MISSIONARY SERVICE IN SAMOA
1910-1912

by
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The first non-English words, possibly the first words in any language, that I learned were "tafalea to lua." And I learned that they were beautiful words. Also as far back as I can remember, one collection of souvenirs and mementos moved with my much-moving parents and their growing family and were prominently displayed on various tables, shelves or cases until 1981 when my 89-year-old mother, 36 years a widow, died and they were divided among her children. These consisted of a beautifully figured tapa, a wooden bowl filled with various shells and beads, larger, glossy shells, such as conch and murex, cowry, and cones, delicate coral of several varieties, fans of feather and palm leaves, a ceremonial wooden knife, an object of bamboo and rattan we were told was a pillow, a large album of brownish personal photographs, and an additional volume of commercial photographs captioned in German and English with such phrases as "Birth-Race on Kaiser's Birthday," "Apia, Looking East," or "A Catch of Turtle." Here was, indeed, a different world! This collection, included a missionary journal. On its flyleaf in fine flowing longhand on opposite upper corners was inscribed "Elder Burton Farnsworth, Beaver City, Utah, November 22, 1909," and "Misi Piva, Pesega, Samoa, January 15, 1919." On the verso he had optimistically written "Journal #1." (1)

Samoa thus has always seemed to me near, yet exotic; a place, and yet a time as remote as my father's youth. In this discussion, I would like to suggest how a mission to Samoa modified, expanded, and directed the life of one particular early-twentieth-century missionary, my father, how his mission suggests the nature of missionary life in Polynesia a decade into the century, and how the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints fared in those distant days in a political world probably no worse than this but very different.

The first objective is more family history, although I revere my father as a man and a model. When Burton Kent Farnsworth died suddenly of cerebral hemorrhage in October 1945, he was an official conference visitor to the stakes of the Northwest as a member of the General Superintendency of the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association of the Church. He died very literally in the service of the Church. As we shall see, his professional career which culminated in over twenty years as director of secondary education for the state of Utah, having been President of the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, followed directions he very likely would never have foreseen or taken had he never served a mission to Samoa nor taught at Mapusaga School on Tutuila nor at least three times served as mission secretary at Pesega, or as Conference President for Upolu.

The second objective, to recall the nature of missionary life nearly three-quarters of a century ago, places his service approximately half way between the arrival in 1830 of the first Christian missionaries from the London Missionary Society (which under a different title numerically still dominates religious life in Samoa) and the opening of an LDS Temple at Pesega near the very spot where he and his companions, remodeled the frame cottage that served as missionary quarters. Today, when every young, able-bodied worthy young man is expected to serve a mission, the Saints and the fanners and cannibals have undergone drastic modifications at the same time as the world in which they serve has also shrunk and altered. And, finally, the presence of the Church in Samoa and the self-realization of its members have significantly altered and grown since my father reluctantly and prematurely left the mission field in April 1912. Before the arrival of the Samoans there had to be a mission, and before the arrival the preparation which, like all beginnings, is really a contribution.

Back in 1848, the Latter-day Saints anticipating their imminent exile from the embattled city of Nauvoo, under the Quorum of Twelve Apostles as interim leaders of the Church, rushed to practical completion the temple their martyred prophet had led them to begin. On February 22 of that year a large gathering of the Saints had assembled in the main hall of the temple when suddenly a frightening noise stirred them to temporary confusion. Brigham Young, then President of the Quorum, wrote of the event:

I attended a meeting at the Temple, the room was crowded and a great weight caused the new truss floor to settle nearly to its proper position. While settling, an inchboard or some light timber underneath was caught and broken, the sound of which created great alarm in the congregation and some jumped out of the windows smashing the glass and all before them. Philo Farnsworth smashed the northeast window while others ran out of the doors and many of those who remained jumped up and down with all their might crying Oh! Oh! Oh! in spite of the fact that they could not settle the floor fast enough, but at the same time so agitated that they knew not what they did. (2)

