

Sketch of the Life of Wiliam Daniel Thomas

U.S. Mail Stage Driver

(This sketch of the life of William Daniel Thomas was dictated by Joseph Harrison Thomas and written by his sister, Stella Thomas Groutage of Preston, Idaho—5/16/1933.

It was read in the Eagle Rock Camp of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers by my grandmother, Clara R. Brunt, on October 24, 1955.

William Daniel Thomas was born May 8, 1834. He was the son of Joseph Morehead Thomas and Mary Ann (Thomas. *(Her maiden name was also Thomas)*). He was born on the east side of the Yadkin River, Richmond County, North Carolina.

This plantation consisted of 8,000 acres. Thirty negroes assisted in the operation of this farm. His grandfather, Daniel Thomas *(also Preston Thomas's grandfather)* died on this plantation on November 7, 1830. His grandmother, Ann Morehead Thomas, at this time had relations living in Tipton County, Tennessee. In 1835 the Thomas plantation was sold and the whole family moved to Tennessee. In 1836, wishing to engage in cotton raising on a larger scale, the family moved to Somerville, Kemper County, Mississippi.

On November 7, 1843, his grandmother died...just thirteen years to the day, after her husband's death. One month later some Mormon Elders came to their home, Benjamin Clapp and others. The first sermon that Daniel's parents heard they were converted and joined the church. The next spring they sold their farm in Mississippi and started for Nauvoo, Illinois, to join the main body of the church. They traveled by way of Jackson and Vicksburg, then up the Mississippi River by steamer to Nauvoo.

They lived in Nauvoo until the expulsion of the saints. His father assisted in building the Nauvoo Temple. My grandfather on the Morehead side helped with the paintings on this temple. He was an artist and did some of the paintings of the walls of this temple.

He also painted portraits.

In May, 1845, his mother and her infant daughter, Rachel, died. They were buried in the Nauvoo cemetery. Uncle Dan has the pleasure of seeing the prophet, Joseph Smith, before his martyrdom. In February, 1846, his father, Joseph (Morehead) Thomas, along with the other saints, were driven out of their homes in Nauvoo into the State of Iowa where he died through exposure, September 17, 1846. He is buried in Bentonsford, Iowa cemetery by the side of his very dear friend and brother-in-law, James Madison Morehead. Thus Daniel was left an orphan together with his sister, Frances and his two brothers, Harrison Ayers and James Claybourn. They were now taken care of by their two uncles, Preston and D. Claybourn Thomas.

In June of 1850, Daniel Claybourne Thomas, his wife, Jane Gather Thomas, together with his widowed sister, Elizabeth Thomas Morehead and her two children, Preston and Ann Morehead, started across the plains. They were well prepared for the trip compared with other pioneers. His uncle, Claybourn had come from Texas, bringing with him many useful things that made for the comfort of the trip.

Daniel, who was now sixteen, drove one of his Uncle Claybourn's team which consisted of a yoke of oxen and a yoke of cows hitched to a covered wagon. While crossing the plains, Uncle Claybourn and Aunt Jane's first child was born. They named him Claybourn. They arrived in Salt Lake Valley in the fall of 1850 in Aaron Johnson's company. The family moved at once to Sulphur Springs, now Lehi, Utah. His uncle, Claybourn Thomas was one of the first four settlers of that city. (*See history of Lehi for portraits*) The next seven years, Dan lived with two uncles here and at Cedar Fort.

In Utah in 1849, there was no regular mail service. The letters were wrapped in buckskin covers, tied round and round with the same material and were sent by chance travelers. The first regular mail service to Salt Lake City, under a contract with the federal government, was contacted by Colonel Samuel H. Woodson of Independence, Missouri, The Eastern terminus of the route. It was a monthly service and was started in July 1850, At first only the mail was carried, but soon the passenger service was added. Later on, a mail contract was given to Benjamin Holloday from St Joseph, Missouri, to Sacramento, California.

Later on a mail contract was given to Benjamin Holloday from St Joseph, Missouri, to Sacramento, California. In the summer of 1856, Uncle Daniel was employed as a mail coach driver between Salt Lake City and Sacramento. The line of travel at this time was by way of Ogen, around the north end of the Great Salt Lake, and skirting the north end of Promontory, thence west to the Humbolt River, over the Sierra Nevada Mountains to Sacramento, California, the center of the gold region at that time. The distance from Salt Lake City, Utah to Sacramento, California is about 800 miles. To drive mail and passenger coach over this route in that early day was a hazardous undertaking. The driver must be brave, fearless, physically fit, and a man of good judgment. He would have to be a first class teamster in order to be able drive a four or six mule team over such dangerous roads.

