

# **Agnes Armstrong Leckie Mason Beals**

Franklin P. Mason II, 1994

Agnes Armstrong Leckie was born on December 20, 1914 in Cleveland, Ohio. She was born at home on Earl Avenue. Her parents were John Taylor Leckie and Sophia Irvine Leckie. Her parents were both born in Scotland; they came to the United States in 1905. Agnes had black hair and sky-blue eyes, which is a typical combination for Scots. Agnes was named for her maternal grandmother, Agnes Armstrong. Agnes was one of six children, three boys and three girls. She is survived by one of her siblings, William Irvine Leckie, who is 83 years old. Agnes's father was a master stone mason, with his own business. And her mother was homemaker, with an active social life.

Agnes was always very close to her mother. In the late thirties, most of the Leckie clan moved to New York City and the surrounding area. From then until her mother's death, Agnes and her mother were never separated by much distance or for very long. Their relationship was very loving and peaceful.

Agnes was the fifth of the six children in her family. Her younger sibling was a boy, James Alexander Leckie, who was two years younger than she was. As young children, Agnes and Jimmy were inseparable. They went everywhere together and did everything together. In fact, all six Leckie children were very close to one another and a very important part of each other's lives. Even in the mid 40's when they were all adults with their own spouses and children, they got together at holidays and helped each other with major projects. In the 50's and 60's Agnes became especially close to her older sister, Janet Thomson Leckie, who continued to live nearby. One talent the sisters had was they could both talk at the same time and understand each other perfectly. This made for very concentrated and intense conversations that they both enjoyed immeasurably.

As a girl, Agnes was something of a tomboy. She taught herself to roller skate at a young age, and later she rode her bicycle two miles to school and all around her neighborhood in Cleveland. When she was in Junior High School, Agnes would borrow her older brother's baseball, gloves, and bat and organize a baseball game at recess. Because she brought the equipment, she insisted on being the pitcher. She insisted, that is, until one day when a batter hit a line drive right back to the mound that hit her in the stomach and knocked her out! After that, she didn't mind so much if someone else pitched.

Also in Junior High School, Agnes belonged to a dramatics club. In all of the productions, she was chosen as the leading lady. For example, she played the Infanta (princess) in a play about the Spanish royal court.

All the Leckie children were good students, and Agnes was no exception. Agnes got straight A's throughout her elementary and secondary education.

In 1933, Agnes matriculated at Barnard College in New York City. In 1933, the Great Depression was near its bottom. Construction of all types had come to a standstill and therefore, she took a battery of exams and, on the basis of the results, she won a 100% scholarship to Barnard. While at Barnard, Agnes baby-sat for several of the professors. The baby-sitting money she earned she sent home to ease the desperate financial situation there.

Agnes's major at Barnard was political science, but she, naturally, took a wide variety of courses. One of her favorite courses was Geology.

Also at Barnard, Agnes played the part of Buttercup in a production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore*.

In her junior year at Barnard, Agnes ran for President of the Student Body. She was very popular with her fellow students, but she had gained a reputation for being outspoken and for challenging the status quo. Therefore, the administration at the college opposed her candidacy, and supported another young woman for the post. Because of the administration's support, the other candidate won.

Agnes was indignant at the unfairness of her treatment by the Barnard College administration. Therefore, she left school after her junior year and joined a "Peace Crusade", what today would be like a VISTA program, in North Carolina.

Agnes then went on to become Extracurricular Activities Director at a small junior college in Alabama. At the college she started a newspaper that had a circulation in the three surrounding counties (which had no other local paper). She also organized a choir and put on plays. And because social dancing was forbidden (recall that it was Alabama in 1936), she arranged for roller skates to be sent to the college, and she started a weekly roller-skating social, which the students really enjoyed.

In the spring of 1937, after one year in the South, Agnes returned to New York City, where she got a job at International Nickel. Her job was to keep the company mailing lists up to date.

During that time also, Agnes worked on weekends at Coney Island Amusement Park doing handwriting analyses, which was a novelty at that time. She continued her studies in the field of graphology for many years, and she became quite skilled in the science and art of graphology. And in the 1950's Agnes was to use this talent to publish handwriting analyses of celebrities in *Town and Country Magazine*.

Employees at Coney Island were allowed to go on all the rides after the park closed. So on the days she worked there, Agnes would ride every roller coaster in the park starting at midnight. And the Coney Island roller coasters were some of the biggest and best in the country at that time!

