

FRANCIS ROBERT CANTWELL



Born: April 7, 1841 in England

Age: 15

Willie / Hodgett Companies

James S. Cantwell, Elizabeth Cotterell Hamer

Francis' story is really the story of his family as told through his father's extensive journal writings. It begins with his father, James Sherlock Cantwell, as a young lad in Dublin, Ireland, where he was born in 1813. James was sent to school at 2 ½ years of age and could read and write at age 4 ½. His parents both died when he was very young, and at 11 years of age he was sent to live with an uncle (his mother's brother, John) in England. James' aunt met him and a brother with the statement that "she was about to be pestered with somebody else's brats for the rest of her days." Uncle John saw to it that his schooling was continued, but his aunt and cousins treated him with disdain until his uncle was forced to bind him as an apprentice to a tailor at the age of 15 in order to have a measure of peace in his household. James said that the main reason for his aunt's intolerance was "that my Uncle and us were of the Methodist Church, and her and her Sons were Roman Catholics." Although James also wrote of her good qualities, he told of her alcoholism which eventually destroyed her and her sons' lives and her husband's previously prosperous business. He said, "She was an odious drunkard, and an ignorant bigot, and led her husband the most unquiet life, because he would not embrace the Roman Catholic religion and bring us up the Same way ... her Sons treated their Father with marked contempt and at times with great disrespect because of his religion. [Uncle John] bore, not only a good character, but was one of the best men I have ever Seen ... He was virtuous, Chaste, Honest, Upright and practiced the religion he professed, in peace and purity and righteousness. He was a man of prayer and his practices was accordingly, and he bore the contempt of his Son, and the continued abuse of his wife, with a patience that was remarkable."

On a Sunday in 1827, James tells about the beginnings of a dramatic change that would later come into his life: "My Uncle and Aunt quarrelled about religion, and I went out of their way, into the Street wondering which of them were right, when an intimation was presented before my mind to the effect that neither of them was, & the day would come when I would know it, and confusion would cease. It was the work of an instant. And I have lived to Know that the above is true."

James spent "two pleasant years" in Lancaster enjoying his boyhood. He attended the trials held there, listening to "a host of ... able lawyers of that day" and saw "about 12 persons hung, (one of them a woman) for various crimes." His "Master" spent most of his time in the "ale house" with his "drunken companions" and eventually lost his business in Manchester. James found that "instead of improving in my trade I was only a common Slush in a beer house, and I concluded that I would break my indenture and run away, which I did, and it was good for me." He walked 36 miles to Liverpool, purchased a ticket under a false name, and returned to Ireland to his brother's home, where he continued in his Methodist faith and church activity.

At the age of 21, James returned to England to seek full-time employment. In 1836 "there was a great convulsion in the Methodist Societies in England and a Split took place." James joined the new association under the leadership of Samuel Warren and "became a Sunday School teacher and prayer leader." At this time he moved to the home of John Wilkinson and fell in love with his step-daughter, Elizabeth Cotterell Hamer.

Elizabeth's mother, Mary Ann Cotterell, was a widow with two daughters when she married John Wilkinson. After Mary Ann and John Wilkinson had two more daughters, John enlisted in the British Army and after a time, correspondence ceased between them. Mary Ann was informed by the war office that her husband had been killed, after which she married Captain William Hamer,

“an officer in the East India company’s Service.” It was to this union that Elizabeth was born in 1819. Captain Hamer was killed in battle before Elizabeth was born, leaving her mother widowed for the third time—or so she thought. One night when Elizabeth was about 2 years old, as Mary Ann and her five daughters were at home, “John Wilkinson walked into the house to the utter astonishment of his family & neighbors who all supposed him dead.” Another John Wilkinson was serving in the army in Spain. Correspondence had been sent to the wrong home, and the other’s death reported to Mary Ann. It seems fortunate for Mary Ann that she was a widow again at this time of her second husband’s return.

James courted Elizabeth Hamer about two years, but he “discovered that it would not be in accordance with her Stepfathers feelings, as he exercised the most unscrupulous and tyrannical control over her, on my account, & both of us were determined it Should end and that by our marriage. We continued to meet in places clandestinely ... and on friday the 27th of April 1838 we were married at the Protestant Church [in the village of Prestwich]. After our marriage we Seperated and returned to Manchester different ways, and did not live to-gether until Sunday the 20th of May. She of course lived at home. During the interval between marriage and housekeeping, I provided her money to commence the world with, and by the above date all was ready, and we took up our line of march together through the world. Our next step was to inform her people of the step we had taken, and accordingly I wrote a note and left it at their house but did not give our address, as my wife feared the virulence of her Step Father, but her mother dreamed, the night Elizabeth left home, of the marriage; and even the place of our residence, and when She rose the next day, She came Straight to the house, to See her daughter, a married woman, exactly in fulfilment of the dream.” Elizabeth’s sisters (now five of them) had all “connived at [their] courtship” and all but one also eloped and were married without the consent of John Wilkinson.

