

THE COMING OF THE LATTER DAY SAINTS TO OTTER TAIL COUNTY¹

The first permanent settlement in Otter Tail County was made by the Cutlerites, a branch of the Latter Day Saints, on the north shore of Lake Clitherall on May 6, 1865.² This was not the first actual settlement, but the first permanent settlement in the county. Before the Sioux War of 1862 a few settlers had built homes near the present site of Fergus Falls; Otter Tail City was a frontier village of probably forty or fifty houses, and a United States land office was located there. During the outbreak some of these settlers were killed by the Indians and the rest abandoned their homes; the land office at Otter Tail City was destroyed, and the town evacuated. Thus when the Cutlerites arrived the county was virtually a wilderness, and they became the first permanent settlers.

In order to understand who the Cutlerites were it may be necessary to go back into their history a few years. It will be remembered that after the death of Joseph Smith in 1844, members of the church that he had organized were scattered and had no leader recognized as such by the whole group. This condition favored the rise of self-appointed leaders who led off various factions of the church with accompanying changes in church government. Thus Brigham

¹A paper read on July 14, 1932, at the Fergus Falls session of the eleventh state historical convention held under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society. *Ed.*

²Lake Clitherall was named for Major George B. Clitherall, whose name was found carved on a tree on the shore of the lake. He was United States land agent at Otter Tail City from 1858 to 1861, a native of Alabama, and a strong slavery advocate. After the Dred Scot decision in 1857 he conceived the idea of making Minnesota a stronghold of slavery, but he was prevented from carrying out his plans by the outbreak of the Civil War. At the beginning of the war Major Clitherall joined the Confederacy.

Young led a large faction to Utah in 1847. Overtaken by winter, he went into camp near the present site of Omaha, Nebraska, at a place called "Winter Quarters." There several groups of his followers became dissatisfied and were disfellowshipped, or cut off from the church; among them were the members of the group that afterward settled at Clitherall. They did not take their expulsion from the church very seriously, however; as they reasoned that Brigham Young, after his introduction of teachings, doctrines, and practices contrary to those of the original church, had no authority to act for the original organization. They recrossed the Missouri River and settled in Mills County, Iowa, in the southwestern part of the state, at a place they called Manti. They chose for their leader a man named Alpheus Cutler, or, as he was known to his followers, Father Cutler.

During the fifties and early sixties Missouri and its border lands were a hotbed of secession and civil strife, and the Cutlerites, who had strong antislavery sentiments, suffered many depredations at the hands of their neighbors. Partly for this reason and partly because of religious persecution they felt that they would enjoy greater liberty and freedom if they removed to Minnesota. They also felt that it was their mission to preach the gospel to the Indians. Plans were accordingly made for the migration of the colony, which numbered between thirty-five and forty families. Before it occurred, however, Father Cutler died and Chauncey Whiting, Sr., was chosen to fill his place—a position that he held until his death, which occurred many years later at Clitherall.

All arrangements having been made, seven families, the vanguard of the migration, set out in September, 1864, to spy out the new home. Constituting this company were F. L. Whiting and his wife, generally known as Uncle Lute and Aunt Net, and their five children; S. J. Whiting and his wife, or Uncle Vet and Aunt Becky, and their children; Ed-

mund Whiting, a nephew of Uncles Lute and Vet, his wife and three children; Calvin Fletcher with his wife and five children; Uncle Jesse and Aunt Nancy Burdick and their little son Kary; John and Mary Fletcher; Isaac Whiting, his bride, and his sister Carmelia; Marcus Shaw and his wife; Lewis Denna, Erastus Cutler, James Badham, and DeWitt Sperry, who was called Father Sperry. The wives of the last four remained in Iowa and came to Minnesota with the second immigration.

The members of this small company of seven families, some with ox teams and some with horse teams, starting north on a journey of seven hundred or eight hundred miles in the face of winter, had need of all their faith, courage, and fortitude. As they proceeded they met with varying treatment. Sometimes they were refused the privilege of drawing water from the wayside wells; sometimes they were driven from their camping places. At other times they met with great kindness and friendliness. Meanwhile the days were becoming shorter and cooler and the nights longer and colder. When the travelers were a little more than half way to their journey's end, they were overtaken by winter. They stopped at Red Wing, where they spent the remainder of the year 1864 and the first part of the following year, the families living in rented houses and the men working at whatever they could find to do and laying up supplies for the remainder of their journey.

