

THE CHURCH AND VANCOUVER ISLAND

Information compiled by Robert J. McCue

In 1845 rumors were widespread in Illinois that the persecuted Mormons "had chosen Vancouver Island as their future home, the metropolis to be situated at Nootka," That President Brigham Young gave serious consideration to this idea is shown in a postscript to a letter published in the 01 November 1845 issue of *Times and Seasons*. The letter invited the Saints throughout the world to gather to Nauvoo in preparation for the westward migration to an as yet un-designated spot. The postscript adds: "There are said to be many good locations for settlement on the Pacific, especially Vancouver's Island, near the mouth of the Columbia."

The Saints in England took up the idea and the 28 November 1846 issue of the *Millennial Star* carried a petition to Queen Victoria and the members of the British Parliament for a grant of land and financial assistance in transporting twenty thousand settlers to Vancouver's (sic) Island. The petition was apparently never directly acted upon, and in January 1849 a Royal Charter turned Vancouver Island over to the Hudson's Bay Company, thus determining that any colonization that was to take place would be under the auspices of that company.

By this time the Mormons were busy colonizing Utah and gave no further thought to Vancouver Island until the outbreak of the polygamy persecutions and the Utah War. At that point the governor and directors of the Hudson's Bay Company were averse to any large scale Mormon migration to the Island, and Sir James Douglas, the company's agent on the Island received instructions early in 1858 that "no rights of occupation whatever" were to be granted to any group of Mormons. "If, however, individuals or families . . . should peacefully apply for admission into Vancouver's Island the case is different." Such immigrants were to be received provided that they agreed to "submit themselves entirely to the laws of England, as retained in the colonial community over which you preside."

Nearly twenty years were to pass before a Mormon family appeared on the Island. The exact date is not known, but it was sometime in 1875 that William Francis Copley, his wife Maria Judson Copley, and their three children arrived in Victoria from Fillmore, Utah, via the Nevada Silver mines and San Francisco. These were the first, and for many years, the only Latter-day Saints on the Island.

About 1890 Sarah Jackson, a niece of Maria Copley, arrived to assist her aunt whose family had increased to nine children. She had only intended a visit, but when she met and married John Raymond the "visit" stretched into a lifetime. The first L.D.S. meetings on the Island were held in her home in Victoria many years later.

In the meantime the first conversion to "Mormonism" to occur on the Island had taken place. In the autumn of 1887 Anthony Maitland Stenhouse, Member of the Legislative Assembly for Comox, announced his conversion to Mormonism. How he was converted remains a mystery, there having as yet been no missionaries sent to the Island. He resigned his seat in the Provincial Legislature and soon took up residence in the infant Mormon colony at Cardston in Canada's North West Territories. There he was baptized and became a prominent citizen until 1891 when he returned to Great Britain, his original home.

On 15 March 1902 British Columbia was added to the Northwestern States Mission. Three months later Charles W. Penrose, editor of the *Deseret News*, visited

Victoria and adjacent points with a Utah Press Association delegation, which was royally entertained by the Victoria Tourist Association. Whether he had anything to do with the arrival on Wednesday 13 May 1903, of the first Mormon missionaries to labor on the Island is not known, but it seems plausible that he did. The missionaries arrived on the steamer "Majestic" from Puget Sound, and the next day President Nephi Pratt of the Northwestern States Mission with six other Elders organized the "Victoria Conference" with William M. Swan of Salt Lake City as President. The missionaries reported that "several Latter-day Saints" were found there." On 10 and 11 June 1903 the *Times* and the *Colonist*, the two local newspapers, both carried the news item that "Elders B.H. Teleford and W.M. Swan of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints of Utah and Idaho, together with five other elders are in the city, and are addressing meetings on the corner of Yates and Government streets on Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday evenings each week. . . . They preach the Mormon faith, and this is their first visit to the city." The *Colonist* on 12 June 1903 noted that "quite a number of Victorians have . . . expressed disapproval of the presence in the city of preachers of the Mormon faith, who . . . [are] spreading doctrines of a sort few in the city would like to see generally followed." Thus began Mormon missionary work on Vancouver Island.

The success of this missionary effort seems to have been minimal. George V. Copley, a son of Francis [Frank] and Maria, tells of hearing the elders preaching on the street corner, deciding that they must be Mormons, and telling his mother about them on his next visit to Shawnigan, where the family resided. "She went back with me [to Victoria] that night and fell on them with rapture." This led to the first baptisms on the Island of which any record has been found. During the summer of 1904 first Maria Judson Copley and her eldest daughter, Clara, were baptized at Shawnigan Lake; then Marian, the seventh son; and William Francis, the father. Mary Graham Copley, wife of the eldest son may also have been baptized that summer. For the elder Copleys, who had already been baptized years earlier, this represented a renewal of covenants; the others were converts. What other successes the missionaries may have had the records do not reveal, but these were apparently minimal for the elders seem to have been withdrawn early in 1905.

In February 1910 missionaries came again, and when President Melvin J. Ballard of the Northwestern States Mission visited Victoria in June it was reported that "a meeting had been appointed for the evening in Victoria, B.C., the hall had been secured, but no one came. So President Ballard and the elders went out on the street and held a very successful street meeting with two hundred present." Progress was painfully slow, but finally in the summer of 1917 there were some more baptisms, four of them members of either the Copley or Raymond families. In December of the same year the missionaries reported that "after years of almost discouraging opposition, it seems that the Gospel is finally making an impression in Victoria. A few good investigators have been found, and already a number have signified their intention of accepting the Gospel."

