

THE LIFE STORY OF JAMES PETER AHLSTROM
COMPILED BY HIS DAUGHTER, BETH HAYES

James Peter Ahlstrom, a High Priest in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, was born September 6, 1861, at Ephraim, Sanpete County, Utah. He was the third child of Mary Larsen of Denmark and Jon Peter Ahlstrom of Sweden.

Through the efforts of the Mormon missionaries, his parents were converted to the Church while living in their native countries. In October of 1855 the Ahlstrom and Larsen families, along with five hundred other Mormon emigrants left their homelands to begin a long and eventful journey to the land of Zion.

The life of Mary Larsen and Jon Peter Ahlstrom has been exemplified by their willingness to obey the counsel and wishes of those who were in authority of the Church. Their meeting and eventual marriage was a direct example of this characteristic. While crossing the ocean, the love of Mary Larson was pledged to one of the other emigrants, and her acquaintance with Peter Ahlstrom was more or less of a speaking nature. In 1857 when their company had reached Burlington, Iowa, Mary's betrothed began to drift from the counsel of the Church. The authorities in the Burlington branch noticed this and approached Mary and Peter, whose acquaintance was still very casual, and asked that they accept each other in marriage. They were married the following Sunday on February 27th in the Burlington chapel. Two years later they began their long journey over the great plains to Utah.

John Stephen McGroesty, a United States Congressman, caught some of the inspiration of Mary Larsen's life from reading her obituary. Excerpts from an article he wrote under the title of Here was a Mother of Men show his thoughts concerning this noble life:

"We like to make records of events of this nature for us who go about our ways complaining and discouraged when life is a little hard and the burdens we bear seem heavy. Had she been a woman of great wealth or of great notoriety and created sensations by a wild career, or had she been of royal blood or something like that, the newspapers everywhere would have had great headlines concerning her passing. But on the contrary, she was just a humble, plodding, God-fearing and patient woman--a Mother of Israel and a Mother of Men. But when you read the story of her life you cannot fail to see that it is a great story of a great life."

The ship in which she and her husband crossed the North Sea was beaten and buffeted by terrible storms and reached Liverpool only by what might be regarded as a miracle. After that they were sixty-six days in an old windjammer vessel that seems to have had as much hard luck on the wild waters of the Atlantic as any other ship about which stories are told. A great number of the passengers died at sea, including Mary Larsen's two brothers. To add to the terrors of the voyage, the ship caught fire in mid-ocean and was saved only by the heroic efforts of the crew and passengers. Then the ill-fated galleon collided with another ship and, though badly damaged, was once again saved as though by a miracle.

Many times providence seemed to take a hand in the lives of the Ahlstrom and Larsen families. When they finally reached the Mississippi River, it was March and the river was still ice covered. They thought the river to be only a pond and dragged their boxes and luggage with them across the ice. By the next morning, the ice had melted revealing to them the treacherous river and their own safety again as if by a miracle. They started overland with four oxen and a covered wagon, but Mary and Peter did not ride as there were thirteen people assigned to their wagon, which was used to haul provisions. They walked all the way with their first baby in their arms.

Peter Ahlstrom, his young wife Mary, and their ever increasing brood of children braved and bore all the hardships that the early pioneers of Utah endured. Wrestling with the stubborn soil for its begrudging harvest, defending themselves against murderous attacks of hostile Indians and waiting through the bitter winters for the spring to come so they could begin again. To this pioneer family were born nine children, three girls and six boys.

The third child was named James Peter Ahlstrom, whose life was to parallel that of his parents in many ways. His early life was spent in pioneering the sections of Utah and Idaho in which he lived. He learned responsibility at an early age, as the very existence of his family depended upon those things they could raise, and every child was expected to do his share as soon as he was old enough. James learned to manage the livestock, and spent his early summers working in his father's fields. Schools and books were at a premium, but the Ahlstrom children took every advantage to learn.

At the age of fourteen, James started working on neighboring farms during the summers and returned home for the winter with his money to help his family. His father had taken a second wife and there was lots of work for the older boys. One day as they were working in the fields at Ephraim, a party of Indians in war paint and feathers came towards them. They were told to run for Fort Ephraim, but James hid in the corner of a fence and watched the raiding party go by.

The family moved to Manti, Utah, where James' father worked on the new Temple as the head carpenter. One winter James worked with his father hauling the large stones that were used to form the window sills of the Temple.

When the Denver-Rio Grande Railroad went through Utah, "Jimmy" as they called him, drove mules for the engineer from Price, Utah to the Grand River. He would sometimes be gone for weeks, never seeing another wagon track except those made by his own wagon. One year he freighted from Ephraim to Nevada, first with mules and later with horses.

