

JOHN LOWE AND CAROLINE SKEEN
BUTLER
– OF COURAGE AND FAITH

Through the ages of the earth, the Lord has strengthened women to fulfill their roles as helpmeets and companions to their husbands, and mothers in Zion.

For example, we read in I Nephi 17:

1. And it came to pass that we did again take our journey in the wilderness; ... And we did travel and wade through much affliction in the wilderness; and our women did bear children in the wilderness.

2. And so great were the blessings of the Lord upon us, that while we did live upon raw meat in the wilderness, our women did give plenty of suck for their children, and were strong, yea, even like unto the men; and they began to bear their journeyings without murmurings.

For Caroline Skeen Butler, who walked beside John Lowe Butler through those soul-rending, body wrenching, heart-breaking experiences of the Mormon pioneers, this help from the Lord was provided also.

In order to understand the life and trials of a woman, as she supports and sustains her husband and family, one must know somewhat of the man. So, this history will tell much of Caroline's husband, John Lowe Butler, using quotations from his autobiography.

John was born "in Simpson County Kentucky, April 8th, 1808. My father was James Butler My Mother's name was Charity Lowe before her marriage." He was the fourth child in the family of fourteen children, four of whom were stillborn.

From his early youth, John had "serious reflections on futurity. My parents being of Methodist faith and hearing them talk about it."

Along with this concern for futurity was another factor which, one can readily deduce, would have serious consequences for his future wife. It was John's poor health. He writes:

"When about seven years of age I was taken sick with the inflamatory rheumatics. It passed from my feet to my finger ends in every joint. It left me in very poor health, and shortly after I was taken with what the Doctor called an impaston (probably and

infection) in my leg. And after it began to mend I took the dropsy in my eye ... And the doctor said it would be difficult to save.

"From that time till I was in my twentieth year I had twelve hard attacks of the rheumatics, it taking me as least once a year and sometimes twice When in my nineteenth year pain fell on my left side, and arm and thigh and leg began to shrink and fail me so that I began to think that I should loose the use of that side altogether. I was so reduced that my mother could carry me from one room to another with ease in her arms but through means used the Lord began to restore my limbs again so that when I was twenty two years of age I was getting better than ever I expectd to be. I was able to do labour at light work."

At this time, he began to think seriously about his future existence and wonder what the Lord would want with someone such as he on the earth, and to desire better health.

Even with these problems, he grew to a height of six feet by the time he was twenty-two. And later, after joining the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, he grew two more inches and "grew quite stout" as he records. In later years, his size was an important factor in his accomplishing the Lord's work.

At about this time, in his twenty-first year, he and his friends begin attending the many revival meetings being held in the area.

Three of these are converted to Methodism, but John continues his search. He tells, in great detail, his experience in finding the truth. I will quote much from his writings in order to give understanding of his zeal once he found the truth.

John tells of his wrestle with evil power after he makes a firm decision to find "religion."

"When crossing the room there was a power came on me that threw me to the ground and every nerve in me seemed to be numb and my hands cramped, and the first thing I knew I cried for the Lord to have mercy upon me. I thought now they all had found out that I was seeking religion and that made me feel very mean. I lay there for six hours, but did not think it more than one hour. Feeling came (probably calm) when I first arose but it was not long till Darkness and the same bad feeling came back to me again."

Later, he tells: "I seemed to have a view of myself, I thought I could see every sin I every committed and while in this condition I felt with all my soul to call upon the Lord God to forgive me, a sinner. And all of an instant the burden left me and I felt to rejoice for a minute or two, then I stopped to think what such a change meant. I

thought is this religion? There was a voice whispered to me and said 'you have yet to preach the gospel to the world'...That day I gave my hand to the Methodists on trial" and he began to search the scriptures.

Through this, he gains a firm conviction that baptism by immersion is right. His parents, wanting him to stay with the Methodists who did not baptize a second time, find a Methodist minister who will baptize again. But when John is baptized his Methodist associates laughed and made fun of him.

He says, "It hurt my feelings to see those professing to be saints make light of the commandments of God ... and finally concluded that I would not live among people that would do so and went to the baptist and was baptized again telling them at the same time I did not believe one word of the Predestinarian Doctrine (predestination) as held forth by them but as they valued baptism by immersion."

