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The Third Witness

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Abstract: This article chronicles the final years of Martin Harris's life and his journey to Utah. Harris spoke to congregations bearing his witness of the Book of Mormon. He died in July 1870 and was buried with a Book of Mormon in one hand and a Doctrine and Covenants in the other.

The THIRD WITNESS

By

BERTHA S.
STEVENSON

THE story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon is an ever new, ever interesting one to the Latter-day Saints. The plates from which this book was translated were shown only to a privileged few, and these were commanded to bear witness that they had seen them.

The three witnesses, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and Martin Harris did as they were commanded. Through all the stress of early day persecution, and under all conditions throughout their lives they were steadfast to that which they had witnessed, that they had beheld the plates and the engravings thereon.

Martin Harris, the third witness, was the only one of the three who came to Utah, and the story of his coming is an interesting bit of church history not generally known. His coming here was accomplished largely through the interest and sympathy of Elder Edward Stevenson, and his appointment to bring him to Utah was the culmination of a friendship born through Martin Harris' testimony to him as a young boy at the impressionable age of his life.

With the announcement of an Aaronic Priesthood pilgrimage to the grave of Martin Harris in celebration of the one hundred and fifth anniversary of the restoration of that Priesthood, this story of his coming is recalled.

It is from the sermons and writings of Elder Stevenson that we get our most intimate and accurate account of his association with Martin Harris.

He tells us of his first having met him in 1834, when he was a boy,

about fourteen years of age, living in Pontiac, Michigan. Martin Harris had a sister living there whom he went to visit, and while there preached and bore his testimony concerning the Golden Plates. "The people of the neighborhood were much interested and impressed."

There is no record of Elder Stevenson's having seen Martin Harris again until he was a man fifty years of age. He says: "Thirty-six years after this first meeting with Martin Harris, I was back again in the east filling a mission for the Church, and while in Kirtland, I met him as he was coming out of the Temple."

MARTIN HARRIS was by now an old man, eighty-eight years

"Be it known unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people unto whom this work shall come: That we, through the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, have seen the plates which contain this record, which is a record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites, their brethren, and also of the people of Jared. * * And we also know that they have been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us; wherefore we know of a surety that the work is true * * *"

—From the Testimony of the Three Witnesses.



THE PRESIDING BISHOPRIC BY THE FLORAL BOOK OF MORMON CROWDS ASSEMBLED FOR THE CEREMONIES

THE MONUMENT TO MARTIN HARRIS

VERL W. GODFREY PLACING THE FLORAL OFFERING



of age and was very poor. Brother Stevenson says he told him of the growth of the church, and the blessings of membership in it, and bore his testimony to him. He says Martin Harris seemed strongly impressed and "I was moved to compassion for him."

While in Kirtland Brother Stevenson preached to the saints and promised to go back sometime and speak in the Temple.

On his return to Salt Lake City he went to President Young and related his experience, of having seen Martin Harris. He says: "After my arrival in Utah in 1870, I was inspired to write to Martin Harris and soon received a reply and after a few letters had been

exchanged, he wrote saying that the Spirit of God for the first time prompted him to go to Utah. More letters were exchanged and President Brigham Young, having read the letters, through President George A. Smith requested me to get up a subscription and emigrate Martin to Utah, he subscribing twenty-five dollars for that purpose. Having raised the subscription to about two hundred dollars, I took railroad cars for Ohio on the 19th of July, 1870, and on the 10th of August filled my appointment, preaching twice in the Kirtland Temple, and finding Martin Harris elated with his prospective journey."

Martin Harris went around and bade his friends farewell and he and Elder Stevenson started for Salt Lake City. They stopped over in Chicago where Martin Harris bore his testimony of the Golden Plates, and the Saints there bought him a new suit of clothes. At Des Moines, Iowa, they stopped again. A conference was in session there, and a baptismal service was being held. He again bore his testimony and Elder Stevenson says: "I took this opportunity to teach Martin Harris the necessity of being rebaptized, and quoted to him from Revelations, fifth chap-

ter and second verse." In the same article he says: "Many interesting incidents were related by Martin Harris on our journey (from Ohio to Utah in 1870), one of which I will relate."* He told Brother Stevenson that on a certain occasion a group of men had tried to get him drunk and then had said to him: "We want you to be frank regarding this story of your seeing an angel and the Golden Plates," and as always, whenever questioned, he told them that it was true, he had seen the plates.

