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Prayer under a Pepper Tree: Sixteen Accounts of a Spiritual Manifestation

Records reveal vivid information from personal points of view about a spiritual experience shared by five in Hawaii in 1921.

Lavina Fielding Anderson

In 1920–21, David O. McKay, then a forty-seven-year-old Apostle, toured the worldwide missions of the Church, beginning with Japan and Korea. He dedicated the land of China for the preaching of the gospel, visited Hawaii, returned briefly to Salt Lake City for the funeral of President Anthon H. Lund, and then continued through the South Pacific, Australia, New Zealand, India, and Europe. He was accompanied on this arduous year-long tour by Hugh J. Cannon, president of Liberty Stake in Salt Lake City and a member of the Deseret Union Sunday School General Board, of which President McKay was general superintendent.

Among the many spiritual manifestations that occurred during this world tour came a remarkable event during the thirty-six hours they spent on Maui. President McKay and Brother Cannon docked at Maui at 4:30 A.M. February 9, 1921, held a meeting at mission headquarters in the morning, and held another for members in the evening; during the afternoon they visited the sites where Hugh J. Cannon's father, George Q. Cannon, had met Jonatana H. Napela, resulting in the first baptism in Maui and the organization of the first branch of the Church in Hawaii, and where George Q. Cannon had also received intense spiritual manifestations. Accompanying the party were E. Wesley Smith, Hawaiian Mission president and a son of Joseph F. Smith, who had also served as a Hawaiian missionary; Samuel Harris Hurst, Jr., a missionary of mature years from Idaho who was then president of the Central Maui Conference; and

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David Keola Kailimai, a Hawaiian missionary, also of mature years, who owned the little Ford in which the party traveled.

Hugh J. Cannon was greatly touched by visiting the sites associated with his father, and on the grounds of the little chapel at Pulehu, President McKay felt inspired to offer a prayer of thanksgiving. During that prayer, all five men were deeply stirred spiritually, and Brother Kailimai, speaking in Hawaiian to President Smith, said he had seen a vision. President McKay, after President Smith translated Brother Kailimai's words, did not interpret the vision but confirmed its divine origins by affirming that "the veil was very thin." Hugh J. Cannon, who had been most profoundly affected during the experience, testified that, at least for him, there had been no veil.

What was the manifestation called forth by the combination of faith and filial love of these five Church leaders? How did the five experience it and how did they describe it, both then and later? What message does it have about the nature of spiritual experience for readers who learn of it through the more distant witness of the written record?

Thanks largely to the kindness of many members of the families involved, I have found sixteen separate accounts of this event, all but four of them unpublished. This essay examines these accounts in chronological order and in the context of the participants' lives, as an exploration of the dynamics of memory, faith, love, and spirituality.

Samuel Harris Hurst's Account

Of the five participants, only David Kailimai, the man who saw the vision, left no personal account, either at the time or later. Abigail Kahanu Kailimai Kailimai, who is both David's niece and his daughter-in-law, does not recall an earlier oral version or, in fact, ever hearing this experience from Elder Kailimai. However, Samuel Harris Hurst, Jr., kept a daily diary and recorded the event within hours of its occurrence. Elder Hurst was then thirty-six, a native of Cache Valley, and a widower. His wife had died a lingering death from heart disease shortly before, leaving him with a ten-year-old daughter, Inez. He had had grave doubts about serving a mission under such circumstances but had accepted the calling, at least partly because of his child's faith, even though he had to sell his farm to pay his expenses.

His diary and his autobiography, written in 1958, breathe a solid, simple faithfulness that is very moving. He confesses that being called to Hawaii was “quite a test to my faith.” His patriarchal blessing had told him he would “go to the land of my forefathers,” which did not seem to be possible. He thought he would be too old to learn Hawaiian fluently and adds with humility, “I had desires to be a good speaker, and I could not see any development for me if simple natives were to be my audience.” He wrestled with his doubts about whether his call had been inspired “all the way to Hawaii.” But when he saw Wesley Smith, the mission president, waiting for him on the dock, he recognized him as the man with whom he had labored as a missionary in a dream seen two years earlier. This dream had occurred a year before Smith had been called as mission president. “With this,” recorded Elder Hurst, “I knew that some power other than that of man was having something to do with it.” Elder Hurst also knew that he would be assigned to some island other than Oahu before President Smith made the assignments.¹

Elder Hurst’s diary for February 8, 1921, records the prayer under the pepper tree in simple prose but eloquent detail:

Elder McKay, Pres. Smith and Cannon Elder Keola and myself drove . . . out to Pulehu where Pres. Geo. Q. Cannon had his wonderful experience in the conversion of so many of the natives and the first to join the church. As we sat in the little Ford in front of the meeting house there, Pres. Smith related to us the story of how Pres. Cannon in 1850 or 51 had delivered his wonderful discourse in a little church which then stood on the ground we were then on. At this meeting he appeared to be standing in the air with a hallow of light around his head. At the same time all but three of the over hundred persons there present were transfigured before him. Bro. Hugh J. Cannon being a son of Pres. Cannon was very deeply effected [*sic*] more so than any one I have ever saw before. We then alighted from the car and walked around the grounds. At the rear of the old church on the grounds now in the shade of an old tree, Elder McKay said: “Brethren I feel impressed that we should render our thanks to the Lord for the labors of this great man and his co-laborer Pres. Joseph F. Smith whose sons are represented here today.” At this we bowed in humble reverence in prayer to God and then I listened to one of the grandest prayers it has ever been my privilege to listen to. At its close Elder Keola test[i]fied he saw a hand and arm extended to me in an attitude of shaking hands. In speaking of this later Bro. McKay said “Bro. Keola, I do not know the significance of the hand you saw, but I know this that the veil between us and the other world was very thin.” Bro. Cannon then said



Pulehu Chapel, Maui, Hawaii. In 1921, under the pepper tree seen on the right, Apostle David O. McKay offered a prayer of thanksgiving on behalf of himself and his companions, Hugh J. Cannon, E. Wesley Smith, Samuel Harris Hurst, Jr., and David Keola Kailimai. During the prayer, the party received a spiritual manifestation that moved them profoundly. Courtesy of BYU-Hawaii Archives.

