

MORMON PIONEERS-1855

James and Sarah Howell McKnight

by Beverly McKnight Cooper¹

Revised 2009

ORIGIN

James McKnight was born June 8, 1830, in Scotland and Sarah Howell was born December 26, 1833, in Wales. James became a voracious reader, while Sarah reached adulthood illiterate. They met on the Australian frontier.

Times were tough. James was the fifth of seven children. When he was nine years old he was put to work herding sheep for his grandfather. He went home on weekends but never permanently lived at home again. To pay for food and board during his teen years he moved from job to job, eking out a living. Working at a rock granary in Edinburgh, a loaded wagon ran over his foot. The rest of his life he was lame, having to walk on the side of his foot. He had to have his shoes custom made.

He found solace in the Bible, memorizing passages and even whole chapters. He loved to learn and was especially interested in travel books. He and his brother decided they would go to “the land of promise”—Australia, where they could own property.

At eighteen, he married Janet Graham (twenty-eight) who like him had put aside her Presbyterian upbringing to become a Baptist. In Plymouth, England, they boarded the Royal Saxon, carrying 241 passengers. It took four months to travel to Sidney, Australia, which meant rancid water and illnesses. Nine babies were born enroute. Four passengers died including the superintendent-surgeon, who was drunk much of the time.²

In Australia James worked in a botanical garden but whatever Eden he found ended tragically the next year when Janet died following the complications of childbirth. Three months later the baby passed away.³

CONVERSION

When James was twenty-two the first Mormon missionaries arrived in Australia. "One evening, as he was going to the library to get a book, he heard singing. He stopped in a crowd that had gathered in the street. Two Mormon missionaries were holding a street meeting. . . . He was very much impressed by the sermons preached by Elder John Murdock and Elder Wandell.⁴ At the close of the meeting, he bought a Book of Mormon, went home and read it. When he had finished reading it, he was thoroughly convinced of its divine origin. He talked with the elders and studied the principles of the Gospel. Baptized by Elder Murdock he was the tenth to join the Church in Australia."

"Soon after his baptism, he went to work in a logging camp. He on one occasion, was sent down the river with a raft of logs. He was riding the raft and in some way lost control of it. The raft headed straight for some rapids. He knew it meant certain death if he were to go over the falls, but could see no way to change the course of the raft. He kneeled down on the raft and told the Lord that if his work on earth was finished, he was willing to go, but if the Lord had other work for him to do, he would dedicate his life to service for the love of God. When he arose, the raft had separated. The part he was on had drifted to the bank and he was saved."

Three years after gold was discovered in California, it was discovered in Australia. James mined for gold during the winter when other labor wasn't available. Also, missionary proselyting ceased in the winter as they couldn't hold street meetings. One winter, mining in Bendigo (north of Melbourne), James shared a tent with Elder Burr Frost, the presiding elder of the mission in Australia. Frost's diary speaks of continual rain, mud, a

frozen water bucket, and barely an income. He did baptize one miner and organized the Gold Diggers branch of the Church.

While James didn't strike it rich in the gold mines he made enough to be generous. For example, Elder Frost wrote that McKnight gave him \$82.50 for passage on a ship and gave \$50 to a Brother Smith for expenses. A dollar then was worth at least fifteen today.

James prepared to emigrate to Utah in early 1854 with President Frost and other members. A few weeks before he was to leave, President Frost called James and another man aside and "I told them what the workings of the spirit were in my mind and it was that the gospel ought to be spread in this colony, and some of those who were prepared to go to the valley were the men who were better prepared than any persons for the work."⁵ With that introduction, both men were called to stay and serve a mission. Disappointed, both set aside their plans and were ordained missionaries. It was a blessing from the Lord, by staying to serve James met Sarah Howell.

He was sent to Forest Creek (Castlemaine) where there were more gold mine diggings and was made first counselor over that area. Later he and his companion were assigned to travel to rural Adelaide to the home of a member—William Howell.⁶ William, a coal miner, had previously joined the Church in Wales and as a result lost his livelihood—he was no longer allowed to enter the mines. After much persecution he, his wife and four children emigrated to Australia. They lived on the frontier where, "they had to fight for their existence against wild animals, native tribesman and roving miners."

Their daughter, Sarah, had a very different lifestyle than James. She never attended school. Living among danger she learned to shoot guns and became an expert marksman. When she was about twenty, she became seriously ill with a high fever. "A doctor said she could not live. She had not been baptized. Her father had faith that she would be well if she could be baptized." Knowing there were missionaries in

Sidney, he sent for them, and soon James McKnight and his companion arrived.

"Sarah was too ill and weak to walk to the river about a mile from the house." James carried her to the river and baptized her. "He was going to carry her back but she said no, she could walk, and she did."

PIONEER VOYAGE

James apparently returned to the Sidney area as a missionary and to work, saving money to emigrate. In 1855, a company of LDS including James and the Howell family were ready for the voyage—but at that time William Howell was called to serve a mission to the Welsh in Australia.