The Indians in this part of the country belonged to the Bannock and Shoshone tribes. To show this condition in regard to the Indians, I will relate the following historical events:

Smithfield, Cache Valley, at this date, 1856, was not settled but was in the next year, 1859. In 1860, two men were killed by the Indians in Smithfield. Ira Merrill and a Mr. Reed were killed. Reed was the first man buried in the Franklin Cemetery. Ira Merrill was the first person buried in the Smithfield Cemetery.

On January 29th, 1865, Captain Conner of Fort Douglass, Utah, fought the battle of Battle Creek in the north end of Cache Valley, killing about three hundred Indians, according to H. R. Groberg. Chief Bear Hunter was the leader of the Indians. In a cool headed manner and coupled with true western tact and splendid judgment, like a flash of lightning he sought the lapels of his coat bearing his breast to the savages, Capt Conner shouted in a loud voice, "Shoot, Squaws, Shoot!"

Dan had acquired a fairly good knowledge of the Indian language and their characteristics while live at Cedar Fort, Utah. Now at this time that knowledge served him well. The old Chief did not like to be called a squaw, it meant the same as being called a coward. The sentence shouted by Dan worked like magic, for in an instant the bows and arrows were all lowered. In an undertone Dan spoke to the passengers in the coach and said, "men, put down your guns and allow me to handle the situation."

The Chief and part of his warriors passed around the frightened mules and came up to the coach saying, "Gimme biscuit, " "Alright" said Dan, turning his team over to one of the passengers. Then he proceeded to unbuckle the heavy straps that held the boxes on the rear end of the coach. As he began to divide the food, the chief said,, "Gimme heap of biscuits." With words and gestures, Dan explained that they would starve if he gave them all. This satisfied the old chief. While the boxes were being replaced, a friendly conversation was kept up between the Chief and stage driver. Before parting the Chief insured Dan that he would be allowed to go over this road unharmed unless he brought "Sogers" with him. With a lighter heart Dan sprang to the high seat on top of the coach and the reins were handed to him. The passengers re-entered the coach and they were now allowed to resume their journey which they did. They reached Sacramento without any further trouble. In due time the return trip to Salt Lake City was made.

THE FATAL TRIP

In the latter part of November, 1858, Uncle Dan left Salt Lake City with the U.S. mail and his coach filled with passengers. His destination as usual being Sacramento, California. This proved to be a sad and fatal one for him.

He had no difficulty on this trip until after he had reached his destination and had made his return trip as far as the Sierra Nevada Mountains. It was now the 10th of December and the snow had fallen to a great depth which retarded his progress. He managed somehow to get through the mountains and reached the station at the north end of the promontory where there was a spring of water. At this station Dan expected to change teams, but to his surprise there were no teams there.

The mail route had been changed by the contractors without his knowledge to pass around the south end of the Great Salt Lake. They had no way by which to communicate with him and thought he could make the remainder of the trip without fresh animals.

His mules were jaded, the snow was deep and not a sign of a track to follow. He had a heavy load of passengers and mail, and only about two days left to reach the Salt Lake Valley or he and his employer would have to pay a heavy forfeit. As usual Dan was equal to the occasion. He decided to leave the passengers, the coach and his wheel team at the station. He would use one of the lead mules for a pack animal on which to put the two heavy packs of mail and he would ride the other mule.

heavy packs of mail and he would ride the other mule. The passengers were not pleased with this arrangement, but finally agreed to it. Dan explained to them that as soon as he reached Call's Fort he would send help back to them.

The next morning before sunrise Uncle Dan was ready to start. As he placed the two heavy sacks of mail upon the pack mule, he remarked to those standing near: "Fellas I'm sorry to have to leave you here, you have paid your fare and should not be treated in this manner, but this is the only way I see of getting the mail through on time."

Uncle Dan spent a good deal of his salary to buy the very best clothing he could buy. As a young man he was very proud and delighted in being well dressed. He had a silk brocaded vest and a stick pin for his cravat, made of a gold nugget which he had purchased in Sacramento. He had silk handkerchiefs of many different colors. This particular morning he was warmly dressed, having several shirts on and also several pairs of pants.

His mule was packed. He swung his two heavy horse pistols over the horn of his saddle. He mounted his mule and turning to the man, he said, "Goodby fellows. You can trust me to get help to you soon."

It was the 16th of December 1858. An eventful day for Uncle Dan. A cold crisp breeze from the north stung his face as he started eastward across the trackless waste.

The sun rose above the snowy peaks of the Wasatch Mountains. These mountains served as a main guide to pilot his way to Call's Fort, the nearest point of civilization.

