

# Edward LaVaun Clissold: “The Second Most Powerful Man in the Church”

*by Brian S. O'Brien*

## **Introduction**

While conducting research on various history projects relating to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (hereafter referred to as LDS), I kept coming across the name of Clissold. Similarly, while examining group photos of Church gatherings and events during the mid-20th century, a short, serious-looking man with a receding hairline is frequently seen. This man is Edward LaVaun Clissold, who spent 50 years of his life in Hawaii devoting tremendous time and talent to the LDS Church. He lived in an intriguing time when Hawaii was transitioning from a patriarchal and plantation society to a more self-reliant and cosmopolitan society.



**Edward Clissold, far left, next to Pres. McKay. CCH campus groundbreaking.  
(BYU-Hawaii Archives & Special Collections)**

Most interesting was his capacity and willingness to accept numerous Church assignments, or callings, simultaneously. This resulted in unprecedented responsibility and power being placed in a single man far from the Church's Utah headquarters.

Because of his multiple responsibilities, he has been referred to as "Mr. Everything", or in the words of one Hawaiian man," the second most powerful man in the Church" (Church President David O. McKay being the single most powerful).

## **Early Years**

Edward LaVaun Clissold was known by his business associates as Ed but he was Vaun to his friends. To everyone else he became known as President Clissold. Pres. Clissold was born in Salt Lake City, Utah on 11 Apr 1898. He grew up in Salt Lake City and attended East High School. After high school he received at least some education from the University of Utah. World War I apparently cut short his education as Pres. Clissold served in the Navy along with his brother Albert aboard the battleship USS Arkansas in the Atlantic. Returning from the Navy at age 22, he married Irene Picknell.

## **The Die Is Cast**

While still barely a newlywed, he made a monumental decision that would affect the rest of his life. At age 23, a war veteran, a husband and soon to be father, he chose to serve a mission in a time when only a few served missions. For 37 months (1921-24) he served as a missionary in Hawaii. When he returned home to his wife in Salt Lake City in 1924, he met a two-and-a-half year old daughter he had never seen before.

As a brand new missionary, he sailed for Hawaii on the S.S. Manoa alone. When he arrived in Honolulu a week later on 27 Jul 1921, there was no one to meet him. He sat alone with his trunk on the dock not knowing what he should do next. A baggage man approached him, asking if he were a Mormon Missionary. He replied yes and asked how he knew. The man replied "Well, we have a forlorn-looking group come in here every once in awhile. I take their baggage up to the mission home." And so the baggage man took Elder Clissold to the mission home.

His mission president was E. Wesley Smith, the son of Joseph F. Smith. Elder Clissold was assigned to the Oahu Conference (zone) and two months later to Laie where he would serve from August to November of 1921. In Laie, of course, was the Temple, which was less than two years old. At that time, most temple workers were missionaries, so Elder Clissold soon became acquainted with the temple as well as temple President William Waddoups, who would be instrumental in his life. This service instilled in him a lasting love for temple work.

He left on November 15, 1921 for Kona (Big Island) where he would spend the next 13 months. Kona had the reputation of being the most primitive area of the mission, and his assignment was seen by some as a banishment. But he did not view it as such. He had the desire to learn the Hawaiian language and Kona was the place for that. His senior companion insisted on using only Hawaiian in all their conversation, which quickly caused frustration for Elder Clissold who remarked that he could have resorted to violence against his companion, Elder Roscoe Cox. But he persevered and later appreciated his companion. It should be noted that Elder Clissold was impressed by Elder

Cox's love for the Gospel. When he was set apart as a missionary by Melvin Ballard, he was promised that the food would be palatable and the language would be given him as a gift. In Kona these blessings came true, though not without the requisite effort first.