“There was no veil at all” at which the apostle cast a penetrating look at him for he as well as we seemed to be in doubt as to whether Bro. Cannon had beheld a vision or not but no more was said at that time. In closing his remarks in a general meeting held at Wailuku tonight Elder McKay made mention of this again and with tears in the eyes of both men he turned to Bro. Cannon and staping [*sic*] on the shoulder said, “My Brother, you have been closer to your Father today than you have ever been before.”²

Because Elder Hurst spoke Hawaiian, he probably heard Elder Kailimai’s testimony to President Smith as it was uttered. Neither here, on the very day that the event occurred, nor later, did Elder Hurst speculate on the possible meaning of this experience. He simply recorded Elder Kailimai’s words, President McKay’s response, and the powerful emotional and physical effect the manifestation had on Brother Cannon, along with Brother Cannon’s testimony of the temporary parting of the veil that separated him from his deceased father. Two of Elder Hurst’s daughters confirm that he did not interpret the story in telling it to them in later years. One of the daughters, Cleo Hurst Bailey, comments, “I have some personal feelings about it. All of those particular people—especially Hugh J. Cannon, E. Wesley Smith, and my father—had ancestors who took part in opening the islands to missionary work. I think all of those ancestors were there, and they knew it. It was a personal occasion, a quiet way of confirming that it was appropriate that my father be there.”³

The ancestor of Elder Hurst who had assisted in nineteenth-century missionary efforts was his grandfather, Frederick William Hurst, whose diary includes moving accounts of visions, inspirational dreams, and answered prayers. He had been born on the Isle of Jersey; his family then emigrated to New Zealand, and as a young man in the goldfields of Australia, he joined the Church with his younger brother, Charles Clement Hurst. As a result, his angry mother disowned him and marked his name out of the family Bible. On April 27, 1855, he and his brother emigrated with seventy-two Saints aboard the *Tarquinia*. The ship was leaking so badly by the time they reached Honolulu that, after repairs and an attempt to continue, they returned to Honolulu where the ship was eventually condemned. Fred W. contributed all of his savings—a thousand dollars in nuggets sewn into his clothing—to send the other members, mostly families, on to California. He accepted a mission call

from President Silas Smith and almost immediately went to Molokai, where he served from August 1855 to October 1856. Gifted with an irrepressible cheerfulness, he learned Hawaiian quickly and met poverty undaunted. Often he walked barefoot. For a long period of time, food was very scanty. On February 8, 1856, he recorded thankfully, "We had three meals today for the first time for I will not venture to say how long. We fasted about three days this week."⁴

After his mission, Fred Hurst worked his passage to northern California, where he voluntarily served another mission. When he was forty-two and living in Cache Valley with his wife and seven children, he was called to serve another mission, this time in New Zealand. He responded promptly though his eight-year-old daughter died three days before he left and his wife had six-month-old twins to care for in addition to five older children. In 1892-93, he worked as a painter on the Salt Lake Temple; he also served for many years as stake Sunday School superintendent in Cache Stake and served two stake missions.⁵ Throughout many years of poverty, sacrifice, and sorrow, he maintained a merry heart and strong faith. This was the man whose grandson joined in a prayer of thanksgiving with the sons of George Q. Cannon and Joseph F. Smith under the pepper tree at Pulehu and to whose grandson Elder Kailimai saw extended a hand and arm in the "attitude of shaking hands."

David O. McKay's Early Accounts

The next account is President McKay's detailed journal of his world tour, which remains unpublished except in excerpts.⁶ It is the most comprehensive source of the thirty-six hours the men spent on Maui. The mission history, although it records the young apostle's visit, does not mention the incident at Pulehu.⁷ President McKay describes their visit to the George Q. Cannon sites, then gives this account of the prayer under the pepper tree:

It seemed to me . . . that we were treading on sacred ground; for surely the Lord was the close companion and guide of that intrepid and faithful missionary [George Q. Cannon].

We offered a united prayer on the ground, during which Bro. Keola seemed to see two men shaking hands. He thought Hugh J. was shaking hands with Elder Hurst, and was surprised when he opened his eyes to see Brother Cannon standing with bowed head and closed eyes! I do not



McKay party, February 1921, Maui, Hawaii. David O. McKay probably used the notebook seen in his hand for jotting down details of his journey. Pictured are Samuel Harris Hurst (on the left and wearing glasses), Elder McKay (in the center), David Keola Kailimai (behind and to the right of Elder McKay), E. Wesley Smith (with bow tie), and Hugh J. Cannon (wearing a Panama hat with a light band). Courtesy of Cleo Hurst Bailey, who owns the original, and the Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

know the significance of his manifestation, but I do know we all felt as though Pres. Joseph F. Smith and George Q. Cannon, two of the intrepid missionaries of early days, were well pleased with our visit and service on that memorable spot.⁸

There is no indication that President McKay knew that Fred W. Hurst, Samuel's grandfather, was also a former Hawaiian missionary. It also seems apparent that he, an Apostle traveling under authority of the First Presidency, was deeply moved by the strong feeling of approbation he felt from the departed Church leaders, Joseph F. Smith and George Q. Cannon. Thus, over time as President McKay told his story, both his own sense of being affirmed in his apostolic mission and his intense attachment to and affection for Brother Cannon reshaped the experience into greater symmetry and logic.

Two months later, speaking at a conference of missionaries and members in New Zealand, he retold the story. This time, he reported that the "two men in a position of handshaking" were "President [George Q.] Cannon and Brother Hurst." This experience is also the only time when the event is attached to a social and doctrinal message. The Saints had been the focus of considerable proselyting zeal from other denominations, and hecklers had interrupted that very session of the conference. President McKay reassured the Saints that they were in the true Church by telling the story of the prayer under the pepper tree. When he reached the point where "Brother Cannon, with tears in his eyes said, 'There was no veil,'" he ended the narrative but added this commentary:

The testimony of his vision is too sacred to give. But let me tell you, my beloved brethren and sisters, his father, George Q. Cannon, and Joseph F. Smith, nephew of the Prophet Joseph, who presided over this Church as the divinely authorized successor to the Presidency of this Church, let me tell you that they live, and these men gave approval of the work now known as Mormonism, which you, brethren and sisters, have embraced.

God keep you to it, and may you know when wolves have entered in among you, even though they have sheep's clothing. Amen.⁹

At this point, President McKay's memory of the narrative was almost certainly influenced by the strong spiritual sense of Hugh J. Cannon that his father and President Joseph F. Smith were present. Although neither man has left a record of discussing the manifestation,

they had just spent almost two months at sea; and it seems very likely that their prayers and discourse would have included grateful acknowledgment of this experience, among many others that had been inspirational to them.