He adds further: "One man who jumped out of the window broke his arm and mashed his face, another broke his leg; both were apostates." Apparently, so many "men of talent" including 20-year-old Philo Farnsworth, were unscathed. As far as I have discovered, this is the earliest recognition of my family in the modern church history. Philo and one older sister and brother had been disowned by their father when they became "Mormons." They all moved westward from Nauvoo with the Saints and then scattered to help found several different settlements under the Great Combs. We learn from family pedigree charts that Philo Taylor Farnsworth was living in the newly-founded town of Fillmore, Utah, when his son Franklin Dewey was born and that both Franklin and his father lived in Beaver City, to which Philo was sent as bishop in 1856 (3) when his grandson Burton Kent was born.
This third generation Mormon, Burton Kent Farnsworth begins his missionary journal with the frank enthusiastic description of a very paradoxical background:

Completing my course at M. (urdock) A. (cademy) of Beaver Utah in the spring of '09, I began working for myself and living on the Old Farm with Dennis (my only older brother). I lived there and worked in a brickyard until on August 1st M. Price Hutchings and I who had been working together, took a notion of going out in Nevada on a ranch ... We left Beaver on the old Owen's stage with nine other passengers and arrived in Melford in evening after a dirty but nevertheless interesting ride ... We left Melford at 12:00 a.m. the 2nd of August and before the day was finished, we were out of Utah for the first time in my life.

On one expedition to Osceola for mail, he wrote: "There was a shooting scrap on in the lumber shack next door to us which was the saloon." The mail brought ... several letters from Father, one asking me to come and go on a mission which I answered stating that I would be home on the 1st of October prepared to leave on a mission.

"The First of October came and the Boss took me to Pioche, gave me enough to come home on but could not pay my fare (to my mission) so I returned home broke."

Most mission preparations in 1909 were not different except in detail from modern-day preparation, although in this instance, Burton persuaded his best friend also to go on a mission, and both were in the same stagecoach. "We were given a farewell party at the Opera House and given $80.00 each." Two days later, the first dated entry reads: "We had a party down at Bro. Shepherds and had a swell time returning home early morning." This entry and many subsequent ones suggest that in several respects daily life itself was less ascetic and less protected than today: for example, after reporting in devout language his first visit to the temple and being "set apart as a Samoan missionary by Apostle (Francis M. O Lyman, President of the Quorum. Another entry of the same date reads: "We spent the time to good advantage. Saw a football game between the U of U and A.C.U. ... Also a dance in the U of U." Parts of four more days took them to rain-soaked Seattle by train where besides visiting "the World Fair Grounds" they visited "shows and dives of all kinds." This I take to be something of an exaggeration.

Since the railroad had been washed out, they traveled by boat from Seattle to Vancouver, B.C., from which they set out by steamship December 3, 1909 for Samoa. Eight days later they reached Honolulu which he called "the Garden of the Pacific" and the most beautiful place he had ever seen. When on December 15 they left the island, they had been travelling 24 days: "Sea calm as a lake and looked more like the broad prairie than the ocean" (December 15, 1909). Reaching Fiji after one day short of a month from home, they learned that they were "doomed to stay there 23 days or thereabouts" (December 15, 1909). This estimate turned out to be accurate. The continuation of their voyage from Suva to Apia began on Wednesday, January 12, 1910. Adding this period of travel to the slow and discouraging period of close to six months needed for language acquisition, the three-year or longer foreign mission of 1909 or the two-and-one-half year mission of my day—the '40s—with no formal language training and no missionary lesson plans may not have contributed appreciably more actual missionary service than the organized and carefully supervised 18-month call of today.

President William A. Moody met the missionaries at Apia, Saturday, January 15, 1910. The love of President Moody and his Elders continued beyond their missions, and the former president accepted the request of our family nearly 36 years later to conduct this mission history in the funeral for his former missionary in the Assembly Hall on Temple Square.

Arrived at Apia, the missionaries presented their Elders' certificates to the German authorities upon docking and ". . . were permitted to land with (their) trunks and not pay duty; in fact, they were not inspected." Anyone familiar with assignments given new missionary arrivals today in most missions will recognize the unforeseeable calls to labor in particular places. Some new arrivals, like President Eric Shumway on arriving at Tonga many years later are whisked the day they arrive to remote and most isolated headquarters for orientation. This is how it happened in Father's case. His hometown friend, Elder Shepherd, was sent out. Father wrote: "In the evening we held an elders' meeting and there were 15 elders from Zion assembled. It was sure a spiritual feast and one, Samuel, Samoan meeting. I was given the new appointments and I was appointed to stay at Headquarters with Elder R. M. Forrest. I also received the name of Kana (based on the middle name of Kent) but soon had it changed to Piva (for Beaver, Utah) as the first word meant 'hell fire' (January 15, 1910).

