

A History of Nels John Johnson

*by Jennifer DeAnn Johnson Banks
a great-granddaughter*



A Lake between Torup and Årstad

The Swedish province of Halland is located on the southwest coast just north of the southernmost province of Skåne. Historically it has been aligned with Denmark and was the last province to come under Swedish rule in 1648. The current population of Halland is about 100,000 with only four true cities. Though rural, the area has been inhabited since early times and is rich in pre-historical monuments that testify to the long period of human occupation.



Farmstead Blixtorp with Årstad parish church silhouetted on the horizon

It was in this area that Nels John Johnson was born on 12 June 1856. He was the first child of Anders Johannes Johanneson and Elna Petronella Pehrson. It is most likely that Anders was working as a farm laborer. The farms are clustered together in small groups of two or three farms. According to his journal, Nels was born at a farmstead named Blixtorp which is located in Årstad parish.



Slöinge, Halland Parish Church

Since the time that church records began to be kept, Nels' ancestors had lived in this part of Halland. His mother, Elna Petronella Pehrson had been born in Boarp, Slöinge while his father had been born nearby in Öinge, Asige.



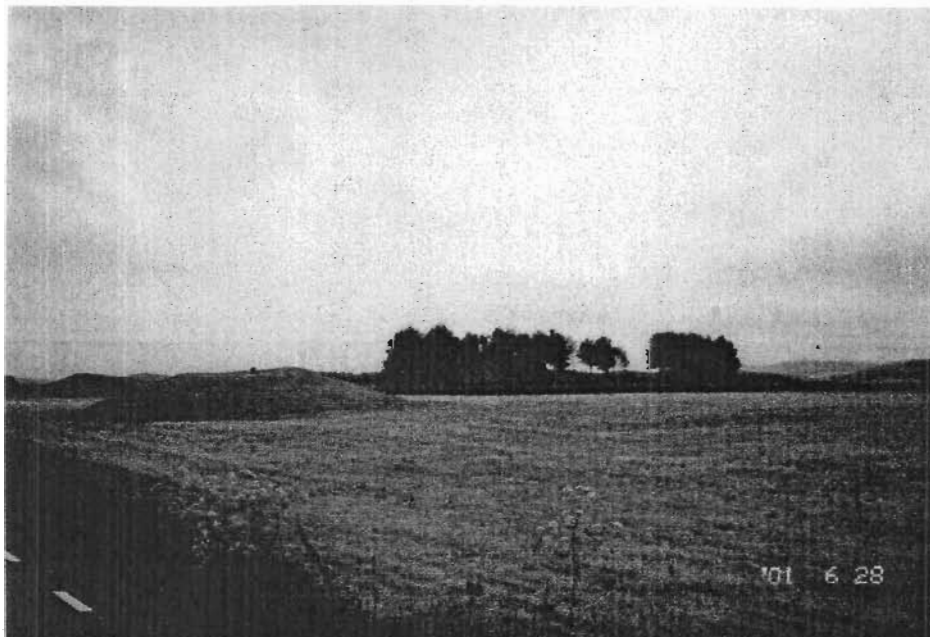
Asige Parish Church

The Asige parish church is literally surrounded by pre-historic monuments. Across from the church are three menhirs, the remains of what is said to have formerly been an avenue of upright stones sixty to seventy meters long. A kilometer north of this is Hagbard's Galge, a