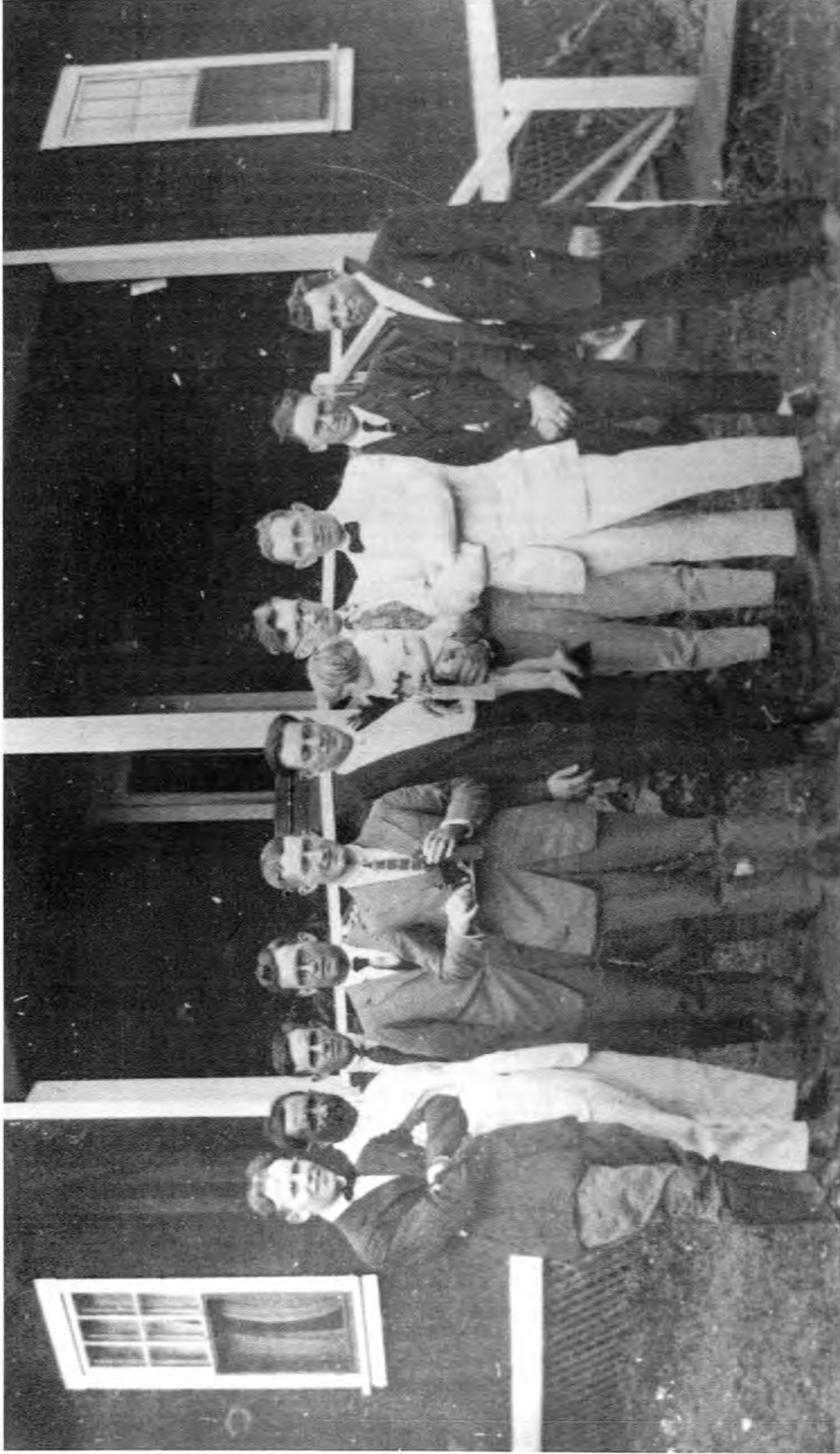
E. Wesley Smith's Account

By reporting President McKay's words, Hawaiian Mission President E. Wesley Smith, the son of Joseph F. Smith and Julina Lambson Smith, also testifies indirectly to the presence of his father and George Q. Cannon. E. Wesley Smith had been born at Laie, April 21, 1886, when his parents spent almost two years there to avoid the polygamy raids. He had served a Hawaiian mission (1907–10), was Hawaiian Mission president from 1919 to 1923, and would return as president for a second time during the late 1940s. His wife, Mary S. Smith, gave birth to their third child, Donald E. Smith, in January 1920 soon after they reached Hawaii.

According to Donald Smith, his father told the story of the prayer under the pepper tree on Maui as one of many inspirational Hawaiian experiences, but no written account was preserved, and due to the passage of time since his death, it is not possible to reconstruct the exact details he emphasized.¹⁰ Apparently the only written version that E. Wesley Smith left of this account is that which appears in the mission president's annual report for 1921:

Elders McKay, Cannon, Samuel H. Hurst, Keola Kailimai (local) and I visited the spot in Pulehu, Kula district where Pres. George Q. Cannon had a wonderful manifestation in company with the noble chief Napela. While there Elder McKay said he felt impressed with a desire to offer a prayer [to] the Lord in the spirit of thanksgiving for the privilege they had in being there, and for the many souls who had embraced the Gospel. We bowed our heads, Elder McKay being mouth. It was a moment never to be forgotten, for indeed the spot is sacred. Elder McKay said, "I feel certain that Pres. Cannon and Pres. Smith are near for the veil was very thin." Elder Cannon was deeply impressed and with tears filling his eyes and in a choked voice said, "There was no veil."¹¹

Like Samuel Hurst, Wesley Smith does not comment on whatever he may have experienced or interpret it but rather affirms the presence of the two missionary fathers and testifies to the



Hawaiian Mission President E. Wesley Smith and his missionaries. This pose was photographed between the 6:00 A.M. missionary meeting with Elder McKay and the tour of the historic missionary sites. Samuel Hurst is fourth from the left and President Smith is third from the right. The other missionaries probably include S. Dunn, Byron D. Jones, David Keola Kailimai, David P. Kalani, Chester H. Nelson, and Lester Williams. Courtesy of Cleo Hurst Bailey, who owns the original, and the Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

powerful spiritual experience that Brother Cannon was having. It seems probable that he sensed the presence of his own father. The mission history is replete with loving references to Joseph F. Smith and expressions of joy that the son of this beloved missionary was the current mission president. Wesley Smith's own discourses show a markedly sweet acceptance of his responsibilities as he followed in his father's footsteps, and his own years in Hawaii brought many spiritual experiences.¹²

Hugh J. Cannon's Experience

Hugh J. Cannon, the son of George Q. Cannon and Sarah Jenne Cannon, was fifty-one years old when he and President McKay reached Hawaii. He recorded two brief accounts of the prayer under the pepper tree, one in his personal journal and another in a narrative of the world tour that he prepared for possible publication. His personal journal reads:

I felt that I was treading on holy ground, that the veil between me and my father was very thin. Indeed, I felt that there was no intervening veil. The brethren partook of the same feeling. We had prayers under a tree back of the building and Brother Keola Kailimai says that while we prayed he saw two men shaking hands. He thought I was shaking hands with Brother Hurst and was surprised when he opened his eyes to see me standing with my hands at my side. I do not know the significance of what he saw but I do know that Father and President Joseph F. Smith were there.¹³

Although the date when Hugh Cannon wrote his narrative is not known, it would have been within the next few years, for the typescript was finished and corrected before his death in 1931. In that narrative, Hugh Cannon explains significant experiences of his father that had already hallowed this site

where George Q. Cannon and Brother Napela preached with such power that 97 of the 100 people who came to hear them were converted. The tradition is that Brother Cannon was not standing on the ground on this occasion, but was in the air and that a great light shown [*sic*] about him.

