

A Biography of Joseph A. Rees

On the 14th of August, 1840 in the town of Fishguard South Wales, I first breathed the breath of life. I was the fourth and last child of my mother. My father's name was William Rees. My mother was Elizabeth Liejshon Evans. My father was a professional business man, honest in his dealings, kind and courteous.

My first recollection was that of being carried Welsh fashion to the market place by my mother.

When five or six years old I was kicked by a jack-ass on the left cheek. Figuratively, the act has been repeated often since. It is wisdom always, to consider the source, and let it go at that.

When I was very young, I remember standing on a wooden box reciting the ten commandments and parts of the Sermon on the Mount, for which mother gave me a penny. This was in Sunday School.

I was not nine years old when two elders of the L.D.S. Church came to our town to preach. Mother was busy washing but she hastily changed her dress and apron, took me by the hand and we went to hear the strangers and find out what they had to say. She received the word of God from those very humble elders, servants of the Lord who had been sent forth without purse or script.

One night my mother's sister Mary appeared to her as she lay in bed, and said: "Elizabeth, this year the Lord has something to do for you." It came to pass surely.

In 1849 my father embraced the gospel. He fed and sheltered the many missionaries willingly, and gladly, and did all he could to defend them against the bitter assaults of the members of other churches.

I well remember the mobs: how they followed us with jeers and insults, and at one time broke every piece of glass in our house, while Elder Sykes was preaching.

My parents gave freely of cash, clothes and food to the Elders.

I remember going with mother to a meeting conducted by the Mormons, when all of a sudden a howling, jeering, hissing mob came in to disturb the sermon. They acted in a most degenerate way, and yet they were called Christian. President Phillips arose to his feet, then raising his hands and pointing toward the howling crowd, he shouted, "Ye people of Fishguard, I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to be still at your peril." A quiet calm followed and Brother Jenkins continued his sermon without further trouble. Those who came to mock, remained to pray.

I went with an elder to preach in Cordigan without purse or script, trying to spread the principles we so devotedly believed. Accustomed to good regular meals at home, to go without food for twenty-four hours at a time was hard, and I surely was glad to be released and return home. I was then fourteen years old.

We always attended Conference, walking from six to fourteen miles both ways. There were no radios, no automobiles to hurry you there and bring you back in a few hours. I took my part in the services preaching and praying.

Education was not general in those days. Schools were often held in teachers rooms or homes with little system, poor methods, forced order and miserable furniture. Teachers were, as a rule, broken down soldiers or sailors, or at best a woman too frail to perform hard work. To one of these I was sent. I remember standing for hours with a dunce cap on. I hated school then. Could you expect a lad to love school under such poor uninviting conditions. Later I attended a national school with some degree of success: walls with maps, books in plenty, backless seats, splinter side up. Here all study was out loud and there was arbitrary discipline. Here I learned the "three R's". This was in Fishguard. When young I loved to read to inform myself. It was a feast for me to read a good book.

My father became quite wealthy in Wales. We were a happy and contented family, but my mother desired to come to Utah. Her great faith and her determination decided my father to sell everything. We sailed for America, arriving in Salt Lake City Oct. 29, 1855. I can picture the scenery crossing the plains even now quite vividly—the buffaloes—thousands and thousands of them stampeding, causing loss of life, loss of cattle. I can almost hear the "Gee" the "Whoa" and the crack of the whip. We would scramble through the woods gathering wild grapes and eating luscious ripe plums.

The Indians, at times, were quite hostile. We children would gather the firewood while the grown folks did the cooking. A double guard was placed around our grazing herd to keep the buffaloes from mixing with the cattle. Our camp consisted

of nine wagons. Evening and morning prayers were said. Cursing, swearing or vulgarity I did not hear during the entire journey. On, on we wended our way, now slowly traveling over the boundless prairies, climbing sand hills, crossing rivers, up steep mountains, down steep rough grades, winding through canyons, sage brush, snakes, vile insects everywhere, and at last entering the valley of Great Salt Lake. I felt the spirit of the pioneers, and in my boy heart felt as the prophet Brigham Young did, "This is the Place."