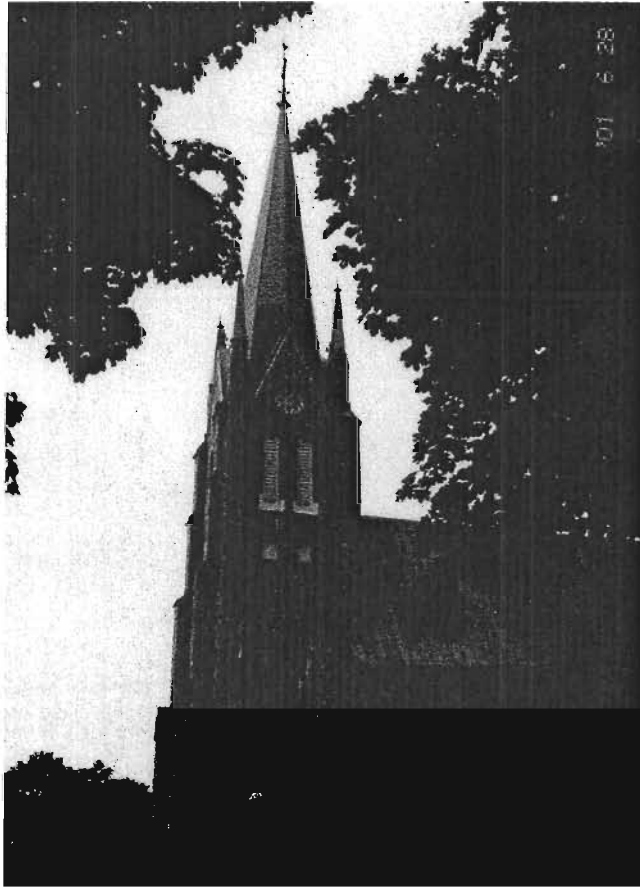
Hagbard's Galge

small bronze age burial ground with circular stone settings and upright stones. Immediately south of Asige a farmer's field is broken by three ancient burial mounds.



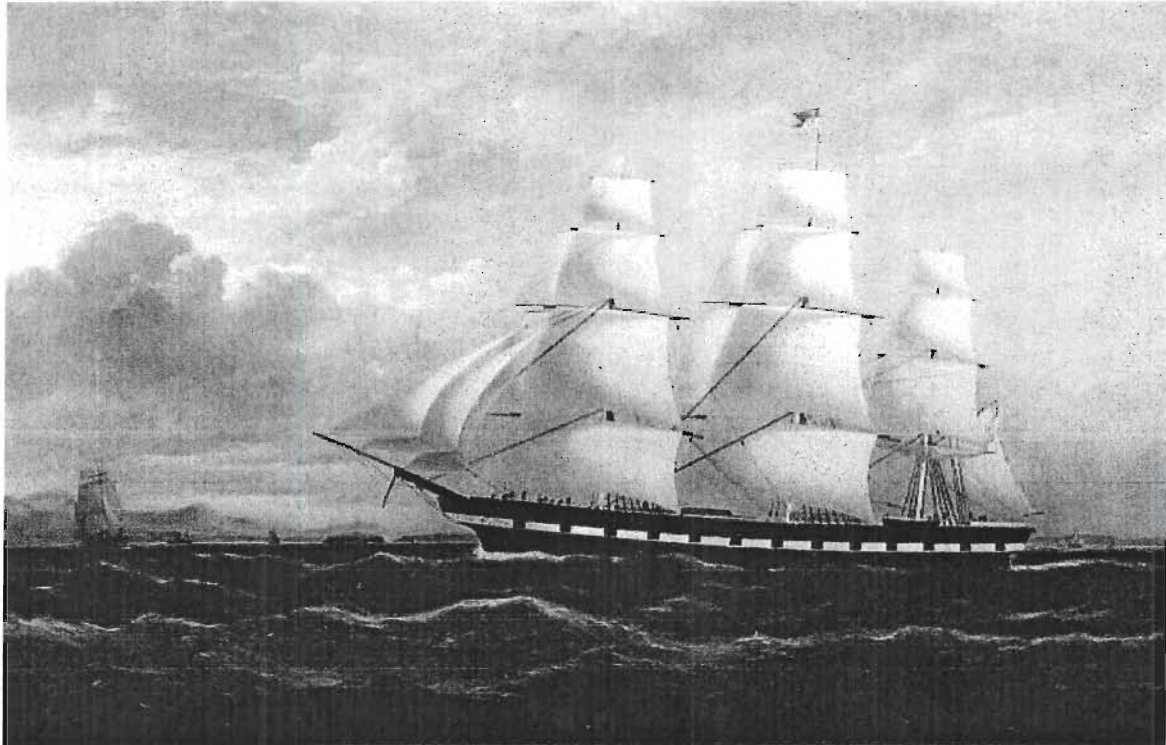
Bronze Age Mounds near Asige

Nels' parents were recent converts to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Shortly after the birth of their second child, John Elof on 4 April 1858, who was also born in the Årstad parish, the family made plans to emigrate to Utah. In March of 1859 the family