Under a beautiful tree on the lot where this occurred and where the Church now has a neat little chapel, the visiting brethren engaged in prayer. It was an occasion which none of them will ever forget,

for they stood almost in the visible presence of celestial beings. In looking back on the trip after the lapse of several years, there are few, if any, experiences which are more impressive than this.¹⁴

Although Brother Cannon withheld the details of that manifestation from the narrative, no doubt deeming them too sacred for publication at that time, his journal makes it clear that he felt the presence of George Q. Cannon and Joseph F. Smith. Another detail about Brother Cannon's experience is reported by Samuel Harris Hurst. In his 1958 autobiography, he recalls:

Elder Cannon had related this experience fully to some of my friends and me several years later, and added the following, "My statement that there was no veil has led people to ask me if it was true that I saw the Savior when I was on Maui. I did not see the Savior," he said, "neither did I see anyone else, but I did hear the voice of my father very distinctly, and he told me several things I had been in doubt about."¹⁵

President McKay's memory merged the visual detail of the two men shaking hands, which he understood President E. Wesley Smith to have reported, with the unseen presence of the two missionary fathers and the auditory manifestation of Joseph F. Smith speaking to his son. This merging of aspects of the manifestation was no doubt intensified for President McKay by his love for Hugh Cannon. On October 9, 1931, when President McKay was speaking at Hugh J. Cannon's funeral, he told the story of the prayer under the pepper tree as one of love and approbation from the missionary fathers, George Q. Cannon and Joseph F. Smith, for their sons, Hugh J. Cannon and E. Wesley Smith.

In this funeral sermon, President McKay, with great warmth, called Brother Cannon "a friend. None truer, none more faithful in all this world," and distinguished for "his implicit faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ." In this context, then, President McKay retold the story of the prayer under the pepper tree:

We approached the missionary field made almost sacred by the labors of his father, President George Q. Cannon. . . . I shall never forget the emotions that stirred Brother Cannon's heart as we neared the island on which his father had translated the Book of Mormon into the Hawaiian language. Bro. Cannon told me about some confidences that his father had given him, his son, which had never been printed. I had never heard them before . . . [on one occasion] George Q. Cannon, crushed and discouraged, heard the voice of God.

. . . [After visiting the site] we withdrew a short distance under a pepper tree, and there bared our heads in thanksgiving and praise to God, and asked his guidance upon our further travels.

I haven't the time to tell you what happened or what vision came to Brother Kaola [*sic*], a native missionary, but after Amen was said I opened my eyes, and Brother Wesley Smith, a son of President Joseph F. Smith, who was also deeply impressed on that occasion, and others, came up and said, "Do you know what Brother Kaola was just telling us?"

"No."

Then he repeated what Brother Kaola had seen during that prayer. We were silent for a few moments and then I said:

"Brother Kaola, I do not know the significance of that vision. But this I do know, that the veil between us and those intrepid missionaries, President Smith, George Q. Cannon and others, was very thin."

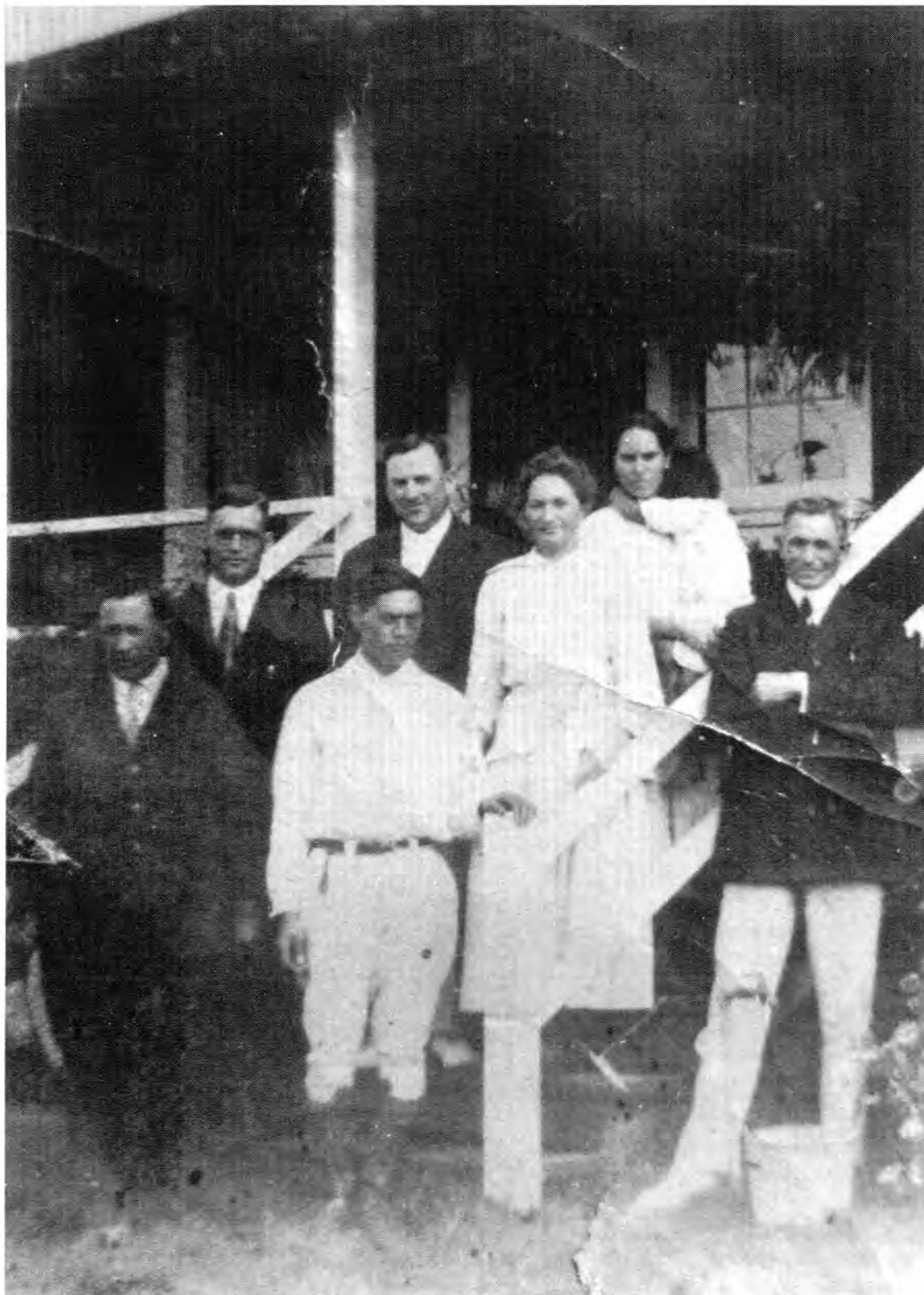
Brother Cannon who was by my side whispered: "Brother McKay, there was no veil."

