

A Visit to David Whitmer

JAMES H. MOYLE



JAMES H. MOYLE
at time of visit

(Editorial Note: James H. Moyle, the author of this article, is, as far as we know, the only living member of the Church who had a conversation with David Whitmer, one of the three witnesses to the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon. He is now approaching his 87th Birthday.)

The Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's early life and work have always had a charm for me. They are the basis of our faith, and upon the divinity of that book rests the truth of our religion. If that book is not a divine record then we are a deluded people.

While I was studying at the University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor, I read in one of the local papers that David Whitmer was alive and that he had given a very interesting interview to a newspaper man. That aroused my interest. So I determined

that, on my way home, I would see him if he were still living.

Realizing this fact, I made my way to Richmond, Missouri, when I graduated from Michigan, on the last of June, 1885. There was only one train a day in and out of that town. I therefore had to remain there during the night. Richmond was a small town, something like our nice little country towns here in Utah, in a farming section of the country. There was a bus to meet the train — drawn by horses, of course. I sat on the seat with the driver, and there I began my investigation of David Whitmer and continued it for one day. I talked with the driver. He said David Whitmer was a highly respected citizen of Richmond. I stopped at the local hotel and talked with the clerk; he gave me the same response as did everyone else I approached.

In the newspaper article the statement was made that David Whitmer was pestered with curiosity seekers who had heard that he had seen an angel from heaven. So I brought a nice little present for him, to show that I was really interested, and I induced a friend of his to give me a favorable introduction.

We went to his home. It was a plain, simple little two-story building with one or two little fruit trees in front of it. There were no other ornaments. (We didn't have lawns in those days.) He was sitting in front of the house under his fruit trees.

I told him something about myself and my family. I was born in the Church. My mother was born in the early days of the Church in Illinois. My father came to Utah in his 'teens—a boy alone in the world with no relatives in America, and it was all for his religion. My mother's father had given up a new home and farm for the gospel. He had come to Kirtland in 1834 where he built a nice home and farm. That, too, was given up for the gospel's sake, and he went to Missouri where his resources were exhausted, and in the late fall of 1838 he built a simple, rough log home in Far West, from which place they were again driven by organized military mobs early in the spring of 1839. Then, with their resources exhausted, they had either to go east or with their people to Illinois. They chose to go to Illinois. My mother was born just after their arrival in Illinois. My grandfather pulled a handcart

every foot of the way from the Missouri River to the valley. My mother saw him as he entered it and said that his fingers looked like the claws of a bird and he much like that of a skeleton.

I told David Whitmer that I had grown up in the pioneer days of Utah believing devoutly in my religion. I told him further that I had just graduated from the University of Michigan as a lawyer and that I was about to commence my life's work as he was preparing to lay his down. And so I begged of him not to let me go through life believing in a vital falsehood. Was his testimony, as published in the Book of Mormon, true? Was there any possibility that he might have been deceived in any particular?

His answer was unequivocal. There was no question about its truthfulness. The angel had stood in a little clear space in the woods with nothing between them but a fallen log—the angel on one side and the witnesses on the other. It had all occurred in broad, clear daylight. He saw the plates and heard the angel with unmistakable clearness.

He was 80 years old at the time I saw him—perfectly gray, serious-minded, and beyond question sincere. His mind seemed perfectly clear. He moved about with freedom and lived three years after, with his mind normal. He was the first witness I ever attempted to cross examine, and I did so with all the intensity of my impelling desire to know the truth. The interview last-

ed two and one-half hours. I exhausted all my resources, and he was very kind and willing to aid me.

There was only one thing that did not fully satisfy me. I had difficulty then, as I have now, to describe just what was unsatisfactory. I wrote in my dairy immediately on my return home that in describing the scene in the woods he was "somewhat spiritual in his explanations and not as materialistic as I wished." That was my description then and I cannot make it any clearer now. He said "it was indescribable; that it was through the power of God." He then spoke of Paul's hearing and seeing Christ, but his companions did not because it is only seen in the spirit. I asked if the atmosphere about them was normal. He said it was "indescribable," but the light was bright and clear, yet apparently a different kind of light, something of a soft haze, I concluded.

A few years before this, in an interview with President Joseph F. Smith and Apostle Orson Pratt, they reported that he said it was more brilliant than that of the noonday sun.

I have wondered if there was a special significance, not clear to me, in the language used by the three witnesses in their testimony referring to the Golden Plates: "And they have been *shown* unto us by the *power* of God and not of man." The eight witnesses say the plates were shown unto them by Joseph Smith. That I call materialistic; the other

spiritual, and I could not get anything more out of it.

