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## David Whitmer, The Independent Missouri Businessman

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**Abstract:** Fifty years of the non-Mormon life of David Whitmer, one of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon, is discussed and his character explored.

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# David Whitmer,

## The Independent Missouri Businessman

By Dr. Richard Lloyd Anderson

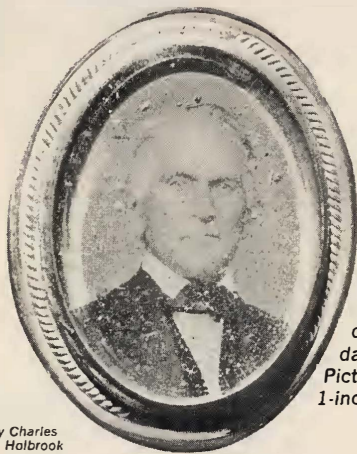


Photo by Charles F. Holbrook

David Whitmer, from a recently discovered daguerreotype. Picture is about 1-inch wide.

Each witness of the Book of Mormon was an individualist. In David Whitmer, this quality verged on the stubborn. Whether in Mormon society or not, he stood like a rock for his principles. This outspoken and utterly honest personality would have been the first to detect fraud and expose it. During eight years in the Church and 50 years of strict separation from it, he maintained without compromise that he had seen the angel and the plates. Only a survey of his life will adequately portray an individual who did not use words lightly. The strength of the testimony is the power of the man.

By birth a Pennsylvania German, David Whitmer still betrayed "a German twang" in his conversation with George Q. Cannon in 1884. The family moved about 1809 to wooded farmland adjoining Seneca Lake in western New York. A reporter obtained from the fam-

ily the description of David's father as a "hard-working, God-fearing man," who was "a strict Presbyterian and brought his children up with rigid sectarian discipline."<sup>1</sup> These qualities, broadened by the humaneness of the restored gospel, characterized the witness-son. Since he was a natural leader all his life, it is significant that the first mention of him in his community is his election March 12, 1825, as sergeant in the newly organized militia company, the "Seneca Grenadiers."<sup>2</sup> He was then a bachelor-farmer of 20.

His subsequent investigation and acceptance of Joseph Smith were painted in bold colors in the interviews of his elderly life. All was still vivid to him then: rumors of the "Gold Bible"; contact with the teacher Oliver Cowdery, who was traveling to Pennsylvania to see for himself; two letters from the young schoolmaster expressing firm con-

viction that Joseph Smith had the plates and enclosing samples of their translation; a third letter from friend Oliver requesting the hospitality of the Whitmer home. David made a 200-mile trip with team and wagon to move the translators to his home, and had intimate contact with their work, events that in later life still glowed with the power of God's assistance.<sup>3</sup> By June of 1829 he had given his name to the world to declare that he saw an angel exhibit the plates and heard the voice of God declare the translation correct.

David Whitmer's association with Mormonism from 1829 to his excommunication in 1838 can be itemized with a little labor. It included sustained missionary journeys, pioneering in newly settled western Missouri, administering the affairs of the Church in the trusted inner circle of the Prophet. In these eight years no more than that many



men were as prominent as was David Whitmer. The pinnacle of his recognition was the office of president of the Church in Missouri, the equivalent of a stake president in terms of current Church organization, but then of such status that the First Presidency and the Missouri presidency sat on the stand together at the Kirtland Temple dedication.

What of the man himself? When mobs terrorized the Missouri Whitmer settlement, burning homes and brutally whipping men, it was David who vigorously organized the resistance. Two years later in Kirtland the lesson of the absence of civil protection was still vivid, and David was named "captain of the Lord's host."<sup>4</sup> The appointment was merely the token of a plan, not a reality, but the recognition underlines the Prophet's respect for David's courage and reliability. Joseph Smith measured the men about him well, and his opinion of David was recorded in a blessing given in 1835, the peak year of the witness's service to the Church. A few phrases from the copy that David treasured for over 40 years capture his basic nature. Beloved as "a faithful friend to mankind," his integrity causes "all his words" to be as "steadfast as the pillars of heaven." "His character" will be unspotted, and "his testimony shall shine as fair as the sun, and as a diamond, it shall remain untarnished."<sup>5</sup> As far as the intent of that blessing, David's continued faithfulness was a condition of its complete fulfillment, but from the point of view of the man's nature, his developed personality at age 30 is depicted, which even in rebellion against the Church was not radically modified.