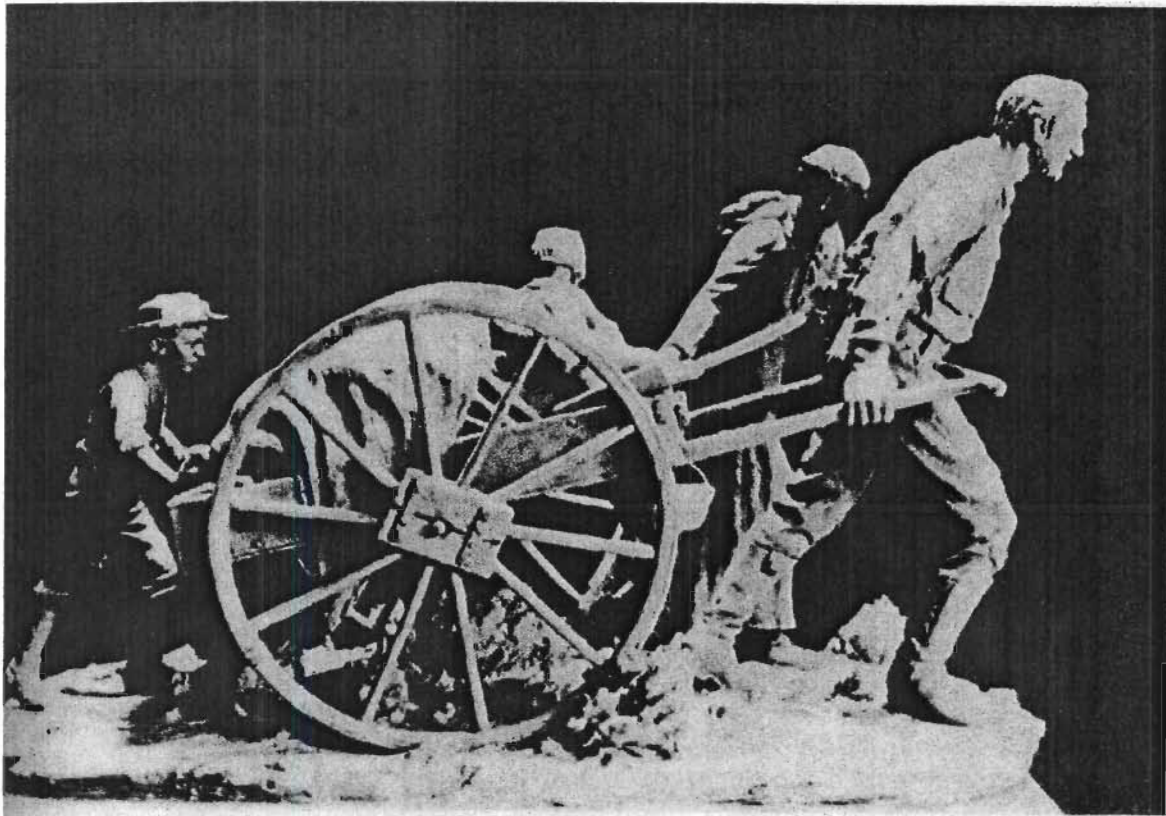
Årstad Parish Church

accompanied by Anders' mother, Elna Johaneson Hakansson, as well as Matthias Nielson, a family friend, left Göteborg and sailed to Copenhagen, Denmark where they met up with a larger group of Scandinavian Saints who were also emigrating to Utah. On 1 April 1859 they boarded the steamer L N Hvedt in the charge of Elders Carl Widerborg and Niels Wilhelmsen for a stormy passage over the North Sea. Many fellow passengers later recorded this to be the worst of their entire ocean voyage. The steamer arrived in Grimsby, England on 6 April 1859. From Grimsby the emigrants traveled by rail to Liverpool where they joined a larger group of converts. On 11 April 1859 the Johnson family sailed from Liverpool aboard the *William Tapscott*. The ship had a total of 725 Latter-day Saint emigrants on board. Robert F. Nelson,