This was a great disappointment to the family, especially Sarah. It is possible James and Sarah had not seen each other since the baptism, and in those days single woman did not travel alone. It seems Sarah was left in James' care.⁷ The ship record lists Sarah Howell as being from New Castle and James McKnight from Sydney. Shortly, they were married, obviously by a missionary.⁸

There were seventy-two Latter-day Saints aboard the *Tarquinia*, embarking from Melbourne. Joseph Banks, a friend of James journaled: "While we were on the ship we held meetings. Sister Smith spoke in tongues and promised if we were united we would make the voyage all right, and if we were not we would have considerable trouble. Soon some became impatient and commenced to stir up trouble."⁹ The boat began leaking and they spent a week at Bora Bora, Tahiti, for repairs.

A missionary on board wrote: "Honolulu was reached July 5, but before arriving at that place the vessel had sprung another leak. Further repairs were made at Honolulu, after which the *Tarquinia* sailed for California, but the first night out being a stormy one the old craft, which was virtually unfit for the sea, was handled so rough by the waves and wind that she began to leak worse than ever."¹⁰

Joseph Banks journaled, "The captain called all on deck and asked if they should go on or put back to Honolulu. All voted to go

back which we did. We worked all night pumping and bailing out water and had only reached harbor four hours when our boat sank, just giving us time to get our belongings out and pitch a tent.”¹¹

"Elder McKnight went with others to the British Consul. They told him they were British subjects and asked his aid in compelling the shipping company either to return their money or furnish another ship to take them to San Pedro where they had paid to go. But when the Consul found out they were Mormons, he would do nothing for them and said they had better stay where they were.

"They were on the island six weeks and the natives treated them royally. They finally got a ship to take them to America. They agreed to take the whole company for twenty-three dollars each if they furnished their own food. Some of the company had spent all the money they had, but through contributions from the citizens and elders of the Church and some of the company who still had money, they were able to take the whole company.” On the 20th of August they departed on the schooner, the ‘Williamantic’ arriving in San Francisco.¹²

"Once in San Francisco, they were faced with the problem of getting [a ship] to San Pedro [Los Angeles.] They took up another collection there to get money so they could all go on. Elder McKnight sold gold watches belonging to himself and [Sarah] and a ring and some silk and other material to help raise money to get them all to San Pedro. There they were met with teams and wagons to take them to San Bernardino. When they arrived there he bought twenty acres of land, a team and cow and began to make a home."

Less than two years later a regiment of the United States army marched to Utah—for it was rumored the Mormons were disobeying civil authority. Concerned for the safety of outlying colonies, Brigham Young directed the members to close the settlement and move to Utah. It was not a convenient time. The McKnights had a one year old daughter and Sarah was well into a second pregnancy. Nevertheless, they “left what property they

could not sell and started on the long, perilous journey to Utah. All they were able to take was what they could fit into two covered wagons.”

Traveling with the Joseph Banks’ family they learned the Indians were on the warpath and it wasn’t safe to travel alone. A Salt Lake stage arrived with the news that in the past two weeks Indians killed three men twenty miles away. They backtracked to a safe settlement (Mohave) waiting until other teams arrived to accompany them. February 14th Sarah gave birth to a baby boy. With difficulty they moved on, resting a few days in Las Vegas and arrived in Parowan (Utah) in April.

EPILOGUE

James and Sarah moved a couple of times before settling in Minersville (in what is now south-west Utah.) James bought property to farm and worked in the lead mine. Sarah anxiously looked for news that her family would emigrate but several years later they received tragic news. William Howell had completed his mission and went back to work in the mines. There was a mine explosion—and he was killed.¹³ After a time, Sarah’s mother, Hannah, (and maybe other family members) arrived in Utah.

James was known throughout the area for his gardens and fruit trees. He held many civic positions. He was a county commissioner, and a delegate to the Constitutional Convention. He successfully negotiated many mining disputes and Indian disputes. At age thirty-seven James became bishop of the Minersville Ward and served twenty-four years. Later he served as a Patriarch.¹⁴

James was quiet. He carefully considered the words he spoke and never engaged in trivia. “He was understanding, gave all matters thoughtful consideration treating everyone with gentle firmness.” His lame, twisted foot would be considered a disability today and likely excuse him from physical labor. Yet he was industrious as a farm laborer, cultivated a botanical garden, single-handedly rafted logs down a river, walked as a missionary, carried Sarah a mile to be baptized, dug for gold and

lead in mines, volunteered to go see the British Counsel when the ship sank, traveled as a pioneer to Utah, labored to clear new farms and raise food, built houses, and traveled extensively in numerous leadership experiences. Lameness in no way limited him. His was a life of industry.