Elder Ballard's promise dramatically came to pass in April of 1922. One day at the home of a member in Holualoa, while Elder Cox was conversing in Hawaiian with an elderly lady, Elder Clissold suddenly became conscious of Elder Cox's speech and clearly understood what was said. He seemed to feel a buzz in his ear at that moment and to his great elation realized that he was hearing and understanding everything Elder Cox said. From that day on, he completely understood all that was said in Hawaiian, and his speaking fluency greatly increased. Elders Cox and Clissold soon found themselves at a missionary conference in Honolulu. Elder Clissold was unexpectedly asked to speak and as he approached the podium, he was instructed to speak in Hawaiian. Nervous as he contemplated his task, he nevertheless delivered a fine talk in the Hawaiian language. The result of this was that he had an assurance of his language skill and never again felt inadequate about his language ability.

Elder Clissold spent the remainder of his mission in the Honolulu area, serving in leadership positions for the Sunday Schools, as was often the practice for missionaries in those days. In these experiences he learned leadership skills.

A summation of his missionary experience might be made from his own words: "A Hawaiian from Kalaoa (Kona) was assigned to me as a companion for a short period. He had a slight disfigurement in his face and unruly hair, the combination of which would have denied him any prize in a beauty show. But if a picture could have been taken of his spirit, it would have taken a blue ribbon. We slept together on the floor, on the ground, and on rough lauhala mats. Oft times I would look at his face as he slept and to me looking through the outward to the inward, he was beautiful." (Clissold, 1982, p.40)

### **Connections, Preparation & Experience**

The years following his mission saw Pres. Clissold establishing himself in business and the community, as well as in the Church, which prepared him for his great leadership in the 1950s.

Pres. Clissold returned to Salt Lake City in 1924 following his mission. William Waddoups, the Hawaii Temple President, was also home from his mission and was involved with American Savings in Salt Lake City. Brother Waddoups persuaded Pres. Clissold to work for the company. American Savings wanted to open a branch in Honolulu and Pres. Clissold was offered the job of running the Honolulu Branch. At the same time, Pres. Clissold was offered the position of sales manager at a Salt Lake auto dealership. Upon the counsel of his mother-in-law, Pres. Clissold & Irene decided to go to Hawaii for a year or so, in order that they may both experience Hawaii together.

Pres. Clissold arrived in Hawaii in January 1925, with Irene following a few months later. However, he was soon uncomfortable with American Savings' overpriced business

practices. In August of 1926 he moved to State Savings and remained there until 1970. During those 44 years, his stature in business and wealth increased. He did quite well, so much so that members in later years thought of him as a tycoon and remember him driving his Cadillac convertible. But there is no indication that his wealth distracted him from his gospel priorities or led him to pride. Other business activities include his establishment of Home Factors, Kahili Investment, and partnership with Wendell Mendenhall in livestock investments in New Zealand.

His business activities brought him important connections with community and business leaders. These associations would prove very beneficial to the Church in later years as Pres. Clissold would call on them for their assistance in advancing the causes of the Church. Examples include obtaining land free of charge from Harold Castle for the Kailua Chapel site. Others are the establishment of the concrete plant in Laie by Henry Kaiser and the Cackle Fresh Egg farm, which Pres. Clissold had solicited in order to generate a broader economic base in Laie.

During the 20s and 30s, he was involved with the Lions Club in addition to his other responsibilities, becoming the president at age 33 and District President at age 42. Associated with his business activities at the time was his desire to learn to speak Japanese. He had observed that approximately half of Hawaii's population at the time was first and second generation Japanese. He thought it made good business sense to learn their language and hired a tutor to teach him the language from 1926-34. His Japanese apparently was not as good as his Hawaiian, as Japanese speakers remember his Japanese skills were less than that of a native speaker. However, the fact that a Haole businessman could speak both Hawaiian and Japanese was most unusual, and earned him respect from the speakers of these languages. Additionally, the Clissold children attended the Makiki Japanese School from 1934 to 1936.

Pres. Clissold resumed his association with Navy in 1936 by joining the Navy reserve as a Lieutenant. He soon went on a shakedown cruise to the South Pacific on the destroyer USS Maori, DD-401. He could not have realized then how significantly his life would be affected only five years later.

The Church of the early 1920's was still essentially all-Hawaiian. Some leadership was given to branch members, but many responsibilities for the general membership rested with the full-time missionaries, as was the practice for most areas outside of Utah. By the time the Clissolds moved to Honolulu, this was beginning to change. The Honolulu of 1925 was still under the leadership of the mission president, but President Neff was beginning to place more responsibilities on members. Pres. Clissold soon found himself as the President of the Mission MIA. His responsibilities and experience quickly grew.