Tragic events culminated in David Whitmer's excommunication April 13, 1838. In the previous year of doctrinal and financial trial,

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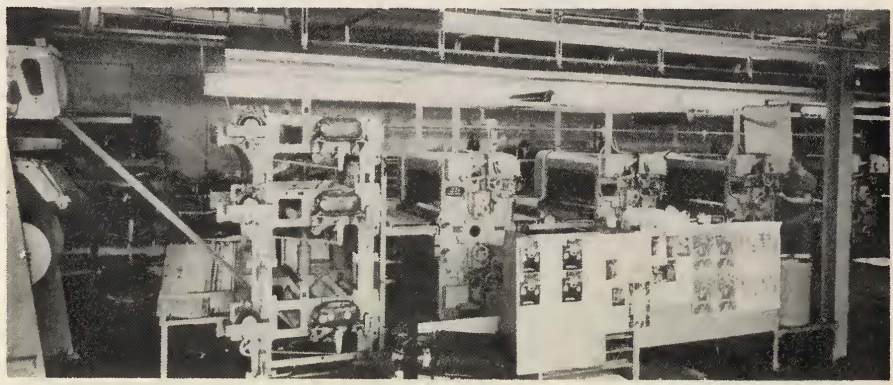
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prominent dissenters moved in open council to depose the Prophet and replace him with David Whitmer, a commentary on the public stature of the latter.<sup>6</sup> Long afterwards the witness denied certain stories of his apostasy, and gave his own version of the processes of his thinking.<sup>7</sup> In summary, he simply was jealous of the power and suspected influence of Sidney Rigdon: "Rigdon was a thorough Bible scholar, a man of fine education, and a powerful orator. He soon worked himself deep into Brother Joseph's affections, and had more influence over him than any other man living."<sup>8</sup>

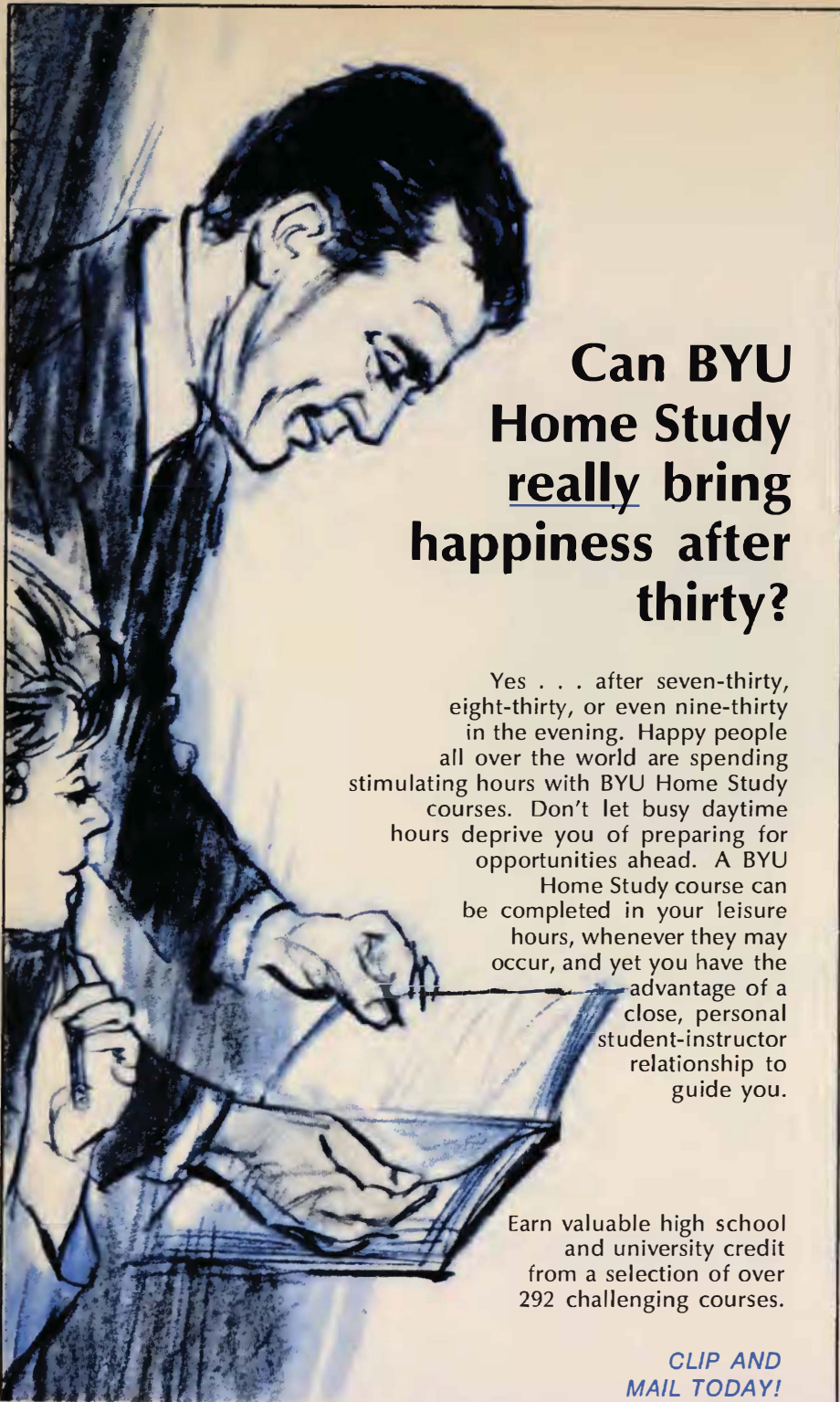
At David Whitmer's excommunication, the main charge was "possessing the same spirit with the dissenters. . . ."<sup>9</sup> This meant that he was skeptical of the new policies of the Kirtland era and had declared economic independence. But David really sought to recreate the intimate days of 1829-30 at his father's home in Fayette, New York. His later writings idealize this period when he felt closest to God and the Prophet. So David Whitmer is really a man who declined to grow with the Church. His grandson defined his position as "standing still."<sup>10</sup> If skeptical of further revelations, he nevertheless accepted the founding guidance of the Church—his letter of withdrawal in 1838 alleged a treatment inconsistent with "the revelations of God, which I believe. . . ."<sup>11</sup> Although the Whitmers succumbed to McLellin's flattery in 1846-47 and joined that reorganization, David soon confessed that he had been emotionally moved instead of divinely directed—so he continued to wait. This position plus opposition to polygamy characterized his family flock, the "Church of Christ" in north-central Missouri.