William Tapscott

the president of the company divided the group into ten wards, five English and five Scandinavian with the Swiss emigrants being included in the English wards. One of their fellow travelers recorded that the vast majority of the company was severely afflicted with seasickness during the Atlantic crossing. On 14 May 1859 the ship landed at Castle Gardens in New York harbor. Later that evening the majority of the group boarded the steamer *Isaac Newton* and traveled on to Albany. In Albany they gathered at the train depot to wait for the train that would take them to St Joseph, Missouri via Niagara and Windsor, Canada. It was during the night that the call for all aboard was made. Everything was in great confusion as the emigrants rushed to gather children and belongings and get on board the train. When the dust settled Nels found himself with his father in a cattle car while his mother, grandmother, and younger brother were in a crate car. After the family arrived in St. Joseph they boarded the final boat of their journey traveling up the Missouri river on the steamboat *St. Mary* to Florence, Nebraska where they would prepare to cross the plains to Utah.



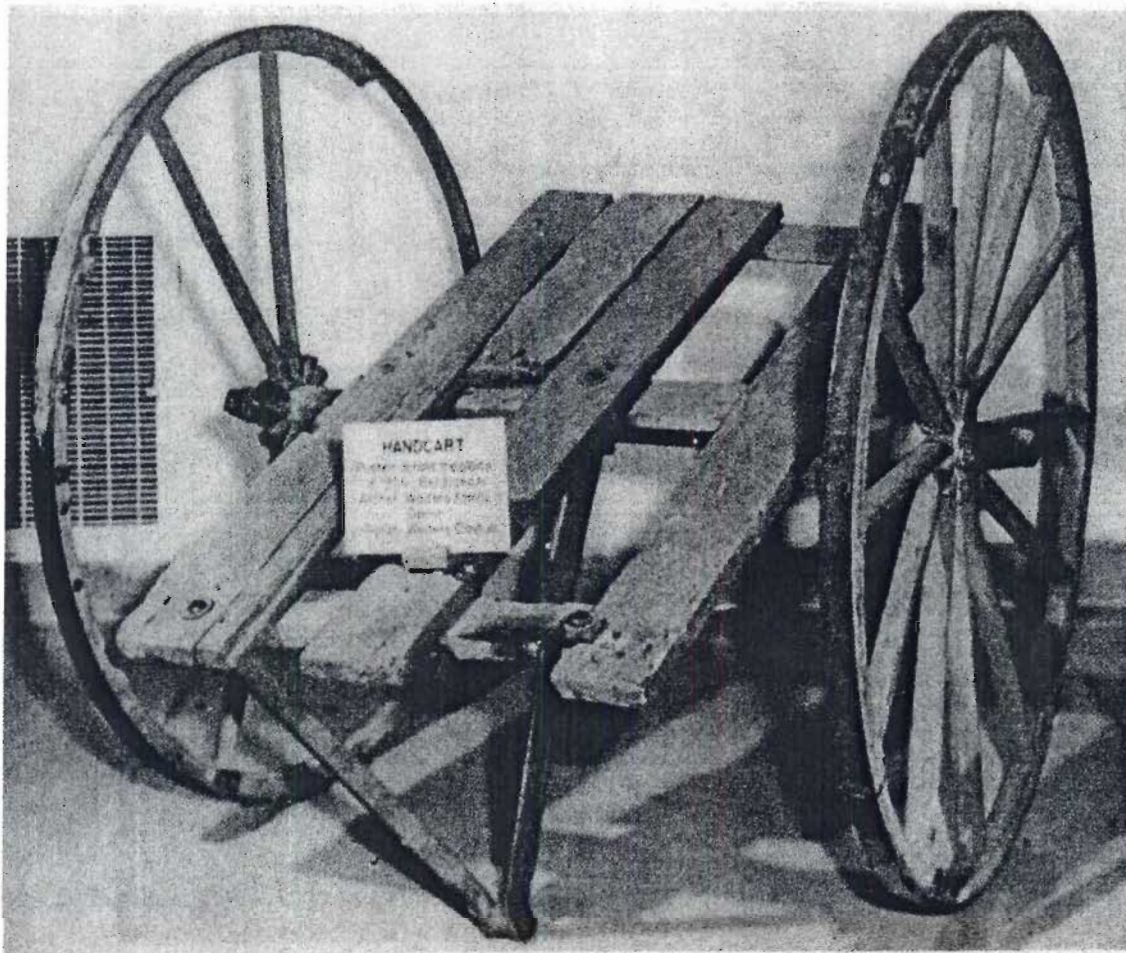
A HANDCART PIONEER FAMILY

Sculpture by Torleif S. Knaphus, in the Church Museum, Temple Square, Salt Lake City.
Photograph, courtesy of the Latter-day Saints Church Historian's office.

At this point Nels' parents found their funds to be nearly exhausted so the decision was made to join the handcart company that was being formed under the leadership of George Rowley. A preliminary start was made on 9 June 1859. They traveled four miles and then camped for one day while completing the organization of the company. On June 11, 1859 the company began their trek across the plains. On June 12, 1859, Nels John Johnson turned three. Because of his young age Nels was probably able to ride along with one-year-old Elof most of the way while his parents and grandmother worked together to pull their handcart. Nights were usually spent sleeping out in the open. While the company had tents along, there being one tent for every ten persons, the pioneers found they usually preferred the open sky to a crowded tent.