Not to him. It just seemed as if he had looked into the other side and felt the presence of his illustrious father and President Smith, who, it seemed, were sharing the experiences of these modern missionaries in that land those first missionaries loved so well.¹⁶

The Man Who Saw the Vision: David Keola Kailimai

The next account of this experience dates from 1936 and emerges from a visit that President McKay made to Hawaii as a member of the First Presidency. Thus, it gives us a glimpse into how the account had been told among the Saints of Maui who had continued contact with David Keola Kailimai.¹⁷ Elder Kailimai, age forty-eight at the time of this manifestation, was born on March 6, 1873, to Samuel Kailimai and Kauahi Kanakaloloa Kailimai. He had a sister, Emalia, three years older and a brother two years younger, William Hoapili Kailimai. The family had been at Kahuwa near Hilo for at least two generations. His parents had been baptized a month apart, in December 1873 and January 1874; his father, according to an 1895 missionary journal, had served a local mission and was a counselor in the presidency of Kahuwa Branch.¹⁸

David was baptized at age ten. He and his wife, Martha (Maka) Kamaka Kaopuni Kailimai, were unable to have children, so they adopted David Kauluwehi, born in 1908, who would have been



Four of the participants and friends. Front row, left to right: David Keola Kailimai, Charles Ako, David O. McKay; back row: Samuel Harris Hurst, Jr., Hugh J. Cannon, Annie Tripp Ako, unknown lady with baby. Courtesy BYU-Hawaii Archives.

thirteen at the time of the Maui experience. This boy married Abigail (Abbie) Kahanu Kailimai, William's daughter; and they raised a family of five. The two oldest sons are named Castle Kauluwehi and Wesley Keola, in obvious commemoration of two beloved friends and mission presidents, Castle Murphy and E. Wesley Smith.¹⁹

In 1913, Brother Kailimai, his wife, and five-year-old David accompanied the Murphy family to Utah where they were endowed and sealed in the Salt Lake Temple; the parents were endowed on October 22, and young David was sealed to them. (The elder David was sealed to Samuel and Kauahi, his own parents, in 1920 in the Hawaiian Temple.) They also spent about three months at Iosepa in Skull Valley. Brother Kailimai reported on these experiences at the mission conference in April 1914, after his return, urging obedience to all of the commandments. He served simultaneously in Aleamai Branch near Hilo from at least 1914 to 1917 as branch president, most of the time with only one counselor, as president of its Sunday School, and as first counselor in the MIA. He had been saving his money to return to Utah and the temple, but after the announcement was made of the temple planned for Laie, he donated his savings, saying, "If I were called to come here and break rock for the temple, I would be glad to do that."²⁰ Speaking at the mission conference in April 1916 at Laie, he said:

Last year I went to Bro. Woolley and told him I was prepared to return to Utah. He said, "Go back to your branch. Wait a while. We don't know what changes will come soon." I did that and I have tried to teach the Saints there the Word of Wisdom, the law of tithing, and the other laws of the gospel. . . . When I heard that the temple was to be built in Hawaii, I rejoiced and from that time until today I have raised my voice in encouraging the people to prepare themselves for that great blessing. I want to tell you what it cost me to go to Zion and return. Perhaps some of you are prepared to go. We can donate that money and the blessing will be an eternal one. If we spend this money, the benefits will go to others and not to us, but if we put it in the temple, we will receive the blessings. It cost us about \$500 for our trip to Utah. That does not include the money we spent for food and other incidentals. When I left I had \$1000. When I returned I had \$3 left. I returned in 1913 and in two years I had enough money to go again.²¹

After Brother Kailimai's mission in Maui, Wesley Smith called him as third vice-president of the Polynesian Genealogical Society,

organized at Laie April 3, 1921. Brother Kailimai was serving as priesthood advisor on the Hawaii District Council (the equivalent of the high council) in 1934 with his brother William as president of the Honomu Branch.²² Sister Kailimai died in 1933, and he followed June 26, 1940.

D. Arthur Haycock, a missionary in Hawaii from 1935 to 1938 and later Hawaiian mission president and temple president, affirmed, "I knew David K. Kailimai very well. I don't know of a finer, more spiritual man who ever lived. He was the most outstanding native member and leader I knew, very faithful, very active, the sort of person through whom the Lord could give such an experience."²³ Elder Hurst described David Kailimai in his 1958 autobiography as "a man full of faith, and . . . a very fine Elder because of the inspiration that attended him."²⁴

Castle Murphy, who was a missionary in Hawaii from 1909 to 1913 and mission president during the years 1931-36 and 1944-46, praised Brother Kailimai as "one of the most influential leaders and able speakers in the Hawaiian Mission. So great was our admiration for this Hawaiian-Chinese leader that when our son was born in Hilo, we decided to name him Keola after this good man and have him be voice when the blessing was given." Castle Murphy also recorded several instances of Brother Kailimai's faith to be healed and his inspired foreknowledge of events.²⁵

Because Brother Kailimai did not leave an account of the prayer under the pepper tree, it is not possible to know what meaning he gave it or how he regarded it as time passed. However, a parallel source exists in the records of his friend, Jonah Patrick (Pia) Cockett, whom R. Lanier Britsch characterizes as "one of the grand old men of the Church."²⁶ He was a forty-year-old native of Maui in 1920 who had joined the Church in 1902, was principal of Puukoolii School on Maui at the time of this event, and would soon serve missions to Kauai and Maui. The father of twelve children, he was a fisherman and also, for twenty-five years, county treasurer of Maui.²⁷

Jonah Patrick (Pia) Cockett's Account

President McKay's diary records that Pia Cockett offered the opening prayer at the meeting at Wailuku chapel on the night of