On the sixth day of April they resumed the march, their teams pulling and straining at the heavy loads and the covered wagons lurching and swaying over the rough roads of the spring break-up. A few days after they left Red Wing, they camped one night in a rather unprotected spot and a blizzard swooped down upon them. Hastily moving to a more sheltered location, they prepared as best they could for the storm. For three days and nights the storm raged and the cold was so intense that an Indian caught out in the blizzard was frozen to death. Yet these hardy

men and women and children—some of the latter were not yet a year old—withstood the storm with no other shelter than that afforded by the covered wagons. When the storm cleared, the roads were blocked in every direction and the members of the little company were prisoners. But during the night a warm rain fell, as they believed in answer to prayer; and in the morning the snow had disappeared to such an extent that they were able to resume their journey. The end of a day's march, however, brought them again to the snow-covered country. A deserted lumber camp at this place furnished them comfortable quarters for the night, and the next day they were able to follow the trail left by the departing lumbermen.

One day the trail led through a burning forest. There were flames on both sides of the narrow road and the smoke was so dense at times that the travelers were unable to see the third team ahead of them. It was as dangerous to go back as to go forward, so they kept going until they came to a stream. Across the stream was safety, as the fire had not extended so far. But the bridge was in flames. The men put out the fire, however, and after a little repairing of the bridge they were able to cross to the other side and breathe clear air once more.

When the party reached Crow Wing, it was thought advisable to leave Mrs. S. J. Whiting there until the second party of Cutlerites should arrive. Accordingly, the caravan left that place without Aunt Becky, her two children, Dean and Allie, and Mrs. Shaw, who remained with them. It was there on April 14, the day on which President Lincoln was shot, that William W. Whiting was born. There was no one to care for him and his mother except Mrs. Shaw and some Indian women.

On May 6, 1865, the little band of home-seekers arrived at their destination on the north shore of Clitherall Lake and laid the foundations for the first permanent settlement in Otter Tail County. Their first work, even before build-

ing shelters, was to put in their crops. They had brought a breaking plow and a few other farm implements and they soon had sixty acres of rich prairie soil broken up and sowed to grain, corn, and garden stuff. Their next work was the building of homes, not only for themselves, but for those who were to follow. These homes were rude log cabins, each with a "stick chimney" at one end, a door, and one or two small windows. The floors were either of dirt or puncheons hewed out by hand. The shingles were split by hand and were called "shakes." On July 31 the members of the second colony, who had left Iowa the last of May, arrived and found not only a warm welcome, but homes ready to enter and occupy. With them came Aunt Becky and the new baby, of course.

Throughout their journey these people had been warned against the Indians and advised not to risk the lives of themselves and families by settling in a country so recently the scene of terrible massacres and bloodshed. This section had been for generations the disputed hunting ground of the Sioux and Chippewa, whose oral history is full of accounts of fierce wars waged by these two tribes. So it was thought best to meet with the Indians and make a treaty with them. A meeting was accordingly held at Crow Wing. There a treaty was drawn up which was signed by seventeen Indian chiefs and which was never broken. In the annals of treaty-making, this treaty is probably unique, as the same provisions apply to both parties alike. It was agreed that in the event of an Indian doing an injury to a white man, the matter would be reported to the chief, who would deal with the offender according to the Indian code of justice. Likewise, if a white man was guilty of injuring an Indian, the case was to be reported to the white leader, who was then bound to punish the offender in accordance with the white man's ideas of right and justice. This treaty worked admirably; in only one instance was its force felt. Some Indian women

had been helping themselves too freely to the new potatoes and green corn grown by the settlers, and it was feared that there would be none left for winter use unless this petty thievery stopped. So the matter was reported to the chief, and he dealt so severely with the squaws that the offense was never repeated.

Among the members of the first group that went to Clitherall was Lewis Denna, a chief of the Oneida tribe of Indians of New York state. He had cast his lot with these people in the early days of the church; and had gone with them to Ohio, Missouri, Iowa, and finally to Minnesota. There he remained a faithful member of the sect, living and dying like a white man. His first wife was an Indian woman and they had a number of children who lived on a reservation in Wisconsin. After her death he married Pearl Dowd, a white woman. They had no children, and after Mr. Denna's death, Mrs. Denna made her home with Mr. and Mrs. F. L. Whiting. One peculiar thing about Mr. Denna was that he was always called "Mister." The native Indians were known as Old Joe Pokanoga, Young Joe, John, and so on. But Denna was always "Mister" Denna. The only Indian custom he continued to follow was that of wearing his hair long. He lies buried in Old Clitherall cemetery.

The settlement at Old Clitherall had a high degree of social unity and solidarity. The settlers worked not each for himself, but each for all. If provisions were low a few good hunters would go out and bring back game for all. Once Uncles Lute and Vet Whiting went to Leaf Mountain on a hunting trip, and after only six days they came home with fourteen deer. These were divided among those who needed them. For making sugar the settlers had two sugar camps; one consisted of several hundred acres of maples on the north shore of Battle Lake; and the other was across Clitherall Lake. Two or three young men would go to a

camp in the spring and stay until the sugar season was over, when they would return with sometimes three or four barrels of maple sugar, maple syrup, and vinegar. This was divided among all the settlers according to their needs. Some of the settlers built a loom and members of the Sherman family wove cloth for the colony. Four adjoining homesteads extending north and south between Clitherall and Battle lakes were filed on for the common use. All shared in the labor and the benefits of the farms, using the tools, machinery, and produce as they had need.

