled that foreordination or served with such strength. Certainly no other person influenced him as much as Flora did. In the Church and in their family, they worked

side by side as powerful instruments in the Lord’s hands.

Just as President and Sister Benson kneeled together when they learned that he would preside over the Church, they worked together to “move the work forward in the earth.”¹³ As she had hoped when she was a teenager, they got what they wanted—together.¹⁴

From the pulpit, President Benson exhorted Latter-day Saints to flood the earth and their lives with the Book of Mormon (see chapters 9–10). At home, Flora read the Book of Mormon to him every day, and then they discussed what they had read.¹⁵ From the pulpit, President Benson urged the Saints to regularly serve and worship in the temple (see chapter 13). Privately, Flora and

Ezra Benson attended the temple every Friday morning when they were able to do so.¹⁶ From the pulpit, President Benson warned of the sin of pride and the “applause of the world.”¹⁷ But even though Flora had succeeded in helping “the entire world to know him,”¹⁸ they were content, together, with the quiet “applause of heaven.”¹⁹

President Ezra Taft Benson delivered hundreds of sermons as an Apostle and President of the Church. It is difficult to imagine any of those sermons without the influence of that three-word sermon he delivered on November 11, 1985: “Flora and I.” ■

NOTES

1. Sheri L. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson: A Biography* (1987), 479.
2. Ezra Taft Benson, in Don L. Searle, “President Ezra Taft Benson Ordained Thirteenth President of the Church,” *Ensign*, Dec. 1985, 5.
3. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Ezra Taft Benson* (2014), 7–8.
4. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson*, 74–75.
5. *Teachings: Ezra Taft Benson*, 8.
6. *Teachings: Ezra Taft Benson*, 40.
7. *Teachings: Ezra Taft Benson*, 10.
8. *Teachings: Ezra Taft Benson*, 11–12.
9. *Teachings: Ezra Taft Benson*, 12.
10. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson*, 176.
11. Ezra Taft Benson, in *Teachings: Ezra Taft Benson*, 16.
12. Flora Amussen Benson, in *Teachings: Ezra Taft Benson*, 23.
13. Ezra Taft Benson, in Searle, “President Ezra Taft Benson Ordained Thirteenth President of the Church,” 5.
14. See Flora Amussen Benson, in Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson*, 74–75.
15. See Derin Head Rodriguez, “Flora Amussen Benson: Handmaiden of the Lord, Helpmeet of a Prophet, Mother in Zion,” *Ensign*, Mar. 1987, 20.
16. See Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson*, 511.
17. *Teachings: Ezra Taft Benson*, 229.
18. *Teachings: Ezra Taft Benson*, 11–12.
19. *Teachings: Ezra Taft Benson*, 229.