After she returned to New York City, Agnes met Willard F. Mason, an engineering student at Brooklyn Polytechnic College. On their dates, Agnes and Bill often went roller skating. Once, they went on a train trip from New York to Washington, D.C. There they rented a bicycle-built-for-two on which they toured the Capitol.

In 1938, Agnes and Bill were married. Shortly after their marriage, Bill received his engineering degree. In 1938, the Great Depression had not yet ended and times were still tough, even for bright young engineers. Therefore, for the first several months of their marriage, Bill worked in a grocery store. And the newlywed's apartment was furnished with orange crates from the store.

In those early years, as Bill changed jobs, Agnes and Bill lived in various places in New York: on Fire Island, in New York City, in Ossining, in Hempstead, and finally in Farmingdale. And in those early years, Agnes and Bill had four children; Willard Leckie Mason born 1938, Janet Thomson Mason, born 1940; Franklin Pierce Mason, born 1942; and Genevieve Barnes Mason, born 1945. Bill used to say, "A new job, a new home, and a new baby."

In 1947, the pattern repeated itself again. Bill got a new job, this time in Connecticut, Agnes and Bill moved to Westport, Connecticut, and their fifth child, David Irvine Mason, was born. The family was to stay in Westport for the next 20 years.

In 1948, Agnes's first child, Willard, was hit by a car and killed. Willard's death affected Agnes very deeply. She went into seclusion for several weeks of mourning. After the mourning period, however, she snapped back with the resilience that was characteristic of her for her entire life, and she rejoined normal family activities.

In 1952, Agnes and Bill had their sixth (and final) child, James Hildreth Mason.

From the time of her marriage, Agnes was a homemaker and mother. She was also active in the PTA and, in Westport, was active in the preschool activities at Saugatuck Congregational Church. Finally, Agnes became director of the preschool program at the church.

For some time relations between Agnes and Bill had been deteriorating, and in 1952, Agnes and Bill were divorced.

After the divorce, Agnes remained active in the church school and, in addition, began to teach part time in a nursery school. In both of these activities, Agnes wrote songs for the children she was teaching. At this time, Agnes had a tremendous outpouring of creativity, and she wrote many, many songs. The culmination of this creativity was a songbook, *God's Wonderful World* which was published by Random House in 1954. The book was very well received, being adopted as the official preschool songbook by several Christian denominations.

Agnes was always a very adventuresome person. In the summers of 1955 through 1958, she, alone with her five children, went traveling throughout the United States. In 1955, the family visited several Southern states. That first year, the trip was for four weeks and the family stayed in cabins. In subsequent years, the family went *camping* for the entire 12-week summer vacation.

In those days, camping meant staying in a tent and sleeping on the ground with few or no amenities in the campgrounds. In 1956, the family returned to the South for a more extensive visit, going from Connecticut to Florida and back by a circuitous route.

On the trips to the South, the combination of Agnes's gregariousness and Southern hospitality resulted in the family meeting many Southern families. Agnes and her kids were invited to fish fries, to local church services, and so on.

In 1957, Agnes and family went all the way from Connecticut to California and back, visiting many of the National Parks: Yellowstone, Yosemite and the Grand Canyon, to mention a few. One morning at Yellowstone, the campsite was visited by a friendly brown bear. Agnes was brushing her teeth. When she saw the bear she ran at it waving her toothbrush and she scared the bear away.

In 1956, at the age of 42, Agnes decided to return to school to get a degree in education. In June of 1958, after two years as a full-time student, she received her degree, with honors, from the University of Bridgeport. Because of the uniqueness of her accomplishment for the time--returning to school and earning a degree despite the fact that she had five children--Agnes received personal congratulations from the commencement speaker, Connecticut Senator Prescott Bush, father of the future President, George Bush.

After receiving her degree, Agnes taught at an elementary school in Fairfield, Connecticut. Agnes taught for ten years, from 1958 to 1968, Kindergarten and First and Second grades. She was a successful teacher, always introducing new techniques into the classroom. For example, she was one of the first teachers in the U.S. to use Cuisenaire rods to teach mathematics to small children. For several years, Agnes taught children who were considered to be slow in their studies. However, after a year in Agnes's classroom, most of these supposedly not-so-bright kids scored average or better than average in the yearly standardized tests.