The days were long and tiring. In the beginning they would often gather in the evenings for music around the campfire. In particular, many members of the company mentioned *The Handcart Song* when they wrote about the trek in later years. As time wore on and rations began to get low they found they no longer had the energy for music. The handcart company had started with several teams of oxen pulling wagons full of supplies. As the trip progressed the oxen weakened and as each animal grew close to death he would be killed for food. None of these animals completed the trip. On one occasion the company was passed by a well-equipped group of men headed for the mines in Colorado. After passing the handcarts this group of miners killed a large buffalo. They took one quarter of the meat for themselves, and then carefully covered the rest with a hide and set up a large note that read, "This is for the handcarts." The food was gratefully received.

By the time they reached the Green River the company had exhausted their supplies of flour. The pioneers were in very poor shape and at one point had gone three days without food. Nels' mother cried for the sake of her two young children. A history of Elna Petronella Johnson records that it was somewhere along the trail in Wyoming that Nels grandmother, Elna Johanneson Hakansson, died and was buried. On August 25 at Ham's Fork relief wagons from Salt Lake Valley met the company. The food from Salt Lake gave them the necessary strength to complete their journey. On the Sunday afternoon of September 4, 1859 the citizens of Salt Lake turned out to greet the handcart company as they rolled down out of the mountains.



THE ORIGINAL HANDCART OF ARCHER WALTERS
The best original example now in existence, although some parts are missing and some replaced. Photograph by courtesy of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers.

Their first year in Utah Nels and his family lived in Salt Lake in a hut that was without floors, doors, or windows. It was difficult for his parents because they did not speak much English and they considered moving south to Sanpete County where many of their countrymen lived. However their friend, Matthias Nelson, had somehow acquired lots in Tooele. He gave two of them to Nels' parents as payment for the financial assistance he had received from them to make the journey to Utah.

The first home in Tooele consisted of a cellar where Nels' sisters Hannah and Emma were born. In 1864 the family moved into a 12 by 14 foot cabin built on the same lot. It was made from log slabs and had a dirt roof that leaked whenever it rained or snowed. Nels must have been greatly impressed during their journey that they were headed for Zion because he is remembered to have said one day after a rain storm, "Oh Mother, see there is a hole in Zion." The remaining three children were born in this home. Two of them, Andrew and Joseph, died as babies.

