

Opapo--Man of Miracles

Talofa! I'm grateful to be here this afternoon to present this paper. I, too, like Dr. Spurrier, am a little apprehensive about this paper. I have never at any time tried to write something as long as this and give it as I've written it. I'm usually one who enjoys the gratitude of just getting up with a few notes and just "winging" it, some people say, but it's a great opportunity for me and it has forced me to do something that I've wanted to do for some time.

When I was asked by Brother Ken Baldrige to consider doing a paper on Opapo Fonoimoana for this conference, it was with a great amount of pride and wonderment to me to accept this assignment. Not because of my literary skills or anything that I have to offer, but because of the individual that I was asked to speak about... Opapo Fonoimoana.

What I am going to give this afternoon is, like Dr. Shumway's, without bibliographies and strictly from what I have learned as part of my oral history training in my family.

I had always thought of Opapo as merely my grandfather, a man of faith and a lot of hard work. However, when a non-Samoan historian such as Dr. Baldrige asked me to speak about him, I soon began to realize the significance of this man's life in a historical setting, and as I review his life in this historical setting I saw that as this historical significance. My grandfather Opapo like most all Polynesians of that era did not keep a journal. The things that I will be relating this afternoon are things that I have heard from other people, his children, his friends.

Not much is known about his early life in Fogatuli, Savai'i, the village of his birth in 1859. It seems that great men in history come

from obscure beginnings, from Bethlehem, Thatcher, from Kohala and so it was with Opapo Fonoimoana who came from a village called Fogatuli. Even in the subsistence existence of the Savai'i villages, Fogatuli was poor compared to the rest. Young Opapo lived a very normal young Samoan life and probably faced the difficult stigmas and pressures given to children with mixed parentage for although his mother, Malia Toa, was a Samoan maiden of the Toa family in Fogatuli, his father was a foreigner-- a foreigner of the worst kind--another Polynesian. As the family story goes, Opapo's father while a young adult, (not the Church young adult, a young man) went fishing one day and was caught in a storm or got lost and landed on Savai'i in the village of Fogatuli. His origin, his beginning was Uvea, or known today as Wallis Island. It's located about 500 miles west of Savai'i; it's not Samoa. I have since found out that his one and only name was Fonoimoana. And this land of Uvea was settled and is today inhabited by Tongans and people of Tongan lines and ancestors. I have also located several Tongan families now residing in Niutoputapu with the name Fonokimoana in their lines going back to Uvea or Wallis Island. That was probably Opapo's father's real name--Fonokimoana.

Other than the uniqueness of his father, Opapo's life was a very normal one, until one day he had a dream. In his dream, he saw two *palagi faifeau* for foreign missionaries coming into his village and walking right up to their *fale*, walked right in and sat down. That was the end of his dream. But later on, when two Mormon missionaries entered into their village and came up to their house and walked in, he not only recognized the two as the men in his dreams, but by his own account the spirit told him that their gospel message was true. It was then that the stage was set for this simple man to do a great work for the Church among

the Samoan people.

The records show that he and his wife were baptized together in 1890, two years after the Samoan Mission was opened in 1888. Opapo's own story to his son Teila, my father, was that he met his wife Toai as she brought food to feed the warriors in a war between Malietoa and Mataafa. Opapo was a supporter of Malietoa. The story continues that when Opapo joined the Church and sought to serve the Church, his extended family ostracized him. He therefore, took as his last name his father's one and only name Fonoimoana and went by Opapo Fonoimoana, thus beginning the line and the family now known as Fonoimoana.

Opapo and Toai then joined a new, young, foreign Church. With the London Missionary Society arriving in 1830, the Catholics and Methodists soon after, the Mormons were a little late by 1888. However, the Lord seems to have his own time-table of success. By this time, all of Samoa were one of three religions and the young upstart Mormon "cowboys" as they were called--cowboys, because of the reference in Joseph Smith's story of his farm (but that's another story). These young upstarts had a difficult task of converting people already Christians to Mormonism, which was religiously nonsensical to the Samoans. Needless to say, the young Church with it's limited membership was hard at work.