Upon reaching the Malad River, he found it frozen over. The north wind was blowing harder than ever and was much colder. Dis-mounting, he tested the ice and decided to attempt to cross it, although the ice was not very thick. He fastened the leather strap of the pack mule to the horn of his saddle, then taking hold of the leather strap of the saddle mule, he started out across the icy stream, leaving the mules as far apart as possible so the ice would not give way. When he reached the center of the small stream of the pack mule with his heavy load broke through the ice and down he went to the bottom of the river.

Dan quickly untied the unfortunate mule and led the saddle mule to safety, fastening him to the bushes on the bank. Returning to the pack mule he at once removed the mail sacks to make it easier for the mule to get out. The Malad is not a large stream and at that time of the year, there was not a great deal of water passing under the ice. It was difficult for the mule to get out for the ice kept giving way under his feet. Not wishing to leave his faithful mule in this plight, Dan stayed with him and finally succeeded in helping the mule to extricate himself. In doing so however, Dan got his legs wet above the knees and his arm to the elbows in the ice cold water. The pack was replaced on the shivering mule. The mail was still dry, having been protected by the heavy leather sacks, but Dan began to wonder if these letters would ever reach the mothers and lovers living eastward of the Rocky Mountains, some of whom were anxiously waiting to hear from the dear ones who were laboring in the gold fields near Sacramento.

Dan was now very cold, but knew he must forge ahead if he were to reach Call's Fort alive. Thinking to warm himself, he began to walk, leading the mules in single file.

As he ploughed through the deep snow his wet clothing froze to his arms and legs. The extra pieces of clothing he had put on for protection were now only a detriment. His greatest fear ahead now was crossing the Bear River, which is much larger than the Malad. Reaching the western bluff overhanging he could see that the river was not completely frozen over. I don't know now he got across, but he managed in some way to reach the opposite side. As Uncle Dan climbed the east bank of that river he was happy to think he had crossed safely the two streams, but by this time he realized that his hands and feet were frozen stiff, but he must go on. Slowly he ascended the hill on the east side of the river. When on top he saw in the distance a horseman coming towards him. Uncle Dan's keen eye soon told him that it was an Indian carrying a gun.

Although he had his heavy pistols hanging to the horn of his saddle, his hands were too badly frozen to use them. Death seemed to be facing this heroic westerner in two ways now instead of one. Suddenly the Indian stopped. Dan beckoned to him to come nearer which he did and then within talking distance, Dan said, "Howdy! Shonta, cold?" The old Indian replied, "Heap cold."

In the conversation that followed Uncle Dan explained to the Shoshone his sad conditions and that he desired to reach Call's Fort. The Indian proved to be a friend instead of a foe and helped him in every way he could, assisting him to mount the mule and leading the way. They set out in single file for the fort. The Indian induced the suffering man to place his hands and feet in the warm water. Then they went on and soon reached the fort.

There were four things that needed Uncle Dan's immediate attention. They were:

1st : a proper reward for the Indian who had befriended him. 2nd: dispatching of help to the passengers left at Promontory station. 3rd: getting the mail bags on to Salt Lake City as soon as possible and 4th: securing medical help to relieve his own suffering.

The kind pioneers of Fort Call and Brigham City furnished a good outfit to take him and his mail to Salt Lake City. They aided him in every way and did everything for his comfort. He secured some good men to go back with the lead mules and bring the coach and passenger left at Promontory. They, in due time, reached Salt Lake City.

Uncle Dan's condition grew worse. His suffering was so intense, it was decided upon reaching the Sessions Settlement (now Bountiful) 10 miles north of Salt Lake, to leave him at the home of Judson Stoddard. The mail was sent on time to Salt Lake City so there was no forfeit to pay.

Word was sent on to Lehi informing Dan's relatives of his sad condition. Several of them came to see him. His brother, Harrison Ayers, and his dear aunt, Elizabeth Morehead stayed with him to nurse him. A good doctor was secured by the mail's contractor and sent to Dan's bedside at Bountiful. After an examination the doctor reported to father that it would be necessary to amputate his hands and feet in order to save his life. Father asked the doctor to break the sad news to Dan, which he did.

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As the doctor stated the facts, Dan's face plainly showed the mental strain through which he was passing, but with a firm voice, he replied: *"If my hands and feet must go, I will go with them"* No amount of persuasion could induce him to change his mind. After two weeks of intense suffering he passed away on the 28th of December 1858.

Note: Uncle Dan's father, Joseph Morehead Thomas was called on a mission to the City of Nauvoo by the Prophet Joseph Smith just before the Prophet's martyrdom. Uncle Dan had a sweetheart (Serena Little).

This sketch of the life of William Daniel Thomas was dictated by Joseph Harrison Thomas and written by his siter, Stella Thomas Groutage of Preston, Idaho, May 15th, 1933

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