"On the 30th of August, 1870, Martin Harris arrived in Salt Lake City in the care of Elder Stevenson." After his arrival he continued to bear his testimony, and on Sunday, September 4, 1870, he spoke in the Tabernacle. One of Edward Stevenson's daughters, Mrs. Charles F. Wilcox, remembers having heard him speak. His voice was feeble but he shouted that all might hear as he vehemently pounded the pulpit in his earnestness.

BROTHER STEVENSON says:

"One day Martin Harris came to my home and said he wished to be baptized and also to be baptized

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WHAT was probably the largest gathering of members of the Aaronic Priesthood in the history of the Church assembled at the grave of Martin Harris, one of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon May 19, 1934, as the climax to the observance of Aaronic Priesthood week. This annual celebration commemorates the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood, May 15, 1829. Approximately ten thousand young men, their leaders and friends, joined in the historic pilgrimage and spent an hour at the grave of the man who played such an important part in the early history of the Church.

The pilgrimage was conducted in honor of the 151st anniversary of Elder Harris, who was born May 18, 1783, at Easttown, New York. The grave is at Clarkston, Cache County, Utah, where he died July 10, 1875, at the age of 91. He had lived at Clarkston more than a year before his death.

Members of the Presiding Bishopric, under whose direction the pilgrimage was conducted were the principal speakers at the exercises held at the grave. Presiding Bishop Sylvester Q. Cannon presided and made the opening remarks. Bishop David A. Smith and Bishop John Wells, counselors to Bishop Cannon, made the principal talks. Others participating were Elder John D. Giles, field representative for the Aaronic Priesthood, Elder Ezra T. Stevenson, whose father, Edward Stevenson, was instrumental in bringing Elder Harris to Utah in 1870, and William Pilkington of Smithfield, who as a boy lived in the Harris home and was a witness to the testimony of Martin Harris many times.

A tribute to the memory of the early Church leader was paid in the placing of a large floral piece in the shape of the Book of Mormon on the grave by Verl W. Godfrey of Clarkston, a Priest representing the Aaronic Priesthood of the Church. All heads were bared for one minute. The invocation and benediction were offered by members of the Aaronic Priesthood, Earl Saunders a Priest of Cache Stake and Melvin Nielsen, a Teacher of Logan Stake, officiating. Aaronic Priesthood members also furnished the music as members of the North Cache High School band and the East Jordan Stake Aaronic Priesthood orchestra. The stake Aaronic Priesthood committee of Benson Stake acted as host committee under the direction of the stake presidency.

John E. Godfrey and John Buttars of Clarkston, both over eighty years of age, who heard one of the last testimonies of Martin Harris, were present as guests of honor. Bishop Seymour Thompson, of Clarkston, had charge of local arrangements. Nearly nine hundred automobiles, trucks and busses were counted during the day.—John D. Giles.

for some of his dead kin," and continues: "The baptismal font was prepared and by arrangements I led Martin Harris down into the water and rebaptized him. Five apostles were present, viz: John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, Orson Pratt, George A. Smith and Joseph F. Smith. After baptism Orson Pratt confirmed him, and I joined with the rest of the brethren, by the laying on of hands. After this, on the same day, he was baptized for some of his dead friends and his sister was baptized for some of their female friends."

On one occasion, when a group met at Elder Stevenson's home, Martin Harris was asked to tell the circumstances of his seeing the plates. He said: "The angel stood on the opposite side of the table from the witnesses, and turned the pages one by one." Martin took up a book and turned the pages to illustrate, and continued, "The angel declared that the Book of Mormon was translated correctly by the power of God and not of man and that it contained the fulness of the Gospel. The witnesses were required to bear their testimony of these things," he said.

"Martin Harris went to Smithfield to live with his son, Martin Harris, Jr., and lived the rest of his days in Cache Valley."† His last years were peaceful and he was lovingly cared for. He died July 10th, 1875, at the age of ninety-three, five years after he had come to Utah.

"On the afternoon of his death he was bolstered up in bed, where with a Book of Mormon in his hand, he bore his last testimony to those who were present."

Brother William Harrison Homer, father of Dr. Rose H. Widtsoe, was present on this occasion and has left us his testimony, that the last words of Martin Harris were: "Yes, I did see the plates on which the Book of Mormon was written; I did see the Angel; I did hear the voice of God; and I do know that Joseph Smith is a Prophet of God, holding the Keys to the Holy Priesthood."

Those who dressed him for burial placed a Book of Mormon in his right hand and a Doctrine and Covenants in his left. He was laid away thus, symbolically witnessing in death, that which in life he had never denied.

†History of the Church.