When he was twenty-three years old he came to Idaho. At that time there was a boom in the Lost River and Wood River mines and Jimmy came up into that section young and eager to get into the thick of things. Instead of mining, he decided there was a good profit in gardening, and with the help of an old civil war veteran, he raised truck garden vegetables and sold them to the miners. They worked at this for three years and did very well, but then came panic with the Grover Cleveland administration and all the mines were closed down.

From Idaho Jimmy went to Oregon and got work on the railroad. He stayed there one summer then returned to southern Utah and settled in a little place called Tropic in Garfield County. The town was just being built, and in order to get water to it a canal had to be built over the mountains. Jimmy was the first president of the canal company, working on it for three years. He was the only one there with knowledge in the use of dynamite and supervised all the blasting. When the canal was completed, the town held a celebration with lots of food, songs, and dancing. They made up a song about it, part of which goes "and the water. It was muddy when us fellers got it through."

At this time Jimmy joined the State Militia. Like all soldiers, he was popular with the ladies. In a big lumber wagon, he drove pretty Matilda Jolley to a Military Drill in Cannonville on their first date.

One time Jimmy lost some horses and followed their tracks up into a canyon he had never seen before. He thought it was the most beautiful place he had ever seen. He returned and told everyone about it. He took some drummers (salesmen from ZCMI in Salt Lake) into the canyon and upon their return, they wrote a piece for the Salt Lake paper about its beauty. Then the Governor and the Mayor of Salt Lake visited the canyon, and from there its fame spread. The canyon is called Bryce Canyon, after a Mr. Bryce who built a cabin there. Mr. Bryce said the only thing he thought about the canyon was that it was a hell of a place to lose a cow. Many times Jimmy Ahlstrom told his family how he was the first one to go into Bryce canyon and then returned to build trails so others could come and enjoy the beauties of that lovely place.

On June 24, 1896, James Peter Ahlstrom and Matilda Jolley were married by Bishop A.J. Hansen in Tropic, Utah. Their marriage was later solemnized in the Temple at Sale Lake.

James Ahlstrom built the first house on the townsite at Tropic; a ten room, three story, white frame home with a basement on a quarter-acre lot. He also purchased a forty acre farm in Tropic on which he raised hay, grain and corn. They sold their produce, taking calves as pay until they had accumulated a good sized herd of cattle. However, a recession hit the country and they had to sell their cattle. A cow and calf brought barely \$10.

After selling his cattle, he and his two brothers bought a saw mill near Bryce Canyon. This was a busy time for him, farming and working at the mill which put out ten thousand feet of lumber per day, surfaced on one side. It sold for eight dollars per thousand, which usually had to be taken in farm produce. He worked the mill for five years when a fire of unknown origin broke out and burned the mill to the ground. He and Matilda again had to smile in the face of disaster.

It was here in their lovely Tropic home that their first son was born--still-born, April 14, 1897. Their second son, Dewey, was born June 24, 1898. A third son, William, was born August 14, 1900. Their first daughter, Opal, was born October 14, 1902, and died of scarlet fever on December 14, 1905. A second daughter, Lila, was born May 15, 1905.

Early in March of 1906 James Peter, Matilda and the three children, Dewey, Bill and Lila, bid a tearful goodbye to their families and friends and with a small caravan of wagons left Tropic for the wilds of Idaho. Matilda left with mixed emotions. They left their lovely ten room

home, their herds of cattle and horses and farm land to make a new start in Idaho where water was more plentiful. They arrived in Salt Lake the day that the newspapers were telling of the terrible San Francisco earthquake and fire. They went on to Blackfoot, Idaho, where James obtained work on the Government Canal. They located two of Matilda's half-uncles, Will and Ed Stolworthy, who had their sheep in that area. They camped on the property of Matilda's girlfriend, Marie Jensen and her husband until they could purchase a farm of their own.

A parcel of land was purchased just north of the townsite of Basalt, Idaho, and east of the railroad tracks. That summer James built a log house with a pitched roof. He planted an arbor, nursery and most of the Poplar trees in and near Basalt, Goshen and Blackfoot came from his nursery. He also raised potatoes, hay and grain on the farm.

He never swore or used any kind of degrading language and never spoke unkind of anyone. He didn't gossip. One time a neighbor came to the door and said "I am coming in without knocking." Dad said, "Fine, and I hope you go out the same way." He didn't like to hear anyone gossip.