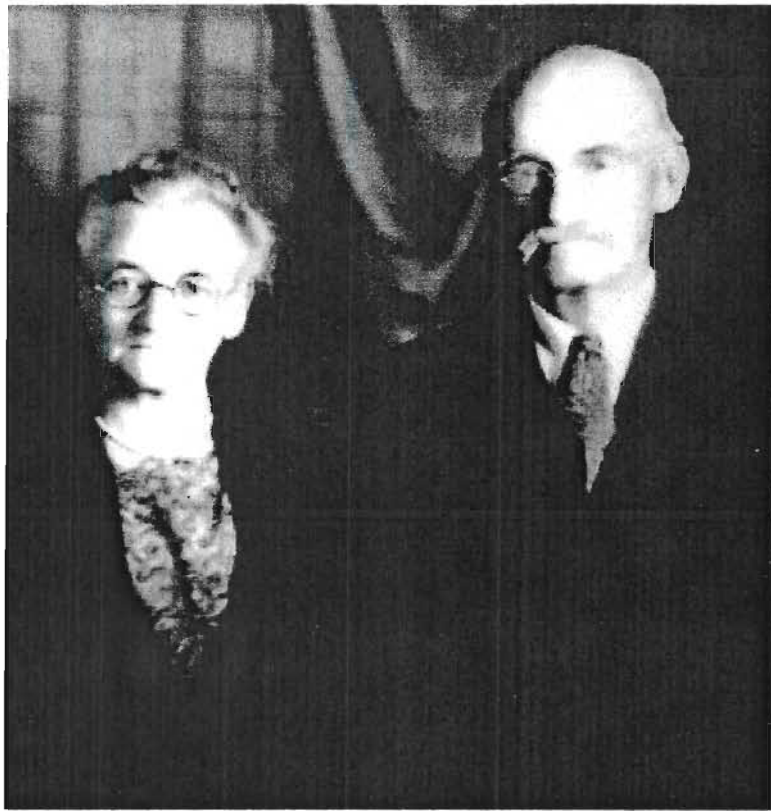
Nels did not receive much formal education growing up. The 1860 census shows that he did attend some school while his family lived in Salt Lake City but ten years later at the age of 14 Nels is working as a laborer while younger siblings attend school. While it is clear that Swedish was Nels first language, he became quite proficient in English, as his diary will attest. He seems to have served as a middleman between his parents and other Swedish neighbors and the English-speaking majority of Tooele. His diary makes numerous references to his conducting business in behalf of his parents and on at least one occasion he records his work as an interpreter. "Tues[day] [February] 9 Cold. I was to the store with eggs 15 [cents] per doz interpreted for Norquist to G. Atkin he is going to work for Atkin."

The 1880 census shows the Andrew John Johnson family living next door to the James Murray family on Main Street in Tooele, Utah. Included in these two households were Nels John Johnson aged 23 and Agnes Murray aged 21. Nels fell in love with the girl next door and three years later on 22 November 1883 these two were married in the Endowment House in Salt Lake City. That same day Nels' sister Emma married George Atkin in the Endowment



Agnes Murray

House. While Nels and Agnes were of different nationalities, they did have some things in common. They had both immigrated to Utah as young children. Nels had lost a grandmother on the plains; Agnes had lost a mother. They also shared a birthday having both been born on June 12.



Agnes and Nels Johnson

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 Nels and Agnes, or Aggie as he referred to her in his journal, initially set up housekeeping on a farm located between Tooele and Lincoln. This was a share crop arrangement between Nels and his brother-in-law John Bowen. Nels' first two children were born in a one-room cabin on this farm. Stanley Nels, born 15 September 1884, and Mary Ellen, born 26 June 1886. Even while Nels was working this farm he was also beginning to build a new home on a lot in Tooele. By the time their third child Agnes Mabel, was born on March 10, 1888 the family was living in a brick house in Tooele City. By August of 1892 Nels had



