

## An untapped LDS treasure: *Liahona The Elders' Journal, 1903-1945*

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If your LDS ancestor served in the Southern States Mission or other U.S. missions during the period 1903-1945, there is a possibility that he or she may have been mentioned either occasionally or frequently--and had his or her photograph published--in issues of *Liahona The Elders' Journal*. The same periodical often mentioned the names and details of converts' conversion stories in the Southern States and other U.S. missions. Photographs of LDS-owned buildings and meetinghouses are found in many issues. This type of information and photographs will help document and enhance biographical knowledge of an ancestor or provide deeper historical knowledge of a geographically applicable branch, ward, stake, district, or mission.

The issues of the *Liahona* (1903-1945) have been microfilmed and are available for research at the Church History Library. Unfortunately, the issues are not indexed well enough that a researcher can easily find all references to a specific person or locality; the researcher needs to know the approximate time period of his ancestor's missionary service in order to peruse the issues and discover buried biographical and photographic treasures. Through other research sources at the Church History Library a researcher can determine the approximate period of a missionary's service.

Below is a short history and content analysis of *Liahona The Elders' Journal* that will give the researcher an idea of whether or not this research source would be pertinent to search for a specific individual or locality of interest:

In August 1903 Southern States Mission President Ben E. Rich inaugurated publication of a periodical called *Elders' Journal*; it followed the mission's previous short-lived publication *Latter Day Saints Southern Star* (8 December 1898-1 December 1900) that ceased publication because of a sizeable reduction of the missionary force. In the first issue of the *Journal*, President Rich stated that the mission boundaries were so large and the missionaries so scattered that it was difficult to communicate important information to them uniformly and quickly. He proposed to publish "this little paper we have christened the '*Elders' Journal*;' trusting that the Elders will derive both pleasure and profit from the perusal of the same, and that it will be a welcome visitor to them as it appears each month hereafter."

Among the publication's planned features would be lists of "the names of all Elders arriving from Zion, and their assignments to their fields of labor; notice of releases and appointments; instructions to the Elders from the Authorities in Zion and from the Presidency of the mission; and all items of interest connected with the work that will be beneficial to the missionaries, and that will have a tendency to draw us all closer together." Pres. Rich stated that the publication costs would be financed by the various

conferences and that the publication's size would be such that "by trimming the edges of this little paper it can be made to fit into the Elders' daily journal and . . . always be kept handy for reference."

True to form the early monthly issues gave details of missionaries' arrivals, assignments, transfers, and releases. Also included were occasional lists of conference presidents with their addresses and statistical charts showing comparisons between conferences relating to, among other aspects, miles walked, miles rode, families visited and re-visited, tracts distributed, meetings held, baptisms, etc. Soon after the first issue, death and obituary notices started appearing related to Church members and missionaries then living or serving in the Southern States Mission. One of the first notices related to a friendly non-member, Addison Prather, of Berzelia, Georgia, who died 20 February 1904. The brief obituary noted that Prather's family were Church members and that he and his family graciously nursed Elder Thomas H. Bell in their home during his illness (and subsequent death) in the summer of 1899.

Copies of the *Elders' Journal* were soon circulated outside the confines of the Mission. Occasional letters from other mission presidents reporting progress in their respective missions were published. The second volume (beginning September 1904) increased in physical size and frequency of publication (from once to twice monthly). A section called "Notes from the Field" began appearing in September 1904. This section included interesting commentary regarding routine missionary activities, baptisms, growth and development of branches, and spiritual occurrences such as miraculous healings performed by the Elders. Many articles detailed persecutions, mobbings, and other ill treatment of missionaries in the South. Excerpts from letters written to the editor by Church members and missionaries along with poetry were published frequently.

Beginning in December 1905 photographs of LDS church buildings and groups of missionaries in the Southern States Mission were published sporadically. In September 1906 the editor announced that dramatic changes would soon be implemented and asked that members and missionaries throughout the Church, not just within the Mission, subscribe to the publication. Shortly thereafter a brief notice stated that all the Elders in the Colorado, Hawaiian, and Tahitian missions had paid for subscriptions.

While the regional focus of the new version of the periodical continued to center on the Southern States Mission, notices and news from other missions were printed beginning in January 1907. The following May the publication announced, "It has long been though[t] advisable to publish in some central place a missionary paper to circulate generally in all the missions in the United States, but until recently no concerted action has been taken in this direction. . . . plans for the publication of such a paper are now effected by making the two missionary papers—the *Elders' Journal* and the *Liahona* [published by the Central States Mission]—one publication, the same to be issued from Independence, Mo., as a thirty-two-page weekly. It will be conducted under the auspices of all the missions in the United States. Its policy will be similar to that followed by the *Journal*. Besides missionary news from the various field and able articles on the

principles of the Gospel, will appear also a rare collection of precious gems from early Church publications.”

Summarized news from all U.S. missions was then sporadically published in the new periodical. A typical entry of this time period reads: “Mississippi [Conference]: [reported by] Geo. J. Gray, president, Darbun, Miss. While traveling along the country road in Wilkinson county Elders Jos. F. Gibb and Francis D. Hancock passed a cemetery where two men were digging a grave. They approached them and conversed on the gospel with them. Resuming their journey the elders had not gone far when two little girls overtook them and said that their parents wanted the elders to come back and preach the funeral sermon. The elders responded to the request, preached to a large congregation, and after the services were taken home with some of the people and held a large cottage meeting that night. At Red Hill Pres. Geo. J. Gray, and three other elders held a most excellent branch conference.” (v. 7, #40; 26 March 1910, p. 642)

About August 1912 the editors began to regularly publish photographs of missionary groups (usually studio portraits of conferences or districts) serving in U.S. missions. Generally, the missionaries in the photos are identified. A photograph in the 8 December 1914 issue shows twenty-five “Lady Missionaries” of the Central States Mission. The issue of 1 June 1915 shows Church members and friends standing in front of their chapel in Winnipeg, Canada. By November 1919 the following missions were sponsoring the publication: Southern States, Eastern States, Northern States, Northwestern States, Central States, Western States, California, Mexican, Canadian, and Hawaiian. Notices and news in varying degrees of detail and interest from all these missions found their way into the columns.

In the late 1930s, the information submitted by the mission and missionaries became more formalized. During this period, a column titled “Mission Miscellanea” began; it included submissions of spiritual thoughts, sermonettes, and poetry from mission leaders, missionaries, members, and subscribers. The publication of *Liahona The Elders’ Journal* concluded with the 27 February 1945 issue. At that time it was sponsored by the Bureau of Information on Temple Square and the following missions: California, Canadian, Central States, East Central States, Eastern States, Hawaiian, Mexican, New England, Northern California, Northern States, North Central States, Northwestern States, Southern States, Spanish American, Texas, Western Canadian, and Western States.

President Heber J. Grant announced in the last issue of the publication that it would become the Mexican Mission’s official organ. Commenting on the change, the First Presidency stated, “It is our earnest prayer that in its new field, it [*Liahona*] will go forward with a like service to the many millions of Lamanites to whom it will now come, bearing its gospel message of salvation.” Subscribers to the *Liahona* at the time of its transfer to the Mexican Mission were offered either a refund or a subscription to the *Church News* or *The Improvement Era*, two Church publications that published similar types of news and information previously featured in the *Liahona*.