Economically the settlers enjoyed almost perfect independence. After the first year, when they had to import flour, the only thing they imported was iron. Later they raised wheat and hauled it to Cold Springs near St. Cloud, where it was ground into flour. Their iron they got at St. Paul. Nearly every home had a log "shop" near by, where some kind of manufacturing was carried on. These pioneers made wagons, chairs, tinware, shoes, clothespins, tools, farm machinery, bolts, burrs; they tempered chisels, repaired clocks, and mended furniture. Their blacksmith could make anything, from the tire of a wagon wheel to a darning needle; though he might have a "squabble," as he called it, to put in the eye. They built a sawmill and operated it by horse power. They mixed their own paints and made their own glue from hoofs and horns. Bucks' horns, they found, made the best glue. Sometimes glue was used instead of oil to mix their paints with.

They had a photograph gallery, operated by Warren Whiting, who traveled around the county to accommodate those who wanted their "pictures took" but who could not afford the time to make the long journey to Clitherall. Thus he spent one winter in the town of Maine; at another time he was in St. Olaf; and when the Northern Pacific Railroad was being built through Henning, he had a little studio on Peace Prairie near by.

The first store, which was located in a room of S. J. Whiting's home, offered for sale a small stock of dry goods and shoes. Some trading was done with the Indians; goods were exchanged for pelts, maple sugar, and the like. The first tavern was kept by Hyrum Murdock, who regularly served bear meat and venison. The writer's first recollection of this tavern is of a bear paw nailed to the gate post. Mail was received during the first years of the settlement from St. Cloud, a hundred miles distant; later it came from Alexandria, whence it was carried one winter by dog sled and Indian to the settlement. When Otter Tail City was reinhabited, mail was obtained there; and after the stage began its regular trips, a post office was established at Old Clitherall, with S. J. Whiting as the first postmaster.

At one time there were probably forty or fifty buildings in Old Clitherall, or, Old Town, as it has been called since the railroad was built, and a station was established at New Clitherall. As the settlement grew, it proved impossible for the four original homesteads to provide work and food for the increasing population. Gradually families began to move away, by ones, twos, and threes, until at present there are only a few families left, and only one of the original buildings remains—a home owned and occupied for many years by James Oaks and his family. This building, which is now the property of the Otter Tail County Historical Society, stands on the plot of ground where a marker commemorates the coming of the first settlers.

As time passed many conveniences were acquired, the comforts of life increased, and neat frame houses began to replace the old log cabins. There was more intercourse, both social and economic, with the incoming settlers; and the settlement at Clitherall gradually merged into the life of the county as a whole.

The outstanding characteristics of the pioneers of Old Clitherall, it seems to me, were their faith in God, their

temperance and sobriety, loyalty to their belief coupled with a large tolerance for the beliefs of others, their industry, charity, hospitality and friendliness, their adaptability to changing conditions, and a great diversity of talents and abilities. In the history of Otter Tail County these people have played an important part. Theirs was the first school district organized in the county—district number 1; they organized the first township, Clitherall. They gave to the county its first auditor, S. J. Whiting, its first two county superintendents of schools, William Corliss and E. E. Corliss; and two members of the first board of county commissioners, Marcus Shaw and Chauncey Whiting, Sr.

The first school in Old Clitherall was operated during the winter of 1866–67 and was taught by a daughter of one of the settlers, Zeruah Sherman, who had attended college at Tabor, Iowa. She received sixteen dollars a month, which was paid by subscription, and she had thirty pupils enrolled. One of the latter was an Indian boy, George Johnson, a son of a Chippewa missionary, the Reverend John Johnson, whose Indian name was Enmegahbowh. To the outside world the Clitherall colony has contributed writers, poets, artists, editors, educators, legislators, ministers, telegraph operators, stenographers, merchants, mechanics, engineers, and farmers.

Looking back over the history of this settlement one sees much of peace and happiness; much of danger, hardship, and privation; and some tragedy. The first death was that of William Mason, a shoemaker, who was frozen to death in a blizzard in February, 1867, while on his way from Millerville to Clitherall. His body was not found for several weeks.

Religious services were held by the pioneers each evening throughout the journey to Minnesota and regularly thereafter either in the homes or in the open air. Later on they were conducted in the church, a large two-story log build-

ing erected in 1870. This was the first and only church of its denomination ever built in Minnesota. It was furnished with homemade desk and benches and heated by a large box stove. This church was torn down in 1912 and replaced by a frame building, and the name "True Church of Jesus Christ" was adopted.

The log cabins, shops, schoolhouse, and church are gone, and there is little left of the Old Town except the cherished thoughts that live in the memory of the few remaining pioneers.

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