Nels and Agnes Johnson home on Main Street in Tooele

met the conditions of the Homestead Act and the land was his free and clear. The remainder of the children born to Nels and Agnes in this home were: Clarence Elof born 10 November 1889, William born 12 January 1892, Erb Murray born 20 March 1893, Clara Emma born 5 June 1895, twins Elsie and Orlie born 20 June 1898, and Merrill born 2 July 1903. All of these children except William lived to reach adulthood. Nels' journal records his sorrow at the death of William and his concern for his wife. "Jan 12th 1892 My dear little Aggie gave birth to a still born child to day about 3 o clock P. M. and is very sick. It is a boy. [January] 13 We buried our child to day and gave it the name of William Johnson."



top row: Clarence, Mary, Erb, Mabel, Stanley, Clara

middle row: Merrill

Bottom row: Orlie, Agnes, Nels, Elsie

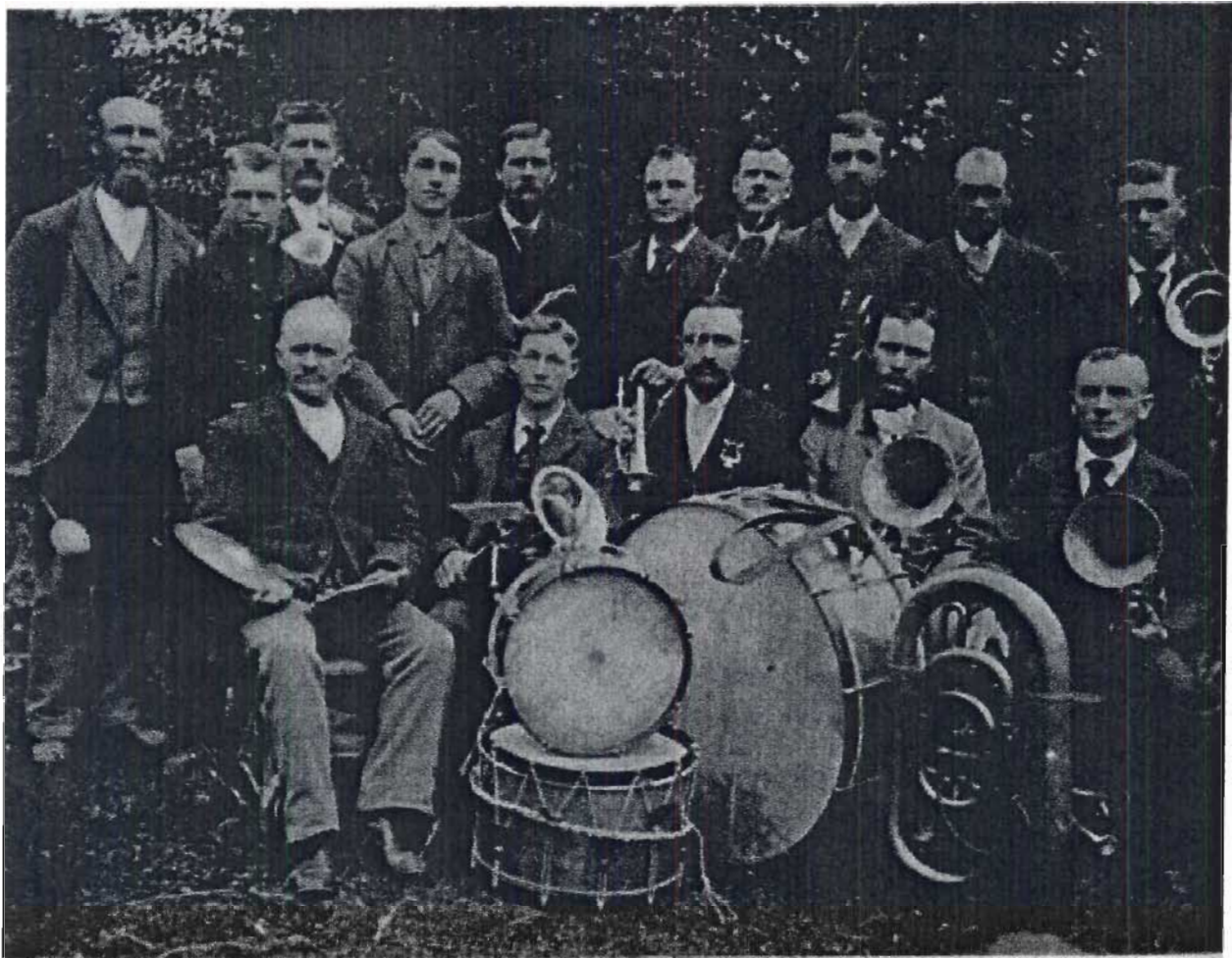
Family was important to Nels. In March of 1860 while a young child living in Salt Lake City Nels received his patriarchal blessing. In it he was advised to follow the counsel of his parents and told that he would be a blessing to his father's household. Nels seems to have