David Whitmer's separation coincided with Mormon expulsion

from Missouri. The estranged witness remained behind to live a half-century in a society hostile to his religious views, a situation that continually highlighted his rugged individualism. Two examples stand out, although the Whitmer modesty makes it necessary for the historian to piece each event together. In indignant rebuttal to the charge that he had contributed to Mormon persecution, David gave background details of an incident of the year of his excommunication: "[W]hen I came to Richmond, General Parks . . . pressed me and my team into service, and I was forced to go and drive a wagon load of baggage to Far West. I told them if I had to go I would take no gun. They said 'all right'; and I took no gun."<sup>12</sup> A reporter recorded David's recollection of the heroic sequel: "During the melee that followed he was handed a musket by the soldiery and ordered to shoot Joseph Smith, but threw the musket down, declaring he 'would not harm the Lord's anointed.'"<sup>13</sup>

David Whitmer also risked his life for his loyalty to country as a firm Unionist in a divided county in the Civil War. His family knew of his open declaration of loyalty to Lincoln,<sup>14</sup> and his grandson alluded to personal danger at that time: "He looked up the cocked gun barrel of the brutal men the times produced. . . ."<sup>15</sup> These traditions tend to confirm a detailed story from an unidentified Ray County resident. This 1888 recollection concerns a meeting where the majority began to frame resolutions requiring non-secessionists to leave the county:

"At this point in the proceedings David Whitmer arose, walked to the platform, and delivered a short but very telling speech. He stated that no resolutions or threats would cause him to run away. He declared that he was a citizen of the



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United States, and should remain such. He proposed to live or die under the old flag. If anyone desired to shoot him, then was a good time. The resolutions were not passed, the meeting adjourned to a given day, but did not convene."<sup>16</sup>

The quiet but immovable ways of David Whitmer turned grudging respect to admiration during the 50 years of his residence in Richmond, Missouri. Three decades of surviving newspapers chronicle many ordinary activities, with supplementation by public documents. By his recollections his sole capital in 1838 was a wagon and team. The census records value his real estate at \$1,000 in 1850, and his personal and real property in 1860 as \$5,000, increasing to \$7,000 in 1870. His private assets at death in 1888 were probably worth \$10,000.

