

2016 JOSEPH SMITH SENIOR FAMILY REUNION TALK

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Story of John Pidding Jones Missing the Boat

Tonight I want to share a story of my great-great grandfather, John Pidding Jones and his family, who came through Winter Quarters in 1851 and 1852.

John and his wife, Margaret Lee Jones converted to the gospel in England. They came under persecution from their family members and made the decision to go to America. They departed from Liverpool England, September 9th, 1848, on the ship, “Erin’s Queen,” with their children, John Lee, 11, and Joseph William, 9.¹

They were seven weeks crossing the ocean. At New Orleans they changed ships and took the steamboat “Grand Turk” up the Mississippi River, landing in St. Louis, Missouri, November 5th, 1848. They stayed in St. Louis three years where two more sons were born, Sylvester, in 1848, and Frederick, in 1851.²

In St. Louis, John found work to support his family and they saved money to buy the essentials so they could continue their trip to the West. On April 15th, 1851, they “left St. Louis with a wagon, two yoke of oxen, two cows, some flour, bacon, a small sack of rice, sugar, a few tools, ammunition and a new Kentucky rifle. With this they left for the valley of the Great Salt Lake, 1600 miles distant.”³

They had great difficulty traveling. City dwellers in England, they had never driven oxen, nor camped in the wilderness. The roads were axle deep in mud. The wheels on the wagon they had bought in St. Louis broke down from the rough travel conditions because they had no iron rims. After arriving at Kaneshville, (now Council Bluffs,) Iowa, John had no choice but to find a place for his family to spend the winter while he returned to St. Louis to work so he could get money to buy wagon wheels with iron rims.

John bought an 80-acre farm a few miles north-east of Kaneshville, near the third crossing of Keg Creek. It had been planted in wheat and vegetables by some

¹ John Lee, (1841-1935), Joseph William, (1843-1852). One baby son, Daniel, (1847.

² Sylvester Frazer, (1848-1934) and Frederick Isaac, (1851-1935).

³ John Lee Jones’ Biography, quoted in J.P. Jones, p. 17.

of the Saints who had moved on west. Leaving his wife and four little boys there to live in the broken wagon.

Margaret spent that winter alone with her sons, John Lee, Joseph, Sylvester, and Frederick; during that awfully cold winter Joseph caught a severe cold after digging vegetables from the frozen ground with his hands. He died November 27th, 1851, and was buried near the “upper crossing of Keg Creek.”

We have heard this family story for years but it became more real to us when we visited Winter Quarters and Council Bluffs. We found the third crossing of Keg Creek and walked, waist deep in native grasses, in a rain storm, to where we could overlook the farm. Then, a few miles away we stood in the hillside cemetery believed to be the spot where little nine-year-old Joseph Jones lies buried in an unmarked grave. We also found his name among hundreds of others engraved on the bronze monument with the statue depicting a pioneer father and mother looking down into the grave at their dead child; many of you may have seen that this evening. It is an emotional experience to be here and contemplate the hardships encountered by the pioneers, and especially, our Jones family, living in their wagon, while their father was away that winter.

The John Pidding Jones history states: (quote), “They started to St. Louis and were supposed to be at the Missouri River at a certain time to catch a boat to take them up the river to St. Louis. They were ten minutes late so missed the boat. It had only been gone a short time when it took fire and exploded and most of the passengers were killed. The men were very thankful to their Heavenly father that they were not on the boat and that their lives were spared. They boarded the next boat and proceeded to St. Louis.”⁴ Unquote.

I suppose we read that paragraph a dozen times trying to glean the facts—the narration says they were going to “catch the boat to take them UP the river to St. Louis.” It was only after our trip to Winter Quarters we realized that whoever compiled the history made an error—if you board a steamboat at Council Bluffs, or Winter Quarters, bound for St. Louis, you do not go UP river, you go DOWN river.

We asked Terry Latey, if there is any way to find out what steamboat blew-up leaving John and his friend standing on the shore. She sent us a link to the historical record of riverboats which sank on the Missouri. We learned that the Missouri is the longest and most treacherous river in America, if not the world. It has a narrow and shifting channel which in the spring is often flooded and clogged with floating ice and debris and has many sandbars. From the inception to the

⁴ J.P. Jones History, p. 7

end of steamboat travel on that river, 211 boats sank, 11 exploded. In 1852, 23 boats sank. In the entire list, the only boat that sank during the time John Pidding Jones was in the vicinity was the Saluda.

