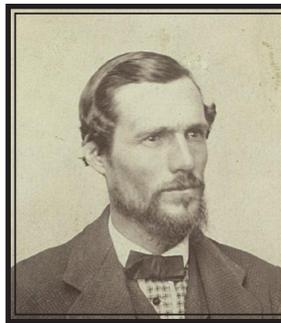


NATHAN TANNER PORTER

Born: 10 Jul 1820 Corinth, Vermont

Age: 35

Hodgett Wagon Company



Nathan T. Porter was 11 years old when his family embraced the teachings of the missionaries of the LDS Church. His father had received a remarkable vision prior to this time which prepared him to accept the gospel. In his youth, Nathan witnessed much of the early history of the Church, its persecutions as well as many miracles, including witnessing his younger brother being raised from the dead by the power of the Priesthood.

Nathan served his first mission in 1841 at the age of 21, traveling through Illinois, Indiana and Pennsylvania. He was called again as a missionary in 1844, to the eastern states. He described it as: “an electioneering tour in behalf of Joseph Smith, our Prophet, he having offered himself as a candidate for President of the United States. We bore with us his written document on the ‘Policy and Powers of Government,’ which was indeed a masterpiece of sound logic, and was so expressed by politicians and men of prominence with whom we conversed. They said it was the greatest masterpiece of statesmanship and mental ability they ever saw, and not withstanding the prevailing prejudice against him, because of the dispensation God had given him.” Nathan and his companion were in Ohio when word reached them of the martyrdom of Joseph Smith, “upon which we immediately turned our faces homeward, and was soon in the midst of our afflicted and sorrowful friends to mingle our grief with theirs.”

Nathan was later present at the special conference in Nauvoo of which he wrote: “It was visibly made manifest to the most, if not all present, Brigham [Young] was chosen to lead his people in Joseph’s stead, in moving the cause of zion. For as he arose and began to speak to the large assembly his countenance was transformed into that of Joseph, while his voice and gestures were almost identically the same. So that some arose to their feet in amazement while many exclaimed in a low tone to those by their side, ‘That is Joseph! That is Joseph!’ And thus the whisper ran through the vast assembly while the eyes of the multitude became fastened upon him. This manifestation settled forever that question in the minds and feelings of the saints, and thus he was nominated and sustained by the unanimous voice of the people. I being in attendance was an eye witness to this marvelous manifestation.”

After being driven from Nauvoo, Nathan first settled on Mill Creek, near Salt Lake City. In 1848 he married Rebecca Ann Cherry and recorded that a year later she “presented me with a fine daughter, whom I embraced as a priceless jewel in the family circle, and a delightful ornament in our new habitation.” In April of 1851, Nathan and Rebecca added a son to their family. Nathan worked hard at building and improving a farm and home for his family and had nearly completed these endeavors when a special conference was called on September 1, 1852. Nathan was called to serve a mission to Europe in connection with many others. He writes:

“The Rock of Gibraltar was assigned to us as our special field of labor, and for that place we were set apart under the hands of the Apostles. Others were sent to various parts – to China, Siam, Cape of Good Hope, Germany, France, Southern States, etc., but the majority to England. This was by far the largest call hitherto made for missionary labor. I now set in with renewed diligence and energy to more fully complete the necessary improvements about my premises, as the time was near for my departure. . . . my labors at home terminated in hanging the little gate in front of the house. On the 14th of September 1852, while my horse was standing with saddle and bridle in readiness to convey me to the city, the instance that this was completed, I put up my tools, embraced my wife and the two little ones, commending them to God and their kindred. Bidding all adieu, I mounted the steed and soon disappeared in the distance. No more to return until after the elapse of years. With a purpose to devote all the time with its toils, hardships, privations and labors, of both body and mind in behalf of strangers in far off lands, without any earthly reward.

“What a strange spirit to be sure, and how strange those who are exercised by it, to leave fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, wives, children, houses and lands. The strong ties of affection will not stay them, much less the love of home with all its endearments. Is there any example of such devotion in the annals of history? Yes, strange as it may appear, it is to be found in that sacred history the Bible. It says there were men who left all those endearments, devoting their whole time in ministering to strangers in a strange land, traveling without purse or scrip. They called themselves the disciples of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He commanded them to do this, telling them that he who would not do this was not worthy of him, and therefore could not be his disciple. . . . it sank deep into their heart, and counting up the cost they made the sacrifice. This was the case with me and my fellow companions. We had chosen this same Jesus to be our Lord and Master, and had taken upon his name, and were called as they were called and ordained as they were, and sent as they were sent to reprove the world of sin and of a judgement to come.”