Paul says: "For what man knoweth the things of man, save the spirit of man which is in him. Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the spirit of God . . . But the natural man receiveth not the things of the spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* and, I think, another encyclopedia, in an edition published not long before David Whitmer's death, rendered a real service, in disguise, to the truth by repeating and giving credit to the falsehood circulated by the enemies of the Book of Mormon that David Whitmer had repudiated his testimony. That provoked a formal denial from David Whitmer, and he said that the contrary of this was the truth. In this statement he was supported by the leading citizens of Richmond and the county officials of the county in which Richmond is located. All of them not only joined in the denial but asserted that David Whitmer had consistently adhered to his testimony and that he was a highly respected citizen of the community.

I asked David Whitmer why he left the church. His answer thrilled me more than any other statement which he made. It was the greatest surprise of the interview. I was not familiar then with his history after leaving the Church. He said, "I never left the Church. Joseph Smith was a fallen prophet of God and I

accepted nothing revealed to him after 1835 because I did not know whether it came from God or Sidney Rigdon. He introduced into the Church many innovations. I have presided over a branch of the Church here in Richmond ever since the thirties."

The surprise and thrill were due to the way he said it, the way he looked and the circumstances surrounding the interview. The spontaneous expression of his thought—it came as if from the depths of his soul—"Joseph Smith was a fallen prophet of God" which spoke so impressively the most important fact that I was seeking. He could not have fallen if he had not been a prophet of God. That fact, that knowledge in David Whitmer was as manifest as the fact that he sat before me. The conviction came to me as clearly as the sunshine that, if David Whitmer knew anything of the facts, it was that Joseph Smith in bringing forth the Book of Mormon and organizing the Church was a prophet of God and the testimony of the three witnesses was the truth and nothing but the truth.

David Whitmer knew the Prophet as few, if any, knew him, so far as the bringing forth of the Book of Mormon was concerned. It was he who went to Harmony, Pennsylvania, and brought the Prophet, his

wife, and Oliver Cowdery to the home of David's father to live there and complete the translation of the Book of Mormon. There they all lived for months in a three-room house, if you believe the Church was organized in the old home, or in a six-room house, if you believe the Church was organized in the new home: Joseph Smith, his wife, Oliver Cowdery, father and mother Peter Whitmer, four sons and a daughter—ten people, in about as close and intimate a relationship as could possibly be. The fifth son lived in the same home yard with his wife in a small and older building. That friendly relationship continued until the disaffection, excommunication and final separation of Joseph and David. If there was anyone who had the opportunity of knowing the Prophet in the most vital months of translating the Book of Mormon it was the five sons of father and mother Whitmer, whose names appear in the Book of Mormon among the eleven special witnesses to its divinity. And David Whitmer was selected to be one of the

three who not only saw the plates and the engravings thereon, but saw and heard the messenger from heaven "who brought and laid the plates before our eyes," and he and they, the three witnesses, declare "beheld and saw the plates and the engraving thereon" and heard



JAMES H. MOYLE
in middle life

the "Voice of the Lord" which commanded them that they "should bear record of it." This they did throughout their lives even when groping in darkness and the loss of the divine "light of life" and in antagonism to Joseph Smith and the body of the people.

If there had been fraud in this matter Joseph Smith would have cultivated those men and kept them with him at any cost. The truth is that when they became unworthy they were excommunicated, even though they were witnesses to the Book of Mormon. It does not appear, I say again, that there was any evidence that Joseph Smith did anything more than was clearly his duty to keep these men around him; but, on the contrary, he did that which alienated them.

That declaration of David Whitmer's that Joseph Smith was a fallen prophet in 1836 coming as it did, removed all doubt in my mind about the sincerity and honesty of David Whitmer's testimony as published in the Book of Mormon.

It is interesting to note that the Doctrine and Covenants contains 133 revelations and that 108 of them were received before 1836. The age of Joseph Smith and his intellectual opportunities are added evidence of the fact that he was a great prophet. His surroundings were those of the pioneer frontiersman, and these 108 revelations before the Prophet was 30 years old contain the fundamentals of the most important essentials of the most perfect religious organization ever created.

Those revelations received before 1836, when Joseph Smith, according to David Whitmer, was a prophet of God were, I repeat, received when the Prophet was just emerging from boyhood on the frontier of the United States, with practically no education, no library, and very few sources of information within his reach.

In that interview I did my best to ascertain if money could influence David Whitmer and so when he showed me what he called the original copy of the translation of the Book of Mormon, which he did with apparent great pride and interest, I asked him what he would sell it for. He would not even discuss the subject. He said that when the great cyclone a few years before struck Richmond and destroyed many homes, including his own, except the room in which the manuscript was kept, that manuscript was not injured at all. It appeared to me to be in excellent condition. Money had no value to him compared with that of the manuscript, notwithstanding his circumstances in life.

I find that I have forgotten much that David Whitmer said about priesthood, polygamy and wherein the Prophet and the people had departed from first principles, which he emphasized. That did not impress me. My mind at the time of my visit was concerned with one question, was the printed testimony of David Whitmer the truth and nothing but the truth?