James loved the great streams of water and fertile lands of Idaho. He grubbed sagebrush, planted trees and shrubs, built ditches, canals and bridges. The winters were cold and the snow was deep. He spent a lot of time during the winter hauling firewood from the lava beds west of Basalt by bobsled. Cedar wood was a good firewood with lots of heat and a pleasant aroma.

Another daughter, Vesta, was born at Basalt, Idaho, February 4, 1908. William (Bill) Peter became very ill with pneumonia at this time. A Dr. Edwin Cutler from Shelley, Idaho, and his nurse, Aggie, came to the Ahlstrom home every other day during Bill's illness. Dr. Cutler made his calls in a one horse sleigh in the winter time and a buggy in the warmer months. Bill's condition was such that Dr. Cutler had to tap his lungs every other day to drain off the puss. This tapping of the lungs was the first operation of this kind performed by Dr. Cutler in this Idaho area. The procedure saved Bill's life even though he had to stay in bed for many months.

In 1910 the Ahlstroms moved to Shelley, Idaho, and bought a home near the school and church. Here they had a large acreage with a beautiful apple orchard and berry patch. Jimmy traded his Basalt property to a Mrs. Little for a dry farm west of Shelley about five miles in what was called then 'the horseshoe bend.' Here James again had to do a lot of grubbing sage to get the land ready for cultivation. This, in 1910, was strictly a dry farm situation. Planting the winter wheat late in the fall or early spring to take advantage of the winter moisture was an absolute necessity. Then they would hope for rain during the summer so the grain would mature and ripen.

Horse-drawn equipment was mostly used at this time on the dry farms. However, Jimmy purchased one of the first tractors to be used in dry farm operations in Bingham County. Bill had recovered from his sickness and, with his brother Dewey, they could be seen with a lantern tied to a long pole out in front of the tractor as they plowed the new land during the night hours to insure getting their crops in as early as possible. Light weight machinery and a series of years of very short moisture was the undoing of many of those early dry farmers and it was not long until they were forced to leave the dry farm for other work.

While living in Shelley, two more daughters and two more sons were born to the Ahlstrom family. Elizabeth, born June 5, 1910; Wanda, born August 17, 1912; Paul Wendell, born August 21, 1915; and Farrell Glen, born September 12, 1921.

Because of the dry farm failure, the Ahlstroms moved to Idaho Falls, Idaho, in 1922. James Ahlstrom secured work as a traveling salesman for the McConnon Company, a distributor of general home merchandise, featuring spices and patent medicines, etc. He obtained a Surrey-type buggy and two small horses. Loaded with home merchandise, he would go to the far areas of the valley to visit homes and farms in out-of-the-way places to make available his products to the farm homes of the area. He traveled to the Star Valley of Wyoming, Swan Valley in Idaho and north and south of Idaho Falls in regular scheduled visits. Travel was slow with the horse-drawn wagon, and he would be away from home for weeks at a time. After several years of this type activity, Jimmy purchased a Model T Ford and then later a Model A Ford to expand his sales area.

Time and age finally caught up with Jimmy Ahlstrom and he was forced to retire from this work. There was lots of work and little pay from this selling activity. However, he had a very wide circle of friends and enjoyed visiting 'his good customers' as he called them.

His later years were spent at his home at 262 South Water Avenue, in Idaho Falls, Idaho, where he saw his family mature and start homes of their own. He was a proud, honest man. He loved his church and had an absolute testimony of the truth of the restored gospel. He was one of the original pioneers, enduring all of the hardships and joys which were a part of pioneer life. Our present day comforts have come to us because of the labors of Jimmy Ahlstrom and an unnumbered host of other pioneers who followed the counsel of the leaders of the Mormon Church to expand and develop the land for those who would come after.

He lived in Idaho Falls longer than any other community and witnessed it grow from a small western farm community to the area trade center it is developing to be. He was here before cement sidewalks and paved roads were a part of the community. He was here before the days of the automobile. He was here when horses, buggies and wagons were the only means of transportation other than the Oregon Short Line Railroad that connected Idaho Falls with the outside world. He saw the telephone and electricity come to this valley. He was here when there was only one Mormon Ward and chapel in Idaho Falls. He was a part of Idaho Falls as it grew and became the thriving community that it is, and throughout his life he maintained a strong membership in the church and a sincere devotion to the call of his parents and himself to settle and expand the communities of this intermountain land.

James Peter Ahlstrom died in Idaho Falls, Idaho, on May 6, 1940, at the age of seventy-nine years. Matilda, his widow, lived at the family home and continued as the beloved matriarch of her large family until her death in February 10, 1968, at the age of ninety-three years.