By the summer of 1918 there were five families composed of twenty-one members in Victoria, and so the first Latter-day Saint Sunday School on Vancouver Island was organized. This success was not sustained and in 1923 the missionaries were again withdrawn from the Island. They came again to Victoria and for the first time to Nanaimo in the summer of 1924, but after three months of unfruitful labor were removed. The Victoria Sunday School, when left to itself, died, and the members of the Church

either moved away or simply lost contact except during brief and unconnected periods of missionary activity.

The Great Depression years saw very little missionary activity on the Island, there being no missionaries assigned to the area for most of the time from 1930 to 1937. However, in the summer of 1933 a Latter-day Saint Sunday School and two Primaries were organized on neighboring Lasqueti Island, the home of the Merian and Fred Copley families. Converts entered the Church until there were about twenty-five members in a Sunday School which flourished for about ten years.

1937 witnessed the birth of a Sunday school that was to provide continuity for the Church organization on Vancouver Island. Melvin Oxspring moved to Victoria in that year. Upon finding a handful of members of the Church he wrote to the President of the Northwestern States Mission and asked if missionaries could be sent back to Victoria. They were sent, and on 17 October 1937 a Sunday school was organized at the Oxspring residence. Reginald Mann was set apart as Superintendent with Melvin Oxspring and Una Hillier as counselors. There were ten adults, including two missionaries, and seven children present. As the years passed Sister Hillier provided the continuity in the organization. Superintendents came and went, but she remained as second counselor for eight years, and then served as Superintendent for over two years from mid 1945 to the latter part of 1947. A Relief Society had been organized near the end of 1938 with Sister Hillier serving as President.

Meanwhile the naval base and industries associated with the Second World War had brought sufficient Latter-day Saints to the Island to justify organization of a dependent branch. That took place in 1942 with Robert Gerber as Presiding Elder. In 1946 the status was changed to an independent branch with Rex Nielson as the first Branch president.

While the Victoria Branch was slowly growing members were also moving into the Nanaimo area, and they too felt the need for Church activity. In the latter part of 1946 two missionaries of the Northwestern States Mission organized a Sunday School in the Samuel Dyson home, with Ervin Sabey as superintendent. There were twenty-three present. A Relief Society was organized early in 1948 with Edith Thompson as president, and a branch organization was sustained 05 May 1949 with Samuel Dyson as the first branch president. June 1949 witnessed the first convert baptism in Nanaimo: Mary H. Adams. In the meantime the Island was transferred to the new Western Canadian Mission near the end of 1947.

Another milestone was reached on 02 June 1951, when sod was turned for the first L.D.S. building on Vancouver Island: the Nanaimo chapel. The first sod was turned by Joseph E. Steed, a venerable member of the Church who was second counselor in the Branch presidency at the time, and who had been a member of the first Primary Association organized in the Church. He had also been present at the laying of the capstones and dedications of the Salt Lake and Alberta temples. The building was dedicated 27 May 1953 to become the center of Latter-day Saint activities on Vancouver Island.

During 1949 missionary work on the Island was intensified. The first converts in Port Alberni were baptized 26 June 1949: Eldon E. Ellis, his wife Ivy and her sister Doreen. Early in 1954 a branch was organized in that community. A Sunday school was organized in Comox in 1953, and slowly grew to become a branch in 1962. 1955 saw the

organization of a Sunday School in the Duncan area, which became a branch in 1959.

In the summer of 1959 the branches on the Island were detached from the Vancouver District and organized into the Victoria District of the Western Canadian Mission. Conrad Oviatt of Nanaimo served as the first president with Eldon C. Ellis of Port Alberni and Albert Isfeld of Victoria as his counselors. Each of these brethren continued to serve as president of his local branch. The first budget totaled \$15, a \$5 assessment for each branch.

At the end of November 1960 the four Vancouver Island branches, Duncan, Nanaimo, Port Alberni, and Victoria, became part of the new Alaskan-Canadian Mission. Comox was added in 1962, and Powell River, on the mainland, in 1967. In the meantime, in 1964 the Victoria Branch was divided. The second L.D.S. chapel on the island was in use in Victoria before the end of 1960, and the third was begun in Port Alberni in 1963.

Early in 1972 another unit was added to the District with the creation of the Sidney Branch. In August of 1973 an eighth unit was created by dividing the Victoria branches and creating the Colwood Branch.

On 9 February 1975 Elder Boyd K. Packer presided at the organization of the Victoria British Columbia Stake. Howard L. Biddulph, who had served as district president for the previous two years, was sustained and set apart as the first stake president with Robert J. McCue and Richard Krikava as his counselors. The Colwood, Nanaimo, Port Alberni, and two Victoria branches became wards, with the Courtenay (Comox), Duncan, Powell River and Sidney branches remaining branches.

Post Script 14 Aug 2006:

Byron Barnard reports reading George Q. Cannon's biography in which he writes about the First Presidency making a stop in Victoria in 1895. Presidents Woodruff, Cannon and Joseph F. Smith and others were in the party. Cannon states that Victoria (Gorge ? Esquimalt area) was one of the most beautiful places he has ever seen. Telegraphed his family and got some of his kids to come up and join the First Presidency party in Victoria prior to continuing on to Alaska.

(Reference: *George Q. Cannon*, a biography by Davis Britton, pp. 359-60.)