This long entry for the first day in Upolu reveals that Father's recounting of spiritual experiences, frequent as they were, often used very conventional language such as "spiritual feast," "invoke heaven's blessings," and the like. Was his command of English inadequate? Did he reach for conventional language when such occasions occurred, seeing this language as heightened and more appropriate than his more homely, if more original expression? These are questions no longer easily answered in Father's case, but still appropriately raised not just in missionary journals but also in testimony meetings. It has been a joy to me since I came to Laie to hear many Polynesians speak about their religious lives because the speakers so rarely employ the clichés of their white brethren.

The custom of adapting the foreign-sounding names of the elders to comfortably familiar sounding ones continued many years. (It would have served me to learn this the same in Iran where my given name DEAN is the Farsi or Persian word for "Religion"—pronounced precisely the same. Instead, I permitted the painfully humorous pronunciation of my surname as something
like "Par-verse" or simply "Maester Farce." The practice in Samoa began during the presidency of Earl Stanley Paul in the early 1950's at the urging of Elder Matthew Cowley, who felt that the identity of the missionary was lost through the practice. (4)

This first day at Pesega also anticipated the final crisis of Misi Piva's mission life; his new companion was already ill, and although he seemed to recover at times, a journal entry two months later reads: "Owing to ill health Bro. Forrest has been released to return home and I have been appointed Mission Secretary until Conference time" (March 4, 1910). In all parts of the world in 1910 there were still many diseases now cured or controlled or prevented by vaccination, inoculation or medicines. Nevertheless, it was true that the missionaries in the tropics suffered great attrition from illness or death that many other mission stations. And we are to learn the just over two years later, Misi Piva's mission would end as Elder Forrest's had done. As conference President then at that distant time, Father wrote:

Journeyed from Vaoval to Sauiniatu over an extreme-ly difficult trail. The distance being about 18 mi. Upon arriving at Sauiniatu I learned that Bro. and Sister Hinck had left for home owing to sickness and that Brother and Sister Jensen (now Mission President and wife) were going to Tutuila. Bro. Shepherd was coming to Pesega as secretary. I was bewildered and sadlyaments at what I heard but pushed it aside as the inevitabled.

Two days later he reveals the meaning of this strange reaction. ... later in the day. President Jensen received a letter from his First Presidency stating him to release me on account of my bad leg" (March 9-11, 1912). So he too, was to leave the mission field like his first companion as a consequence of an infection that plagued him the rest of his life. On March 9, 1913, a year after returning home, a journal entry suggests that his problem began near the very beginning of his mission: "One of the most important things that happened to me... while in Boise was that the scabs came off my sore leg and after having sores for nearly three years, it seems a blessing indeed to be well again."

Returning now to that first Saturday in Upolu, we read another human detail brings the name of a mission member into the journal for the first time: "That night we went over and slept in Mary Ah Mu's house. I. (January 16, 1910). As you have already heard from Sister Forster, the name Ah Mu had become an important name in the annals of the Samoan Mission, and it was to occur again many times in this personal record as it did also in every extensive missionary journal or reminiscence of the time. How typical was the mission that followed that first delicious sleep at Mary Ah Mu's? Now, if at all, did it differ? In writing of his own Samoan Mission over a decade later than Father's, Elder Karl W. Brewer included a list of common duties given him by his mission president, John Q. Adams (served January 1, 1929 to the end of 1932), who in the foreword to Elder Brewer's book, "ARMED WITH THE SPIRIT" had already quoted this list more extensively. In the decade between these two missions, duties had changed very little. I quote excerpts from President Adams' list; all items mentioned in this excerpt are recorded as occurrences in my father's mission:

Teach in one of our ... schools. Put in time ... on a Church plantation. Eat, almost exclusively, the native food. Learn the native language ... Study, pray and work ... Tramp about the steep volcanic rocky trails. Ride in small boats and face seasickness. Sleep on a mat at a grass floor (no pillow). ... Be stationed as Branch President in a village. (Though it was called conference president for my father.) Often wash own clothes (no ironing) ... For a few, become district president ... Endure ridicule and some persecution. Labor among four sectarian mission groups. Work all day in rain and mud. Then sleep on pebbles in steam ing garments. (5)

President Adams only implies what I am sure he took for granted that these arduous duties included teaching the gospel: preaching, exhorting, baptizing, and sometimes rebuking and chastising, "the giving of wedding musical activities—sacred and secular, peace making, and still more.

With his rural background and training Father did in the line of duty many other things that are not specifically itemized in President Adams' list. "January 26, 1910, I schooled a horse for President Moody to ride to Sauiniatu." "February 17, I have just helped the Dr. make an operation on my companion ... who had an abcess in his groin. It was a very painful cut, deep and about 2 inches long." He later identifies this abcess as a "bubo," an infectious swelling of a lymph gland. "March 25 ... helped kill a goat at Mary Ah Mu's."

"April 25 ... broke Mary Ah Mu's cow to give milk."

July 4 at Sauiniatu: "In the afternoon we Ahe and his companion U visited the cricket game, the missionaries and women against the men. We were victorious and all the men had to dance."

October 11, now at Mapusaga: "This afternoon I was sent down on the work with about 15 women to boss. They go to school in the forenoon and cut bush in the afternoon getting from ... 10 cents to 25 cents per day." The following day, he continued: "Today we worked about 6 hours. My hands are all in blisters but one must either work or be eaten by misquototes (sic)."

As time passed and increasing facility in the language improved communication with non-English speakers, more and more responsibilities appear. Let us briefly trace this growth. January 20, 1910. "Have been studying most of the day on the language."
January 27: "I went out visiting Saints alone and learned how to count fa'asamoan."

March 8, 1910, his 20th birthday: "Today was the first time I ever blessed the sacrament (sic) and I did it in the Samoan language."

Just short of three months at Pesega—March 13: "Today was my first attempt at presiding over services in the Samoan language. President Moody said I did fine but I can hardly talk at all, and I had to preside and lead . . . the singing."

March 20, a week later: "I could see a great improvement over last Sunday. So far as I know I made no noticeable mistakes while last Sunday I did nothing noticeable but mistakes."

March 24: "I went to visit Saints and forgot my book so I had to trust to another Source and I had a lovely visit with them.

As the language barrier at least partially disappeared, interaction with Samoan families both members and non-members became more direct and personal. At first came considerable culture shock:

"We visited 9 families of Saints and three who were not members. I saw more of Samoan life and manners which you have seen before, but I see more naivete (sic) and faithfulness than I ever cared to see again."

(March 8, 1910)

A few months later the empathy of belonging appears in this touching incident. July 22 (f) "Elder Tangreen was called to the house of one of our Saints here last night but before we got there the baby was dead. So on the day following we prepared a funeral . . . Conference President A. Jensen and I dug the grave and at 2 p.m. we held services.

"Never before had I felt nor imagined the pangs of parents when laying their baby in the grave." (This was the baby of Johnie Ah Mu.)

May 19. "I am beginning to pray fa'asamoan. The work here is progressing and we have several Gospel Conversations every day." Henceforth, reports of sermons of 15 minutes or more in Samoan or of teaching in Samoan appear, such as this:

Last night we visited in Apia (f); the man of the house was a member of the Church but he was not at home, but a house of nonmembers were there. We started in on them and as one would get enough they kept leaving until only a poor sick old woman was left so we tried to cheer her with a half hour gospel sermon then left them feeling that we at least tried to preach to them. (May 16, 1910)

By the end of July sufficient independence was achieved to result in a major change: "Elder Hogan and President Moody came from Tutuila this morning . . . President Moody told me to prepare as quickly as possible and go to Tutuila and take charge of the Mapusaga School." (July 31, 1910)

Arriving August 3 at Mapusaga, the new schoolmaster found his housing pleasing but the school a disappointment. "They were splendid singers but I saw nothing else to flatter them on." (August 4, 1910)