Perhaps general hauling work continued for some time, since he gave no specific occupation on the 1850 census. By 1860 he is listed as a "Livery Keeper," and his newspaper notices are fairly continuous for a quarter of a century for the "Livery and Feed Stable" of "D. Whitmer & Son" or "Whitmer & Co." The editor of the *Conservator* regularly editorialized for his advertiser: "They have everything all O.K. in their line, and can furnish customers with anything from a saddle horse to a four-horse coach at a moment's notice."<sup>17</sup> For over two decades David Whitmer's advertisement had the same closing message: "Customers may rely on promptness, good turnouts, safe horses, and moderate charges."<sup>18</sup> After a time both editor and paid notices refer to the business as "The Old Reliable Livery and Feed Stable." This title symbolized the record of the firm and is really a comment about its owner.

David Whitmer's business interests were broad, and so was his service and friendship in his com-

munity. What the Whitmers did commercially for Richmond was summarized accurately by David's great-granddaughter:

"They filled hauling contracts, rented out carriages and buggies, and met two trains a day at Lexington Junction with a beautifully decorated yellow bus. . . . Side lines were feed and grain, sand and gravel."<sup>19</sup>

David was public-spirited, serving on fair boards, and he and his wife entered competition and won prizes. Named in the newspapers as participating in many public meetings, he appears as the elected chairman of some. Shortly after the Civil War he signed as one of the "friends of Johnson, Liberty and Union,"<sup>20</sup> and his temperate voice was most influential in this reconstruction period. As early as 1858 he was nominated for city councilman, a position subsequently held several times.<sup>21</sup> He was elected to fill the unexpired term of mayor in 1867-68, during which he sponsored several practical programs.<sup>22</sup> But the active businessman of 63 apparently retired from further office seeking; declining to attempt a second term, he recommended the election of a "younger, more energetic man."<sup>23</sup> His prominence, however, never diminished. The Ray County Atlas of 1877 featured his picture as one of 20 influential individuals.<sup>24</sup> Likenesses appeared on the same page of his lawyer-nephew, David P. Whitmer (eldest son of the witness Jacob), and Jacob T. Child, the editor of the *Richmond Conservator*.

A firm friendship existed between David Whitmer and the editor Jacob Child. This journalist was an enlightened reformer of his period and had no party connection with the Book of Mormon witness, who was 30 years his senior. Child was a forthright spokesman for the causes he championed, and one of

them was supporting the integrity of David Whitmer. The opinions of "the famed publisher of the *Richmond Conservator*"<sup>25</sup> should carry a good deal of weight. Dynamic in local and state politics, he was elected mayor of Richmond and state assemblyman. His fellow editors named him president of the Missouri Press Association, and he was United States ambassador to Siam under President Cleveland.<sup>26</sup>

Some of Child's comments on David Whitmer favorably mention the Whitmer transportation business, perhaps for favors shown. A

step beyond this is a definite personal relationship. For instance, during the sickness of the witness in 1881-82, Child gave regular progress reports: "We were glad to see Unele David Whitmer on the street Monday looking remarkably well. . . ." <sup>27</sup> Later that year the town was excited by the marriage of David's granddaughter Josie to the brilliant young Chicago resident, James R. Van Cleave. Writing the front-page story with Victorian eloquence, the Missouri editor noticed the presence of the "silver haired patriarch, whose

Twenty-two leading citizens of Richmond, Missouri, signed this statement, attesting that David Whitmer was "of the highest integrity."

*Upon the undersigned Citizens of Richmond Ray Co Mo where David Whitmer Sr has resided since the year 1838, Certify that we have been long and intimately acquainted with him, and know him to be a man of the highest integrity, and of undoubted trust and veracity. Given at Richmond Mo this 17th March 1881*

*J. W. Josephson*  
*Engelb. Drenn* Judge of the Fifth Judicial Circuit.  
*T. D. Woodson* President Ray County Barrio Board  
*Jacob T. Child* Editor of *Conservator*  
*W. C. Warner* Cashier Ray County Tax Bank  
*M. A. Keokuan* County Treasurer  
*J. S. Hughes* Banker Richmond Mo.  
*James Hughes* " " "  
*D. P. Whitmer* Attorney at Law  
*Samuel H. Wood* Attorney at Law  
*R. C. Cantwell* Postmaster Richmond Mo  
*Geo. W. Warner* Mayor  
*Geo. A. Davis* Revenue Collector  
*J. S. Hughes* Probate Judge of Ray County  
*Geo. W. Davis* County Clerk Ray County  
*Wm. Mosby* " " "  
*Geo. McGinnis* Late Sheriff Ray Co  
*W. R. Keokuan* Junior Merchant  
*J. P. Dunsberry* Merchant  
*Lewis Slaughter* Recorder of Deeds  
*Wm. Buchanan* M.D.  
*A. H. Ryburn*

“After 50 years in non-Mormon society, he insisted . . . that he knew the Book of Mormon was divinely revealed”

form is as erect and his eyes as bright as when he gazed on the Lord’s messenger.”<sup>28</sup> On several definite occasions Child went beyond such notices to openly defend the integrity of the Book of Mormon witness.