taken this to heart as his journal speaks continually of his spending time with and helping his parents with their farm even as he worked his own farm in support of his growing family. His children remember him fondly as a hard-working man with a strong sense of humor. Family Christmas parties were held at the home of Nels' parents each year. At one of these parties Nels bet his brother Elof one dollar that Nels' twelve-year-old son Clarence could outrun Elof. Then Nels secretly cut a lilac switch. When the race began Nels ran after Clarence tanning him with the switch causing him to run faster. Elof laughed so hard he lost the race. After the dinner Nels would dress up in a sheet and straddle a broom pretending to be Goola. The children would scream and run trying to avoid the swishing of the broom. This was an old Swedish game.



First Uniformed Band in Tooele. Back row: George Shields, James Gollaber, Herbert Vowles, Arthur Vowles, James Kirk, Richard Henwood. Front row: Solomon Isgreen, Nels Johnson, Samuel Johnson, Alvin McCuston, John Shields, Robert McLaws.

Music was an important part of Nels' life. He participated in church choirs and would sing duets with his sister Emma. He also played the bass horn in the Tooele band. In 1898 the Tooele City Council granted \$150.00 for band uniforms. Called the Martial Band the group gave concerts and on holidays would be up early to ride around town playing music in the band wagon. The band would also go from house to house playing for individual families. Their hosts often provided refreshments. On one occasion the band was served a peach pie that lacked sugar and was rather dry. When no one in the family was looking some of the band members slipped the remainder of the pie into the big bass horn. Nels did not see this and so when they were about to leave he proposed that they play one more tune for the family. The other band members insisted that it was too late, but Nels was persistent and put his horn to his mouth to play. When he blew into the horn, no noise came out. Puzzled, he turned the horn upside down and out poured pieces of the peach pie. The band never received another invitation to that home.



Tooele Band 1896 or 1897. Taken during a Sunday School outing at Swing Flats, Settlement Canyon. Back row: Richard Henwood, John Frazer, James Gollaber, Frank Beesley, Robert McLaws, Alvin McCustion, John Marsden, John Shields, Nels Johnson, Solomon Isgreen. Front row: James Kirk, Lyman McBride, Frank Davis, Samuel Johnson, William Vowles.

Nels was an active member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints throughout his life. He always attended his meetings and did not work on Sundays. He spent many years working in the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association. He was ordained a Seventy on November 1, 1885 and a High Priest on February 20, 1916. He worked as a special missionary at one time to help preside over the Stockton ward during a time that they did not have a bishop.



1929 Family Picnic at Liberty Park in Salt Lake City

parents in parenthesis

front row: Faye (Erb), Edna (Mary), Orlie (Elsie), Clara (Mabel), Dean (Elsie), Roxie (Erb), Wesley

second row: Maxine (Mary), Elsie holding Lee, Mabel, Agnes, Nels, Mary, Clara with Ross (Erb)

third row: Mona (Mabel), Marjorie (Mabel), Wanda (Stanley), Florence (Erb's wife) holding Barbara, Lila (Clarence's wife),

Irene (Merrill's wife) holding Willard, Eva (Stanley's wife), Joseph Jones with Luana(Erb)

fourth row: Sidney Isgreen, Stanely, Erb, Clarence, Merrill, and Ted Barton

Toward the end of his life Nels developed appendicitis for which he underwent an emergency operation. He died November 22, 1932, his forty-ninth wedding anniversary, from cancer of the lower bowel.