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Among this large contingent of missionaries was James G. Willie and Edward Martin who led the 4th and 5th handcart companies to Zion in 1856, and many others involved in that great drama as captains, sub-captains and rescuers. Like Nathan, they would serve as missionaries for four years, and gather converts to emigrate home with them when their missions ended. Nathan's own account of his journey home sheds light on all these companies:

"Having now been released to return home to zion, I began to make the necessary preparations for my departure, which occurred about the first of January 1856, in company with several of the American Elders and some 300 saints. We moved out of the Liverpool docks with our faces zion-ward!

"We arrived in New York after a passage of thirty days having been somewhat delayed in calm and head winds. Sea sickness was prevalent at the commencement of the voyage. I, having taken a very active part in waiting on and administering to the sick, became exhausted, so much so that I became prostrated as we arrived in New York, and thus was left in care of Brother Beadon at his residence in Williams Burg of that city, and under the cognizance of Apostle John Taylor who was there editing a paper called the Mormon. I remained here for six weeks, during which I was visited by Elder Taylor and several of the elders and saints who administered to me the ordinance of the gospel as I desired, bestowing their kind attention to my welfare.

"I however became so low that all seemed to despair of my recovery. I besought the Lord that he would spare my life to return home, for the sake of having my body laid with those of the saints in zion, instead of the wicked in that corrupt city [New York]. While I was thus anxious in my feelings there came a whisper saying, 'Are you better than your Lord and master? Was he not numbered among the transgressors?'

"The answer came in a moment. 'Nay Lord, I am nothing in comparison.' This brought a feeling of reconciliation. I was now ready and willing to have my body laid whither-so-ever the Lord saw fit, and to go or stay as seemeth him good. The Lord saw fit to make this fact manifest to me.

"Showing that I was indeed reconciled to his will. I saw in a dream a messenger from the spirit world who had come for me. I was within the company of the saints who had just landed with me and were now leaving the shore to take the cars [train]. I began shaking hands with them and bidding them farewell, while the messenger was standing by my side in waiting. The last to bid adieu was one of the elders with a valise in his hand. As he went up from the shore I turned to see the messenger who was some six feet in height, in so doing I saw a man coming in full speed on a white horse. As he came up I recognized him to be Daniel Spencer, who gave me a returning blessing after my release to return home, in which I had the promise that I should return and again enjoy the society of my family and friends in Zion. He stopped suddenly at my side, and leaning towards me placed his hand on my shoulder saying, 'Brother Porter, you will not go to the spirit world now. There are many of the saints who have become cold and lukewarm. We want you to go and stir them up and prepare them for Zion.' I replied that I was willing to do anything the Lord wanted me to do.

"Well,' he says, 'we want you to go.' At this I looked at the messenger in the face to see what he would say. He bowed his head in token of his consent. At this I asked him if he would be so kind as to remember me to Brother Joseph and the brethren there. He again bowed his head, and I awoke with an assurance that the time of my departure to the spirit land was changed, so far as the present call was concerned. And thus the way remained open for the promised blessing to be realized in mortality, coupled with a mission in the midst of the saints, having for its object the renewal of the diligence of those who have become careless in discharge of their duties in the observance of the laws of the gospel. For without this no one is prepared for Zion, after her redemption.

"Having had the above manifestations and ministrations I began to recover very fast so that I was able to join the last company of saints who arrived from Liverpool, about the 15th of April [1856]. I continued to gain strength as we proceeded on by rail. Soon arriving at Iowa City [Iowa], it being the point of outfit for the plains. I was surprised to find many of the former company, who were my companions across the sea, still on the campground. On inquiring the cause of their delay, I was informed that the hand carts ordered from St. Louis had been delayed, and finally their purchase abandoned, under the impression that they could manufacture them with less cost, and so they were now constructing them.

"Now the mode of crossing the plains was in light carts drawn by hand. This method was adopted by the recommendation and counsel of the First Presidency, which with wise management bid fair to be a success. But otherwise a failure which proved to be the case in this instant, by adopting the policy that would cause a prolonged delay at so late a date in the season. It being the first of August ere the camp ground was cleared of its occupants. With 1300 miles before them, 300 miles of which we made in passing through the state of Iowa.