Our first winter was bitterly cold, snow very deep, cattle were dying and food was scarce for man and beast, but the people enjoyed generally good health. Peace and contentment were supreme. I remember going to school in the Fifteenth Ward. The teacher was a big rough Texan. One day he asked me to read. I read the first Psalm, or rather, tried to read it. Before I got through he shoved me to one side and said: "For God's sake quit reading so fast." I stopped and never read aloud again that winter. What encouragement!

In 1856-1857 were the days of reformation among the people. This had a decided up-lifting effect upon all. Missionaries were appointed throughout the whole territory whose calling it was to invite all to repent of their sins, acknowledge them and turn to God, seek his forgiveness, and live near Him in the future.

I remember when the U.S. troops came to Utah to discipline the Mormons into obedience to the laws of the United States. Words fail to describe such ignominious folly. Here in the mountain dales were a people who had been ruthlessly despoiled of home and possessions of various kinds; a people whose great leader, Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum had been cruelly and wantonly murdered; a people who had furnished 5000 of their men to defend their country against Mexico after suffering the results of maddened mobs and driven into a wilderness. Uncle Sam, you may well and ought to blush with shame because of your defiance of common sense. Brigham Young, who was then the Governor, issued a proclamation recounting some of the sufferings of the Saints. Their right as free men under the Constitution, forbade any and all armed forces to enter into or go through the territory without permission. The coming of Johnston's Army caused a great stir in Salt Lake City. I was in Echo Canyon standing guard. While on duty there some of my companions had their feet frozen. We stood guard alternately. When we were ordered home the war was over. Salt Lake City was almost deserted the people having moved South. Loneliness and silence was everywhere. My family had gone south, so I bundled my bedding and started to find them. For the first time I heard the name of God blasphemed, but not by a Mormon. Brigham Young had ordered a number of Saints to locate in different sections of Utah. Having confidence in their church leaders and an unfaltering trust in God they left their homes, rather than submit to a crushing persecution, not in the least deserved. God bless the memory of those self-sacrificing honest American citizens! They needed no discipline by U.S. troops into obedience to the laws of the United States.

I found my folks at Spanish Fork. This was in Dec. 1857. Soon after my father became dissatisfied, disgusted and discontented with conditions here. He was not accustomed to hard laborious work such as digging ditches, fencing, canyon work, rough farming methods prevalent here in those days. So that with a few more dissatisfied ones the family started back to Wales taking me with them, although I begged to remain here in Utah. Ever since, I have regretted going back, and do so now.

Our return to Wales was hard and rough and we were caught in a hurricane, its fury lasting two days. We met a dismantled vessel with no one on board. Evidently they all had perished.

Our trip across the plains was made in wagons drawn by oxen to Nebraska City from St. Louis to New Orleans, and then across the mighty Atlantic to Liverpool and thence to our old home in Fishguard.

My mother, however, determined to return to Zion with a number of her friends. She left father in Wales. He would not again endure the hardships of the times. I left Wales a year later for Utah and Mother.

How I loved my mother! She stands next to God on earth to me! How I cling to her memory. Neither time nor distance nor death, nor the grave can ever divorce me from her. Whatever condition in life we may have, whether a king or an outcast, a millionaire or a pauper, exalted or condemned, he is her boy. There all argument ceases.

My mother had a hard time to get along in early days in Utah. Sometimes she felt the burden of life hanging heavily but with faith in God, and in herself, with courage to do right, and a testimony of the Gospel, she had won the great prize of life—she had become a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in her fortieth year.

Time sped on. I find myself a young man doing a man's work, thinking as a man, trying to act the part of a man.

On Feb. 1, 1863 I married a beautiful Welsh girl by the name of Mary Ann Jenkins. We had no furniture or wares of any kind to start housekeeping. We purchased a few cups and saucers and bowls, some provisions and other necessities, a bed, a bench and we felt as rich as Rockefeller. Later we bought a one room house. In 1864 our first babe, Katherine, was born. To us were born five lovely children now all deceased (1913). My dear wife died in confinement. The babe

died the day it was born. On her mother's breast she was laid to rest in the cemetery at Grantsville. Here I was left with four little children.