At age 23, in 1831 John married Caroline Skeen, daughter of Jesse and Keziah Taylor Skeen. Caroline was born April 12, 1812 on an estate along Drake's Creek in Sumner County, Tennessee. She was the daughter of what was, in their day in Kentucky, a middle class family, her parents having considerable land, 1450 acres, and eleven slaves in their household of twenty-two. It was said that Caroline never combed her own hair until after her marriage. (Hartley) her Negro mammy combed it.

John's family would have been classed yeoman in the Kentucky society of their day. They had small holdings, were comfortably situated on a small farm of 600 acres. Fortunately for them, considering John's frail health, they apparently had the help of at least two Negroes, possibly the slaves given to Caroline at their marriage, and who had been freed by John. The Butlers did not believe in slavery.

Both John and Caroline were from families who had come to America before the revolution and had fought for the cause of freedom against the British. Had pioneered along the early frontiers.

So these two were not unprepared for the rigors they encountered in embracing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in its infancy, nor for the necessity of defending their beliefs with great sacrifice and courage. They had heard the stories by or about their forebears, and these steeled them in their time of "refining."

John, with Caroline's support, continues to search for the word of God but "could find no relief" although he continued to go to meetings. When one of the men of the Baptist church tells him the Lord will continue to chastise him until he agrees to preach their faith, John is filled with a rebellious spirit and decides he will quit going to the meetings, as there is such a spirit of contention and nothing to be gained.

Discouraged, because he also did not seem to be able to learn what he wanted to know through study of the scriptures, and his prayers, John goes home and tells his wife, Caroline that he is going to give it all up.

He reports that "it hurt her feelings very much indeed. I then went to put up my horse. My barn was up by my Orchard. When I had got there I found that a wind storm had passed over when I was away and had destroyed several of my fruit trees by blowing them down and had blown off a great deal of the fruit from the other trees. When I saw what had happened I began to feel very angry to think that the Lord should send such a storm to do me so much damage. And still feeling the same independent spirit I stood up looking towards the heavens saying I would not preach such stuff as my Baptist Brethern told me I would have to preach. And if he thought he would make me to try it and I would quit praying to him for he would not answer me and I would be as independant as he. While in this exercise of mind there was several streaks of lightning passed before me in the heavens. I said 'I know you can strike me dead with lightning but pop away if you wish for I will neither preach, pray, go to meeting, nor read the scripture any more.'"

He then gets some corn tops and begins feeding his horses when he hears a voice which says, "I will set on you a refiners fire." He turns to see the speaker, but there is no one.

Realizing what he has done, he returns to the house and relates his experience to Caroline. One can imagine the anxiety of this good woman, who has followed his searchings, and, quite possibly, is searching for her own witness. Probably, with some limitation on her understanding of his condition, as research shows that her own family appears to have no formal religious affiliation. But we can imagine that she herself has developed a feeling of religious conviction, as we have noted earlier, John's report of her hurt feelings when he decides not to read any more scripture.

After the interview with Caroline, John determines to read Malachi which he does, reading it through twice. In Malachi it speaks of the refiner's fire. John then decides "never to open it again" but to go once more to pray for the last time.

He retires to a field where he had made prayers before, but he reports, "Fifty feet from the house my whole mental powers seemed to be drawn out to God to know the truth and the true order of his Kingdom, and if I could only know that I would do anything even to the laying down of my life if necessary."

He hears the voice again saying, "Stand still and see the salvation of God and that will be truth." "That instant a light shone round me. I was fill'd with the Spirit of the Lord and saw clearly that God would save all the workmanship of his hands and truth would stand or be set up in our midst, and it will not need propping up as the sects of

the day had continued to do. From this time I began to look for something to come forth different to what we then had in any church. I often told my bretheren that the truth would stand alone and might be told by an illiterate man. It could not be put down."

He tells that, following this spiritual manifestation, things go along "tolerably well." He continues to attend meetings where he agrees to preach, but mostly on the subject of repentance.

He also was "keeping school at that time, for I was unable to do much hard work being sickly from my boyhood." They must have depended heavily upon their servants to work the land and do the heavy tasks in a household in those early days.

One can imagine the responsibility and worry Caroline assumed, for which she was probably not prepared, having come from a home where there were many slaves to do her bidding.

