

Pioneer Teamster Peter Edmund Van Orden Sr.

By Alan Van Orden
Great-Grandson
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I have often commented on how it is that the hand of the Lord is evident in our lives. Such is the case with my great-grandfather, Peter Edmund Van Orden. He was born January 27, 1830, just months before the church was organized in this dispensation. His parents, William Van Orden and Julia Ann Haight resided in what would later become Moravia Township, Cayuga County, New York at the time of Peter's birth. He was their first son and second child.

It wasn't until 1838, however, that the family was introduced to the restored gospel. Julia Ann's brother, Isaac Haight, met Elder Pelatiah Brown and was baptized in 1839. Very likely, the Van Orden family and others followed soon thereafter. Peter, even though he had reached the age of accountability, was not baptized until July, 1844.

This is the time, 1838, when the saints were being driven from their homes in Missouri. Among them was the Knight family, part of the Colesville, New York branch sent to Missouri from Kirtland in the early 1830s. Joseph Knight, Sr. and his family had befriended Joseph Smith years earlier. A daughter of Joseph Knight, Jr., Martha Ann would later become Peter's wife.

Also in 1838, the Twelve met at Far West, Missouri, despite the mob violence, to fulfill a prophecy that they would so meet prior to their mission to England. Most of them

departed Nauvoo in the summer of 1839, sick of the fever and destitute. Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball could scarcely rise from the wagon box to bid farewell to their families. George A. Smith left with two companions, also sick.

Peter would have been nearly ten years old when Elders Young and Smith arrived in Moravia in late 1839. The account of this visit is recorded in the History of the Church. Peter's father was able to help the missionaries with their needs. The story goes that William had cloth that was made into an overcoat for Elder Smith.

A few years later, in 1843, the Van Ordens were ready to gather with the saints in Nauvoo. They sold their farm in New York and traveled by wagon to Illinois. This was probably an exciting adventure for Peter, now 13 going on 14 years old. This was not a forced move, so William and Julia were able to sell out for a good price, reportedly \$3,000, in New York. This provided the means to buy property in Nauvoo. Eventually William bought a home on Mulholland Street in Nauvoo and farm property within a few miles of town.

William participated in the activities of the saints, working on the temple one day in ten. He also was a member of the Nauvoo Legion. Peter was the age when he was probably receiving whatever education was available. The story is told of Peter going with his father to Joseph Smith to settle the tithing. William apparently gave \$360 in cash plus one tenth of his livestock. Among the animals given, according to the family, was a horse named Charlie which soon became a favorite of the prophet Joseph. The prophet reportedly told young Peter that the Lord would bless him and his posterity that they would never want for bread.

The Van Ordens had been in Nauvoo less than a year when things turned ugly for the saints. Nauvoo, by 1844, was the largest city in Illinois. Joseph Smith was a candidate for President of the United States. Just as the saints had been driven from Missouri a few years earlier, now their enemies wanted them out of Illinois.

Joseph had prophesied that the saints would ultimately settle in the Rocky Mountains and had determined to flee, hoping his leaving would allay the violence. He was dissuaded, however, by those close to him. He came back to Nauvoo, saying, "If my life is of no value to my friends, it is of none to myself." (*Comprehensive History of the Church*, Vol. II, p. 247)

Peter was probably among those who witnessed the prophet's departure from Nauvoo to go to Carthage, where he had been summoned by Illinois Governor Thomas Ford. On this occasion, the prophet said, "I am going like a lamb to the slaughter; but I am calm as a summer's morning; I have a conscience void of offense towards God, and towards all men. I shall die innocent, and it shall yet be said of me – he was murdered in cold blood." (*Comprehensive History of the Church*, Roberts, Vol. II, page 249)

In the aftermath of the martyrdom, Peter's father, William, took his turn in guarding the bodies of Joseph and Hiram. William became ill and, two weeks after the martyrdom, on July 11, 1844, died of the "bloody flux". A few weeks later, Peter's youngest brother,

William Arthur, a child just three years old, died from the same malady. Only those who have experienced such losses can understand the grief. Peter was fourteen years old. He had an older sister, a younger brother, and three younger sisters.

About this time, Peter would have witnessed another great event in the history of the Latter-Day Saints, the succession of the head of the Church. With the death of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon offered himself to be the guardian for the church. Many of the Twelve were away from Nauvoo at the time of the martyrdom. Travel was slow so it took several weeks for their return. But when the saints met to listen to the alternatives, the “mantle of the prophet” fell upon Brigham Young. For three years, Brigham led the Church as president of the Quorum of the Twelve before the First Presidency was reorganized. I am thankful to Peter that he was in tune to recognize that Brigham and the rest of the Twelve were the Lord’s choice to lead the Church.

In the spring of 1845, less than a year after the death of his father, Peter’s mother married Dr. John M. Bernhisel, one of the leading brethren in Nauvoo. Julia Van Orden was not Dr. Bernhisel’s only wife. Apparently, Peter and his brothers and sisters were not aware of the others. Julia was not pleased that Dr. Bernhisel had embraced “the principle”. She was especially annoyed when her husband, under the guise of providing medical attention, was late for dinner after visiting Elizabeth Barker, a young woman in her sixteenth year.

One of these occurrences took place on a Sunday in January, 1846, when Peter was just sixteen. Dr. Bernhisel had been out visiting his wives. After dinner he told Peter to drive him to the temple for a meeting and then bring back the rig and take care of the team. “While Bernhisel could have put the team up himself and walked the short distance to the temple, he believed firmly that children must learn the dignity and joy of honest toil.” (*Nightfall at Nauvoo*, Samuel W. Taylor, p. 351)

Apparently Julia and her children left Nauvoo after the first group of saints, who left in February, 1846. The Legacy film documents the difficulties they faced in getting across Iowa. Dr. Bernhisel was probably very little help; he stayed in Nauvoo to help settle affairs there. It is even unclear just what role Peter, as the oldest son, played.

