

# Swansea-born Lizzie Thomas Edward sings for the President of the United States

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Christened Mary Elizabeth, 'Lizzie' Thomas was born in Swansea in 1866 to



Thomas Parry Thomas and his wife Sarah. The family lived in Aberdyberthi Street, Hafod, at the time of the 1871 census but shortly thereafter emigrated to America. Converts to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints ['Mormons'] since before their marriage, Thomas and Sarah took their young family to Liverpool for passage aboard the *Wyoming*,<sup>1</sup> heading for Salt Lake City in what was then Utah Territory. Early converts to the 'Mormon' church were encouraged to emigrate to strengthen the

church in America and avoid the opposition they all too often encountered to their 'new' religion. The Thomas family were among thousands of Welsh converts who left home between 1845 and 1900. They would have found Salt Lake City to be a well-established, bustling place of about 13,000 souls, which would almost double its population within ten years. They arrived by train, as the Transcontinental Railroad had been completed, shortening the journey from months to just a few weeks.

The Thomas family were evidently musical. Lizzie, her brother Moroni and her sister Sadie sang with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir<sup>2</sup>. And at age 15 Lizzie was singing solo, featuring in the programmes for both the capstone ceremony for the Salt Lake City temple, and a year later at the temple dedication. She would go on to a lifetime of musical performances and

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://mormonmigration.lib.byu.edu/mii/voyage/491?page=2&query=thomas+parry+thomas>

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://www.mormontabernaclechoir.org/about/choir/roster.all.e.html>

teaching, but as a member of the choir she was also part of two historical firsts.

The Tabernacle Choir had been formed in 1849, under the direction of Welshman John Parry. But for the first forty years of its existence it was largely a local choir, performing to 'Mormon' communities in the mountain west. This only changed in 1893, when the choir competed and took second place at the World's Fair in Chicago. Its growing reputation led to the choir being part of the first sound recording of a large choral group in 1909.<sup>3</sup>

The phonograph had been invented by Thomas Edison in 1877, and was capable of recording the human voice. But early microphones were unable to cope with music. As the technology developed, soloists were recorded, with very large flared horns focusing the sound into the acoustic recording device. By 1909 *Columbia* was ready to attempt recording a large group of singers and offered the Tabernacle Choir the honour of being part of the historic event. Two enormous horns were suspended from a rope stretched across the Salt Lake Tabernacle where the experiment took place: one focused on the women's voices; the other on the mens'. The ladies had to remove their hats, so they could stand closer together. Soloists Lizzie Thomas Edward and Horace Ensign stood to the front of the singers. The experiment was considered a great success, with *Columbia* beating its main rivals *Victor* and *Edison* as the first recording company to capture a choral performance.

But two years later, Lizzie was also part of another historical first. In October-November 1911, two hundred members of the Tabernacle Choir travelled 3,000 miles to the east coast to sing at the *American Land and Irrigation Exposition* in Madison Square



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<sup>3</sup> Richard E. Turley, Jr. 'The First Mormon Tabernacle Choir Recordings, 1910.' *The Ensign*, September 2010. Available online at: <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2010/09/the-first-mormon-tabernacle-choir-recordings-1910?lang=eng>

Gardens,<sup>4</sup> under the direction of Welshman Evan Stephens. It was a demanding engagement. Not only did they perform four concerts a day for 10 days, but as they travelled across the continent by train, they stopped to give concerts in 25 cities. One of these was Washington DC, and although President William H. Taft was scheduled to be away on their appointed day in DC, at the last minute the choir was summoned to the White House. The President was in fact 'at home;' he and his wife with 50 guests would be pleased to hear the choir perform. This was the first time the Tabernacle Choir sang in the White House. The programme included both classical and popular songs, as well as an original piece by Evan Stephens. Mrs Lizzie Thomas Edward sang *The Kiss* by Luigi Arditti.

Lizzie died in Salt Lake City on 23rd July 1936, age 70.<sup>5</sup> She was survived by her husband of 45 years, John Taylor Edward, and her foster daughter Margie, as well as grandchildren. It was more than 60 years since she had left Swansea as a young girl, but she had enjoyed a very successful musical career as a member of the Tabernacle Choir, a music teacher, the conductor of a women's choir, and a soloist at more than 3,000 funerals.<sup>6</sup> She was also part of the first sound recording of a large group of singers, and as far as we know the first Swansea girl to sing for the President of the United States of America.

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<sup>4</sup> A full account of this trip was serialised in the *Juvenile Instructor*, beginning in March 1912, and can be found online at: <https://archive.org/details/juvenileinstructor>

<sup>5</sup> 'Leading Choir Soprano Soloist Dies after Operation.' *Salt Lake Tribune*, 25 July 1936. Online at: <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/10822493/>

<sup>6</sup> Further details of her life can be seen at: <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/KWJZ-5GK/memories>