In spite of all this, John must have liked James and Elizabeth, as he asked them to return to live with them in a few weeks. James rented a large house, “capable of containing us all, and [we] continued to live peaceable with no ill feelings.” John Wilkinson died six months later and James bore the expense of his funeral. Before he died, John had an unusual dream and prophesied concerning his step-daughter, Elizabeth. James records, “he called his wife, and my wife, alone before him. He asked forgiveness of the latter for his ill treatment of her previous to her marriage. He Said he was going to die, and he told her She would leave her native country with her husband and go to a far off land and She would never See her relatives again, as She would die there and leave a family. He Said it was revealed to him in a dream, a person came and told him so.” Elizabeth did not tell James of this until some time later and James said, “Of course I did not place any reliance on it, at the time: but the Sequel has proved it all to be true.”

Elizabeth gave birth to two sons in the next two years. She and James were heartbroken when they both died. James worked as a vest maker to support the family. He and Elizabeth remained active in their Methodist faith, and James was also a local preacher. At last, in 1841, Francis Robert was born, a great blessing to his bereaved parents. The Cantwell family moved to Liverpool in 1841, as James had been offered a good job there. He continued with his “duties” as a member of the Methodist “Wesleyan Association,” but soon joined a group formed by John Bowes called the “Christian Brethren” which taught the “truth of adult baptism” which doctrine was not a part of the Methodist creed.

When Francis’ parents moved to Liverpool, they did not know the momentous changes about to take place in their lives. James recorded: “One day in the month of December 1841, I was walking along Blackstock Street, I Saw a large placard on the wall, Stating that Elder George J Adams, late a Wesleyan preacher in America, would give his reasons for leaving that body, and uniting himself with the Latter Day Saints, in the Music Hall Bold Street. The reading of the placard made me wonder what could induce the man to do so, considering he could not give Sufficient reasons for Such a change.”

James and Elizabeth attended the meeting that Sunday evening, were introduced to Parley P. Pratt, and heard Elder Adams speak: “He Spoke very free and pointedly on the loss and restoration of the gospel, The necessity of a Prophet to guide the church, and the first principles of the church viz faith, repentance,

baptism for the remission of Sins, and the laying on of hands for the Gift of the Holy Ghost. He quoted largely from the bible, and proved his teachings So pointedly, that both Mitchelson [James' employer] and myself were fully convinced of the truth of what he Said."

James purchased a Book of Mormon and several tracts from Elder Adams, and stayed up most of the night reading and pondering them. The next day he invited Elder Adams to dine with them and said it was "a wonderful circumstance, the profound Knowledge he had relative to the bible, as we could not ask any questions whatever, but he could answer them So effectually and with Such ease, that we were Still more confirmed in our opinion of the truthfulness of the doctrines promulgated by Joseph Smith."

James was baptized February 7, 1842, in the River Mersey by Elder John Angel James. He began assisting the local branch of the Church with his means and every other way possible. Elizabeth did not join the Church for seven more years.

James' former friends, John Bowes and others, began to persecute him: "They attacked us in the Street and house, and wherever they could ... especially John Bowes. He, in consequence of his opposition, Subjected himself to a prophecy of Parly P. Pratt, who said his church Should be broken up, and it was so, and Scattered to the four winds."

In spite of opposition, James said he "continued to do battle for the truth." He was sent to Prescott and other places to preach. He continued in his employment as a tailor with George Mitchelson, who had also been baptized. In addition to his missionary work, James became a conference clerk.

In 1844, James had heard of the persecution of the Saints in Nauvoo and especially Joseph Smith, but, he writes, "We did not expect to hear of His death. ... I was appointed among others to purchase mourning to decorate our meeting room, which was universal throughout England."