Ten years after he moved to Honolulu, the Oahu Stake was created, and Pres. Clissold was called as 1<sup>st</sup> counselor to Stake President Ralph Woolley. Many thought that Pres. Clissold should have been the President, particularly in light of the fact that Pres. Woolley had not been particularly active or committed to the Church prior to this calling, although he was quite prominent in the community. It is to Pres. Clissold's credit that he

knew his place as a counselor, and faithfully served President Woolley for nine years. Pres. Woolley was good at policy while Pres. Clissold was good at details, so their relationship was complimentary.

The period of the mid to late 1930s saw an extensive effort to bring the Gospel to the Japanese in Hawaii and making those Japanese Latter-Day Saints feel comfortable. At this time there were two missions working the same geographical area: the Hawaiian Mission and the Japanese Mission (which was renamed the Central Pacific Mission during World War II). Pres. Clissold played a great part in this work for both missions, but his modesty makes it difficult to determine how much of a part he had in this work.

In 1936, Pres. Clissold became the Hawaii Temple President, following the departure of President William Waddoups. This responsibility was in addition to his Stake Presidency calling. He felt inadequate in this new calling, a feeling that became a nagging fear. One afternoon as he was walking through the celestial room, he had the feeling that he was Brother Waddoups; he felt like him, and walked like him. As he sat in a chair, the thought entered his mind that if he could detach himself from his body and look back at it, he would see Brother Waddoups sitting there. That feeling satisfied Pres. Clissold that the mantle of President had passed from Brother Waddoups to himself, and he no longer had any feeling of inadequacy. He served as the president until 1938.

## **War**

The first Japanese bombs of December 7th fell at 07:55, and at 08:15. Pres. Clissold received a call to active duty. For the next few years he performed all of his Church duties while in Navy uniform. The Navy assignment for the 43-year-old Lieutenant Commander was in the Radio Cablegram Censorship of the Pearl Harbor Communications Department. His assignment was not terribly inconvenient, and it allowed him to continue his Church responsibilities. However, he did have to set aside his business responsibilities for the duration.

1942 found him serving as the Hawaii Temple President again due to the departure of the former president and the lack of replacements to serve because of the war. However, the temple was seldom open during that time. At the same time, he became the acting president of the Japanese Mission. It was during this time that the mission name was changed to the Central Pacific Mission.

In 1943 the war finally carried him away from Hawaii as he was sent to the Mainland, first to Charlottesville, Virginia and then to the University of Chicago, to teach the US occupational forces who were preparing for post-war Japan. He received a release from his multitude of church callings in 1944. His military service overseas saw him participating in the military government in Philippines, Okinawa and Japan. While in Japan, he surveyed the situation in anticipation for reopening missionary work there. He finally returned home to Hawaii in 1946.

With only 2 years of respite, Pres. Clissold was then called to Japan as the Japanese Mission President during 1948-49. He reopened the mission which had been closed since 1924. The work of that time can occupy a book in its own right and is not the subject for this paper. Suffice it to say, he firmly established the foundation for the Gospel in Japan. He is also credited for "miraculously" acquiring property for the mission headquarters, which property is today occupied by the Tokyo Temple.

### **Maturity and Responsibility**

The year 1950 found Pres. Clissold finally released from multiple years of overseas assignments for both Church and nation. He had been away from his business for quite some time and felt the need to resume his career. But his Church career was just beginning; the next decade and a half would see the Church in Hawaii indelibly marked by his contributions in multiple and simultaneous callings.

The first assignment of the new decade found him as mission president. During his tenure, he merged the two co-located missions, the Hawaii Mission and the Central Pacific Mission into the single Hawaiian Mission. He was released the following year, 1951.

