Family Stories: Handle With Care, Especially the Most Dramatic Ones

William G. Hartley
FAMILY STORIES:
HANDLE WITH CARE, ESPECIALLY THE MOST DRAMATIC ONES

WILLIAM G. HARTLEY

Rare is the family story that does not get “better” as retold over time. A few families have in them characters who like to tell tall tales, or at least embellish information they relate about their parents or grandparents. Most often, however, misinformation gains currency unintentionally. People assume they have the story right, but in fact they misunderstood minor and sometimes major details. We need to record and treasure family stories that come to us, even though most are wheat with chaff. Folklorist Bert Wilson has shown us that repeatedly told family stories, be they true or false, convey a truth about what the family values. He suggests we ask why that story matters so much to the family that it continues to be told.1

But, as history students are taught early, we need to keep an attitude of skepticism about how accurate our sources of historical information are. Here are some examples of stories that circulate in families but that are seriously incorrect.

Among descendants of Johan Christenson, a Swedish convert to Mormonism who immigrated and settled in Gunnison, Utah, a typed family story says that he crossed the plains in the John Murdock Handcart Company in 1861. Those who know LDS Church history quickly see misinformation here—no handcart companies came after 1860 and no handcart company was captained by John Murdock. So what is the truth of the story? Checking documents outside the family’s histories, we find the story was almost correct, that Johan was in the John Murdock wagon train—not handcart train—in 1861.2

So, how did the handcart element get into the story? Apparently someone said or heard, correctly, that Johan walked across the plains in the Murdock Company. Someone else heard

that, and, not realizing that almost everybody in wagon trains walked, must have figured that if Johan walked, he was not in a wagon train so must have been in a handcart company, and told that version of Johan’s crossing the plains. Sad to say, the Christenson family lost a handcart pioneer when this story was checked out.

The Ellison family has a story about English ancestors aboard a sailing ship bound from Liverpool to New Orleans. It tells how a storm struck, blew off the masts, and forced the ship off course and near to Portugal. Dead in the water, it received a tow from a passing ship and was pulled to New Orleans. Portugal to New Orleans? Not a chance. Although the story has elements of truth in it, somehow someone in the family garbled the facts. Records show that the ship did lose its masts in a storm at sea, but ended up off the coast of Puerto Rico—not Portugal! It was not towed to New Orleans except when it entered the mouth of the Mississippi River, where all sailing vessels, even those with good masts, were towed upriver. Obviously the family story became more dramatic than the realities warrant.3

One of the LDS Church magazines almost ran a great story about John Lowe Butler and his family being told by Joseph Smith to flee from mobs to safety in Nauvoo, Illinois. The Butlers obeyed and avoided the mob, the story goes, who came to their cabin that night looking for them. Artists had rendered the story in picture blocks showing the Nauvoo Temple in the background. This garbled story came from a Butler descendant who did not have the facts straight. Other family records show that the setting was in Missouri, not Illinois, and that the Butlers, following the counsel of Joseph Smith, moved into Far West, Missouri, not Nauvoo. Therefore, the family story was correct except for the time and location.

A Skeen family story meant well but fell apart when compared against basic facts. Jesse Skeen, the story said, was a kind slave owner—so kind that when the Civil War freed the slaves, they all decided to stay with Jesse and work for him as freedmen. The major problem with this

3 Mary Siegfried, “Family History of Matthew and Jane Ellison and Descendants,” unpaged, copy in author’s possession.
story is that Jesse Skeen died in 1841—twenty years before the Civil War and twenty-three years before the Skeen slaves were freed!4

A story involving a Schlesselmann family said that one of the five Schlesselmann children orphaned in the late 1860s dropped out of Mormonism because his adoptive family was not active in the LDS Church. But, checking the facts, we find that Mrs. Mair, who adopted Harry Schlesselmann, was a pillar in her ward, even serving as the ward Relief Society President. Hence, Harry’s Church inactivity cannot be attributed to a backslid stepmother.5