Now let me stop here and go back quickly to my theme: Opapo--Man of Miracles. It appears that whenever the Lord begins a dispensation, establishes his gospel, or organizes his Church, He allows a tremendous outpouring of the gifts of the spirit in the form of manifestations and miracles--not for the glory of the individual or the people involved or because of their righteousness only, but for the sake of the Church and its growth. Now Samoans, like all Polynesians, or Book of Mormon people

or Jews or Israelites or whatever, are greatly affected by miracles and manifestations. There's something about a good ol' miracle that gets us every time. Well, that seems to be the role that Opapo played in fulfilling his role in the church in Samoa. He was a man of miracle--to bear witness of the powers of the priesthood, to testify that the Mormons spoke for God and to remind the Saints of their need to live righteous lives--all of these were accomplished by his spiritual gifts. I have noted here to make a commentary on miracles with Mormons, and I'm just going to--wait on it for a little while.

The Christian Church had arrived in Samoa in 1830, and by the nature of Polynesian people there's a certain affinity to great faith in these people. Miracles were not and have not been the sole property of Mormons in Samoa, neither have they been a corner from the priesthood. Miracles have been performed by Polynesian people before Christianity, and after Christianity by the mere faith they had in the Lord Jesus Christ, and what we have here is really an attesting of the power of the priesthood to perform miracles--now I just like to throw that in because the rest of my presentation has to do with some of these miracles. What I am saying is that the Samoan people had been seeing miracles in the name of Jesus Christ prior to the church coming to Samoa, but now they were seeing it for the first time by the power of the priesthood.

It is not quite certain when Opapo began to exhibit these particular strengths, but the saying quickly spread throughout the mission, "Whatever you do, don't be cursed by Opapo". Many Saints living today have substantiated the fact that whatever Opapo said would come true. If he blessed you, you were blessed, if he cursed you, you were cursed.

In 1904, Opapo, Elisala, their wives and a few others were asked to

establish a wilderness area in the mountains of Upolu for the gathering and protection of the Saints in Samoa. They called it Sauniatu, or "Preparing to go forward". In this area, they carved out a beautiful settlement that was later described by President McKay as the most beautiful place on this earth. Perhaps it was because of the great persecution at the time or the hard struggles that the Saints experienced that the Lord saw a need to have strong, fearless leaders, so that the Saints would not falter but remain strong and faithful. No one who has ever lived in Sauniatu will ever speak differently of Opapo. One story is told of the first chapel built in Sauniatu. One day the small cooking house in the back of the chapel caught on fire and the alarm of "Fire!" spread throughout the village. Everyone ran to get their containers and run down to the river, so that they could get water for the fire because it was spreading too quickly. It looked as if for a moment that the fire would spread to the chapel and the chapel would be lost. The people however, began to notice that Opapo had climbed to the top of the chapel and was sitting there straddling the roof. He looked up to heaven and raised his right arm and said, "Father, we can spare the small house, but we cannot spare the big one, in the name of Jesus Christ and by the power of the holy priesthood, I command the wind to change". The wind changed and blew down the small house and the chapel was saved. The Saints were not only spared a chapel, but their faith had increased in God in a very difficult time of the settlement of Sauniatu.

There are many stories stemming from Sauniatu that would take too much time to recount, but let me tell another. Opapo had just returned from a three month trip to another island and upon his return to the

village saw that the people were preparing a *fiafia* or *luau*. Upon inquiring, he found that a young girl and boy were to be married soon and so he called for the young girl to come to his *fale*. When she arrived, Opapo questioned her only as a Church leader could make an interview and found out all that he desired to know. Then suddenly, without any explanation, Opapo told this girl not to marry this young man, because if she did she would soon be saddened. Well, the girl wept sorrowfully and cancelled the wedding. You have to understand that Opapo's words were treated as prophecy. A couple of months later, the young intended bridegroom passed away and the entire village said, "no wonder."

During Opapo's years as the head of Sauniatu, in spite of his spiritual gifts, he was not spared the individual tests of God. Of the fourteen children born to Opapo and his wife, Toai, ten died as children, one at age 25 and only three lived to marriage, adulthood and to have children. Toa, the oldest of the three, Eseta, still living in Laie and my father, Teila, who is 72 this year. These tragedies seemed to strengthen him more and caused him to be more humble, more prayerful, and more industrious. He was known for his hard work. He worked for his own substance and also cared for the needy people, especially the widows and the fatherless. Where ever he lived, he was known for his long, tireless labors planting, cleaning and building. Several people have also recounted his practice of praying every morning at 5 am. and every evening at 5 pm. and several times in between.