In 1960, Agnes was stricken with arthritis. At first, it did not affect her life significantly. She continued to teach and to carry on her normal daily activities. But gradually, it crippled her more and more, until she was forced to give up most activities. She had to use crutches to walk, and she had difficulty getting into and out of a car, so it was difficult for her to drive. Finally, she had to give up teaching altogether.

The arthritis had Agnes down but definitely not out! In 1968, Agnes met Clyde Beals, a retired newspaper publisher. Agnes and Clyde had a whirlwind courtship that culminated in marriage and an around-the-world honeymoon trip. Agnes on her crutches, with Clyde at her side, visited places such as New Zealand, Bali, India, and Greece before returning to the U.S. That trip was, needless to say, one of the highlights of Agnes's life.

After the honeymoon trip, Agnes and Clyde bought a home in Palm Springs, California, where they lived for a couple of years. Unfortunately, Clyde became senile and could no longer carry on a normal life, and Agnes could not care for him because of her illness. Therefore, Clyde left Palm Springs to live with his son in the East.

Agnes stayed on in Palm Springs for a while longer. But finally, she could not maintain the home there. She had lost her ability to walk, and thus she was confined to a wheelchair.

After Agnes left Palm Springs, she moved to the Long Beach area to be near her son, David. David set her up in an apartment and arranged for in-home nursing care. Agnes lived in the Long Beach area for about 18 years. During that time, she engaged in various activities. For example, Agnes took television courses in Spanish and music appreciation.

It was while she was in Long Beach that Agnes joined the Church of Latter Day Saints. The LDS Church was of great importance to Agnes for many reasons, not the least of which was the companionship and love of other members of the church.

Agnes's physical condition continued to deteriorate during the years she lived in Long Beach. Finally, Agnes could not write, even to sign her name, or get out of bed, even to sit in a wheelchair. Therefore, it was impossible for her to maintain her own home. In addition, her main support, her son David, had also become ill. Therefore, it was clear that it was time for a change.

In 1988, Agnes moved to Julia Convalescent Hospital in Mountain View, California to be near her son, Franklin, who lived with his family in Sunnyvale. At first, because of her physical condition and because she missed having her own home, Agnes was withdrawn and quiet.

Julia, however, provided a very supportive atmosphere. The administration and staff encouraged Agnes to sit up in a wheelchair and to engage in the activities available to the residents. Agnes was given physical therapy and she began to see that she could build a new life at Julia.

Within about a year, Agnes was able to sit up in a wheelchair for most of the day, and she engaged in the activities to such an extent that she became President of the Resident's Council! Therefore, in the end, her leadership qualities were recognized, and the position denied her in college was bestowed upon her at Julia. After that, Agnes participated in all the activities at Julia, literally until the day she died.

Agnes's son, Franklin, his wife Tina, and their family visited Agnes frequently at Julia. And in fact, Agnes watched the family grow in number as well as size over the years. Two babies were born to the family after Agnes came to Julia. Agnes met the new babies when they were just one day old and watched them grow to be six years and four years before she died.

In 1990, Agnes's son David died. So, for the second time, Agnes had to bear the grief of a child's death.

Julia Convalescent Hospital was a godsend to Agnes. The administration and staff all loved her very much and she loved them like family. And Agnes had many visitors who became her friends. Some brought spiritual comfort, some read to her, some took her for walks, and yet another helped her plant a garden. Each person in his or her way brought comfort and happiness to Agnes's life. And Agnes appreciated them all very much.

About six months before Agnes died, she suffered a debilitating stroke. Although she never lost her awareness or sharpness of mind, the stroke left her unable to speak effectively. She would get out half a sentence and then be unable to finish it. This inability to communicate must have been very difficult for her, but she took it in her stride. She would laugh heartily and shrug her shoulders when she was unable to finish a sentence, inasmuch as to say, "well, I guess it doesn't matter anyway."

After this last stroke, Agnes gained a real peace, a peace that had perhaps eluded her until then in her life. Laughing and shrugging was one sign of the peace she felt but there were others. She no longer worried about anything. She just let it be.

Which is not to say that she gave up on life! Five days before her death, Agnes attended the Cinco de Mayo festival dressed for the occasion in her poncho. On the day before she died, even though she was having gastrointestinal problems, she attended the Mother's Day Tea. And even on the morning of the day she died, she got up to sit in her wheel chair.

Agnes Leckie Mason Beals died on May 9, 1994, in her 80th year. Her death came quickly. And the peace she had gained was with her when she died. Agnes passed away very quietly and peacefully. May she rest in peace and with the love of God.