February 8, after the prayer under the pepper tree, so Brother Cockett would have heard Brother Cannon and President McKay tell the story within hours of when it occurred. Almost certainly Brother Cockett would have had many opportunities to hear David Keola Kailimai tell the story (assuming he did), both then and in subsequent years, for Pia Cockett was fourth vice-president in the genealogical society in which Brother Kailimai was third. Although Brother Cockett says he recorded the experience in his 1921 notebook, only a journal for 1924–50 is in the archives. Brother Cockett refers to Brother Kailimai's vision at Pulehu in both April and July of 1924, then reports telling the mission conference April 9, 1933:

I spoke in Hawaiian and related the vision of D. Keola Kailimai in Pulehu related by David O. McKay on Feb. 8, 1921, where he saw the hand shaking in form of greeting while David O. McKay was praying. Keola thought it was Hugh Cannon and Elder Hurst. After the prayer he told his vision to McKay and he said perhaps the veil was thin that he had seen thru beyond the veil. Hugh Cannon said there was no veil. He must have seen his father Geo. Q. Cannon.²⁸

On April 25, 1937, he records the vision again, adding the detail that Brother Cannon had confessed to feeling depressed before this experience, but this manifestation made him “the happiest man.” He also explained in the 1937 account that President McKay, on his 1936 visit to Hawaii, had heard him tell the story and had corrected his impression that it was Hugh J. Cannon and George Q. Cannon shaking hands; rather, it was “Geo. Q. Cannon and Joseph F. Smith shaking hands and the hands were seen by David Kailimai.”²⁹

Brother Cockett's willingness to accept President McKay's correction points out that for him the importance of the story lay in its sacralization of the land near Pulehu chapel. In all of his versions, he calls it “that sacred spot”; and it had sanctified associations for him, not only through the experience of George Q. Cannon and later of the five men who met in prayer, but also because it was there he was ordained to the priesthood and met his wife, who was not yet LDS. He refers frequently to these events and also records holding both formal and informal testimony meetings there with missionaries and members of the district council in 1924, 1933, and 1943, with allusions to at least two earlier meetings.³⁰

David O. McKay's Reenactment

Another account has been preserved and it is by far the best known, since it has been published as part of the inspirational stories of President McKay. Returning to Maui in 1955 as president of the Church, President McKay reported and reenacted this experience on the grounds of the Pulehu chapel for his party of forty-four. He first recounted George Q. Cannon's experiences, then recalled the 1921 visit with Hugh J. Cannon, E. Wesley Smith, Samuel Harris Hurst, Jr., and David Keola Kailimai. As President McKay spoke, D. Arthur Haycock, then president of the Hawaiian Mission, dropped to one knee, put his steno pad on the other, and took the account down in shorthand. This account has circulated widely both in typescript and in its published form.

"We became very much impressed with the surroundings, association, and spiritual significance of the occasion," President McKay remembered; he added they felt impressed to offer a prayer under the old pepper tree that had stood on the site for years. President McKay arranged four of the men present as the other individuals in the original party had stood, then continued:

I offered the prayer. We all had our eyes closed, and it was a very inspirational gathering. As we started to walk away at the conclusion of the prayer, Brother Keola Kailimai took Brother E. Wesley Smith to the side and very earnestly began talking to him in Hawaiian. . . . Brother E. Wesley Smith said, "Brother McKay, do you know what Brother Kailimai has told me?" I answered, "No." "Brother Kailimai said that while you were praying, and we all had our eyes closed, he saw two men who he thought were Hugh J. Cannon and E. Wesley Smith step out of line in front of us and shake hands with someone, and he wondered why Brother Cannon and Brother Smith were shaking hands while we were praying. He opened his eyes, and there stood those two men still in line, with their eyes closed just as they had been. He quickly closed his eyes because he knew he had seen a vision."

Now Brother Hugh J. Cannon greatly resembled Brother George Q. Cannon, his father. . . . Of course, E. Wesley Smith has the Smith attribute just as President Joseph Fielding Smith has it. Naturally, Brother Keola Kailimai would think that these two men were there. I said, "I think it was George Q. Cannon and Joseph F. Smith, two former missionaries to Hawaii, whom that spiritual-minded man saw."

We walked a few steps farther, and I said, "Brother Kailimai, I do not understand the significance of your vision, but I do know that the

veil between us and those former missionaries was very thin.” Brother Hugh J. Cannon who was by my side, with tears rolling down his cheeks, said, “*Brother McKay, there was no veil.*”³¹

Conclusion

The prayer under the pepper tree at Pulehu has much in common with what I feel is a majority of sacred, spiritual experiences that come to members of the Church. Relatively few personal experiences are “First Vision” experiences—spiritual experiences received by one but foundational in the testimonies of all members of the Church. Rather, the personal strength, support, and consolation of spiritual experiences, shared in family circles, through the medium of historical records, and in ward testimony meetings are, I think, opportunities for the Holy Ghost not only to affirm the truth of the experience as received by the teller but, more importantly, to awaken a spiritual hunger in each member of the Church to seek such confirmatory experiences for himself or herself. During the research for the account of the prayer under the pepper tree, I encountered many retellings of this story but perceived each retelling as holy. It has been a profound privilege to enter as a visitor into that sacred story.

The manifestation under the pepper tree teaches us lessons about the nature of spiritual experience. Although all five men stood in the same spot, heard President McKay offer the same words of the prayer, and felt its spiritual impact, they experienced the manifestation in different ways. None of the written accounts attempts to provide a formal interpretation. Even President McKay, who shared the experience with New Zealand members to confirm their testimonies of the truthfulness of the Church, consistently reported that he did not fully understand its meaning. Nor do we. This narrative evades tidy explanations. It has not become part of the inspirational lore of the Church used to teach lessons of faith and obedience, like Mary Fielding’s resuscitated ox or Wilford Woodruff reluctantly leaving his bed to move his wagon.

The historical process is a quest for both facts and truth. For the most part, it is a process that requires and rewards rationality. Yet spiritual experiences are often untidy, paradoxical, unfolding

their meaning slowly over time as the participant's understanding matures and as other experiences illuminate it. These accounts reinforce and echo each other but do not mirror each other identically, much like the accounts in the New Testament Gospels. They remind us that our human limitations mean we can glimpse portions of a truth, the wholeness of which we will apprehend only later. I feel that the prayer under the pepper tree ultimately meant, to its five participants, less doctrinal information or specific guidance about a problem to be solved than an intimate love, an affirming peace, and a supernal joy. I feel this strongly because, even as far removed as I am, I have heard those echoes and sensed that touch. I am deeply satisfied that the prayer under the pepper tree compels us to puzzle over its meaning, yet still ends in a reverent silence.

