

The Welsh Settlement

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The saga of the American West is one of hard working pioneers struggling for a new and better life. These pioneers willingly sacrificed almost anything, including their lives, for a new land, a better way of life for their families, religious freedom, and association with fellow saints in the valley of the Great Salt Lake.

But was this westward movement only hard work and struggle? Or could there possibly have been a lighter side of the pioneer people and their daily lives? The Welsh pioneers that settled in Brigham City, Utah, knew the agonies, struggles, and hardships which are graphically depicted in volumes written by Church, State, and family historians. But there also existed a lighter, more carefree, even humorous side to their lives.

Brigham Young, Church president, directed a group of newly arriving emigrants to a vally north of Salt Lake City. Pioneers from Wales founded and settled Brigham City in the early 1850's. In 1851, there were twelve homes in all of Box Elder County, one being the home of Porter Rockwell. In 1853, there were at least sixty-three families living there.¹ This settlement was sometimes referred to as the "Welsh settlement."²

One of these Welsh emigrants was Thomas Mathias, born in Carmarthenshire, South Wales on June 6, 1808. Prior to coming to Utah in 1850, he was a blacksmith and miner. He located a farm in Box Elder in March of 1853 in what was then known as the Welch Fields.³ He became a very successful farmer, and with his wife, Margaret Williams, raised four children. Ada was their first child.

The first marriages in Brigham City occurred during the winter of 1853-54, while the people were still living in the "Old Fort." The contracting parties were Ada Mathias and Leander Clifford, Susannah Clapper and James Davis.⁴

Since the first settlers of Box Elder County were all members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the authorities of that organization directed both the civil and religious activities of the pioneer community.⁵ Jonah Mathias, Thomas and Margaret's third child, actively supported the community as Bishop's counselor in the Brigham First Ward from 1877 to 1892; as county clerk from 1886 to 1890; justice of the peace 1889; county collector, 1890; city councilman, 1893 to 1895; county commissioner 1894-1896; mayor of Brigham City 1895-1897; and school trustee for four years. He was born July 30, 1843 at Carmathen, Wales, and emigrated as an LDS pioneer to Box Elder with his parents, Thomas and Margaret, in 1853. When Jonah was a young man of 16 years, he went back

over the plains about four times riding horse alone to meet some of the other people emigrating out here to direct them down from the other side of Casper down through to the Brigham City area.⁶ He married Abigail Burbanks April 4, 1868.

Abigail came to Salt Lake City with a group of emigrants, those people were known mostly as the Burbank tribe.⁷

Jonah has been described as "a stern man, rather stout, piercing blue eyes, and a peg leg. No one sat down at the table until they had knelt beside their chair to say prayers. Then he would sit down, after, that everyone else could be seated."⁸

Jonah had a peg leg. His real leg was caught and mangled in an accident with a thrashing machine, and had to be amputated. Jonah fashioned a new leg for himself. Stories are told that when he went hunting or into the hills and there was a need to start a fire, Jonah pulled up his pant leg, shaved off some wood from his leg, and, using the shavings, started the fire. When the wooden leg got too thin, he'd just go make a new one.

Brigham allotted Jonah a plot of land on which to settle in Brigham City. He had two farms below town. At the time he made property allocations to his children, 12 of them, he gave each one of the girls a building lot and divided the farms among the boys. Thomas, Jonah and Abigail's third child,

bought one of the lots from his sister and built an adobe house in which his first son Oral, was born in 1897.

In 1852, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir was organized as a singing group as part of a religious train. Oral recalls:

My great grandparents were part of that original group that organized the Salt Lake Tabernacle Choir. They met down in Salt Lake some time during the conference week or so ahead of time; it used to be quite a carnival to go to conference in Salt Lake City because it was horse and buggy days to get down there and they'd stay about a week and they'd rehearse. The Welsh singers have been quite a noted bunch of singers for a good many years, hundreds of years; they come over through here and give concerts once in a while in Salt Lake, well this is part of that group, and they organized the Tabernacle Choir at that time.⁹

Jonah and Abigail had 12 children. Donny, the oldest, was kind of the renegade of the family. He did not want to stay around Brigham City. He left for a while, and that was when Thomas got working with his father, Jonah, operating the farm, so Thomas spent his entire life on the farm. There were two farms just south of Brigham.

