

AHMU; AN EARLY SAMOAN LATTER-DAY SAINT

By
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I became a Mormon on July 4, 1948--significant not because it is a celebrated American day, but because it is my birthdate and because I adopted by baptism and confirmation, on a clear tropical day in Pesaga, Western Samoa, the Mormon tradition of my great-grandfather Ahmu.

Ahmu, according to three family versions, was born in China. The favorite account told in the oral style of Polynesian legends, relates how he was found floating half-dead in the Amur River which forms the boundary line between Manchuria and Siberia. Rescued by a kind-hearted captain, he was revived, cared for, then adopted by him and given the name Ahmu in remembrance of his deliverance.

A second version recounts that he was a homeless orphan who approached a certain skipper in Hong Kong and begged to be a cabin boy. Because the captain divined that "he was a very smart boy" he was given a berth on the ship. The captain, taking a liking to the lad, saw to it he was well taken care of.

The third rendition tells that he was born in Canton and that he grew up on the waterfront. At the age of twelve he left to seek his fortune on an English merchant vessel. He became a British citizen (he possessed a British passport) speaking on his arrival in Samoa only English having forgotten any Chinese.

The story of Ahmu is consistent in the next phases of his life. He lived a sailor's life it is said. During his travels in the Pacific he diversified his talents learning the skills of a wheelwright, blacksmith and carpenter. He had a special gift, an inborn sense of businessmanship. One day, while his ship was at dock in Apia, Western Samoa, he set his sights in a new direction by marrying the first of his three Samoan wives. There he remained until his death at the approximate age of 56.

Ahmu gained property and prosperity first in the wagon business and then later in a taxi service. His wagons were pulled by 4-6 horses--the flat beds for hauling goods for the German firms, others with seats for transporting local passengers and for carrying sightseers whom he picked up on boat days.

Because he could not read nor write, Ahmu kept most of his business accounts in his head. This he did until his oldest son John, my father's father, kept books for him.

Ahmu, when his family increased, built a fine, two-story house in German plantation style in Pesega on the outskirts of Apia. The family lore insists that he raised the Union Jack on a flag pole directly in front of his house everyday. He kept busy with his horses, his wagons and his family. He greatly enjoyed taking tourists to view the falls behind Apia, to try the Sliding Rock, and to enjoy the cool mountains. The family legends do not indicate when the incident occurred that rallied Ahmu's support and resources around the Mormons; the stories only reveal that when Ahmu did so he remained faithful to Mormon leadership even

though he was unbaptized several years. It should be noted that the incident differs in its fine points, not the basic plot.

My immediate family story suggests that Ahmu was a Buddhist. Because he put great stock in his social position he contributed weekly to the maintenance of the local pastor by providing him with a generous Sunday basket of food. Apparently one week the houseboys were late with the offering. Peeved, the pastor sent the boys back home with a petulant message. Ahmu was furious--he felt betrayed and dishonored. It so happened that as he stormed in his house (a typical thatched dome with no walls) he saw two white men passing by on the road. Calling to the houseboys he instructed them to hasten to the street and invite the strangers (an accepted Samoan custom) to partake of the food. The two Mormon missionaries welcomed the hospitality which they returned by preaching the new Mormon religion. From that day Ahmu became a patron of the Mormons sheltering them and providing care in the best Polynesian manner.

A like version told by Oliver Ahmu, a son by Ahmu's second wife, states that Ahmu attended the Methodist Church. As was the custom in the village in which Ahmu resided, the pastor honored every week the biggest contribution to the plate. Because Ahmu's name was announced each time, the parishoners refused to pass the plate to him; consequently, he disavowed himself from the church. At the same time these events were occurring the Mormon missionaries were proselyting in the area. They called upon Ahmu who was still smarting with anger. Seizing an opportunity to regain a religion Ahmu adopted the Mormons and became their benefactor.

Percy Rivers, a grandson of Ahmu through his only son John from his first wife, recounts that the incident occurred on a Saturday. It seems that Ahmu sent his teenaged son to take the usual food offering to the London Missionary Society pastor. The son, John, got on his horse and took the parcel (a food basket) over to the pastor's residence. The pastor was in a bad mood when John presented himself at the back of the house. "Bring that here and let's see what you have." After the pastor looked into the basket he picked it up and threw it out. "What do you mean by coming with this food just on a Saturday. What about Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday?" (In Samoan the meaning is: "Do your parents think I should tie a rope around my neck and hang myself on a breadfruit tree while I wait here for food from you?") So John retrieved the basket of food, got on his horse and returned to his father. Upon hearing what had happened Ahmu decided the pastor could not be a man of God and do such a thing. Having heard that there were American missionaries in town preaching a new religion, he sent his son on a horse and buggy to fetch them. The missionaries came and held their meeting in Ahmu's house in Pesega. And the most well-known center for Mormonism in Samoa was encouraged. May I read from the book published just last year (1983) when the Samoan Temple was dedicated. I quote from the SAMOA APIA MISSION HISTORY-- 1888-1983, pages 94 and 95:

The land which the Pesega mission home was to be built on had been given to the Church by Ah Mu,

which was the first of a long line of strong Church members who bear the Ah Mu or Rivers surname.

