

Santa Clara, Utah's Little Relief Society House

The Santa Clara Relief Society was organized by Bishop Edward Bunker on May 16, 1868 with sixty-four members enrolled. Two years later, October 9, 1870, the Society purchased a city lot for the sum of \$150.00 and planted mulberry trees with the intention of raising silkworms as President Brigham Young had suggested. This lot was where the Santa Clara Merc. is now located. Here they built a two-story adobe structure with gable ends on the east and west. The front faced the main road through town and was plastered inside and out. There were steps at the back leading to the large upper room where the silkworms were raised. The ground floor of the building was divided into three rooms, the center section having bins where wheat was stored; for at that time the women of the Church were asked to store wheat against a time of need. The other rooms were used for the Relief Society meetings.

After twenty-two years the silkworm project was not profitable and the mulberry trees were dug up and grapevines planted. The large upper room was used as living quarters for the Prehner family and for at least two years (1892-1894) for the younger grades of school, with Lydia Eva Knight Graff as the teacher.

On March 25, 1906 a special meeting was held with the Bishopric to discuss buying the lot where this little Relief Society House now stands. The Bishop offered to purchase and secure a deed to this building spot in contemplation of exchanging the same for the Ward. This plot was on the southwest corner of John Gubler's property and adjoined the Public Square. John would sell it to them for the sum of \$50.00, with the stipulation that when the building was no longer needed for Relief Society it would be returned to the Gubler family. This offer was accepted by the Relief Society officers. It was agreed in this meeting, by all present, that the Relief Society would place their means, including wheat on hand, in the hands of the Bishopric and they would carefully take down the old house, which was very dilapidated, and build a new one on the spot selected. The material in the old house that was not used in building the new one was to be sold at auction, as also the wheat bins. The Bishop, John G. Hafen and Counselors, Edward R. Frei Sr., and John S. Stucki, agreed that it was no necessary for the women to store wheat in the future since there was no profit in it and it made a good deal of work for them.

As there were no Ward funds on hand it was decided that the Relief Society would forward to the Bishop the \$50.00 cash for the lot and the Bishop return the same amount in labor on the new building.

The new building was constructed of adobe at a cost of \$800.00 under the able direction of President Eliza Ann Ensign, and was dedicated on June 5, 1908 by George F. Whitehead, a member of the St. George Stake Presidency. At this time President Whitehead reported that the Relief Society was free from debt.

This building was a small, one-roomed structure, but large in the amount of good done by the Sisters. Much distress and sorrow was alleviated through the efforts of the members. "CHARITY NEVER FAILETH" being the slogan of this benevolent organization. Many welfare projects were participated in and projects to earn money for a new chapel were carried on. The records state that on March 21, 1912 Bishop John G. Hafen said this Santa Clara Relief Society stood first in the St. George Stake as donors to the Stake Academy, now known as Dixie College.

Through the years it has not only been used for relief Society but for many other purposes. When the old one-roomed chapel (built in 1902) was too small to accommodate the population, this building was used for classes in Sunday School, Primary, and MIA. It was also used as a school classroom until 1913 when the new, modern cement-block school house was constructed. It was even used as sort of makeshift clinic and hospital. In 1939 when Lizzie Reber was so seriously ill from an infectious disease and conditions in her home were very unsatisfactory, it was deemed unwise to have her in a private home. Cecilia E. Tobler and Pearl Bauer said they would care for here if she could be housed in this little building, which was directly across the highway from Cecilia's home. Arrangements were made and they cared for her until her death on December 3. During the late 1930's until the early 1950's, it was used as a clinic for the preschool children, where they were weighed, measured and given shots for the various children's diseases. Later on it was used as the Post Office. Jessie Frei had served as Postmistress for many years, having the office in the north part of her home. After her death on November 15, 1953 the postoffice was moved into this little building until such time as other arrangements could be made, Max Hunt having been appointed to take her place.

This little building served as home for the Relief Society for almost forty-one years--through two World Wars and the Great Depression. Because of World War II, building a new chapel had to be deferred, so the little structure had to be renovated. It was resingled, painted inside and out, cupboards installed and a Red Cross cupboard built into the northwest corner--the carpenter work being donated by a civic-minded citizen Mr. E.C. Gates. New curtains were purchased and shrubs and flowers planted at the front of the building.

It wasn't until 1949 that the long-awaited new chapel was completed and the first Relief Society meeting held there on February 1. What a joy and satisfaction that was! At this time the building was turned back to the John Gubler family as stipulated in 1906.

Presidents who served in this small house-of-all-purposes were:

Rosina Blickenstorfer Hafen, Francis Helen Wilson Hafen, Freda Reber Stucki, Otilia Ence Tobler, Selina Gubler Hafen, Cecilia Ence Tobler and Lila Hafen Reber. This building was small in structure, but large in building testimonies. Many joyous times were experienced along with some trying times and heartaches from deaths and anxieties caused by the War Years. Though small, it served us well and we are hoping that it can be saved as historic building--for that it is!! ---Nellie M. Gubler
(April 1990)