"Arriving at Council Bluffs, September 1st which brought us on to the borders of the plains. Here a council was called by those having charge of the emigration including the captains of companies. The council took into consideration the propriety of undertaking to cross the plains so late in the season. A decision was rendered in favor of continuing on without further delay. Two manifested their disapproval, one declined going any further, the other submitted to the majority and continued his services. I felt to some extent the weight of the responsibility, having been appointed to assist Elder Benjamin Hodgit [Hodgett], who was in charge of one of what was called [the] Independent Company (of which there were two, one [with] Elder John Hunt). The Independent Companies were composed of those who furnished their means for their outfit in wagons, teams, and provisions; at the same time assisting those of the handcart companies, who were mostly supplied through the Emigration Fund. I was not in the council above mentioned, as I was not invited by those in charge. I felt delicate in doing so at the solicitation of Captain Hodgit. My own feelings,

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according to my judgment, was not in harmony with the decision of the council. Nevertheless I felt it my duty to comply with the request of those who were placed to direct the work in which I was engaged. And thus I endeavored to use my best energies to make a successful trip across the extended plains before us, notwithstanding the lateness of the season.

“All moved on in proper distances between the companies on account of feed for our animals. Elder Hodgit and myself took into consideration the propriety of lightening up the weight on our wagons, and thus increase our speed without jading our teams[;] feeling that it was needful for us to do all that we could, even at a sacrifice if necessary, in accomplishing what was needful. We were impressed to call the company together and show unto them our condition, and dependence on the Lord to stay the storms from overtaking us and that it was our duty as his children to use all the means within our reach to accomplish what is required of us, and then if more is necessary he will come to our aid. Therefore, we had a proposition to make to them. The proposition was for us to unload our wagons and take the clothing out of our heavy boxes, and put them into sacks which we could prepare for that purpose, and thus make the burden on our teams more easy so as to increase our advance on the way. And as to our boxes and chests, we would make a bonfire in token of the sacrifice we were willing to make to gain the desired blessing. The proposition was unanimously sustained by vote on the part of the brethren and sisters. All went to work overhauling their wagons, emptying their boxes, putting their contents into sacks and bundles in the best possible manner. Thus we made our way on with more ease and greater speed.

“The handcart company was in our rear under care of Elders Mosses [Moses Cluff], [Edward] Martin, and Daniel Tylar [Tyler]. Captain Hunt’s company was in their rear. Thus the handcart company were between the Independent Companies, having as it were a front and rear guard.

“Captain Hodgit and myself spared no pains in selecting campgrounds where the best feed could be found for our animals. By so doing our teams were kept in good condition. And it was for the care and regard we had for those more dependent ones behind, that held us from making longer marches. As we drew nearer to the mountains region there was now a noticeable change in the temperature of the atmosphere. The water in the streams were very cold, making it a very painful task for men, and much more so for women and children to wade in crossing them, which was the case with those in the handcart company.

“November was now passing in her cool days and chilly nights, and ere we made the last crossing of the Platte a snow storm was upon us. We made the crossing the night before. As we arose in the morning we saw there was an approaching storm, and by the time we were in readiness to move on the snow commenced falling. I was aware of a place three miles up the river where there was low grassland surrounded by high bluffs, and was well supplied with grass and timber for fuel. I remembered this place from when I came with the missionaries in 1852. We therefore decided to make for that point and wait the result of the storm.

“At this juncture the handcart company made its appearance on the opposite bank at the crossing. We instructed the company to move on, that we would stop and see the handcarts cross and soon overtake our company. They had just commenced crossing as we rode up. It was not a pleasant scene for us to behold[;] women and children wading above their knees in the cold piercing element. We hastened across on our animals and began taking them one by one behind us across the river. The wading soon stopped. They huddled like sheep awaiting our return as we made each trip. We never failed to return without a blessing pronounced upon us, in addition to ones we had already received.

“All the handcarts being over the river, we proceeded on and overtook our company which had passed on to the place we had selected to stop in till the storm was past. We found it well adapted to our conditions, there being plenty of grass and fuel, surrounded with high table land and thick bunches of willows interspersed in the little cove. Thus it was a covert from the bleak winds of the plains that was now driving the falling snow. Here we rounded up our wagons, pitched our tents and gathered some wood for the camp fires ere the day closed in.

“I wonder how it is with the handcart company. They must [have] remained at the crossing. I wish they were here with us.’ This was frequently expressed during the evening as we sat around our fires. We arose in the morning with about 6 inches of snow on the ground. Elder Hodgit returned to the crossing to learn the condition of the other companies, Elder Hunt not having come up when we left, and inform them of our success, and invite them up to share with us[,] there being a supply for all. He [Elder Hodgett] found the handcarts still in camp at the crossing, Captain Hunt having crossed soon after we left. The handcarts were very much exposed to the severity of the storm which we scarcely felt. They listened with gladness to his report and readily [accepted] the invitation, but as it was still snowing they remained for the rest of the day.

