

HISTORY OF JOHN MADISON CHIDESTER

My Great Grandfather John Madison Chidester, was born in 1809, in Pompey, New York. He was left fatherless in infancy, but was fortunate to grow up with loving Grandparents, a devoted mother and a considerate Step-Father. At an early age he learned carpentry and millwright trade, becoming very skilled in both.

The family moved to Michigan where he met and married Mary Joesphine Parker.

In the summer of 1832, two itinerant missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints came to Michigan. John liked the message they brought and decided to join them. On the 20th day of June 1832 he was baptized. The following summer he was ordained an Elder in the Church.

When the call for volunteers came, to make a march to Missouri to aid and defend Church members there, reached Michigan, it found ready volunteers in the Chidester family. Selling his property in Michigan, John, with his wife and infant son, set out on a great adventure. They traveled as far as Florance, Ohio, then paused to wait for the main group to come from Kirtland, Ohio. While there, a daughter was born, making four members of the family joining the camp.

It was a long, difficult march--a time of testing and trial. John and his family stood the test so well that many years later he was to bear testimony of his increased faith as a result of the experience. He told of the time when, after a hard day's march, they came to a lovely camp spot on the bank of a river. Everyone hurried to make camp, but Joseph Smith, their prophet-leader, insisted that they go on quite some distance to a much less desirable spot. Some grumbled but all eventually complied. The next morning it was learned that there had been a mob gathering the night before, intending to descend on the camp to destroy it. There were many such incidents that so inspired John with the leadership of the Prophet Joseph that he gave undying allegiance to him and would never henceforth be engaged in anything that was not part of the Church. After the emergency was met and the camp was disbanded, John settled his family in Liberty, Missouri. Again mobs were incited against the Saints, and they had to move on. It was here John acted as body guard to the Prophet. The story was repeated in Far West, Missouri. They moved to Quincy, Illinois for one year, then to Nauvoo, Illinois. In Nauvoo there was comparative peace for a few years. For their protection the Nauvoo Legion was organized, John joined and in December, 1844 he became a First Lieutenant.

John prospered in Nauvoo, although he had lost all his worldly goods in the previous move and had arrived without means. As the Saints prospered and built their small empire

up again. The Prophet was the main target and was constantly under the necessity of evading the persecutors. The family tells the story of one time John was out in the country peddling apples. The Prophet met him and asked him for his help, for a mob was after him. John rearranged the apples so that the Prophet was completely covered--all but his feet. There wasn't time to do more. The mob came up and demanded that he submit to a search. They looked all around, did not see the uncovered feet, and finally left, whereupon John turned his wagon around and headed for home. At a fork in the road John decided to take the shortest route, but as he turned into that road a blinding flash of lightening struck just ahead of the horses. They were frightened and began to run out of control. By the time John was able to calm them he found that they were well on the way down the opposite road. He drove on and when he arrived home he discovered that, had gone on the first route, he would have encountered the mob again and probably not been so successful in evading them.

The Prophet was martyred and events forced the Saints to abandon their homes yet another time. John moved his family across the Mississippi River to a camp on the edge of Sugar Creek near Montrose, Iowa. He then loaned his wagon to one of the General Authorities, Ezra Taft Benson, so that he could accompany the new leaders in their scouting a way west. He and his eldest son built a raft and busied themselves in helping other Church members to cross the river. While there, a daughter was born. John, disguised as a woman, cared for his wife and baby. Most of the Saints had moved on and he was alone with his family. Mobs would not, at that time, hurt children and women if there was no man around.

In Kaneshville, now Council Bluffs, Iowa, the family stopped to recoup their fortunes and prepare for the difficult journey across the prairies to the Rocky Mountains. John built a horse powered grist mill and ground corn and wheat into meal to sell as well as to sustain his family. He and his sons worked to fashion wagons and carts for the pioneers. Eventually, the family was ready to move, but not before another child had been born. Again, as had happened twice before, Mary would walk the weary miles with an infant in her arms.

Arrived in Utah, the family camped in Salt Lake City for a time, then when to Bountiful for a year. While there John made a living by building spinning wheels which were desperately needed by the women. Then came the call for him to settle in Spanish Fork. No other settlement had been made in this barren region. John became a spiritual and temporal leader of the group, serving as their branch president, as the chaplain of all civic affairs and as a military leader during the time of the Walker Indian War.

In 1856 there was a terrible grasshopper plague that took all the crops and left the family so destitute that it was decided that they should leave. They spent a short time in Parleys Park to recover a bit and then returned to Salt Lake City where they lived in the Sixteenth Ward.

In the fall of 1862 they were asked to join the "Cotton Mission" and go to Southern Utah where they would be involved in the production of cotton and cloth. John's skill as a turner was deemed necessary in the new community. They went without a murmur to this new, very difficult land and settled in what is now Washington. They were to experience many things. There would be want, Indian troubles, malaria and all problems of building a life in a forbidding land.

John sold his water rights in the Mill Creek so that a cotton factory could be built. He helped to build and operate the factory, hand carving the reeds that went into the looms. His skill was constantly in demand. His next and last big venture was to help in the building of the St. George Temple, doing much of the hand carving of the interior.

As the temple became a reality, John was inspired to begin a family record. He wrote letters, researched all available means, and compiled a record that is the basis and inspiration of this present work.

After a life of hardship and trial but content with his life, John died peacefully at his home in Washington. Mary having preceded him in death.

Mary L. Formo

REFERENCES:

Family History of John M. Chidester
Ward Records
Stories told by his Children
Journal History of the Church