My husband, son, and I visited Pulehu Chapel on June 9, 1990, and there found Stanley and Shirley Makekai. Brother Makekai, a landscaping contractor, was donating his Saturday afternoon repairing a faulty sprinkler. William Kailimai had baptized him, and Pia Cockett had been a neighbor for many years. He confirmed that the building was no longer used for regular worship services but was often used for firesides and other special meetings. "It is a place to come to get close—very close—to the Spirit," he said, adding, "When there is a temple on Maui, it will be here." Obviously, the pepper trees of Pulehu still stand on holy ground.

Lavina Fielding Anderson is Editor of the *Journal of Mormon History*. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Mormon History Association, Laie, Hawaii, June 1990, and published as "Prayer under a Pepper Tree: Five Accounts of a Spiritual Manifestation," *Mormon Pacific Historical Society Proceedings: Eleventh Annual Conference Held in Association with Mormon History Association, June 10-16, 1990*, ed. Ken Baldrige (Laie, Hawaii: Brigham Young University-Hawaii Campus, 1990), 16-53.

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Kailimai Kailimai, and especially Lorraine Hoemi Kailimai Carr, who also supplied genealogical information; to D. Arthur Haycock for his personal reminiscences about President McKay's 1955 retelling of this event and for his recollections of David Keola Kailimai; to R. Lanier Britsch for responding generously with bibliographic assistance; to the staff of the LDS Historical Department Archives, particularly Ronald Watt and Ronald O. Barney, and to Mrs. Leone Doxey, for searching her husband's New Zealand papers.

NOTES

¹ Samuel Harris Hurst, "Memoirs," 1958, 12; photocopy of mimeograph in possession of Cleo Hurst Bailey; used by permission; mimeographed copy in Archives Division, Church Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives); used by permission. Elder Hurst was largely responsible for freeing the Maui Saints from involvement with kahunas, or native priests who sometimes engaged in witchcraft. In addition, he was responsible for building two chapels on Maui in 1921, one at Kahuki and the other at Peahi, and also helped construct the Kalihi chapel in Honolulu on Oahu. He and his second wife, Ida Nielsen Hurst, served a second Hawaiian mission, 1952-54.

² Samuel Harris Hurst, Journal, February 8, 1921, photocopy of holograph in possession of Cleo Hurst Bailey; used by permission.

³ Cleo Hurst Bailey, telephone interview, February 5, 1990, and personal communication February 8, 1990; notes in my possession.

⁴ Frederick William Hurst, Diary, compiled by Samuel Harris Hurst and Ida Frederickson Hurst, 1961; ribbon copy of typescript and photocopy of typescript in possession of Cleo Hurst Bailey; used by permission; holograph in the LDS Church Archives; used by permission. The diary begins with an autobiographical sketch that includes his conversion. For incidents from his Hawaii mission, see pp. 43-66.

⁵ Hurst, Diary, entries for 1857 (California), 1875-77 (New Zealand), and a summary epilogue, p. 209. See also Cleo Hurst Bailey, "Frederick William Hurst: Australian Gold Missionary in California" (Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Mormon History Association, Claremont, California, May 31, 1991).

⁶ The author is currently preparing the McKay journals and the Hugh J. Cannon narrative of the 1921 tour of world missions for publication by the Institute for Polynesian Studies, BYU-Hawaii, in The Church in the Pacific Series under the general editorship of R. Lanier Britsch.

⁷ A short summary of the visit appears in the Hawaiian Mission, Manuscript History, microfilm of typescript (CR/3695), LDS Church Archives, used by permission. A separate and slightly fuller account is included in Hawaiian Mission Historical Record Book C., 1912-22, #2880, vol. 9 (typescript, "Conference Minutes of Annual Conferences," microfilmed as LF 3695/series 11/reel 1, item 9), LDS Church Archives; used by permission. The first account does not mention the visit to Pulehu. The second says only: "In the afternoon places of interest in the Central Maui Conference were visited. In the evening a general service was held. . . . Pres. Cannon

told of the experiences of his father on the island of Maui and also expressed his great happiness in being able to be present" (311, under the date of February 20, 1921, but separated by considerable space from the "daily" entry). A few days later in Honolulu, "Elder McKay spoke at some length of his visiting throughout the Islands and of the happiness he had had in goin [*sic*] over the ground covered by Pres. Joseph F. Smith and Pres. George Q. Cannon" (314, letter no. 17 #4), while "Elder Hugh J. Cannon expressed the pleasure he had had in visiting the places that were so dear to his father" (315).

⁸ David O. McKay, *Journal of World Mission Tour*, February 8, 1921, typescript, ribbon copy from manual typewriter, in possession of David Lawrence McKay, photocopy in my possession; used by permission. It is not known exactly when President McKay wrote this entry; but although he would have had little free time during the visit itself, he was known for his habit of taking voluminous notes in a pocket notebook; and some photographs Samuel Harris Hurst took on the afternoon of the visit show the notebook in President McKay's hands. A typescript of the Maui entries covers three single-spaced pages. In addition to President McKay's record of the prayer, he records this comment about Hugh Cannon's address that evening at Wailuku: "Eloquent and inspirational tribute to his father, Pres. George Q. Cannon's labors on this island, Maui. Bore a fervent testimony of the Gospel, and of the confirmation of this testimony that he had this day on the ground where his father received such divine inspiration."

⁹ The New Zealand Mission History reports and details the visit but not President McKay's sermons. A separate shorthand account was made by the mission secretary, Graham H. Doxey, and is cataloged under the name of the mission president. George Shepherd Taylor, "Report of Sermons of Elder David O. McKay Delivered at the Annual Conference of the New Zealand Mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints held at Huntly, Waikato, New Zealand, April 23rd to 25th, 1921," mimeograph, 8 (Ms/d/5919). The mimeograph does not include Cannon's speech, which obviously preceded McKay's. President McKay consistently referred to Hugh J. Cannon as "Brother Cannon"; hence, his reference to "President Cannon" should be read as George Q. Cannon.

¹⁰ In 1970, when President Smith was eighty-four, Don and another son, Julian, "bought some recording equipment for his Christmas present with the idea that he would record some of his experiences. They set it up for him and tested it on Christmas afternoon. The test tape contains this little conversation: 'Now, Pop, what are you going to do with this?' He answered, 'God willing, I'm going to the office in the morning and when I get home, I'm going to start on this project.' He died of a heart attack that night." Alice Barratt Smith, telephone conversation, June 6, 1989, notes in my possession; Donald E. Smith, telephone conversation, February 22, 1990, notes in my possession.