Ah Mu migrated to Samoa from Shanghai in mainland China and married a Samoan woman by the name of Talaesea. When the early missionaries came, he befriended them and over the years they lived in Fagalii and Pesega, and he often extended kindness and material help to them. There are many accounts by different missionaries of having gone over to Ah Mu's place to use his horse-drawn cart, or Ah Mu giving them food, or Ah Mu helping them when they were sick, or Ah Mu helping them out of some kind of trouble."

There is a deed signed by Ah Mu which "attests to the legal transaction between Ah Mu and the then legal representative of the Church in Samoa, Edward J. Wood, as he (Ah Mu) transferred into possession of the Church for the sum of \$1.00 this piece of property comprising of little over an acre on October 17, 1898 for perpetual jurisdiction by the Church as long as the land would be used for Church purposes. Still quoting from SAMOA APIA MISSION HISTORY;

"In perspective, standing 87 years distance from these events, we see that it was providential that Ah Mu would, through this generosity make this land available. It was the first of several pieces that eventually were purchased by Church. This land made it possible not only for the Church to build the first Pesega Mission Home but also in subsequent years has provided a location with the purchase of other parcels for other mission homes, for a large high school and finally, a Temple which is the culmination of a long series of buildings on or near the original Ah Mu property."

Ahmu built a two-story structure on the Pesega property which was his residence, according to his son Oliver. He notes that additional rooms were constructed as Ahmu's family increased. This house was later taken over by the Church, the downstairs used as a chapel and the upstairs as living quarters for the missionaries. In this tropic-styled building there were verandas all around which were used as classrooms during Sunday School. Percy Rivers, a grandson of Ahmu and the first stake president and regional representative for Samoa suggests that Pesega was the first real Church meeting house in the Samoan Islands although he acknowledges Fagalii as the first Mission Headquarters.

During some of those early meetings some surrounding villagers who disagreed with the Mormons would disrupt the

gatherings by throwing stones and sticks on the roof or they would loudly call out disparaging remarks. Most of the Church members became familiar with the arguments and were able to call forth gospel principles to refute the hecklers.

The original Pesega of Ahmu was basically bush land. According to Ahmu's grandson Isaac Rivers the family had a small cattle herd which grazed within its perimeters, the cows providing milk for young children. There were pigs to butcher and chickens to pluck. Coconut trees dotted the ground and taro patches lay cool in freshwater ponds. Whether he was cooking for his family or supervising the workers attached to his household, Ahmu worked tirelessly. He never cared for standing still. Perhaps that is why he moved from horses to carts to wagons and his children to motorcycles to cars to taxis.

In the Samoan Mission records between 1897 and 1900 there are references to Ahmu:

Sunday, February 21, 1897

Elders Cluff and Jeppson spent the day at Vaimoso (adjoining Pesega) with the old converts, and before returning succeeded in baptizing the head of three families viz., Fanene and wife, Ah Mu, wife and children and Iosefa, a graduate from the L.M.S. Leulumoega Theological Seminary. The Elders having made arrangements to visit regularly, as is done in all branches. The prospects are bright for an early increase in that locality of the Church.

Monday, July 4, 1898

Ah Mu had gone out in his carriage, and brought in the sisters, who were at Mr. Hellesoe's.

Wednesday, July 6, 1898

Ah Mu and Ah Chini, with their families went and surprised Sister Reid on her birthday. They took flowers, oranges, ducks, etc., etc..

July 12, 1899

. . . and good old Ah Mu of Pesega.