Now, along with all of the above, she has children to bear and rear. So far, there are three: Kenyon Taylor 17 November 1831, William Alexander 20 April 1833 who died four months later, Charity Artamesia 13 Jun 1834. Heartaches for this young couple and joys. One imagines their sorrow when leaving the little grave when they move to Missouri to be with the Saints.

March 1, 1835 came the announcement at the Baptist meeting that two Mormon Elders were coming to preach. When John decides to hear them, two baptist men are appointed to accompany him.

In John's words, "I expected they would speak from their golden bible but they did not and to my astonishment, they commenced preaching the first principals as set down in the new testament. This astonished me. I knew every word they said to be truth for I had the testimony of it. I asked them a few questions and they kindly answered them. I then told them that my house was a home for them as long as they wished."

The "brethren" with him say to one another "how John is taken up with them, see his mouth is wide open to swallow it all, this doctrine will just suit him for it is what he has been seeking after..."

John invites the elders to come and preach at his home. Then returns to tell his family what he has found. His mother, who is staying with them says, "Yes, that is just like you, you were not content with the Methodist, then you joined the Baptist, and they do not suit you, now you will join these Mormons." But, later, John's mother, too, recognizes the truth.

John's reply to his mother's comment is that the Lord has said try all things and hold fast that which is good.

Caroline, apparently, has received her own witness before her husband, and supports him in his new found faith, because, when he comes home from a meeting and reports to her that, "They preached the Order of the kingdom and I had never heard any thing so plain in all my life before. A child could understand it all. It was just the thing I had been hankering for...I asked to my wife what she thought of the Mormon Elders. She said she thought that they were men of God and that it was the only true Church of God and only way to be saved.

To this testimony, Caroline will cling desperately, in the coming months and years of persecution, after they leave to join the body of the Saints in Ray County. In truth, she will need its strength for the rest of her life as she and John valiantly follow the leadership and counsel of the Lord's prophets.

Consider the role of this good woman, who bore and reared twelve children while supporting her husband, and in many cases accompanying him, while he filled the assignments described below:

"During anti-Mormon turmoil in Missouri, John became a Danite and militiaman defending his people. In Nauvoo Joseph Smith called John to be one of his twelve official bodyguards, an officer position in the Nauvoo Legion. John thereafter filled several Legion assignments. After Joseph Smith's death, Brigham Young chose John to be one of his bodyguards, and John also helped guard the Nauvoo Temple." Hartley p. ix

"Between 1840 and 1847 he (John Butler) served four special missions among the Native Americans, two of which Joseph Smith ordered. Brigham Young sent John to help stabilize James Emmett's Iowa Expedition in 1844-45. Then, President Young called John to merge the Emmett group into a large contingent of Saints who wintered among Ponca Indians instead of at Winter Quarters.

In Utah Territory John helped the LDS Church claim Green River ferries from mountain men. At Spanish Fork he had Indian Farm responsibilities, made complex by the Utah War. He was a Utah militia officer. And, rare among Mormonism's corps of frontiersmen, John became an ecclesiastical leader, called by President Young to be a pioneer bishop to unify the Spanish Fork settlement. Hartley p. ix

Following their conversion, and contemplating baptism, John, and we assume Caroline along with him, contemplate what joining the Mormons will mean. He will lose his possessions and his reputation, their life will be very hard and different. They will have to sell out and move away. But he remembers his covenant with the Lord a few years before, when he was searching for the truth.

He now records, "But then it was the truth that we had heard and the Elders were sent of God to preach the true and everlasting Gospel. What could I do? I had promised the Lord that I would serve and obey him and even lay down my life for the Gospel's sake if nessessary, and what was my property against my life."

March 9 1835, John and Caroline along with several others are baptized. After the confirmation, the gift of the Holy Ghost rests upon them and five, among them John, speak in tongues.

Because of the persecution which rages, the Mormon missionaries, Elders James Emmett and Peter Dustan, leave.

Upon learning of their departure, John's mother says, "O what a fool have I been to have heard the Gospel for two weeks and then to let the Elders go and leave me unbaptized."

Moved by the spirit, the Elders return and baptize the mother and also Caroline's sister, Charity, who is both deaf and dumb. But she has observed, and asks Caroline to explain things to her. Patiently, Caroline explains the truths of the new faith to her sister, Charity.

