

# Society Island **Sidney Alvarus Hanks**

by  
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The history of the early missionaries to the pagan and heathen nations give us many instances of their peculiar lives, their endurances, faith, privations and sometimes persecutions.

Historians of later times have, in some instances, convinced and made them Saints.

The writer has read with great interest, the history of a number of those devoted, pious and self sacrificing missionaries who, went forth as it were with their lives in their hands, to carry the gospel of our Savior to the pagan and heathen people who had been traditional in heathen practices by their forefathers from time unmentioned.

I have however, thought that if the travels, labors and endurance of some of the faithful Elders who have performed missionary labors in the early days of our Church were fully written up, they would compare quite favorably with the experience of those early Christian missionaries in their religion, endurance and hardships.

A few years ago, the writer listened to a very able lecture on the life of St. Patrick, the first missionary to carry the Christian religion to Ireland. The lecturer was himself, an Irishman and quite an orator who had given his subject full thought, having been appointed to lecture on that subject before a "Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association." He gave a fine lecture on the history of St. Patrick's mission in Ireland, not omitting the traditional exploits of that great Irish Saint, namely the killing and banishing all the toads and snakes from Ireland as fully believed by the Irish of the present day.

The writer, while listening to the young orators' description of St. Patrick's actual missionary labor in converting the Irish people to Christianity, is reminded of the remarkable missionary labors and life of one of our Elders in the early day on the Society Islands in the South Pacific Ocean. Notice was given there and then that if the program committee had not made up their program for their next meeting and it was agreeable, he would give a lecture on the life and missionary labors of Elder Alva Hanks. At the close of that meeting, the president, having conferred with the committee, gave notice that my offer was accepted and the lecture, as proposed would be given, at the next meeting of the Association.

Alva Hanks was a brother of Eph Hanks, a pioneer, noted frontiersman, and express carrier on the Great Overland Route from the Missouri River to Salt Lake City.

After laboring there two or three years the associates of Elder Hanks concluded to return to their homes in Utah. Elder Hanks, being on another island, they did not consult with him, but instead wrote him a letter, informing him of their departing. It was some weeks after before the letter reached Elder Hanks. He was greatly surprised and disappointed, but without murmuring or giving away to despondency at being left alone on those far off isles in the great Pacific Ocean, he made up his mind to remain and fill his mission to the best of his ability, putting his trust in the Lord. The prophet of the Lord sent him here and here he would remain until such time as he might be honorably released to return to his home.

As soon as he had somewhat recovered from his disappointment, he started out on a regular tour of the several islands; he visited the branches organized and holding meetings where opportunity offered. He lived among the people, eating such food as they lived on and accepted such hospitality as they could bestow. His clothing, by degrees, wore out and he found himself almost destitute. But being in a warm climate he did not suffer or feel discouraged. He had been without shoes for months and finally had nothing but a shirt to cover his nakedness, a shirt that came down a little below his knees. In this unpleasant condition, he continued his labors, traveling among the natives and preaching the Gospel to the people. In a more civilized country, he could have been greatly mortified in this condition. But the natives of those islands, or the masses of them, went mostly naked having only a birch cloth around their hips. So however mortifying it would be to a white man to live among such a people without proper clothing, Elder Hanks, with his tenacious and persevering character, determined to fulfill his mission to that people. His endurance and perseverance were strong characteristics of his nature.

Besides these trials of his faith, he was exposed to many hardships and dangers in his travels, from one island to another in the native canoes. In that country, tidal waves are quite frequent as many of the islands being low, and many little above the surface of the ocean. A tidal wave often flows right over them destroying much property and many of the people. Only a few years after Elder Hanks left that country, a great tidal wave swept over one of the islands where he spent much of his time. Nearly the entire population with all their property perished in that great flood. Two Mormon elders who happened to be on that island miraculously escaped death by climbing a coconut tree.

Personally, Elder Hanks was not persecuted. But he frequently had the meetings he was holding broken up by fanatical native Catholics, incited, it was supposed, by the Priests.

The native Saints and many of their friends he had among the Tahitians, people always spoke of him to the Elders who labored in that mission after him, with great reverence and love on account of his faithful labors among them.

In the year, 1857 a number of white men on the Sandwich Islands chartered a small schooner to go to the islands in the South Pacific to gather the beautiful corals and pearls that are found among these islands. Among those white men was one Robert Brown who resided on the island of Kauai. Mr. Brown had been baptized a member in the Mormon Church.

In cruising around among the Society Islands, they had anchored one Sunday morning near a small island, and to pass the time they concluded to go on shore. In a native village near the landing, they learned that a Mormon missionary, a white man, was holding a meeting in that town. Brother Brown proposed that they go and hear the Mormon missionary preach. Accordingly, Brother Brown and some of the party went to the meeting. On entering the house, they were greatly surprised to see a white man standing and preaching to the Tahitians, in their own language with no clothing on except a long shirt and no shoes on his feet.