In many LDS families, life stories are passed along that say an ancestor left Nauvoo in 1846 by crossing on the ice, but that wonderful and dramatic fact is wrong. Contemporary documents clearly show that during the February 1846 exodus from Nauvoo of Brigham Young’s vanguard company of Latter-day Saints, almost everyone in that company ferried across the unfrozen river between February 4 and February 22, when the weather was good. They encamped seven miles inland in Iowa at the Sugar Creek campsite. President Young himself crossed by boat on the 15th. By February 22, two days before the river froze over, President Young and the camped company were ready and anxious to start west. But bad weather and some delayed wagons prevented their departures until March 1. Diary accounts show that no ice bridge formed until the 25th, that it lasted only five days, and that relatively few Saints crossed it to join Young’s company.

This being true, what do we do with dozens of accounts claiming the people left and crossed on the ice on specific dates before February 24? For example, George Whitaker’s fine autobiographical account says that his family left on February 9, at noon, and their four wagons crossed on the ice. Further, he claims that President Young and the main body of Saints had crossed the river a day or two before his family did (Young left on the 15th).6

5 William G. Hartley, Kindred Saints: The Mormon Immigrant Heritage of Alvin and Kathryne Christenson (Salt Lake City: Eden Hill, 1982), 164. Harry Mair’s niece, Kathryne Christensen, told the author that Harry’s inactivity was due to his being raised in a family not active in the LDS Church.
While working on my own life story, I once wrote about one of my personal experiences in high school and called the episode “Livermore Kiss.” Later I found out how faulty my own memory was—except for the kiss itself! My story said that when I was student-body president of Arroyo High School in San Lorenzo, California, I went with classmates on a bus to an evening football game in Livermore. Our team beat Livermore. While we were boarding the bus, a jubilant junior varsity cheerleader came up to me and gave me a kiss. I thought that was great and decided maybe I should not be going steady with my girlfriend, who went to another high school—maybe I could be dating some nice Arroyo High School girls. So I broke up with Gayle—because of the Livermore kiss. Ah, but in checking my high school yearbook, I discovered some embarrassing problems with my story. Arroyo did not play Livermore in football that year. The game was in fact against Castro Valley, not Livermore. And we lost, we did not win. I was definitely correct about the kiss, but the girl was a junior-class officer, not a junior-class cheerleader. My own mind and memory had altered the facts over time, something I would not have known had I not checked records outside my memory.

And so it goes. We need to be cautious about accepting family stories at face value. As a general “rule of evidence,” firsthand stories are usually (but not always) more accurate than ones told by someone else to the person who writes them down. Also, the closer in time the teller is to the event, the more reliable the information (usually). I find that people often tell garbled stories about their grandparents because the stories have passed through their parents and usually were not told correctly in the first place or else were misunderstood by the grandchildren. Sometimes in the same family we find contradicting versions of the same story.

Relatives usually do not lie, at least intentionally, when telling stories about their ancestors. But sometimes they do not have the facts quite right, even the ones who experienced it. And then, when stories are retold, understanding gets lost in the transmission. What level of accuracy can we assign to information given us firsthand by the person who witnessed or experienced it? That will vary, but fuzzy math gives us at best an 80 percent accuracy level—the person might not have understood exactly what he or she saw or experienced, and his or her words cannot convey the actuality adequately. What about information a son said his mother or father told him? This is a second-hand account, and if 50 percent accurate, we are lucky. Third-
hand accounts—what the daughter says she heard her mother say about her grandmother—could be about 30 percent accurate.

It helps if we can find out how the person who wrote it or told it knew it in the first place. Witnessed it? Heard about from a participant? Heard it second hand? Read it somewhere?

One vital safety check is this: whenever possible, we need to compare our family’s stories with other family and outside-the-family records, and with recollections of others who were there.

Sad to admit, embellished or garbled family stories often are more dramatic and of more interest than the factual story. But we ought to cherish accuracy more than entertainment—even if it kills a good handcart story or replaces Portugal with Puerto Rico, or makes a saint out of a lady who was portrayed as a backslider, or changes a crossing-on-the-ice story—or even if it takes away a kiss from a cheerleader.