August 5: "Today I taught my first class which was the highest, and I found out then that we only had school four days a week and only half a day. Dismissed at 12 o'clock. This is the first report from the Murdock Academy graduate in "iron works" on teaching, which was to become his profession. A month later in a village three miles from Mapusaga where he and his companion had sought out the house of the "pule nuu'ou chief magistrate," he already identified himself as a successful teacher. The missionaries, he said, had been there only a short time. The Samoan came in and they had us going some. We thot (sic) he was a teacher and my heart was in my throat half the time. Soon however we found out that he was a native Governor over the West End of Tutuila and had just called in on a journey to Pago . . . He asked if any of my boys were then down on the coast, I sent up and had Kupa come down. And from 7 until about 11 o'clock we had a lovely time. I've talked school, gospel, polotics (sic) and education . . . That night we had a splendid bed in the house and much respect was shown us." (September 9, 1910)

October 1. "Last month, for at the conference held there October Misi Piva had a long talk with President McBride following which he felt quite impressed that he was going back to Pesega. "Sure enough," he wrote, "I was reappointed Mission See't and was to return to Upolu with the company when Conference was finished" (October 24, 1910)

Reviewing the records back at Pesega, he made the diurnal summary: "In looking over the books, I found that they had not been copied since I left . . . (?) the cash account lacked nearly a thousand marks of balancing" (November 8, 1910). It is not completely clear how many times Father served as mission secretary, but it is certain that he served at least once under three different presidents and while branch president or conference president at Pesega over the "Upolu Conference" he was repeatedly returning to help with the mission records--twice with year-end reports.

What were the social and political circumstances in Samoa affecting the members and missionaries just before World War I? More than the rest of Polynesia, Samoa seems to have protected and preserved its ancient social structure up to this time despite the arrival and domination of foreign missionaries or foreign naval or military administrators. Some Samoan customs and traditions made acceptance of the Gospel at times fairly simple, such as large numbers--on occasion even a whole village--responding to the conversion of their "matai" as reported in detail by W. Karl Brewer. (6) Also, following the partition of the islands between the U.S. and Germany the Samoans took in stride the onerous status of being nominally independent but really foreign controlled. They made celebrations in their own fashion acknowledging foreign chieftains as we see from this journal entry: "March 2, (1910): Ten years ago today, the German
Government came into possession of these islands and in honor of the event, we have just finished celebrating three days.... (A)ll of the villages of Samoa under the German rule, met at Muliniu and engaged in Samoan marches, dances, and other feats. A Samoan dance is something very peculiar to us. Each village have a group to dance for them... They make all sorts of twists, signs and motions in their dances." Description of the celebration continues: "Each village marched in in fine Samoan style, put their food before the Governor and returned to their part of the campus. The food was then distributed again."

As we have seen, Father served, as did most missionaries of the time, in both American and German Samoa. In the former he explicitly mentions pride at the various American developments of the famous harbor at Pago Pago (August 2, 1910) and annoyance at the disallowance of occasional official meddling, both Samoan and American (September 9, 1910). Later, while he was Conference President at Upolu, he accompanied newly arrived Mission President Christian Jensen on two fruitless visits to the German governor who had forbidden the missionaries and the Saints to hold church in a specific village. On a third visit, accompanied by a fellow missionary, they were "asked to make a written statement or expand on what was said to the governor." A fourth visit with President Jensen followed, by appointment, with the Vice Governor, Dr. Schultz. "The decision was," he writes, "that he hold no more meetings there (at Saleaula) for the present but wait until such time as the majority of the village are willing for us to establish.

We accused of not being loyal to the Government in that we did not agree with the officials, we did not pay our taxes to the appointed place and we did not perform the necessary and customary law of going under oath each week. We was not pleased with us and did not mind telling (us) so. He asked us to make a report of village and what we are aiming at in our work" (February 27, 1912). The following day, apparently resisting the official German decision, President Jensen and Father sought assistance from the U.S. Consul "...but," he writes, "we found our only protection was personal safety and that we must submit to German rule, which he himself had to do."