“On the morrow our men turned out and met them, and assisted those with handcarts in pulling them into our quarters and shovelled away the snow, and pitched their tents as some of the men had become almost exhausted and benumbed[,] the cold having increased several degrees as the snow ceased falling, being about a foot on the level. It was a trying time with us, on man and beasts. It proved fatal to two of the handcart company during the night and one the following day. They fell with their faces zionward to await the resurrection day.

“After being here several days we were met by two of the brethren from the valley, who informed us that men with teams and provisions were coming to our assistance, and would meet us at Devil’s Gate on [the] Sweetwater 30 miles ahead. This was joyful news to us and especially so to those of the handcart company who had been on short rations and now very much exhausted from exposure and fatigue.

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“We lost no time in moving on the best we could to meet our brethren at the point designated. The snow had settled to about 4 or 5 inches. We were two days in making the point, arriving late in the evening in a terrific storm of wind with intense cold, which continued all night and the following day and night. It was under these trying circumstances that we met our brethren, who had come from the valley to our relief, so far as it was in their power. But alas there were quite a number of our handcart company whose physical powers were so far exhausted as to be unable to endure more. And so they fell asleep in death until the morn of the first resurrection. This was a trying hour indeed. Nevertheless there is consolation in knowing that they lay down with their faces zion-ward in full faith and fellowship with the saints[,] while some who survived them in those hardships to become associated with the saints in Zion, have drifted away from the path of the gospel into darkness and the spirit of unbelief. Better they had fallen with their brethren in the light of truth.

“But to return – a council was called to consult the best method to take to save life at any sacrifice requisite. It was decided that those of the Independent companies should cache all their luggage [except] what was really necessary for the remainder of the journey, and thus turn over to the use of the handcart company a portion of their teams and wagons so as to convey them on as fast as possible. This decision was unanimously sustained by a prompt compliance. Brother Dan Jones with three other brethren were left in care of the cached goods. While the now Dependent companies proceeded on receiving further aid from the valley as we advanced. Our teams had become [so] jaded and reduced that on arriving at Green River and Fort Bridger they were left with some of the brethren at those points to chance their surviving the winter[,] while we proceeded on with horses and mule teams sent to bring us through into the valley. Thus on the 15th of December 1856 I arrived safe at my home in the embrace of wife and children, also my aged parents and friends after an absence of four years and three months.

“I soon learned that a general reformation was in progress among the saints throughout the valleys, in which the First Presidency took a most prominent part, laboring incessantly in stirring up the people to repentance and renewed diligence in keeping the commandments of God. Elder Jedediah M. Grant [of the First Presidency] was so wrought upon under the influence of the Spirit, that he went forth among the saints laboring day and night until his natural strength became exhausted. So much so that he was prostrated upon his bed to rise no more until the morn of the first resurrection, and thus he passed the vale [December 1, 1856] while his words remained as live coals in the altar in the hearts of the saints, so that they came forth in the waters of baptism, confessing their sins before the Lord and each other. Now the saints were being stirred up to renewed diligence in the service of God.”

Nathan Porter had served faithfully, both as a missionary and as a rescuer within the ranks of the late 1856 emigrating companies. When he arrived in Gibraltar to serve his mission, he was allowed to stay only two weeks, and then illegally forced to leave by the prejudice of the churches in that country. He managed to return to England and served the term of his mission there. Elder Stevenson stayed in Gibraltar as he had been born there and could not be so easily deported.

Nathan continued his faithful missionary duties throughout his life at home in Centerville, Utah, and other places. He served two more missions to the Eastern States in 1869 and 1872. He died April 9, 1897, in Centerville. His parents had moved to Morgan County, Utah. The town of Porterville was named for them.

Source: Autobiography of Nathan Tanner Porter, copy in files of Jolene Allphin, courtesy of a family I met on Rocky Ridge, who “just happened” to have an extra copy with them. (Now posted with more information at www.nathantannerporter.homestead.com - 2017)

Pictured are two homes and a granary on the historic Porter Farm in Centerville, Utah, at 370 W. Porter Lane. Nathan Tanner Porter was one of the first settlers of Centerville. He built his first home on the property after returning from his mission in 1856. These three structures on the property are listed by the U.S. Department of the Interior on the National Register of Historic Places. Recently, award-winning restoration of the property was completed.