In the course of time I met a beautiful young woman by the name of Amelia Hassell. We were married in the Endowment House in Salt Lake City June 24, 1872. during the whole of our married life she proved herself to be a true and noble wife, kind to my children, loyal to her friends, and a dear devoted mother to her thirteen children who love her dearly. Her life is an inspiration to them.

After her death in Spanish Fork, I was assigned to teach in Santaquin. There I met a widow by the name of Catherine Olson, who mothered my little girls with true affection. To us were born four children, three of whom are living.

How I Became a School Teacher:

While laying rock on a culvert on North Temple I was asked to teach school in Salt Lake City. I was an optimist. I thought, "God gave me a few brains,--why not use them." This was the turning point of my life. Was I educated and capable of teaching school? No! My knowledge was ridiculously poor. I had a very little education, but I was willing to do my best.

For my pay I got carrots, potatoes, bacon, butter, molasses, flour, sage brush, and wood or whatever the good people had to offer. This you might say was the happiness of ignorance. At the opening of school, good old Brother James brought with him a bunch of willows. In the presence of the school children he handed them to me saying, "Joseph, here is your authority. If any of these big fellows don't mind you, you lam them like hell!" I didn't lam them like hell! Nor did I have occasion to do so, but how I studied myself to keep ahead of my pupils.

I had a wonderful memory and easily retained what I had read. I attended the University of Hard Knocks. In 1877 I passed my first teachers examination. How thrilled I was to receive a flattering certificate. I was now fully competent to teach the common branches of the district school in the territory of Utah. I had mastered the subjects by my own efforts. No tutor to assist me. I burned the midnight oil away into the night, and even into the small hours of the morning. Sometimes I slept not more than five hours, until I received a High School certificate.

I also served as a member of the examining board of teachers of Utah County. I taught school in Spanish Fork for twenty years. George H. Brimhall was principal. After his resignation I became principal. Besides teaching and supervising the schools at Spanish Fork, I was honored by my church as High Priest and Superintendent of the Sunday Schools. I held civic positions as City Councilman, City attorney and Alderman.

I never was happier than when working with young people. They were an inspiration to me. We organized dramatic clubs, spelling matches and at my home I taught book-keeping, mathematics, and some of the common branches to older people who could not attend day school.

They paid me in provisions out of their granary, and meats of various kinds, but very little cash. Those were jolly times and I love to ponder over them. I tried to find out what each individual person was fitted best for in life, and then put all my energy forward to train, cultivate and direct him to fulfill his ambition.

Wonderful people I found in Spanish Fork, and loyal friends whom I will love to my dying day. I hope to meet them beyond the grave.

I was principal of Santaquin in 1900 for four years. Then I was principal in Sandy for two years. I returned to Santaquin after receiving a flattering offer to come back with additional salary.

In September 1914 I taught in Payson half time. Then because of a serious illness Prof. John C. Creer and the Board of Education thought I could not stand the strenuous application of school work and for that reason I was retired and put on half pay.

I want to testify here that my Father in Heaven has indeed been a father to me. For forty-six years I have devoted my best energies to the school room, the church and to public affairs.

The Board of Education, so loyal to me, keeps me on the payroll, sort of a pension. However, I visit schools often and give suggestions and advise when required.

A wonderful banquet was given in my honor in 1918, and a beautiful school building was named for me, THE REES SCHOOL in Spanish Fork. John P. Creer was master of ceremonies at the banquet and said that Prof. Rees has turned out more and better graduates than any other principal in the State.

To the multitude of men and women, once boys and girls in my class room, now in active life, I feel blessed for having been your teacher, for the sunny times we have had together in profitable employment, and for the inclination and determination we have to press forward and discharge every duty we owe to home, to country and to God.

On my birthday my old-time graduates surprised me at Santaquin bringing supplies for a big banquet. We enjoyed it on the lawn. How we enjoyed each other's company and talked of by-gone happy days!

Nothing eventful of importance has happened in my life since. I am tired, physically weak and handicapped for future labor. I love my home, my children and my friends. God only knows how long I will be with them.

This account as written March 1, 1922. Mr. Rees died suddenly March 21, 1922, just three weeks later. A funeral was held in Santaquin and another at Spanish Fork Pavilion, one of the largest ever held there attended by friends, former pupils and educators from all over the state