Opapo often traveled to other parts of Samoa to do missionary work as assigned by the Church. In those days, men were often sent from Sauniatu to accompany *palagi* or American missionaries in proselyting to

other areas and returning later to Sauniatu, using Sauniatu as a home base. On one such journey, Opapo and his long-time friend Elisala and one or two American missionaries were sent to Manu'a to preach the gospel to the people of Manu'a. When they arrived, they had found that their arrival had been forwarned and that the King, Tuimanu'a, had given strict instructions forbidding anyone from receiving, housing, feeding, clothing or assisting the Mormon missionaries in any way. It was a difficult situation for all concerned. Even though some people may have wanted to accept the missionaries and care for them, as is their normal custom to care and assist ministers, the fear of reprisals from this dominant king and his harsh edict was too much for anyone to go against. The consequence of accepting these missionaries would be an immediate stoning of the individual or individuals. The prospects of any conversion was hopeless. Nevertheless, the missionaries were very determined and stayed two months on Manu'a. Without other food to eat, they relied heavily upon fallen coconuts on the beaches and other small staples. Without a *fale* for shelter and sleeping, they had to dig holes on the beach. They would enter the deep holes and the last one would cover they heads with leaves so as to protect them from mosquitoes. Unfortunately, the last had to suffer for the night, having no one to help cover his head and each night these missionaries would take turns being the last one.

On one particular night after several weeks of this grueling ordeal, Opapo recalls being awoken by the smell of some freshly baked food. Having survived on a simple diet of old coconuts for a few weeks, the smell of freshly baked goods were strong enough to awaken him from his sleep. As he investigated the smell, he found that near the location

where they were sleeping was a woven coconut basket and it indeed had some freshly baked food. It was hot and delicious and as no one was seen bringing it or leaving it from the area, the food was attributed by the missionaries to the angels.

During the end of their stay, an elderly lady brought some food for the missionaries. Being old anyway she stated that if she had to die for this act of kindness, it was all right with her for she did not fear Tuimanu'a.

After several weeks, it was becoming evident that they were not going to succeed and the missionaries began winding up their messages in preparation of their departure. In this view, Opapo and Elisala spoke directly to Tuimanu'a and his people that if they did not repent and be baptized that very shortly, they would feel the wrath and power of God against them. As the missionaries were preparing to board the longboat back to Tutuila, Opapo paused at the edge of the village of Fitiuta, Manu'a and ceremoniously dusted the dirt off of his feet as a witness against them. A couple of weeks later, the worst hurricane in Manu'a's history hit the islands with such devastation that many people died. All of the houses were destroyed, save one, and all of the crops above ground were destroyed. The only house saved was that of the elderly lady and her daughters. The Manu'a people have since stated to Brother Mauga Tapusoa, who lives in the community of Laie, that if the hurricane had lasted a little while longer, not a soul would have survived the hurricane and all would have perished.

The disaster appears as a historical entry in the history books, but to the people of Manu'a who were there, and to the Saints during that period, the powers of God and the authority of the priesthood were more

firmly established, that he has entrusted this authority to men on the earth was illustrated and the church grew stronger because of the Saint's trust in their local leaders. Now, bear in mind that miracles are done for many reasons, just as disasters have been done for many reasons. During the time of Christ when he performed many of His miracles it accomplished many different ends, some to the convincing of the Jews of his divinity and others to the hardening of their hearts against him. As in the case of Lazareth after the Lord had raised him from the dead it states that many did believe on his name, but immediately the scriptures turn those people, who after seeing what Christ had done went and told the Pharisees so that they could continue their plot against Him. The disaster in Manu'a had that type of an effect. Although the people knew from whence the disaster originated, it nevertheless did not assist in building the Church in Manu'a. To the contrary, the Church from that period had a difficult time in establishing itself in the islands of Manu'a and it wasn't until 1974 that a branch as part of a stake was actually organized. On the other hand, the Saints in Tutuila, having heard of the incident in Manu'a, their faith was greatly enhanced thereby enabling much of the work to move forward in the islands of Tutuila. The disaster in Manu'a did not have any harmful effect on the islands of Tutuila although it's only 40 miles apart.

On the return from Manu'a, Opapo and his companions settled again in Sauniatu where they assisted the work of the Church there. In 1921 the visit of Elder David O. McKay was the major event of the year for the Samoan people. There are numerous accounts of the visit of Elder McKay to Sauniatu which are more vivid and explicit than what I could explain in this account, but suffice it to say, that Opapo, Elisala and the Saints

of Sauniatu were greatly uplifted and strengthened by the visit of this great apostle and man of God. Soon after Elder McKay's visit, Opapo, his wife and their family decided to move to Tutuila and locate there in preparation to the coming to Hawaii. They subsequently settled in the village of Mapusaga, building their house right adjacent to the graveyard. Having their house next to the graveyard brought about some interesting encounters of Opapo with some spirits, and they're good for stories for midnight camping up in the hills, but we won't go into those stories at this time.