James' employer and many others left the church after the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph. James says that George Mitchelson "ended his mormon life, and he ceased to feed his Sheep, but turned away to his old methodist creed ... and tried to induce me to follow him, but I didn't heed him, altho' Still in his employ." This persecution increased as time went by and in 1847, Mitchelson began threatening to fire James if he did not renounce his faith. "His wife repeatedly came to my house to threaten my wife ...[who] paid no attention to her, but let her go as She came." In March of 1848, James finally was discharged from his employment due to his "continued adherence to the Church." James and Elizabeth had become the parents of four more children during this time, one of whom had died at the age of one year. On February 7, 1849, James baptized Elizabeth, exactly seven years to the day and hour of his own baptism. James also baptized Francis. In 1846, Francis became extremely ill with scarlet fever and almost died. James called in the Elders to administer to him and records that he and the other children were "healed in a very Short time to the astonishment of our neighbors."

In 1850, it was proposed in council by Milo Andrus, president of the Liverpool Conference, that James should be released from his offices and duties and means raised for him and his family to emigrate to America. The means was raised by a public tea party. The Cantwell's sailed on the ship *James Pennel* in October 1850. On the 3rd of November, James had a dream about a hurricane striking the ship. He was also shown in his dream that they would all be saved. The next day, as they were sailing around the cape of Florida and into the Gulf of Mexico, a hurricane suddenly struck with a vengeance, leaving the ship a wreck, but they were all saved as related in his dream. The *Pennel* and another ship, the *Badger*, consisting of Saints from Wales, which had encountered the same storm, were finally towed to New Orleans by a steamer, appropriately named *Hercules*. James wrote: "The report of our dis-aster was previously published in the Papers and a great crowd of people came to See us, and among them a gang of rowdies, thieves, and desperadoes ... but between the whole of us, including the captain and crew, we Kept them off."

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The Cantwells arrived in St. Louis in December 1850, where they settled and James worked to earn enough money for the rest of their journey to Utah. James was president of the branch at St. Louis in 1852 and also served on the High Council in 1854. Four more children were born to James and Elizabeth while in Missouri. One of these babies, Wilhelmina, died at five months of age “with teething.” Elizabeth had now given birth to eleven children, five of whom had died. Francis had another brush with death while in St. Louis. His father tells of this time:

My oldest son, Francis Robert, was seized with cholera immediately after the death of the child, and when brought to the verge of the grave, he slowly recovered. He was reduced to a mere skeleton, and during his recovery he ate an enormous quantity of onions and bread.

In 1856, the Cantwells traveled from St. Louis to Florence, Nebraska, where they left on August 17th with the Andrew Siler Independent Wagon Company, traveling with the Willie Handcart Company. The family at this time consisted of the parents, James (42) and Elizabeth (37) and their children, Francis Robert (15), James (13), William (10), Ellen (7), Mary Ann (3) and Elizabeth, Jr. (1). At the end of August, James tells that they came “to the remains of a camp where a company of 4 wagons belonging to Almon Babbit were Killed and robbed by the Cheyenne Indians. The bodies were buried by the Soldiers from Ft. Kearney. The wagons were taken to the Fort. We covered the remains up better where the woolves had uncovered them and burned the remains of beds, bed clothes, clothes &c and went on our Journey. I picked up a lock of light brown (mans) hair, and put it in my pocket book. A woman and a little child was killed at the Same time.” The next day, Almon Babbit overtook them. A woman named Nancy Stewart who was with Babbit, left him and came as a passenger in the Cantwell’s wagon. Almon Babbit and his other traveling companion were killed by these same Indians after leaving the Willie Company.

On September 4, buffalo got in among the cattle and later that night a severe storm caused many of the cattle to run off. The Cantwell’s lost one ox and had to go on without it as it could not be found. Two weeks later, James recorded:

Wednes-day the 17th of September as we were descending Scots bluffs my daughter Ellen was bitten by a rattle Snake in the two first fingers of her right hand. It being noon we were camped. We had great difficulty in Saving her. She suffered until the month of January before She recovered, the virus Settled in the back of her hand, and eat out the flesh insomuch that the bones and Sinuses were discernable. She bears a Scar to this day, on the back of her hand, also the mark of the tape on her arm where She was tied to Stop the circulation of blood.