The Saluda was a double engine, two boiler boat, with two side wheels, built at one of the Ohio boatyards in 1846, it had sunk in 1847, was reclaimed and refurbished in St. Louis. She was 26 feet wide and 179 feet in length. She measured 233 tons, which is one of the smaller boats to run on the Missouri, and was also one of the oldest in service.⁵ At departure from St. Louis on March 30th, she carried 10 officers., a crew of 12, and between 200 and 230 passengers, about 115 of them Mormon immigrants from England and Wales. Some had stopped off before reaching Lexington; the passenger lists were lost so no exact accounting can be made. Officials of the LDS Church estimated that when it exploded about 80 Mormons were on board; 25 were killed, three missing and presumed dead, and at least that many wounded, some seriously. Among the survivors was Henry Ballard, wounded; but he recovered to become the father of Melvin J. Ballard, and great-grandfather of our own Elder M. Russell Ballard.

According to historic record, the Saluda exploded at Lexington, Missouri, April 9th, 1852, killing more than 100 people, the most fatal accident that ever occurred on the Missouri River. All cargo and most of the passengers, including the captain, and all but two of the crew were lost.⁶

We can surmise that on their return trip, going up river to Kanesville, John Pidding Jones and his friend got off the Saluda when it stopped at Lexington. They were 372 miles into the 783 miles trip to Winter Quarters, now being held up there for five days, partly for repairs and loading supplies, but mostly because after two days of trying, they had failed to get around the bend just past Lexington.

On that fateful morning, perhaps John and his friend were delayed getting to the boat, or the boat left ahead of schedule leaving them stranded on the shore, where they may or may not have seen the explosion. It seems if they had seen it John's history would have said so. But they surely must have heard it, as it says they only "missed the boat by 10 minutes."

⁵ Hartley, William, "Don't Go Aboard the Saluda!" The Saluda, was 179 feet long, 26 wide, and "5 ½ feet depth of hold," had two side paddles 20 feet in diameter with 10 feet buckets, powered by two high-pressure boilers, 30 feet in length, and two engines.¹⁶ Built in 1846, she had sunk in the fall of 1847. After being underwater for months, a salvager raised her and floated her to St. Louis for repairs. Refurbished, she still retained her same boilers.¹⁷

⁶ "Listing of Steamboats operating on the Missouri," from "History of Steamboating on the Missouri," by Phillip Chappell, p. 42 of 50.

According to the official report of the incident, the captain of the Saluda had been extremely frustrated because they were running late. Early on the morning of April 9, the Captain ordered another attempt. With a heavy current and much debris in the water the captain is reported to have said, "I will round the point this morning or blow the boat to hell."⁷ He ordered the crew to employ full capacity steam power. Before the wheels had made a second rotation, both boilers exploded, disintegrating two-thirds of the passenger-loaded vessel.⁸ There was fire; within minutes, the boat sank.

Eye-witnesses said the explosion blew bodies and body parts, smashed items and jagged wooden pieces of the boat up onto the boat-landing and even up on the hillside. Some bystanders were injured and two killed. Many bodies of passengers and crew went into the river; a few survivors were rescued by another boat going downriver, but many were lost in the swift current and never recovered. In the aftermath, some orphaned children were taken in and raised by good people in Lexington. The injured were treated and nursed to health, over time. The dead were buried in a mass grave, and a Memorial was established by the people of Lexington.

A manifest of passengers of the next ship leaving Lexington, the Isabel, contained the entry, "two men bound for Winter Quarters." We can safely assume those two men were John and his friend. We are not given the date of their arrival back in Iowa, but we learn that by 20 June 1852, John Pidding Jones had his 'wagon with iron rims on, two yoke of oxen, one cow and provisions for one year, and into this wagon he must pack all their belongings and carry his family of five. Their happiness was dampened by the fact that they must leave one little boy in his grave in the wilderness, but they were glad when they were finally ready to leave. . ." for the west.

We can now fully appreciate John Pidding Jones' story of his miraculous life-saving-missing-of-the-boat, the Saluda, which sank on Good Friday, April 9th, 1852. After arriving in Salt Lake City, Brigham Young asked what he did in England; he answered he had apprenticed as a molder in the Iron works. Brigham sent him to Cedar City to assist the brethren in developing the iron business. His posterity helped settle many areas in Southern Utah. He is the ancestor of thousands; has left a wonderful heritage of faith, courage, and commitment to God, Family and Country.

⁷ Harley, William, "Don't go Aboard the Saluda", p. 62

⁸ Ibid, p. 41.