John reports, "The Lord then opened her understanding and she told my wife that she would be baptized by the men sent of God. But my wife told her she better not, as her Father was very much opposed to Mormonism and that he would lay all the blame upon her (Caroline). But Charity persisted in being baptized. This all took place just after the Elders departed.

"So when the Elders turned back again, they knew that the Lord wanted them for some wise purpose."

Caroline's fears are realized. Her own father, Jesse Skeen, "told every one that he met that me, my wife and Lucy Ann (John's sister) and the Elders all slept together, in one bed on the floor." But John's Uncle, John Lowe, a Justice of the Peace comes to their aid; and he eventually forces Jesse Skeen to sign a "liebill" admitting he had lied.

There were other persecutions. Then, the final trial. Jesse sends word three times threatening to shoot John if he tries to leave and take Caroline. But Caroline is true to her faith and her husband. They continue to make their plans; and, over the next year, gradually dispose of possessions and property.

One day, Uncle John arrives at the Butler's and excitedly asks Caroline for John's gun, as there are some turkeys to shoot. Caroline gives him the gun and he does not

return it until the night when the party is leaving, saying "John I should not like to see you kill the old man."

Upon hearing Jesse' threats, John had said to Jesse that he had a good rifle and could shoot as well as Jesse. When he finds his gun gone, he worries about how he will defend himself against his enraged father-in-law. But they remain safe until the time of their departure.

When, in 1836, John and Caroline and their three children and his mother, three brothers and a sister leave, stealthily, for Missouri.

Traveling from early April to 16 of June, they arrive in Ray County (Missouri) and cast their lot with the saints. Here, John and Caroline realize more fully that they have "embraced the truth from God." But probably did not know that they were never to know peace for most of the rest of their lives.

From Ray County, with the saints, they trekked to Clay and then to Caldwell County, and then to Gallatin in Davis County.

It is here on August 8, 1838 that he and Brother Gee and the others fight the mob for the right to go to the polling station. With his increased height and his new found strength, since joining the church, John "felt as if he could handle any two men on the earth." And, indeed, he handles more than two that day.

In his words, "... power rested upon me such as one I never felt before. When I got in reach of them, I commenced to call out aloud for peace and at the same time making my stick (a piece of the heart of an oak and quite large) move to my own utter astonishment, tapping them as though light, but they fell as dead men, their heads often striking the ground first. (He mentions that the stick is quite big and reminds himself, as he wades into the battle that he must strike lightly, or he will kill someone.) I took great care to strike none except those who were fighting the brethren."

Following this episode, John rides to Far West, about fourteen miles where he visits the Prophet. Joseph warns him to move his family immediately. John says he does not want to appear a coward, but follows the counsel of the Lord's chosen, which was his practice until his dying breath.

After the Prophet's warning, fearing retribution for the injuries John had inflicted on the mobsters, he and Caroline pack hurriedly and leave, their second wagon load departing just before dawn.

At daybreak, their neighbor, Brother Gee, sees a mob of about thirty men surrounding the Butler home. He is sure they will all be killed; and is greatly relieved when he rushes to the home of the Taylors and finds the Butlers there, safe and sound.

John's comment, "I thus saw the hand of the Lord in guiding Brother Joseph to direct me to move my family away...and I felt to thank God with all my heart and soul."

As John must continue in hiding, he starts for Far West, leaving his wife to come later with the family. Not an easy assignment for a woman.

Meanwhile, the mobs have rounded up Joseph and Hiram and all the males they can find and jailed them. But, fortunately, they did not find John.

It is about this time that William E. McLellin comes to Emma's and takes possessions, including most of the bedding. The Prophet sent to her for quilts, as it is winter, and cold in the jail. Emma weeps, as she has only two blankets. Caroline and other women tell her to send Joseph the blankets and they will see that she has some. True to her word, Caroline returns to the Smiths with the precious bed clothes.

In the next few years, John serves several missions, while Caroline remains at home, looking after family and farming, enduring the worry, fear and loneliness of those violent times on the frontier, and with the addition of religious persecution by the mobs. So often, the men had to hide, or fight, or go on missions; and the women, like Caroline, carried on at home, sustained and made strong for their burdens through their faith in the Lord. Even as the women of Lehi's family were strengthened when they traveled in the wilderness, as recorded in the Book of Mormon.