However, there are two incidents that happened while they were in Tutuila that I would like to recount. And these incidents have affected the work of the Church in Samoa ever since.

During the early 1920's, the members of the Church in Samoa were sorely persecuted and hated as in other parts of Samoa, but in Tutuila acutely so. Brother Pinemua Soliai, who recently passed away and who was the grandfather of President Cravens, tells the story of him and Opapo. One day as they were walking along the road towards Pago Pago. Opapo, as was always the case in a missionary ministry in Samoa, always had an umbrella. As they walked along the road Opapo noticed the bus coming and he lifted up his umbrella to stop the bus so that they might get a lift to town. As the bus stopped ahead, they began to pick up their pace thinking that they were going to get a ride into Pago Pago. As they approached the bus, the driver must have noticed that these were the two Mormon missionaries and quickly pressed on his accelerator and left the two men standing there. Brother Soliai turned to Opapo and said, "Well, now it's going to take us a long time to get up to town," at which time Opapo turned and said, "No, we'll get to town before he does." As they continued their walk to town they came upon an accident after a mile and as they came to the accident,

they found that this same bus that had left them had run into another truck. The driver of that bus was immediately killed. It is difficult in recounting stories such as this to place a judgement upon the whys and wherefores of an accident such as this, and I don't pretend to have the answer as to whether this is a common practice or a common allowance by Heavenly Father of those who hold the priesthood, or whether there were eternal consequential reasons for things like this happening. My only point in recounting the story is the effect that it had upon the Saints and the powers that seem to be given to certain people and especially to Opapo by the things that he said.

The second incident in Tutuila during that period had to do with a non-member lady by the name of Salataima. In the village of Nu'uuli lived this Soliai family. The family was the only member-family of the church during that period. The head of the family, Pinemua, who I referred to earlier, one day requested that his good friend Opapo come and give his children blessings as he had done before, to have Opapo's blessings on his house, blessings on his property, and blessings on his friends. Agreeing to the request of his friend, Opapo came to their *fale* and proceeded to bless each individual child. In the home at the time was a good friend of Sister Soliai, a woman by the name of Salataima Puailoa. Mrs. Puailoa was from the Fanene family but had married into the Puailoa family. They had control of a large portion of land in the Mapusaga valley through Mr. Puailoa's family. However, they had no children and when Mr. Puailoa passed away, the control of that land was left with Mrs. Puailoa. Now the Puailoa family seeing that if they didn't do something immediately, this land would be controlled by this lady who married into their family. And so they proceeded to do something to regain the

control of the land. Now when Mrs. Puailoa witnessed the blessing that Opapo had given to the Soliai children, she immediately asked for a blessing at his hand. Opapo refused to give her a blessing because she wasn't a member of the Church. So, she decided that she was going to be a member of the Church and receive a blessing. After going through the proper steps of the mission home and missionaries and the branch there, she became a member of the Church and then requested a blessing. But, before receiving the blessing she related this problem about the land. In the blessing, Opapo promised that the land would come to her without any problems and that the people and those who would stand in her way would not be a factor. He continued in the blessing that not only would she receive this land, but the time would come when she would have the opportunity to use this land for the furtherance of the work of the Church in American Samoa, and that if she were faithful she would be an instrument in the Lord's hands to do a great work in American Samoa for the Church with that land. In the early 1950's, that blessing had its fulfillment, in that she had the opportunity to sell that piece of land to the Church and it became the center of the Church and Church activities for the island of Tutuila. On that property the Church built a high school, and faculty housing, a large welfare farm and also recently built a stake center and was the proposed site of the Temple in American Samoa. Last night in the dinner that I had with Elder Pinegar, he said that the Church has just been reaffirmed that property by the courts of American Samoa in the case, and that land has now been tested again as the property of the Church. So, again the blessing that was given to Salataima in the 1920's continues and carries on today.

In 1926, my father Teila arrived in Hawaii to prepare the way for his family to come to Hawaii and be close to the Temple. In 1928, Opapo and his wife were called by the Church to come to Hawaii, and do Temple work for Samoans in the Hawaii Temple. So in that year the Opapo Fonoimoana family moved to Hawaii and established themselves in the then-still small community of Laie. Opapo and his wife and many of the Samoans that had come at that time had faithfully worked in the Temple and labored to build the Church in the community of Laie from that time.