Thomas and Harriet Mathias' home had a bathroom, electricity, a seldom used parlor, an unheated second floor where the children slept (and it was cold in the winter). There were 2 or 3 bedrooms on this floor. The first floor had the parlor, kitchen, parents bedroom, the bath, and dining room, which was kind of a family room. The kitchen had a big

wood stove but the best baked bread, pies, cakes and cookies came out of that oven.¹⁰ The home also had a basement where the laundry was done and food stored. It had a root cellar; also on the first floor there was a back porch. Thomas and Harriet's granddaughter LaPriell Carlton remembers her grandparents home:

The milk was brought in, poured through cloth, set in the basement to keep cool. The cream was skimmed off the top. They made butter, butter milk (which grandma always encouraged me to drink, but I never liked it). But there was always lots of thick cream to put on hot cereal, make whipped cream, etc. Grandma used to make a thick milk gravy which was spooned over slices of home made bread. It seemed to me that they were always cooking and baking. On my visits between grandparents, I could always find freshly baked goodies.¹¹

Oral Mathias and Edna Constance Graves were married in 1920. Edna went to school in Winthrop Harbor, Illinois. Her mother was converted to the LDS church. Edna and her brother LeRoy were baptized in Lake Michigan in 1912. After she completed the 8th grade, the family sold their home in Winthrop Harbor and moved to Brigham City. Edna remembers the first person she saw in Brigham City was her "most favorite LDS missionary walking up the street smoking a big cigar."¹² She was surprised!

There were four in the Graves family. Edna's father was a laborer. She recalled: "It wasn't until I got good at

arithmetic I figured out Mr. Graves was not my real father. I can truly say he was the best step father in the world."¹³

He worked on the railroad, was a sheep herder & did anything to make some money. They lived in a small house, only three rooms, and as soon as school was out in the spring, Edna worked picking fruit which kept her busy until school started again in the fall. They had a cherry tree and her mother paid her 1¢ a pound for picking them and sold them for 5¢ per pound. In the winter time, Edna's mother got a job as janitor in the High School. She was embarrassed when her friends saw her sweeping and working there. Edna recalls:

When [mother] bought a sack of flour it was important to get the prettiest sack, so she could make my bloomers. Sometimes it was hard to bleach the "Big J" off. She insisted we wear our long underwear late in the spring "till the sheep were sheared." We would roll them up when we were out of sight of our mother and go bare-legged until time to go home.¹⁴

The Graves home was located at 124 South 400 East, and there was a living room, a bedroom with 2 beds and a feather, soft kind of mattress. When you laid on the bed, the mattress would puff up around you like you were in a nest. The kitchen was quite primitive. Oral and Edna's daughter, LaPriel, didn't remember it having any counter space, but recalled: "There was a garden and fruit trees with a hammock made of canvas hung between 2 of the trees. A lot of their food came from the garden. I'm sure life was a struggle for them."¹⁵

Oral went to the old central school and to Box Elder High and graduated in 1917. His father had a fruit farm and some live-stock so he was always kept busy helping on the farm. He was one of six children. His younger sister, Leah Jensen, tells of those days:

Father had a farm and it seemed we all went to the farm and picked fruit and went home and bottled it. The school and church was the main things then for entertainment, etc. Not many cars so if anyone had one, they was [sic] considered wealthy. There wasn't a lot of luxuries like we have now days, but neighbors helped each other a lot in whatever they could, and they were very close friends. They did not have to go to church only 3 or 4 blocks and it seemed as tho [sic] everyone went. There was only one other church, other than LDS, in Brigham at that time, that was the Presbyterian church on North Main. The schools taught reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling and only the essentials needed in those days, not like schools today, but the necessary classes needed in those days. They had home work and I think students did their school work or took it more serious because they didn't have as many out of school activities as they have now.¹⁶

Oral tells of what he remembered on the day of the Titanic tragedy, and it was not the ship sinking:

I'd taken a bunch of cows down to the pasture and I'd gathered up a bunch of watercress down there, there's a lot of good springs down in that area, and I took the watercress back up to my mother. Before I went down there, I went down to my granddad's barn and swiped two eggs, and on the way down I bought some candy, licorice, chocolate candies, and when I come back up home after taking these cows down there, out to the side of the house (this was before I met Edna), there was a buckskin horse my uncle owned and I always

wanted to ride. He was a fast son of a gun, he'd been taking all the horses in the neighborhood. My uncle wouldn't let me ride it because I was Jonah's oldest grandson on his side of the family and I had to be protected, so they wouldn't let me ride this horse. And I saw it out there and looked around, I couldn't see anybody around, so I took the reins over this horses head, climbed up on him and I couldn't reach the stirrups, I got down the street and I got a block away and reined him off to the left so I could take him down the street there, and he was going just as fast as he could go, his feet slid out from under him and the stirrup lit on my leg and he landed on top of the stirrup and bounced and away he was gone. It was a good thing I couldn't reach the stirrup, because he would have dragged me to death. They hauled me up home, and my uncle come down and said "What's the matter" and I said "I've got a broken leg," and they said "let's see if you can move your toes", and I said "it isn't the bone that moves my toes!" Uncle Dan said to me "that smart kid." I was about 14 or 15. Dr. Harding used to be here, they called him up to set my leg and they made out of a piece of board to straighten my foot up, he tied me up and gave me some ether. By that time they were using ether. And he give me some ether to put me to sleep while he set my leg. And this ether made me sick, and I started to vomit and I threw up all this black stuff, licorice and candy I'd been eating. And then the doctor and the nurses and my father and mother and everybody got concerned I was hurt on the inside. And I didn't dare tell them, because I'd swiped the eggs!¹⁷

Oral and Edna both agree that they were very, very poor, but it seemed like everyone was poor. They did not realize that they did not have anything. Everybody was the same way. "In those days they didn't have relief, food stamps, or welfare, that was unheard of. We all survived. Everything in this life is made by comparison, so if everyone was in the

same classification, there is no way of judging whether you are poor or rich. We used to be envious of somebody in Brigham City like the Stohle Furniture Company because they had a big business."¹⁸

Even if they were poor, they still had fun. At least Oral did:

I remember I used to go rabbit hunting. I had a single shot 22. I'd go out around Brigham City there and collect rabbits for a time there people liked to eat them. I could pick up 5-10 rabbits a day as a kid and bring them in and sell them to the courthouse for a nickel a pair, if you cut off all their ears. They wanted them to get rid of them, they were a pest, they were like flies, you could sell them for 5¢ a quart. I'll never forget, it was up on the second floor of the courthouse on the east side, I'd take these rabbit ears up there and sell them. I was going over there one day and walked right around the side of the courthouse and I saw this guy open the window up above, and dump all my rabbit ears right down into a big box there. I got nearly home, and I thought, well for hell's sake, what are you going home for? So I went back and gathered these rabbit ears up and took them back up and sold them to him. There was somebody else in there at that time. And I got out of there and I was so scared I could hardly walk. So the next time I went out rabbit hunting like that, I'd take them up and sell them to them, and then I'd collect them and take them home for a couple of days, and then I'd take them back, but I wouldn't go back the same day.¹⁹

On the Mathias farm, they raised a lot of apples, tomatoes, potatoes, and sugar beets. After Oral was married and the depression hit, he was out of work. He tried to find work of some kind and there was not any. So he said to his

father: "if you're going to hire somebody to thin your beets, how about giving me a chance. He said sure, and I'll pay you just the same as I would anyone else. So I'd go down there and try to thin beets, and my gosh, by night I couldn't hardly move. I'd make 50¢ a day thinning these doggone sugar beets so I could buy some milk from my dad to feed my kids. I don't think he ever accepted the money, but I'd go up there and chop some wood or help him with some chores."²⁰

Edna picked strawberries and gooseberries, which, she said, was as hard as thinning beets. "It was just such a back-breaking job. We got paid by the case. There were 24 cups in a case. It was mostly just a matter of survival. Just to get by. There was no food stamps."²¹

Generations have passed since Thomas and Margaret first left their homeland in South Wales, bringing with them their traditions, ideals, and goals. These concepts of hard work, honesty, thriftiness, love of life, and laughter have been nurtured and passed down through each successive heir of the Mathias name.