The trip to Quincy, Illinois is an example. John has gone ahead to "keep school" and Caroline and the children follow, bringing the light wagon and two horses with their goods. The Smoots, who have no wagon, accompany them, and because the wagon was light, all have to walk. By this time they have four living children, one of them my great grandmother, Keziah Jane, born in 1837. The first child born near Quincy is Caroline Elizabeth, born in 1839.

In John's words, "... it was a hard trial for women and children to pass through the severity of the weather and the hard-heartedness of the people. But they will have to suffer for their ill treatment of the Saints ... Well it still kept bitter cold, and my wife and children suffered very much indeed."

John's detailed record of Caroline's trials during her journey to Quincy gives us some idea of his love and devotion to his wife, and his understanding of her courage and endurance in the face of their many hardships.

The following are examples of her experiences, as recorded in John's retrospective. At one time, Caroline's eyes became very sore, and Sister Smoot had to lead her for several days. At one house the man invited them in to get warm, but the woman said she "could not think of such a thing" as they and the children might have some disease. So they were turned away from the warm fire and back out into the cold.

There were a few bright spots in the tale of anguish. Like the day when the back horse kicks up its heels and strikes Sister Smoot, who is seated in the front of the wagon, and little Kisia (Keziah Jane) who is on her lap. They were bleeding "most fearfully" and a woman came out of her house to help them.

Interesting that she brought brown paper and camphor to treat the wounds.

Another time, when they had built a fire to keep warm, the farmer came out and told them they could not cut another piece of wood. Then he left them, "to their own meditations," as John quaintly records.

They finally arrive in Quincy where there is more hardship, and the dreaded cholera. John spends little time telling of the hardships.

In 1860, when John makes his record, he writes briefly of the hardships. One wonders if he wishes them to be forgotten, or if the Lord has mercifully blessed him with forgetfulness. A great grandmother of mine, Tamar Loader, who came with the ill-fated Martin Handcart Company, told her granddaughter, Irene Smellie, that she never wanted the tragic story written.

John Butler relates some of the trying circumstances of his missions to the Indians. On one of these, he takes his family. But the Indians are not responsive, and finally become quite hostile. Caroline, with their five children and Sister Emmett and family make their escape to Nauvoo, while John and Brother Emmett lead the enraged and bloodthirsty Indians away on another route, at great risk to their lives and those of their families.

He is appointed body guard to the Prophet and relates his own versions of various times when the Prophet was captured and imprisoned, or escaped. Through his record one feels his deep distress at the martyrdom of the Joseph Smith. He was among the guards who accompanied Joseph to Carthage at the time of the martyrdom.

Of leaving Carthage he relates, "For my part, I felt that something great was going to transpire. He blessed us and told us to go. We bade them farewell, and started. We had twenty miles to ride, and we went the whole distance without uttering one word. All were dumb and still, and all felt the spirit as I did myself. I cannot express my feelings at that time for they overpowered me. I felt like the Prophets of the

Lord were about to be taken from us and that they were going to await their doom, the same as the Lord did when He was here upon the earth. We went to our homes like so many sheep that had lost their shepherd, knowing not what to do."

Of the Saints, John wrote, "The Saints all felt it when Brother Joseph was Kill'd. They could not tell the reason why it was, but their hearts seemed to melt within them and they mourned and knew not what for. And when the tidings came (of his murder) they were sorely distressed and prayed that the Lord would avenge the blood of his servants, the Prophets. And truly he will for he has said so and he will keep his word. But Mormonism will still roll on till it breaks in peaces all the other Nations, which will have to be accomplished before a great many years... We still went on preaching the Gospel."

In 1842, John goes back to Kentucky and Tennessee to see old friends and family, and to try to teach them the gospel. But he is met with hardness and resistance. Here, he narrowly escapes death when he steals away, taking Caroline's sister, Charity, with him. Her brothers follow them, but prayers are answered, and they lose the trail.

Safely back in Nauvoo, Charity and Caroline are overjoyed to be together, and to worship the Lord with the Saints.

1. All quotations except those noted, "Hartley" are from the autobiography of John Lowe Butler written a few years before his death.

2. Hartley, William G., MY BEST FOR THE KINGDOM, HISTORY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JOHN LOWE BUTLER, A MORMON FRONTIERSMAN, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1993