¹¹ E. Wesley Smith, *Report of Mission President, Hawaiian Mission, 1921*, 175 (CR4/12), LDS Church Archives, used by permission. R. Lanier Britsch, *Unto the Islands of the Sea: A History of the Latter-day Saints in the Pacific* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 538, note 1 to chapter 10, cites this source as part of the Missionary Financial and Statistical Report. This source is currently closed to researchers. However, I was allowed to see and take notes from a photocopy of the page on which this incident was reported.

¹² See, for example, Hawaiian Mission, "Mission History," March 17, June 29, October 11, and November 27–28, 1919. Two years earlier, during the dedication of the Hawaiian Temple, the elderly sister who had cared for Joseph F. Smith as a youthful missionary testified that she had heard him say "Aloha" to her during the ceremony ("Mission History," December 11, 1919; also cited in Britsch, *Unto the Islands of the Sea*, 156–58). Speaking at the mission conference at Laie, William W. Waddoups, president of the temple and later of the mission, said: "As I was listening to President Smith I was thinking of his father, the man you all love. I believe that his spirit is with us today and that his hand has been stretched forth to approve this his son. . . . I knew his father. He had a heart of a mother filled with love for all mankind." "Record of Conferences and Branches, Organizations and Officers, Hawaiian Mission, Compiled October 1914" by O. P. Burr, LDS Church Archives, microfilmed as LR/series 11/reel 2/item 2, p. 356, used by permission. See also an unusual spiritual experience before the dedication of the temple. Elias Wesley Smith, "Cain," ms/d/5273, LDS Church Archives.

¹³ Hugh J. Cannon, *Personal Journal*, 1921; typescript in possession of Alice Cannon Hicken; used by permission.

¹⁴ Hugh J. Cannon, *Untitled typescript of world tour mission*, n.d., 57; original in possession of George Richards Cannon, photocopy in my possession; used by permission. A carbon copy donated by Adrian Cannon is in the LDS Church Archives.

¹⁵ Hurst, "Memoirs," 12. Elder Hurst's autobiography is more reticent than his journal. He recorded that a manifestation occurred under the pepper tree at Pulehu but gave no details, instead referring the reader to the published McKay account in Clare Middlemiss, comp., *Cherished Experiences from the Writings of President David O. McKay* (1953; reprinted, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 50–52, which describes the experience as being a vision of Joseph F. Smith and George Q. Cannon shaking hands with their sons. According to Elder Hurst's daughter, Cleo Hurst Bailey, he did not wish to publish, even in an autobiography of limited circulation, an account that differed from President McKay's.

¹⁶ David O. McKay, "Remarks at Funeral of Hugh J. Cannon 9 Oct. 1931, Granite Stake Tabernacle, Salt Lake City, Utah," typescript and mimeographed transcript of services in possession of George Richards Cannon; used by permission.

¹⁷ Why did the vision come to Brother Kailimai rather than to Hugh J. Cannon, who, apparently, had the most powerful emotional experience out of the five men present? Was it possible that Brother Kailimai had particularly close ties to either George Q. Cannon or Joseph F. Smith? Brother Kailimai would have been thirteen in 1885, when Joseph F. Smith returned to Hawaii for two years; twenty-eight in December 1900, when President Cannon returned for the Jubilee of missionary work in the islands; and forty-three in 1915, when Joseph F. Smith returned for a two-week stay. However, the mission history and other sources contain no evidence either confirming a relationship or ruling one out. Abigail Kahanu Kailimai Kailimai, the daughter-in-law and niece of David Keola Kailimai, could not recall hearing him mention knowing either of these two men (telephone conversation, May 5, 1990, notes in my possession).

¹⁸ Family group sheets under the name of Kailimai in the family archive, Family History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; copies of personal family group records provided courtesy of Lorraine Hoemi Kailimai Carr.

These sheets are also the source for the death dates of David and Maka Kailimai. Thomas Brimley, *Thomas Brimley: Missionary to the Hawaiian Islands 1893-1896*, May 14, 1895; photocopy of typescript prepared in 1977 by Bliss J. Brimley of Pleasant Grove in Family History Library, Salt Lake City.

¹⁹Family group sheets under the name of Kailimai in the family archive, Family History Library, Salt Lake City; and copies of personal family group records provided courtesy of Lorraine Hoemi Kailimai Carr.

²⁰Hawaiian Mission, Record Book C., 1912-22, 73, 105-6; Hawaiian Mission, "Record of Conferences," n.p.

²¹Hawaiian Mission, Record Book C., 102-5.

²²Hawaiian Mission, Record Book C., 326; *Directory of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Hawaiian Mission* (N.p., released April 1934), 45-46; copy in Family History Library, 996.9/K2Ha.

²³D. Arthur Haycock, telephone conversation, February 2, 1990, notes in my possession.

²⁴Samuel H. Hurst, "Memoirs," 20.

²⁵Castle Murphy, *Castle of Zion—Hawaii: Autobiography and Episodes from [the] Life of Castle H. Murphy, Missionary to Hawaii* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1963), 42-43, 138-39.

²⁶Britsch, *Unto the Islands of the Sea*, 162.

²⁷Jonah Patrick (Pia) Cockett, Diary, undated biographical reminiscence beginning p. 1, photocopy of typescript (ms/2354), LDS Church Archives, used by permission.

²⁸Cockett, Diary, April 9, 1933.

²⁹Cockett, Diary, April 25, 1937.

³⁰Cockett, Diary, April 6 and 20, 1924, April 9, 1933, April 25, 1937, and April 24, 1943. Jonah Patrick (Pia) Cockett, "Visit of Pres. McKay in 1921," typescript; microfilmed as LR 3695/series 21, "Miscellaneous Local Records"/reel 3/Box 4, Folder 9, and listed with other items in the register as "Mission and Local Histories." They are unpaginated and undated; however, from internal evidence this particular typescript can be dated between 1947 and 1953, probably 1952 or early 1953. Britsch, *Unto the Islands of the Sea*, 162, cites this account by Cockett as CR 3695/Series 1/Box 1, but the LDS Church Archives thereafter began using a cataloging system without a series 1.

³¹Middlemiss, *Cherished Experiences*, 50-52. "A few days later," Brother Haycock gave Reuben D. Law, first president of the Church College of Hawaii, "a copy" of the transcript (telephone interview with D. Arthur Haycock, January 23, 1990, notes in my possession). Law published this account in *Founding and Early Development of the Church College of Hawaii* (St. George: Dixie College Press, 1972), 19-21. Britsch also cites this account in *Unto the Islands of the Sea*, 538, note 4 to chapter 10.