Next came his single most influential calling, Oahu Stake President, which he fulfilled from 1951 until 1963. He had served as Ralph Woolley's counselor in the stake presidency, and now became his successor. Among his first actions, and controversies, was to follow the order of the church regarding which ward members should attend. Up until that time, most of the Haole people attended the Waikiki Ward regardless of where they lived on the island. Many had only recently moved to the island and were employed in Honolulu but lived in diverse locations. Most enjoyed the Sunday association with others of similar circumstances which meant meeting at the Waikiki Ward (that chapel still stands today on South King St. at Artesian St. in Moilili.) Soon after becoming the stake president, President Clissold directed that all members should attend the ward in which they lived. There was some annoyance at this, but eventually most members abided by the instruction.

At the same time Pres. Clissold became president of Oahu Stake, David O. McKay became president of the Church. Years earlier, during a visit to Laie in 1921, Pres. McKay experienced a vision in which he saw a college established in Laie. No sooner than he became president of the church, he began energizing the effort to establish the school. His point of contact in Hawaii became President Clissold, and soon, Pres. Clissold found himself having the responsibility of bringing Pres. McKay's vision to reality. Although responsibility for the establishment of the school was shared by many, Pres. Clissold was chairman of the Continuing Committee which was leading the effort. In this position, Pres. Clissold soon found himself in an awkward situation: the order of the Church instructed that Pres. Clissold report problems and progress up the chain of command, passing through various individuals before being brought to the attention of the President of the Church. However, Pres. McKay had personally telephoned Pres. Clissold numerous times and gave instructions that Pres. Clissold call him personally to

report on the school's progress. This provided Pres. Clissold a little consternation as to what he should do: obey the order of the Church or the instructions of the prophet. Personal challenges aside, the school was opened in 1955 in temporary facilities after a great deal of preparatory activity.

In addition to being on the committee for the Church College, he was also a member and then the 1st Chairman of the Pacific Board of Education which oversaw all Church schools in the Pacific. Church commercial properties in Hawaii were managed by Zions Securities which was the successor of the old Laie Plantation. Pres. Clissold became the manager and then chairman of Zions Securities during the years 1953 to 1970. He stirred controversy with this position. Until that time, Laie residents were leased the land under their homes from Zions for little or no money. Pres. Clissold thought it better that they take more responsibility for themselves and their community by having them pay for the services they received via increased lease rents. He did have at least one secular "calling" during this time, that of membership on the Hawaiian Homes Commission from 1954 to 1958.

Simultaneous with these activities, he was also laying out the foundation of what would become the Polynesian Cultural Center (PCC). While President McKay had the vision of a school in Laie, Pres. Clissold had a vision of the PCC as early as 1951. This vision followed the success of the Laie Ward's fund raising hukilaus and Maori cultural activities in Laie during the 40's and 50's. Realizing the need for students to find employment near the Laie campus, as well as sensing a good business opportunity, Pres. Clissold acted to establish the PCC. He faced many skeptics in this venture from within and without the Church, but by 1963 the PCC was operational. Pres. Clissold was a vice-president and served in various management positions, including director, until ceasing all association with the center in 1976.

Upon his release as the Oahu Stake President in 1962, Pres. Clissold was soon called, for the third time, as the Hawaii Temple President. During his tenure, which lasted until 1965, he oversaw the translation and recording of the temple ceremony onto audio tape for the Japanese Saints who were beginning to seek out their temple blessings at the Hawaii Temple. Pres. Clissold noted with satisfaction that this recording process took just a few days, when compared to the several weeks it took for the similar process in the European temples.

It is very difficult to express in the limited time allotted here the tremendous work he accomplished for the Church in Hawaii in the 1950s. Much of it was done quietly behind the scenes. He exercised his leadership responsibilities while capitalizing on his business and personal associations to build the Kingdom. The acquisition and expansion of physical facilities of the Church, alone, could easily inspire an entire book. His spiritual leadership and testimony are, as would be expected, not well documented. But suffice to say, some have said that he should have or would have become a General Authority, except that the Lord needed him too much in Hawaii to allow him to be taken away to Utah.

## **"Therefore, What?"**

Elder Dallin Oaks posed the question "therefore, what?" during his address to the Church in the October 1997 general conference regarding 1997's celebration of pioneers. His intent in this was to question how we might grow from the examination and celebration of the pioneer experience. I believe that Pres. Clissold's life and personal attributes are worthy of the inspection envisioned by Elder Oaks.