The Willie Company soon began encountering increasingly cold nights and a shortage of supplies and feed for their remaining animals. When they reached Ft. Laramie, it was decided the four “Independent” wagons would stay behind to wait for the Hodgett and Hunt Wagon Companies, as they had more cattle to spare. The Cantwells were among these. They left Ft. Laramie October 17 with the Hodgett Wagon Company. This Company was traveling closely with the Martin Handcart Company. After the last crossing of the Platte River on the 19th of October, the Hodgett and Martin Companies became stranded for several days with severe cold and deep snow. James says that “One or two of that company [Martin] died every night. One of my old friends from Liverpool named Thomas Dodd died there. ... Several men from the valley came out to assist us in. ... We travelled on day by day, in Snow Storms. Our cattle continued to drop down in the yoke one by one every day, and Sometimes 5 or 6 would die in a day, until the 4th of November [when] we arrived at the Devils gate. ... To give any just description [of] the times we Stayed at the above place, would be impossible. It was a combination of wind, hail, Snow, and cold in terrible reality. Many of the remaining cattle died, and our travelling power fell So Short that it was deemd adviseable to leave one half the wagons behind and all the freight and take nothing except our food and clothing. A company of about 20 young men was left behind to guard the property, with food, arms & amunition.”

James mentions some of his continuing rescuers as being William Dawson, Alonzo D. Rhodes, and John Skeen.

James says that in their “ascent and descent over the big mountain we encountered a formidable amount of Snow. At the Summit we found a depth of about 18 feet. It took about 60 of us to dig our way through it, occupying

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about two hours. The cold was intense, and when the passage was made, the people was hurried over as fast as possible. I verily believe a person would have frozen to death, if they had remained there five minutes, without being Securely wrapped up.”

After arriving in Salt Lake City, Francis hired out to a man named Nymphus Murdock, where he remained for some time. On April 2, 1858, as the family was preparing to move south at the oncoming arrival of Johnston’s Army, Francis’ mother awoke in the night in labor. She died two hours after giving birth to a son. James records that this event “marred the future of my life, and caused Sacrafices that never will be redeemed on earth” and left him “feeling lonely and wretched” with 7 children to care for. James was directed to the home of Joseph and Mary Knight, as Mary had just lost a baby the week before. Mary agreed to nurse and raise the baby, who James blessed and named Lucius Sherlock. The Knights were also just leaving their home to move south and James did not see Lucius again until December.

Francis and his brother, James, came home from their employment long enough to help their family build a dugout in the Provo area. James said that “With their help, I got a large cellar dug, and roofed with maple poles and cane: comparatively comfortable.”

James settled in his temporary home and mourned the loss of his wife. On June 10, 1858, he found some solace in writing a poem, a few lines of which are repeated here:

How long Shall I feel that a pilgrim I roam, Or having no place I can claim as a home
The hearth Stone is vacant, where She used to preside - And Sorely I miss her away from my side.
She breathed not a breath, but was hushed calm and Still, Cold insensibility, vacant and chill
The body lay there, death came to destroy - Asleep by her side, lay our beautiful boy.
I cannot forget the remembrance of one Who from Youths early day, had followed me on
To lands afar off, for my Sake alone She forsook all the comforts, of house, friends, and home.
Her Sons and her daughters, now Stand on the earth To Speak of their mother reposing in death,
To drop the Soft tear, in rembrance of her, Who bore them and bles’t them, without dread or fear.
We Shall not forget, So much goodness and worth But wait for to meet her, again on the earth.

Tragedy struck again in late June, when the Cantwell’s dugout accidentally caught fire and the family lost nearly everything they owned. However, James relates, “One circumstance ... as being remarkable. ... I discovered Something on the ground and as I looked at [it] I found it to be the portrait of my wife, the cover was burned up, but the likeness was perfect. I look upon that ... as a special act of Providence, as it was of priceless value to me and mine.”

In July the threat was over, and the Cantwells returned to their home in Cottonwood. James tried farming and several other ways to support his family, without much success. Of necessity, his older children hired out and his younger ones were taken into foster care by kind friends.

In January of 1862, Francis purchased a farm and house in Smithfield, Cache County, for his father and siblings. He paid for it with “his horse, saddle, pistol, a steer, and Some other property.” The Cantwell’s moved north, where James continued to care for his children as a single father. Francis helped him a great deal. On August 6, 1874, James wrote, “My Son Lucius S came here from Salt Lake City to visit us. I met him at the Station. I did not Know him, not having Seen him Since the 8th day of Decr 1865.” The son that had been born 16 years earlier was finally able to become acquainted with his family.

During the immigration, Francis had spent a fair amount of his time walking with Emily and Joseph Wall of the Willie Company. Francis likely assisted Emily (16) when her brother, Joseph (17), became very ill and had to be pulled in the handcart. This friendship proved to be fortuitous, as Francis married their sister who emigrated to Utah later.

James died in 1887 at the age of 73. Frances died just eleven years later at the age of 57.

Sources: Journal of James Sherlock Cantwell; familysearch.org.