However, in 1933 Opapo had a dream in which he was told that he needed to bring all of his family and children out of Samoa. Opapo returned to Tutuila and while leaving his wife in Tutuila proceeded to the island of Savai'i where in the middle of the night went to the family of his daughter-in-law and grabbed his grandson, Sepi, who had been given to them to care for, and stole him in the middle of the night, bringing him back to Tutuila and Hawaii. Now this Sepi, let me just stop here, still lives here in Laie. He has many children and one is married into the family of Ken Baldrige. So that little act of stealing the child in the night has had some implications right here in this room. In 1935 Opapo's wife Toai passed away of pneumonia and was buried here in Laie. She at the time of her death was 70 years old and had supported her husband faithfully and contributed generously to the work of the Church. Two months prior to the death of Toai, Teila had married Mataniu Tuia, the daughter of Api Tuia, a close friend of Opapo. Their wedding was one that was arranged by Opapo and his friend Api without the two children ever having met each other or knowing each other. It was one of those weddings that you read about that was pre-arranged where the bride, traveling from a foreign country by boat, arrives and meets her intended

husband-to-be for the first time, knowing that they had no other choice but to get married. (Those two are still married, by the way. They're sitting here in the audience). Such was the case of Teila Fonoimoana and Mataniu Tuia, who are my parents. During that period of time also, Opapo and his son Teila had built a house, and this house was built on the property that is presently leased by Bishop Joseph Ah Quin. Now, I tell this next story not to scare anyone who is a friend to Bishop Ah Quin or his family, but again it's the story about this man Opapo and some particulars of that house.

My mother recalls every so often passing his room when the door was closed and hearing Opapo speaking as if he were speaking to someone. At first she thought the old man had become senile, and she didn't want to bother him with any questions, but after constantly hearing these so-called conversations, she couldn't help herself, and she asked him who he was talking to, at which time Opapo said, "my friends". He would then name their names and describe them. According to Opapo, they all passed away, but these are people that were Hawaiian and people of other nationalities. Opapo even gave a little description, that the fair ones were good, but the dark ones were really bad. My mother didn't know how to take his explanation and answers to her questions, and so she dropped the issue and didn't pursue it any further.

In 1958 on a trip that my mother made to Hawaii to meet her son finishing his mission in Hawaii, she by chance happened into a surveyors office to inquire about some information about former leases when she happened to come across an old Hawaiian map that was on top of the desk at this particular office, and this map showed certain roads and trails. When my mother asked the man what this map was and what the trails were

on the map of Laie, the man replied, "This is an old Hawaiian map which shows, as the Hawaiian legends say, the trails that go from the ocean to the mountains where all the spirits who die in the ocean walked in an attempt to go to the mountains and meet the Savior in the Resurrection". To my mother's surprise that trail passed right through a little corner of our house, which is Opapo's room, not to any other part of the house but through that part of the house.

It's without a doubt that Opapo had the ability to communicate with the spirits on the other side of the veil. This fact has been attested to by many people relating stories of what they had known about Opapo while he lived in Laie, but I suppose none of these gifts really have any meaning except as I've mentioned before, to help strengthen the faith of the people, especially the Samoan people to the principles of the gospel, the power of the priesthood, the truthfulness of the plan of salvation, and all that is taught within the framework of the Church.

In 1938 in December Opapo remarried a woman by the name of Taimi, who still lives today. In a meeting I had with Taimi about five years ago, she told me that after their marriage, Opapo gave her a blessing, and he blessed her that if she were faithful in the Church that the Lord will bless her with long life and she would live to see many changes in the community of Laie. Taimi is now about 90 years old, and the latest report is that she's still very strong and healthy. A couple of months after Opapo's marriage to Taimi, he contracted a cold and as was his practice, never went to the hospital. In refusing medical treatment and by not going to the hospital, this minor cold turned into pneumonia, and in a couple of days Opapo passed away. He was buried next to his wife Toai in the Laie Cemetery near his 81st birthday, and there he rests today.

Opapo Fonoimoana was truly an extraordinary man. He labored in the Church because of his faith and belief in God and Christ, and the restored gospel, and the faith and belief that if we are faithful in the Church, we will be blessed. He was given many spiritual gifts, I'm sure, so that in turn he could bless the people and lift them in difficult times when the Church was young in Samoa.

His family has truly been blessed as well, and I would assume that many of the blessings now being enjoyed by Opapo's children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren are partially because of his work in the history of the Church in Samoa and the Pacific. Opapo Fonoimoana was truly a man of miracles.

Carl Fonoimoana