Whitmer’s election as mayor induced some spiteful remarks. Child’s editorial reaction reminded his readers that one with “self respect” would not indulge in vicious gossip: “Mr. Whitmer is a gentleman, and as such represented the views of our people when they cast for him their votes for mayor.”<sup>29</sup> Some fifteen years later the vitriolic anti-Mormon lecturer, Clark Braden, came to the hometown of the last Book of Mormon witness and publicly branded him as disreputable. The *Conservator’s* response was a spirited front-page editorial unsympathetic with Mormonism but insistent on “the forty six years of private citizenship on the part of David Whitmer, in Richmond, without stain or blemish. . . .”<sup>30</sup> Although admitting that theological views were open to question, the prominent journalist insisted that the character of his friend was not: “If a life of probity, of unobtrusive benevolence and well doing for well nigh a half century, marks a man as a good citizen, then David Whitmer should enjoy the confidence and esteem of his fellowmen.” The following year the editor penned a tribute on the eightieth birthday of David Whitmer, who “with no regrets for the past” still “reiterates that he saw the glory of the angel. . . .”<sup>31</sup>

This is the critical issue of the life of David Whitmer. After 50 years in non-Mormon society, he

insisted with the fervor of his youth that he knew that the Book of Mormon was divinely revealed. Relatively few people in Richmond could wholly accept such testimony, but none doubted his intelligence or complete honesty. The agnostic John Murphy from neighboring Polo, Missouri, interviewed the witness in 1880 and published his version virtually claiming David’s denial. In turn, the witness-businessman printed a crisp “proclamation” that he had never modified his written testimony. He also enlisted 22 of Richmond’s political, business, and professional leaders to sign an accompanying statement that they had known him for over forty years as “a man of the highest integrity, and of undoubted truth and veracity.”<sup>32</sup> This certificate rightly claimed that the signers knew David Whitmer well—personal relationships can be traced in many cases, including the six that were pallbearers at his funeral seven years later. None on the list, including Jacob Child, publicly accepted the Book of Mormon, but all admired the man who testified of its truth.

The existence of witnesses of such capacity and credibility confronts every thinking person with a challenge. Those who personally talked with David Whitmer seem to have sensed the dilemma of skepticism. No one explained it more clearly than Hiram Parker, who lived in David Whitmer’s section of town for a decade spanning 1870, when he listed himself on the federal census as a “marble marker and deal[er].” Later prominent in the insurance business in Detroit, Parker wrote an article around the

turn of the century recalling “Uncle Davy Whitmer” and the years that they lived “side by side.” Reminiscing about the appearance and personal industry of “the last living witness,” who never allowed a weed to mature in his small garden. Parker tells why he was “respected by all”:

“No one could know Uncle Davy and not like and trust him. . . . Children liked him, men respected him and trusted him, and I never heard a word from anyone during my ten years’ acquaintance with him and those who had known him intimately for years that spoke a harsh word or uttered a doubt as to his truthfulness and general kindness of heart.”<sup>33</sup>

Parker had obviously reflected a good deal on how one might admire the man without accepting his message. Few of his townsmen could accept his Book of Mormon testimony, but “on any other subject or statement of fact neither myself or others could doubt.” Hiram Parker spent most of his life in selling in several states but had never met “a more honest, guileless man”: “How one can account for the delusion that must have possessed this old man is beyond me.”

Such reasoning cuts two ways. Man is both a rational and a rationalizing creature. If he can invent reality, he can also explain away what has actually happened. David Whitmer insisted on the actual appearance of a supernatural being. His community insisted that he was a man of remarkable acumen and truthfulness.

