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ANOTHER ACCOUNT OF MARY WHITMER'S VIEWING OF THE GOLDEN PLATES

Royal Skousen

Carl T. Cox has graciously provided me with a new account of Moroni showing the Book of Mormon plates to Mary Whitmer (1778-1856), wife of Peter Whitmer Senior. Mary was the mother of five sons who were witnesses to the golden plates: David Whitmer, one of the three witnesses; and Christian Whitmer, Jacob Whitmer, John Whitmer, and Peter Whitmer Junior, four of the eight witnesses.

For a long time we have known that Mary Whitmer was also shown the plates. These accounts are familiar and derive from David Whitmer and John C. Whitmer (the son of John Whitmer). For comparison's sake, I provide here two versions of their accounts (in each case, I have added some paragraphing).

David Whitmer's account, according to an interview with Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith in September 1878, published 16 November 1878 in the *Deseret News*, and reproduced by Dan Vogel in his *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:51-52 (Salt Lake City, Utah: 2003):

When I was returning to Fayette with Joseph and Oliver all of us riding in the wagon, Oliver and I on an old fashioned wooden spring seat and Joseph behind us, while traveling along in a clear open place, a very pleasant, nice-looking old man suddenly appeared by the side of our wagon and saluted us with, "good morning, it is very warm," at the same time wiping

his face or forehead with his hand. We returned the salutation, and by a sign from Joseph I invited him to ride if he was going our way. But he said very pleasantly, “No, I am going to Cumorah.” This name was somewhat new to me, I did not know what Cumorah meant. We all gazed at him and at each other, and as I looked round inquiringly of Joseph, the old man instantly disappeared, so that I did not see him again. ... It was the messenger who had the plates, who had taken them from Joseph just prior to our starting from Harmony.

Soon after our arrival home, I saw something which led me to the belief that the plates were placed or concealed in my father’s barn. I frankly asked Joseph if my supposition was right, and he told me it was. Sometime after this, my mother was going to milk the cows, when she was met out near the yard by the same old man (judging by her description of him) who said to her, “You have been very faithful and diligent in your labors, but you are tired because of the increase of your toil, it is proper therefore that you should receive a witness that your faith may be strengthened.” Thereupon he showed her the plates. My father and mother had a large family of their own, the addition to it therefore of Joseph, his wife Emma and Oliver very greatly increased the toil and anxiety of my mother. And although she had never complained she had sometimes felt that her labor was too much, or at least she was perhaps beginning to feel so. This circumstance, however, completely removed all such feelings, and nerved her up for her increased responsibilities.

John C. Whitmer's 1878 account, as recorded by Andrew Jenson (see his *Latter-Day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia* 1:283, Salt Lake City, Utah: 1901):

I have heard my grandmother (Mary Musselman Whitmer) say on several occasions that she was shown the plates of the Book of Mormon by a holy angel, whom she always called Brother Nephi. (She undoubtedly refers to Moroni, the angel who had the plates in charge.)

It was at the time, she said, when the translation was going on at the house of the elder Peter Whitmer, her husband. Joseph Smith with his wife and Oliver Cowdery, whom David Whitmer a short time previous had brought up from Harmony, Pennsylvania, were all boarding with the Whitmers, and my grandmother in having so many extra persons to care for, besides her own large household, was often overloaded with work to such an extent that she felt it to be quite a burden.

One evening, when (after having done her usual day's work in the house) she went to the barn to milk the cows, she met a stranger carrying something on his back that looked like a knapsack. At first she was a little afraid of him, but when he spoke to her in a kind, friendly tone and began to explain to her the nature of the work which was going on in her house, she was filled with unexpressible joy and satisfaction. He then untied his knapsack and showed her a bundle of plates, which in size and appearance corresponded with the description subsequently given by the witnesses to the Book of Mormon. This strange person turned the leaves of the book of plates over, leaf after leaf, and also

showed her the engravings upon them; after which he told her to be patient and faithful in bearing her burden a little longer, promising that if she would do so, she should be blessed; and her reward would be sure, if she proved faithful to the end. The personage then suddenly vanished with the plates, and where he went, she could not tell.

From that moment my grandmother was enabled to perform her household duties with comparative ease, and she felt no more inclination to murmur because her lot was hard. I knew my grandmother to be a good, noble and truthful woman, and I have not the least doubt of her statement in regard to seeing the plates being strictly true. She was a strong believer in the Book of Mormon until the day of her death.

Here is what Carl Cox writes:

This same experience with Mother Whitmer and the plates is a part of my family history. Elvira Pamela Mills Cox heard the story before she was married. Christian Whitmer, one of the Book of Mormon witnesses and the eldest son of Peter Whitmer, had married Anna Schott in 1825. They must have lived in close proximity to Peter Whitmer while the Book of Mormon was being translated. When Christian died in Clay County, Missouri, in 1835, Anna was left a widow. Sylvanus Hulet married the widowed Anna, and also had care of his orphaned niece, Elvira Mills. The experience of Mother Whitmer would have been known by family members, and Elvira was an interested teenager at that time. This is the way the story appears in our family history:

“Elvira Pamela Mills”, *Cox Bulletin II* (1958), written by Orville Cox Day (O C Day):

Grandma stopped telling a story of Mother Whitmer till 1900 when B. H. Roberts printed it in his “New Witness for God.” Then she said, “I’m so glad I can tell it again.”

David Whitmer had invited Joseph and Oliver to live in his father’s home while translating the Book of Mormon. When Oliver’s hand and Joseph’s eyes grew tired they went to the woods for a rest. There they often skated rocks on a pond.

Mary Whitmer, with five grown sons and a husband to care for, besides visitors, often grew tired. She thought they might just as well carry her a bucket of water or chop a bit of wood as to skate rocks on a pond.