These stories, particularly the antics of Oral Mathias, are written contributions to the free-spirited human nature inside all of us. Fortunately for our amusement and entertainment, Oral was brave enough to live them, and especially generous enough to tell about them.

ENDNOTES

¹ Lydia Walker Forsgren, History of Box Elder County n.d. (probably 1937), n.p. (probably Salt Lake City, Utah), p. 4.

² Forsgren, p. 7.

³ Forsgren, p. 12.

⁴ Forsgren, pp. 4-5.

⁵ Forsgren, p. 331.

⁶ Interview between Oral Reeves Mathias and Lisa Wood, April 1, 1984.

⁷ Interview, Oral Reeves Mathias.

⁸ Letter received by Lisa Wood from LaPriel Carlton, February 16, 1984.

⁹ Interview, Oral Reeves Mathias.

¹⁰ Letter, LaPriel Carlton.

¹¹ Letter, LaPriel Carlton.

¹² Letter received from Edna Constance Graves Mathias, February, 1984.

¹³ Letter, Edna Constance Graves Mathias.

¹⁴ Letter, Edna Constance Graves Mathias.

¹⁵ Letter, LaPriel Carlton.

¹⁶ Letter received from Leah Jensen February 22, 1984.

¹⁷ Interview, Oral Reeves Mathias.

¹⁸ Interview, Oral Reeves Mathias.

¹⁹ Interview, Oral Reeves Mathias.

²⁰ Interview, Oral Reeves Mathias.

²¹ Interview between Edna Constance Graves Mathias, April 1, 1984.

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Utah Printing Co., 1958.

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(probably 1937), n.p. (probably Salt Lake City, Utah).

Jensen, Leah. Letter to author. February 22, 1984.

Personal Interview between Oral Reeves Mathias & Edna Constance
Graves Mathias, and Lisa Wood at 1019 22nd Street,
Ogden, Utah, April 1, 1984 at 3:00 p.m.; cassette tape
in the possession of Lisa Wood

Mathias, Edna Constance Graves. Letter to author. February,
1984.

Mathias, T. Wayne. Letter to author. February, 1984.

Tullidge's Quarterly Magazine. Edward W. Tullidge. Nos. I,
II, III, IV, Volume II; Salt Lake City: Star Printing
Company, 1882.

Addendum

Edna Constance Graves Mathias: "This is a price list of what we paid for groceries when we got married." Information taken from the Box Elder Journal, April 15, 1921

Prime rib roast	15¢	1b.
Hamburger	19¢	1b.
Veal Roast	24¢	1b.
2-1/2 lb. Hills Bros. Coffee	\$1.19	
5 lb. Hills Bros. Coffee	\$2.29	
2-1/2 lb. Can Blue Caro Syrup	25¢	
10¢ can of milk	2/15¢	
1 lb. butter	49¢	
3 cans tomatoes	25¢	
2 cans Best June Peas	23¢	
1 can pork and beans	9¢	
5 lbs. rice	31¢	
5 lbs. navy beans	35¢	
2 lbs. pail lard	38¢	
4 lbs. Snowdrift	83¢	
14 bars Naptha soap	\$1.00	
15 oz package Lux	12¢	
27 bars Peter Pan Toilet Soap	\$1.00	
1 pkg. Puffed Wheat	15¢	
40¢ pkg Oatmeal	33¢	
9 lb. corn meal	29¢	
1 pkg. corn flakes	14¢	
Prunes	15¢	1b.

P. J. Larsen Grocery Co.

AREA MAP OF BRIGHAM CITY, UTAH
(circa 1920)

4th East

124 S. 400 E. Graves Home		Orchards
		Barn
Reeves Home	137 S. 300 E. Mathias Home	Jonah & Abigail Mathias Home

3rd East

First Ward