One account indicates that Peter was one who volunteered to return to Nauvoo to assist the poor who had not been able to leave to join the body of the saints. It appears, however, that on the way he met his mother and accompanied her to what would become Winter Quarters.

Once in Winter Quarters, the saints needed to erect homes for shelter. The building materials consisted of logs and sod. Peter was nearly seventeen so he was undoubtedly expected to do a man’s work. Available accounts indicate this to be so; he apparently carved a frame so his mother could have a window. He was apparently called to assist other families in need. Under these difficult circumstances, Peter’s mother gave birth to a child, John Milton Bernhisel, Jr. Years later, this half brother would join with Peter in settling Lewiston, Utah.

In the musical Porgy and Bess there is a song that starts out with “summertime, and the livin’ is easy.” Well, at Winter Quarters, it was wintertime, and the livin’ was anything but easy. It was a challenge just to keep warm and provide food. According to one account, Peter and another boy had the assignment of driving the cows out to find feed during the day and bringing them back at night. In the process, it is told that Peter’s dog ran into some brush barking and emerged with a pig chasing after. Peter is said to have shot the pig and taken the carcass into camp where Brigham Young directed that it be divided among the people. Later, it developed that there were more pigs where the first one had come from. These also were killed for use by the saints.

Peter was not among the group of pioneers who arrived in Salt Lake in July, 1847. He must have been needed at Winter Quarters to help care for his mother and the other brothers and sisters. He was also busy seeing to the needs of others, what with 500 men going off with the Mormon Battalion and many of the church leaders gone with the advance party to the Great Basin. Brigham Young returned to the Missouri River in 1847, where the First Presidency of the church was organized with Brigham as president. The Twelve had run the church since the martyrdom of Joseph Smith.

In 1848, Peter’s mother and his younger sisters and brothers were preparing to go west. The youngest brother, actually a half brother, John Milton Bernhisel, was just one and a half years old when they left the staging area at Elk Horn River on June 7. Peter, according to the available information, helped to get them fitted with a wagon, oxen and horses for the journey. He had borrowed \$50 from the government, however, and was obligated to work to pay off the debt. He hired out as a teamster to help build roads and forts. It was two years later, in 1850, that Peter reached the Salt Lake Valley. (Pioneers and Prominent Men of Utah, p. 262)

Also leaving Nauvoo in the spring of 1846 was Joseph Knight Jr. and his family, including 13 year old Martha Ann. The Knights were part of the Colesville, New York Branch that had, up until this time, traveled together. Joseph Knight Sr. was unable to leave, so stayed behind in Nauvoo.

Shortly after their arrival at the Missouri River, Joseph Jr. was appointed Bishop and was chosen to captain a group to return to Nauvoo to assist those, including his father and family, who had stayed behind. By this time, they had been driven from the city, being forced across the river into Iowa. They were barely surviving in what was called the “Poor Camp”. As they were about to start west, the party experienced the “Miracle of the Quails”. Several flocks of exhausted quail dropped into the camp. The hungry saints were easily able to capture and make a meal of the birds.

Bishop Knight presided over the 23rd ward situated on the Iowa side of the Missouri. The members were engaged in farming, raising wheat, corn and potatoes. Joseph stepped down as Bishop in 1849 due to ill health. He was 41 years old. He immigrated with his family to Utah in 1850, traveling with the Benjamin Hawkins Company. They settled in Salt Lake City. (A History of the Joseph Knight Family 1825-1850, William G. Hartley, p. 185) Peter Van Orden and Martha Ann Knight were married November 25, 1851. Peter was 21; Martha was 18. One can only speculate how they met and courted.

Peter and Martha had their first child, Mary Elizabeth, on October 30, 1852 in Kaysville, Utah. Three more children were born in Kaysville, including my grandfather, named Peter Edmund after his father. In 1858, the Van Ordens were caught up in the migration south to escape the Expedition of Johnston's Army. Thus, the fifth child, Ellen, was born in Provo in 1859.

One account of Peter's life says that he was called by Brigham Young to drive a four horse team on a light wagon, called the fast freight, between Salt Lake City and the Missouri River. It is said that he made two trips a year for three years. It is not specified in what years he made the trips, but it must have included the years of the handcart pioneers as there is reference to his having carried some of the children to the valley. One account puts him in Wyoming meeting up with Ephraim Hanks and actually assisting in the location of the ill fated handcart companies of 1856. The book "Fire of the Covenant" does not list him among the rescuers, however.

Apparently, Peter was a skilled teamster. What else he did for a living is not known for sure. One account indicates that, while in Provo, he worked in a blacksmith shop owned by a brother-in-law, a Mr. Peck. I am also told that he is listed as a "lumberer" in the 1860 census of the Provo area.

According to the family traditions, he went to Montana to search for gold. What I do not know is when he left and when he returned. One account written by a grand daughter (Martha Van Orden Parks) indicates that he was gone for eight years. Peter's second family descendants believe it was closer to three years. I had always understood that he came back and discovered that Martha Ann had married again (the record shows that she married Martin Mills on November 2, 1867). Assuming this to be so, the question, then, is when did he leave? I do not know. The other question is why did he leave? Our family has understood that he went to find gold because Martha was unhappy with her circumstances and wanted more than he was providing. Definite answers will just have to wait.

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