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The NAUVOO ROAD

By

C. Frank Steele

here except go to meeting—Tuesday morning. I find I must close my letter as there is a chance to send [it] immediately to the village. My request to you is that if you have not a Bible that you purchase one and read it carefully as the word of God and pray to God that you may be directed in wisdom. If you should have a chance to hear a Mormon elder preach, go and hear him without prejudice and do not despise your mother for believing them until you have heard them yourself but prove all things and hold fast that which is good. I must close by subscribing. Your affectionate mother,

O. Higley.

* * *

Attica, N. Y., Feb. 25, 1844.

... Samuel, it would gladden my heart to see your face again, and I do cherish a hope that I shall know what your feelings are with respect to our being Mormons. I have thought whether that did affect you, but I think I could convince you if I could have a chance to talk with you that we are not deluded but that we are the true believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ, for it is in believing and obeying the gospel of Jesus Christ that will gain us an inheritance in the celestial kingdom of God. You need not be afraid of offending me but tell me your feelings on the subject plainly. . . .

* * *

LaHarpe, Ill., Sept. 1, 1844.

Dear Son: I now embrace an opportunity of writing to let you know how we get along. We arrived here the second day of July being five weeks on the roads . . . you probably have heard of the death of the Prophet. We arrived just in time to attend his funeral. We were obliged to take the boat at Ottawa and we landed at Nauvoo. I cannot describe to you the heart-rending scene nor do I believe there has been such a day of mourning since the day our Savior was crucified. It was truly heart-rending, not a dry eye to be seen, sorrow and mourning was depicted on every countenance. Yes, we have met with the greatest loss in the death of Joseph and Hyrum Smith that can be felt by us. The two most righteous men on the earth are taken from us by a ruthless mob, and they are not contented with that, they threaten more, to exterminate the rest from the state. How it will be we know not but must leave the event to God who orders all things for the best. . .

This from your affectionate mother,

O. Higley.

THE Nauvoo Road—ever hear of it? Possibly not, and yet western Ontario, Canada, has a highway called the "Nauvoo Trail" even today, reminiscent of a very early migration of Latter-day Saints from the dominion. I will tell you more of it later; meanwhile, let us recall some of the beginnings of the church in Canada. This will give a necessary background to a hitherto little-known incident in church history.

Canada was one of the first missionary fields of the church in this dispensation. This is but natural in view of the proximity of Canada to those sections of the United States in which the church had its beginnings.

The opening of the British Mission, as is well known, was closely linked with the preaching of the gospel in Upper Canada, the area now covered by the province of Ontario. Lower Canada was Quebec. Three years after the church was organized, Elder Orson Pratt carried the message of the restoration to Canada. In the fall of the same year, 1833, the Prophet Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon crossed the border into Upper Canada, and this brief mission resulted in a number of baptisms and paved the way for further work in that area.

However, the greatest impetus to the work in Upper Canada came in 1836 when that zealous missionary, Parley P. Pratt, made many converts and strengthened the branches. It was at this time that that man of destiny, John Taylor, later an apostle, confidant of the Prophet Joseph and the third president of the church, received the gospel and joined the church. This was the city of Toronto. Through a marvelous shaping of events many years later—1886 to be precise—this same Canadian convert, now head of the church, directed President Charles Ora Card of the Cache Stake, then the most northerly stake in the church, to go to Canada rather than to Mexico as he had planned, to seek a gathering place for the Saints on British soil. He assured President Card the Saints would find "British justice" there at a time when they were being sorely tried in the United States. Under this inspired counsel the settlements were founded beginning with Cardston in 1887.

But to return to that early missionary work in the vicinity of Toronto. During his mission there, Elder Pratt numbered among his converts Joseph Fielding and his sisters, Mary, who later married Hyrum Smith the patriarch, and Mercy. Through these and other Canadian converts, relatives in England were told of the restored gospel and when the first missionaries

landed in Britain the field was already "white for the harvest."

SOME new and valuable data on the beginnings of the church in Canada came to my attention recently in a volume, *Western Ontario and the American Frontier*, by Prof. Fred Landon of the University of Western Ontario at London, Ontario. This is a regional study of the ebb and flow of ideas and peoples across the international boundary and is one in a series of treatises undertaken for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, division of economics and history.

In discussing the religious scene in the 1830's, Professor Landon deals with a number of movements in western Ontario, among them the Mormons. His comment, although brief, is interesting. He says:

Mormonism quickly spread from its birthplace in New York state in Upper Canada. Missionaries were reported at work in the Kingston district as early as 1833 while between 1833 and 1835, when Canadian Methodism was somewhat upset by the competition of Wesleyan missionaries, the Yonge Street Circuit (Toronto) lost heavily to the Mormons, the membership declining from 951 in 1833 to 578 in 1836.

Through the decade after 1830 there are frequent references in the press to Mormon activities in the province. The village of Churchillville in the Home district, was a stronghold of the belief with frequent meetings and baptisms. At Mersea in the Detroit River area, the Mormons were apparently unpopular, for an attack made upon them in 1838 was recorded in the *Western Herald*, published at Sandwich (issue of October 9, 1838).

And now comes the reference to the "Nauvoo Road." Professor Landon continues:

In Lambton County, near the St. Clair River, the preaching of Thomas Borrowman led to an emigration of Canadian Mormons and the road by which they made their exodus to the United States in 1846 is still known as the "Nauvoo Road." The emigrants were chiefly Scottish people who came to Lambton from Lanark County in the eastern part of the province. (Collections of William Nisbet of Sarnia, Ont., read before the Lambton County Historical Society.) Joining their fellow religionists at Nauvoo, Illinois, the Mormon "New Jerusalem," they became part of the larger migration to the new city of refuge in the valley of the Great Salt Lake. The gaunt framework of an old mill on the Sydenham River near Alvington, Ontario, is all that remains now to recall this Mormon community of 1836.