Tuesday, June 19, 1900

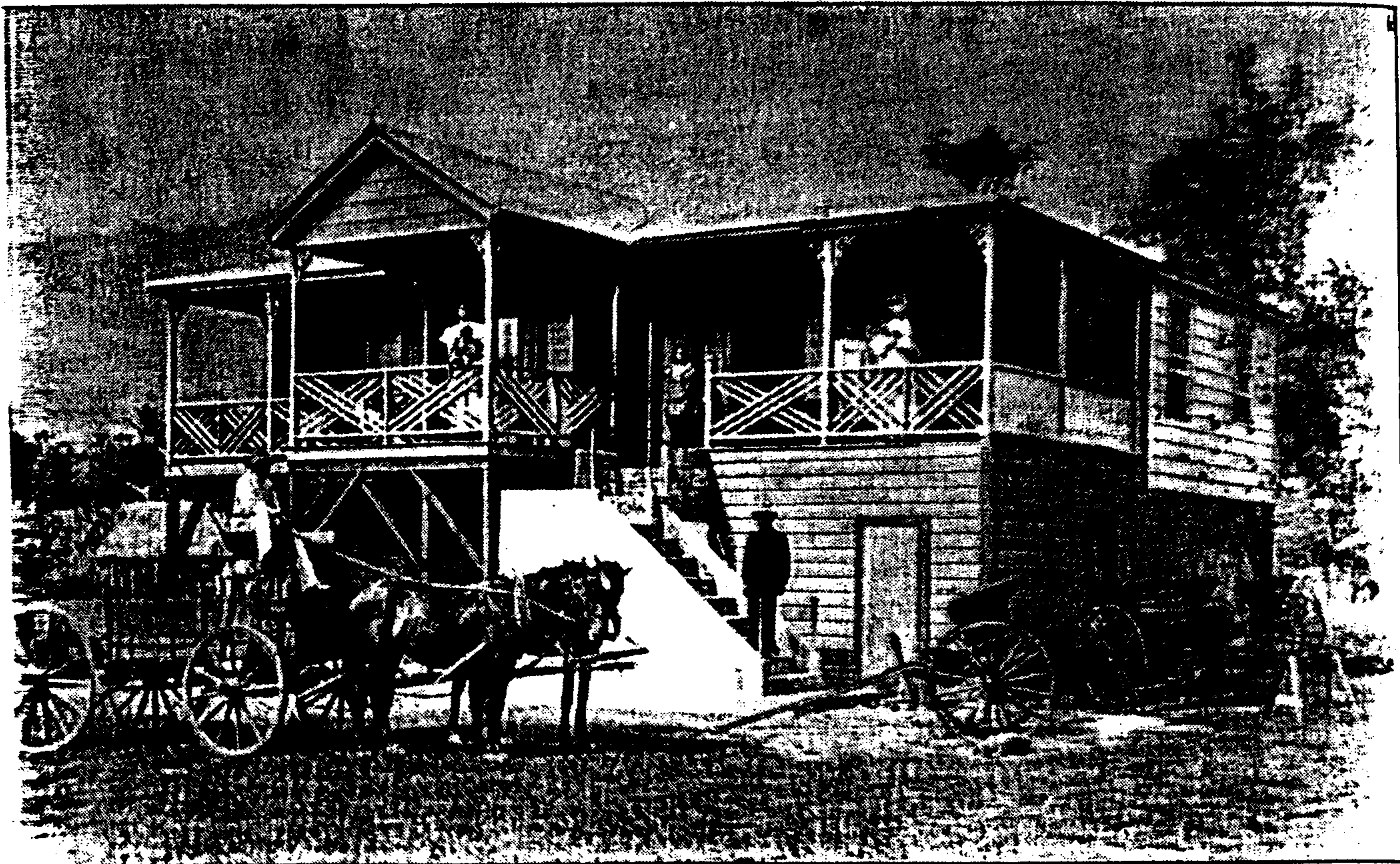
A fast was held for the special benefit of Johnnie Ah Mu (Ah Mu's son) who was troubled with what was thought to be an incurable abscess on the left side of the body. Before the fast was broken, the Pesega Saints were instructed how they must be free from ill feelings and by uplifted hand they witnessed they had forgiven each other. Upon being administered to, Johnnie felt much relieved, and later walked upstairs.

Tuesday, December 25, 1900

After the meeting they feasted at Ah Mu's.

Just this past week Dean Farnsworth of the English faculty shared his father's diary with me. I would like to read

Having briefly shown the work done on the mission homes at Tuasivi, Págo Pago, Mapusaga and Sauniatu, we return now to further efforts with mission homes at Pesega. To capture the full extent of this story we must turn back to the year 1885 when the picture below was taken.



references to my great grandfather and members of his family.
From Burton Kent Farnsworth's writings:

Tuesday, May 17, 1910

Last Sunday we accompanied Ah Mu up to the plantation and had a very nice time.

June 18, 1910

Owing to the long severe illness of Brother Ah Mu we elders at Pesega together with the Ah Mu family held a fast for today until 5pm. After the administering to him they asked us to stay to supper which of course we did. We enjoyed a very nice meal with the family on the kitchen floor.

November 12, 1910

President McBride and I left Pesega to spend Sunday in Fasitoatai. We hired Ahmu's cart and took Bell.

I would also like to quote from W. Karl Brewer's book ARMED WITH THE SPIRIT; MISSIONARY EXPERIENCES IN SAMOA, page 116:

Sio "Joe" Creighton was part English and part Samoan. His wife Va'i Ahmu, was the daughter of a well-to-do Chinese trader at Pesega who gave so much property to the Church.

In the years 1962-1965 I had the privilege of teaching at Pesega School in Western Samoa built on the land given by my great grandfather. Again let me quote from the SAMOA MISSION HISTORY;

This historic photograph shows the beautiful home of Ah Mu. We are not sure when the home was actually constructed but we do know that Ahmu kept horses and a number of different wagons and carriages and was trader and business man in a number of different kinds of enterprises, including transportation. The gentleman standing at the bottom of the steps is thought to be Ahmu and those standing at the veranda are members of his family. This home stood almost at precisely where the front entrance of the new temple is today.

I would like to conclude with a story from Burton Farnsworth's missionary diary:

I was asked the meaning of the feast (at Ah Mu's) 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 have another feast and break the mourning. 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 happy and there is nothing more to feel bad about."

Thank you for such a good meal, now we're all happy and there is everything to feel good about.