At his death in 1888 a new generation of editors reiterated Richmond’s judgment on the last Book of Mormon witness. The *Conservator* described David Whitmer as “one of our oldest and best known citizens,”<sup>35</sup> but the *Democrat* was

more personal in its report:  
 “[N]o man ever lived here, who had among our people, more friends and fewer enemies. Honest, conscientious and upright in all his dealings, just in his estimate of men, and open, manly and frank in his treatment of all, he made lasting friends who loved him to the end.”<sup>36</sup>

(To be continued)

FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Chicago Tribune, Dec. 17, 1885. Quotations herein are modified only in spelling and punctuation.
- <sup>2</sup>Seneca Farmer, March 23, 1825.
- <sup>3</sup>Kansas City Daily Journal, June 5, 1881.
- <sup>4</sup>The Book of John Whitmer, *Journal of History*, Vol. 1 (1908), p. 302. Cf. *DHC*, Vol. 2, pp. 281-82.
- <sup>5</sup>The blessing, copied by David Whitmer's admirer J. L. Traugher, Jr., appeared in *The Return*, Vol. 2 (February 1890), pp. 212-13. Its occasion appears in John Whitmer's history, *op. cit.*, pp. 302-03; the correction of two transposed words has been made from LDS records.
- <sup>6</sup>"History of Brigham Young," *Deseret News*, February 10, 1858, cit. *Millennial Star*, Vol. 25 (1863), p. 487.
- <sup>7</sup>Whitmer stated that Lucy Smith relied upon hearsay for her reports of him in 1837. Cf. *Saints' Herald*, Vol. 34 (1887), p. 90, with Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith* (Liverpool, 1853), pp. 211-13.
- <sup>8</sup>David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, 1887), p. 35; cf. p. 59.
- <sup>9</sup>Far West Record, Church Historian's Typescript, p. 124; also cit. *DHC*, Vol. 3, p. 19.
- <sup>10</sup>George W. L. Sweich, *The Return*, Vol. 3 (1893), p. 1.
- <sup>11</sup>See n. 9.
- <sup>12</sup>Letter of David Whitmer to Joseph Smith III, Dec. 9, 1886, cit. *Saints' Herald*, Vol. 34 (1887), p. 89.
- <sup>13</sup>Chicago Tribune, Dec. 17, 1885.
- <sup>14</sup>Helen Van Cleave Blankmeyer, *David Whitmer, Witness for God* (Springfield, Illinois, 1955), pp. 51-52; cf. p. 66.
- <sup>15</sup>George W. L. Sweich, *The Return*, Vol. 3 (December 1892), p. 4.
- <sup>16</sup>Chicago Times, Jan. 26, 1888.
- <sup>17</sup>North-West Conservator, Aug. 12, 1865.
- <sup>18</sup>Cf., e.g., his *Conservator* advertisements of Sept. 10, 1863, with July 31, 1884.
- <sup>19</sup>Blankmeyer, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
- <sup>20</sup>Conservator, Aug. 25, 1865.
- <sup>21</sup>See the *Conservator* of April 9, 1858, April 5, 1861, and April 7, 1864. He lost by a 48-49 vote in 1858.
- <sup>22</sup>Newspaper references to Whitmer's mayorship are surveyed in Ebbie L. V. Richardson, *David Whitmer* (M. A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1952), pp. 86-87.
- <sup>23</sup>Richmond Conservator, Mar. 21, 1868.
- <sup>24</sup>Illustrated Historical Atlas of Ray County, Missouri (Philadelphia, 1877).
- <sup>25</sup>William H. Taft, *Missouri Newspapers* (Columbia, Missouri, 1964), p. 182.
- <sup>26</sup>Ibid., pp. 182, 354. Cf. *History of Ray County, Missouri* (St. Louis, 1881), pp. 513-15.
- <sup>27</sup>Richmond Conservator, July 14, 1882.
- <sup>28</sup>Ibid., Nov. 17, 1882.
- <sup>29</sup>Ibid., June 22, 1867.
- <sup>30</sup>Ibid., Aug. 22, 1884.
- <sup>31</sup>Ibid., Jan. 9, 1885.
- <sup>32</sup>This statement and testimonial was published as a pamphlet and appeared in the *Richmond Conservator*, Mar. 25, 1881. Portions of the original (now at the Church Historian's Office) were photographically reproduced in Richardson, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-80.
- <sup>33</sup>"Mormon Reminiscences," published letter of Hiram Parker, Detroit, February 15 of an unidentified year. Miss Jo Clare Mangus of Goodland, Kansas, great-granddaughter and a member of the Church, holds the original clipping.
- <sup>34</sup>Richmond Conservator, Jan. 26, 1888. The editor was George W. Trigg, a signer of the 1881 testimonial.
- <sup>35</sup>Richmond Democrat, Jan. 26, 1888; the long biography was rerun Feb. 2, 1888.



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