Pres. Clissold's personality has been described by himself and numerous others. Adjectives include: quiet, humble, private, self-effacing, with a tendency to detail. He held an unprecedented number of callings and responsibilities, simultaneously mind you, which gave him unprecedented power. Yet there is no intimation that he ever used any position for his own gain. He pushed his counselors and subordinates to the center of attention, giving them credit for accomplishments. He was pleasant and made friends of everyone he met, even though he was not by nature outgoing. One example of his nature comes from Ed Ludloff, who, as a young seaman newly assigned to Pres. Clissold's Naval Reserve unit, was greeted by Commander Clissold by an arm around his shoulder and an expression that he was glad to have Seaman Ludloff in his unit. This personal and warm greeting is a practice which is very uncommon among Naval Officers, then or now. Some members of the stake thought of him in terms as either "just" the stake president, or as a tycoon. Given his private nature, and if the members did not have the opportunity to interact with him on a one-on-one basis, this superficial impression is understandable.

His impressive list of accomplishments makes one ask, How did he do it? He was very organized; he looked after details. He delegated responsibilities. Of course, he was constantly on the go, and had no time to fool around, which required self-discipline to stay with the task at hand without diverging to tangent issues. Amazingly, he was always home for dinner. And his wife often accompanied him on his journeys throughout the island and mission. As previously mentioned, he was trilingual, which earned the respect of those whose language he spoke. He was interested in other people, their culture, and how they lived. As Mission President, he would spend hours with new missionaries trying to make them see the different cultures, economic levels, the ways of life and how different people react to situations. Pres. Clissold successfully wore many hats. Wherever he served, those around him had the impression that when he was with them, they and their task at hand were the only things in his life.

An examination of his life would be incomplete without asking why he did what he did. The answer, I believe, is simple: his testimony. He loved The Lord, His Gospel and Church. Pres. Clissold was converted and committed in all respects. The key turn at the crossroads was when he submitted his papers to serve a mission.

## **Reflections About Hawaii**

After six decades in Hawaii, Pres. Clissold had the opportunity to reflect on these islands during a 1982 interview. Here are some of his observations. Up to 1920, the Church was an all-Hawaiian church. The period 1920-50 started bringing in other nationalities: in



1938 the work formally began amongst the Japanese in Hawaii; World War II brought Mainland LDS servicemen who settled in Hawaii after the war. By the early 1960s, the Church in Hawaii reflected Hawaii's population. He was dismayed about the urbanization of Waikiki, and wondered that if he could make the tall buildings in Waikiki go away with the flick of a wrist, if he would not do it. He did miss the sleepy tropical Waikiki of 1921. A positive aspect was the increased affluence that allowed individuals the "opportunity to feel and experience the power of money, to get an education and to see and feel the pulse of the world". However, many had lost much in the quality of life due to the ever increasing costs associated with living in Hawaii. Lastly, he missed the old Polynesians, and the opportunity to just sit and speak in Hawaiian with the old timers about the old days. (Baldrige, 1982)

## **Conclusion**

Edward LaVaun Clissold lived an abundant and service-filled life. He no doubt made many important decisions that affected his Christian discipleship throughout his life. In my assessment, however, one crucial decision early in his adult life made all the difference: to temporarily leave his family and serve a mission. From this, all his future blessings and opportunities followed.

## **References**

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Baldrige, Kenneth. (1982). Interview with E. L. Clissold (11 Feb & 5 Apr).

INTERVIEWS conducted by Brian O'Brien

- Francis Loo, former work associate of E.L. Clissold at State Savings & LDS member
- Molly Elliot, former member of Honolulu Stake
- James Hallstrom, former Hawaii Mission Clerk and Honolulu Stake clerk from 1940s-1960s
- James Hallstrom, Jr, former member of Honolulu Stake
- T. David Hanneman, former Hawaii Mission missionary
- Richard Clissold, only son of Edward LaVaun Clissold
- Edward Ludloff, former Navy associate and LDS member

### Timeline of Clissold's Major Responsibilities