She was about to order them out of her home.

One morning, just at daybreak, she came out of her cow stable with two full buckets of milk in her hands, when a short, heavy-set, gray-haired man carrying a package met her and said,

“My name is Moroni. You have become pretty tired with all the extra work you have to do. The Lord has given me permission to show you this record:” turning the golden leaves one by one!

The most interesting aspect of this story is that Mary Whitmer’s difficulty with the household situation was more than just being tired from all the extra work. She was irritated by Joseph and Oliver’s indifference to all the work she was

doing, with their not helping out and instead skipping rocks for relaxation, so “she was about to order them out of her home.” Thus Moroni’s intervention was perhaps more purposeful than we might have previously thought. Undoubtedly, many others exerted much effort on behalf of providing help to Joseph and Oliver (such as Emma Smith had just done in Harmony, Pennsylvania, for the previous three months). Here, however, Moroni needed to deal with a more difficult situation, one that could have forced Joseph to find another place – and a secure one – to do the translating. Moroni (and the Lord) weren’t in the habit of just showing the plates to people to encourage them to act as a support team for the work of the translation.

There is independent evidence that during the translation process Joseph Smith liked to skip rocks on water as a form of relaxation. Martin Harris tells of one such occasion in the spring of 1828 when he was acting as scribe when Joseph was translating the book of Lehi (the 116 manuscript pages that were later lost). In an interview with Edward Stevenson and published in the *Deseret News* on 30 November 1881 and republished in the *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* (30 January and 6 February 1882), Martin says (on page 87 of the *Millennial Star*) that “after continued translation they would become weary, and would go down to the river and exercise by throwing stones out on the river, etc.”

There are a few other differences in this account. The plates were in a package rather than a knapsack. Mary had already done the milking, and it was in the morning rather than the evening. As with all independent accounts of historical events, there will be minor additions, omissions, and variants. But the reason for Moroni’s intervention is clearly a significant difference – and probably accurate.

Carl Cox has also provided me in various emails (dating from 2012) with the following information on the provenance of this account:

21 August 2012, email from Carl Cox to Royal Skousen:

I talked to O C Day's children (he is the one that published the pamphlet) and they do not know of any earlier written stories. O C's mother, Euphrasia, liked to tell family stories at night to the children, and her mother Elvira Pamela Mills Cox probably did the same. O C was 18 when Elvira died, so he would have heard the stories from her, and also from his mother. I have another Cox history pamphlet from 1957 that has genealogy with many tidbits of stories interspersed. O C was born in 1885, so he was in his 70s by that time. The pamphlet we are interested in was published just a little later.

The other pamphlets were published in the late 1950s by the Alpine Publishing Company, in Alpine or American Fork. Orville Cox Day is the son of Euphrasia Cox Day, who is the daughter of Elvira Pamela Mills Cox, who married Orville Sutherland Cox, my great grandfather. All this genealogy is on the website, OSCox.org. I got the pamphlet in the 1960s when I published the Cox Family Bulletin, which was the source for the beginnings of the OSCox.org website about 10 years ago.

29 September 2012, email from Carl Cox to Royal Skousen:

My investigation of the source of the Elvira Mills Cox story mostly confirms my earlier ideas. I have almost identical copies of the story, one typed on the legal size sheet used for Books of Remembrance, and the other which may be the

published Cox Bulletin II printed in typewriter paper size.

I believe that O C Day heard the stories from his grandmother, Elvira, and from his mother, Euphrasia, in his youth, but didn't write them down until the 1950s, when he decided such history needed to be shared. His daughter and granddaughter that I talked with only knew of them after the stories were printed in 1958. And at the beginning of the compilation of Elvira's stories he said: "While spinning and weaving wool, grandma liked to tell us stories about her people."

At the end of the 14 page bulletin is written: "Abridged from information written by" in pencil just before the typewritten – Orville Cox Day –, and indicating 5 sentences just above about Elvira's character. But the whole bulletin is a Xerox copy, which I just noticed. And this bulletin says it is John Whitmer whose widow Sylvester married, but it is Christian Whitmer instead.

1 October 2012, email from Carl Cox to Royal Skousen:

I have scanned the 14 page printing. I think some of the marks on there were instructions to the typist 50 years ago when I published the Cox Family Bulletin, but otherwise I don't know anything other than it came from O C Day when he was about 73 years old. I think I corrected his errors.

I am just sending the cover this time, and will send about 4 pages at a time because they are big files.

3 October 2012, email from Carl Cox to Royal Skousen:

Christian Whitmer was in the David Whitmer [Peter Whitmer Senior] home during the translation process, and is listed as one of those who actually acted as scribe, I believe. He and his wife would have known of the visit of Moroni to Christian's mother. He died in 1835, and his widow, Anna Schott, whom he had married in 1825, then married Sylvester Hulet, in troubled Missouri. Sylvester cared for his niece and nephew after their parents died, while Elvira Pamela Mills was a teenager, during this time. Elvira married Orville Sutherland Cox, my great grandfather, in 1839, and told the stories to her descendants.

Elvira's youngest daughter was Euphrasia Cox, who married Eli Day as a second wife. Their oldest child was Orville Cox Day (O C Day), 1885-1969, who followed his mother as the family genealogist. He was also one of the grandchildren who heard Elvira's stories, and wrote down some of what he heard in later life.

Royal Skousen, professor of linguistics and English language at Brigham Young University, has been the editor of the Book of Mormon critical text project since 1988. Volumes 1, 2, and 4 of the critical text are published by the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at Brigham Young University. In 2009, Skousen published with Yale University Press the culmination of

his critical text work, The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text. He is also known for his work on exemplar-based theories of language and quantum computing of analogical modeling.

