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The Historians Corner

Edited by James B. Allen

Historical research sometimes takes on a very personal flavor, as it did recently when Donald Q. Cannon discovered that one of his ancestors was the last Mormon to hear the final testimony of the last of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon. In this issue of "The Historians Corner" Professor Cannon uses this incident to demonstrate the value of comparing primary and secondary sources in attempting to validate historical claims.

The second item in this issue comes from Ronald K. Esplin, whose continuing study of Brigham Young has given him some important insight into various personal characteristics of this pioneer leader. He has used the publication of a tender, heartwarming letter written by Brigham Young in 1840 as an opportunity to illustrate some of these characteristics.

ANGUS M. CANNON AND DAVID WHITMER: A COMMENT ON HISTORY AND HISTORICAL METHOD

Donald Q. Cannon

Angus M. Cannon was apparently the last Latter-day Saint to hear David Whitmer's testimony concerning the origin of the Book of Mormon. David Whitmer was the last to die of the Three Witnesses who testified that a heavenly angel had shown them the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated.

The first inkling I had of Angus Cannon's association with David Whitmer came through reading a newsletter of the George Cannon Family Association. As a great-grandson of Angus Cannon, I read the November 1973 issue of *The Cannon Chronicle* with great interest because it contained the following lead article:

Donald Q. Cannon is a professor of Church history and doctrine, Religious Instruction, Brigham Young University.

I. Angus M. Cannon's Story of David Whitmer's Testimony
as told by Charles F. Solomon, March 2, 1952.

The writer, Charles F. Solomon, was intimately acquainted and lived and traveled with President Angus M. Cannon, who was the son of Ann Quayle and George Cannon, the Immigrant. Charles F. Solomon lived in Salt Lake in Beatrice Cannon Evans neighborhood and recounted this experience with her grandfather, Angus M. Cannon. At her request he wrote this so that we can all share it.

"In the year of 1897, President Cannon told me he was on the 25 day of January 1888 returning from the east and concluded to call at the home of David Whitmer in Richmond, Missouri, who was one of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon. President Cannon found David Whitmer on his death bed, with his wife and family around his bed. His wife, Mrs. Whitmer, asked President Cannon to remain with them, which he did, and before Mr. Whitmer passed away he said he wanted his entire family to know for assurity that he did hear the voice of the Lord, and he did see the angel of the Lord and hear them both testify the Book of Mormon was translated correctly and did contain a true and correct record of Christ's teachings and the history of the ancient inhabitants of this continent.

"President Cannon stated that he remained in Richmond for the funeral of David Whitmer, and on 26 of January 1888 he walked down the street and saw three elderly men standing together. He addressed them saying, 'Did any of you men know David Whitmer?' To which one replied, 'We all knew him very well.' President Cannon said, 'Did any of you ever hear him deny the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon,' to which one of the men replied, 'See that saloon right there? We took him in there one day, and knowing that he liked liquor, we got him thoroughly intoxicated and I said, "Now Dave, what have you got to say about that old Book of Mormon?"' The man told President Cannon Mr. Whitmer had a cap on his head which he removed and held in his left hand over his heart, raised his right hand to the square, and said, 'Gentlemen, I will have to admit you have got me thoroughly intoxicated, but I positively cannot deny the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. I did hear the voice of the Lord. I did see the angel and hear both of them declare the truthfulness of this record.'

Respectfully

Charles F. Solomon''

As I read this article I became very skeptical about its authenticity. Having been trained as a professional historian, and having taught history at the college level for several years, I was suspicious because of the nature of the source. It was a secondhand reminiscence of an event that took place sixty-four years earlier: Charles F. Solomon, who did not experience the event, was relating

from his memory in 1952 something that supposedly happened to Angus M. Cannon in 1888, but that President Cannon did not tell him about until 1897. Such evidence is always suspect by historians.

My original feelings of skepticism were suddenly transformed into a spirit of acceptance, however, as I in working on a current research project was reading the Angus M. Cannon journals, recording excerpts, and writing notes and commentary. The journals consist of seventy-two volumes located at the Library–Archives, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City. While studying the journal for 1888, I was delighted to find the following passage, which seemed to confirm that my ancestor was indeed the last to hear the testimony of David Whitmer:

Jan 7, 1888, Sat.

I took RR tem at Lexington Junction and reached Richmond after going 8 miles where I got breakfast—at Hotel and visited David Whitmer 83 years old that day. He said:—My friend, if God ever uttered a truth the testimony I now bear is true. I did see the angel of God and beheld the glory of the Lord and He declared that Record true. I felt I should be the last stranger to hear it.

I immediately recognized the relationship of this diary entry to the story recounted by Charles F. Solomon. Although Charles Solomon clearly embellished the account, the essential facts were supported by the journal entry. Indeed, Angus M. Cannon was probably the last member of the Church to hear the testimony of the last survivor of the Three Witnesses.¹

Here is a fascinating example of the difference between a reminiscence and a journal entry. The reminiscence recalls the essential core issues, but also adds detail and color which probably were not part of the original experience. The diary entry, on the other hand, refines and sharpens the image produced by the reminiscence. It contains the facts as recorded by the observer at the time of the event. Both kinds of sources are important in helping us understand the past. In this instance, both sources tell us that Angus M. Cannon was the last of the Latter-day Saints to hear the testimony of David Whitmer.²

¹For more information on people who visited with David Whitmer, see Richard L. Anderson, "The Most Interviewed Witness," *The Improvement Era* (May 1969), pp. 76–83.

²Angus M. Cannon visited with and heard David Whitmer bear his testimony of the Book of Mormon 7 January 1888. David Whitmer died 25 January 1888 (B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. [Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1965]: 1:144).