President R. Carl Harris's SAMOA APIA MISSION HISTORY: 1888-1913 records that similar more extensive difference continued throughout German tenure of the islands. For example, schools were to be taught in German though no elders spoke German. Parents in the church and parents of many non-member children who attended wanted their children to learn English. There was stubborn noncompliance.

In both American and German Samoa, officialdom was autocratic and seldom held the welfare of the Samoans as their first priority. With respect to American Samoa, "...technically the island (did) not belong... to the United States until legal act before 1929..."(6) The Germans were forced to leave Western Samoa as a consequence of World War I. The New Zealand protectorate then established extended 1912, when Western Samoa's new constitution as an independent country went into effect.

Returning to the social harmony or dissonance between Samoan life and the church, consider the time-honored funeral arrangement. When Father arrived, conventional burial always took place, but the mourning customs raised controversy. The multiple feasts associated with death and mourning were looked upon as unusual but tolerable practices. For example, after traveling one day nearly to exhaustion, Father had just returned to Pesega. I was met, "he writes, "by the group of the deceased's family who approached (sic) Jerry and I (sic)." Perhaps this is not very different from our own practices except in the tone of the gathering. On another occasion, he was invited to a feast: "I asked the meaning of the feast and was told that it was in accordance with a Samoan custom. That when some member of the family died they had a feast of mourning and were supposed to be in mourning for six months, then the feast was prepared so that the family would help the deceased enjoy his feast. This feast was to end the mourning. As one old woman left the table she said 'Thanks for such a good meal, now we're all happy and there is nothing more to feel bad about'" (April 15, 1911). Burials were followed by public feasts. Marriages were occasions for great and prolonged celebrations. Other social issues arose especially during Father's period as Conference President. He writes, "We had instances of infidelity, disfellowship, reinstatement to full fellowship; as with funerals, the young missionaries were called to act in circumstances they had not previously faced in their own culture. Often, led by humility and faith, they seemed wise beyond their years. Sometimes what they saw repelled them; for example, following a funeral service, Father accompanied the family and the corpse to the family cemetery. 'As we neared the cemetery several half-dressed women, distant relatives of the family, came out and stampeded before us rending the air with unhuman yells and the earth with their feet and hands. This conduct was horrible and heathenish in the extreme. After the interment, we hurried away but they remained for a feast as is their custom at death'" (March 25, 1912).

As time passed, an urgency seemed to fill the journal. The visits alone or with companions, on foot or horseback, to the scattered saints and branches are occasionally almost wistful, as if the writer were set apart in more than a priesthood role. Not once had he mentioned his own illness. Later the family learned that he had suffered prolonged illness--probably malaria--boils, which still plagued him when he was displeased and the unhealing sores still mentioned. Perhaps they were the reason for such an entry as the following the Saturday before he determined to return to Pesega and "explain to Mission President Jensen conditions as I saw them, just before the decision to send him home" (March 8, 1912): "...We had a lovely ride (by sea) to Malaita a distance of about 50 miles... We were pleased to
meet with the saints and after a good breakfast we went out fishing. All the natives hustled out and fished while I walked around enjoying the beautiful island scenery" (March 2, 1912).

According to President Harris's history, 2852 missionaries had come to the mission from outside Samoa by mid-1983. My father was literally only one among thousands—about the 214th to arrive. His journal is also one among hundreds at least, for missionaries then and now kept and keep journals. His missionary journey may be a representative glimpse of the growth of a young man in knowledge of the world, of human life, and of the gospel, in courage, in tolerance, and in faith. The basic pattern repeats itself each generation; only the externals change. But the externals changes are phenomenal: today one can leave Salt Lake City or the Missionary Training Center in the morning and be almost anywhere in the inhabited world the same day. And Samoa, along with Tonga as Brother Lung has reported, is fully covered with stakes of Zion.

NOTES

1. This journal, currently in my possession, is a sewn journal 6 3/4 x 8 1/2" with a cardboard and paper cover, cloth reinforced spine and corners of 15 signatures of 10 sheets, making a volume of 300 pages. The mission record covers 120 pages generally very legible in black ink on pale blue lines. Subsequent references will be made by date in parentheses in the text or quoted with the date.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


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