Sarah was congenial and quick to express opinions on any subject. She worked hard keeping everything clean and in order. Concerned with others she helped those who were sick or sorrowful. She made special foods like cheese which she took to all the elderly and sick at Christmas. She taught her children principles of the gospel, especially not to lie or be deceitful. She taught Relief Society and served in other callings.

James taught Sarah to read, write, do arithmetic—and even to knit. She became an excellent and avid reader. Wonderful cook, she loved to entertain—apostles and presidents of the Church were guests.

Once an Indian came begging for food. Sarah said she had none to spare, and the Indian said he would take the baby. As he headed for it, Sarah reached up to a top shelf, pulled down her gun and aimed it at him with such force he fled for his life. Indians never again came to beg from her. At times they found James in the yard and begged but they never came to the house.

Sarah bore a total of eleven children, but died of a heart attack shortly after the birth of the eleventh. James was fifty years old when Sarah died. He remarried four years later to a widow, Lydia Thrower, and managed to outlive her by eleven years.¹⁵

¹ Beverly McKnight Cooper is the daughter of H Neil McKnight (1915), the son of Harrison McKnight (1889), the son of William Howell McKnight (1862), the son of James McKnight (1830). This biography contains the most pertinent facts from the vast research compiled by James Clayton McKnight (1918) the son of Harrison McKnight (1889). James C. McKnight's self published book, *The James (1) McKnight Families in America and Antecedents in Scotland* is the major source. When quotes are not footnoted they come from two biographies in this book, (1) James McKnight and (2) Sketch of the Life of Sarah Howell McKnight, written by James and

Sarah's daughter Susanna McKnight Roberts (as edited by Kent H. McKnight.) Also referenced are James C. McKnight's research papers posted on the Internet at www.harrisonmcknightfamily.org

² James was nineteen and Janet twenty-nine when they sailed on the Royal Saxon, which arrived July 19, 1848. James listed his occupation as farm servant and both were listed as Baptists.

³ Janet died the 12th of May, 1849, in Sidney. It is not certain whether the child born that day was a boy or girl, and he or she died August 20th.

⁴ John Murdock is mentioned in Church history and D&C 99 and 52:8. His wife died in childbirth after giving birth to twins, which John gave to Joseph and Emma Smith to raise as their twins had died. Ironically, he preached in Missouri to my Gledhill ancestors, James and Eliza Ivie, leaving them with a burning testimony of the gospel.

⁵ Burr Frost Diary Extracts, www.harrisonmcknightfamily.org/researchpapers.php, Research 1987 Bk McKnight Graham, Howell Rees Ritchie.

⁶ Sidney is on the SE coast of Australia. Melbourne is over 500 miles SW, and is another main harbor. Bendigo and Castlemaine are about 75 and 50 miles north of Melbourne respectively. Adelaide is about 400 miles NW of Melbourne. Wikipedia says: "Castlemaine was established during the gold rush of 1851 and is in an area originally named Forrest Creek. In September, 1851, three shepherds and a bullock driver discovered gold in Specimen Gully, about 5 km NE of present-day Castlemaine. Within a month the alluvial bed of Forrest Creek was being worked with 8,000 miners on the field by the end of the year and 25,000 by March 1852."

⁷ On LDS emigration voyages, women without male family members were usually assigned to the care of a missionary.

⁸ There are no marriage records, apparently because they were married on board the ship. James was 24 years old and of medium height. Sarah, 21, was petite. She was born in Llamsamlet, Wales. William Howell was 51 years old when he stayed behind to serve a mission.

⁹ History of Joseph Banks Sr., www.harrisonmcknightfamily.org/researchpapers.php, Research 1987 Bk McKnight Graham Howell Rees Ritchie.

¹⁰ Australian Mission Manuscript History, as quoted in the James C. McKnight—Marjorie Newton Correspondence page 14,

www.harrisonmcknightfamily.org/researchpapers.php

¹¹ Banks

¹² Mormon Immigration Index, lists Sarah Howell from Newcastle and James McKnight from Sydney as passengers on the *Tarquinta*. There is no passenger list or Personal Accounts available for the *Williamantic* but "It is assumed that all 72 passengers continued the journey."

¹³ William was killed October 1862 in Castlemaine, Victoria, Australia, 58 years old.

¹⁴ There was a second man in Utah by the name of James McKnight, of an Irish heritage who lived in Salt Lake City. He was a newspaper reporter mentioned in some Church history reports as being a scribe for George A. Smith when he went to southern Utah to investigate the Mountain Meadows Massacre. He was later excommunicated and moved to Oregon. James and Sarah McKnight arrived in Utah seven months after the massacre and were working to establish a home site and produce food a few months later when Smith and the other McKnight were investigating the massacre.

¹⁵ Sarah died June 3, 1880. James died October 4, 1908. The author is indebted to her brothers, Ralph and D. Harrison McKnight, for their research and proofreading. Ralph preserved and organized the papers of James C. McKnight and together with his daughter Bonnie McKnight Sorensen maintain the Harrison McKnight web site.