At the close of the meeting, Brother Brown went up and introduced himself as a member of the Mormon Church from the Sandwich Islands. In their conversation, Brother Brown learned that the missionary's name was Alva Hanks from Salt Lake City, Utah, that he had been on those islands a little over seven years and that he was alone. He also learned that Elder Hanks' companions, who came with him from Utah, had all returned to their homes in Utah and that he had been on one of the other Islands at the time and did not learn of their

departure for several weeks after they left. Elder Hanks had never been released and he was still there.

"You must have had a very lonely time being here all these years alone. There are over twenty of your Elders from Utah laboring on the Sandwich Islands. If you would like to go there, we will give you a free passage with us to those Islands. They will be glad to have you join them. You may know personally some of those Elders. Among them were Elder Joseph F. Smith, a nephew of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Jon R. and Franklyn W. Young, nephews of the President Brigham Young," and several others whom Brother named.

"Yes, I know most of them you have named. Well, but thanking you gentlemen for your kind offer, I will say-"I was called to his mission by Brigham Young and until he releases me, I shall remain here though it be another seven years or even longer."

Soon after their meeting and an interview with Elder Hanks, the shell and coral gatherers sailed for the Hawaiian Islands.

On arriving at his home, Brother Brown made some of the Elders there acquainted with his chance meeting and interview with Elder Alva Hanks on one of the Society Islands. Brother Brown explained Elder Hanks' destitute conditions, the length of time he had been on that mission, that they tendered him a free passage with them to the Sandwich Islands and that he declined to leave that mission until President Brigham Young who had sent him to that mission, etc should properly release him.

As soon as the Hawaiian Elders learned of Elder Hanks' condition, they communicated all the facts to President Young in Salt Lake City.

President Young at once wrote to Elder Hanks through the American Council at Tahiti, enclosing his formal release with a draft on a San Francisco Bank to pay his passage home and buy him a complete suit of good clothes, etc.

In the fall of that year Elder Hanks arrived in Salt Lake City after an absence from his home of eight years; and to his friends he was like one just raised from the dead, having performed one of the most unique and remarkable missions in the history of the Church.

Alva Hanks was quite a wit and in some respects a very eccentric man, as the following anecdote will show:

It was Spring of 1847. The pioneer company was about to leave Winter Quarters on the Missouri River on their long journey westbound to find a new home for the Saints somewhere in the Rocky Mountain. Alva Hanks was to drive the lead team, the baggage wagon with four fine mules, while the pioneers were taking leave of their loved ones. Alva was sitting on his seat holding the lines over Polk and Dallas, his stalwart wheelers and Prince and Princess, his sparkling leaders. President Young and several of the leading men were standing near the lead team waiting to give the order to move on. Alva Hanks was sitting on his high seat swinging his whip high over his head saying: "Leading Israel" while the bystanders were indulging in a good laugh. The crack of the whip over the leaders caused them to frisk about. Alva said: "Polk and Dallas, hold them steady boys. Princess, old gal, quite down, we will soon be off and there is a long journey before us." Just at this time, President Brigham Young stepped forward and gave the order to forward march.

That noble company of pioneers started on that long journey of over one thousand miles across plains and over rugged mountains arriving in the Great Salt Lake Valley on the 24<sup>th</sup> of July 1847 where they founded what is now the beautiful city of Salt Lake.

As the company started to move on, Alva sitting erect on this high seat holding a tight line over his fine team, waiving to the bystanders on the right and left and in his pride said: "Am I not leading Israel."

A short time later after Elder Hanks returned from the Islands, he wanted to visit his relatives living in Heber City, Wasatch County. The winter in the meantime had fully set in, but still he decided to go. He started one morning on foot alone. That night he reached William H. Kimball's place in Parley's Park where he was made welcomed by his old friends. The next morning, although it looked stormy, he said he would go on.

Mr. Kimball told him he had better stay over until next day at least, that the road was drifted full with snow and nearly obliterated, and should the winds blow as it often does in this high altitude, he could not see his way for drifting snow and might get lost in the hills. "I have lived up here in these high mountains for twenty years," said Mr. Kimball, "and no man is safe in a wind storm when the snow is deep. You are perfectly welcomed to remain here with us until the storm is over."

"I thank you but I think I will go on," said Brother Hanks.

Seeing he was determined to go, Mrs. Kimball fixed him up a lunch and he started.

He had not been long gone, when the wind blew a gale filling the air with blind drifting snow. Still Alva pressed on as best he could, wallowing through deep snowdrifts, unable to see or follow the road. Some time in the afternoon, he reached Silver Creek wearied and chilled through with keen piercing wind. Seeing not far off a clump of scrubby willows and thinking perhaps he could rest and be protected from the keen blast for a little while, he made his way to that clump of willows, making his way to the center of the clump. He trod the snow and tried to kindle a fire but failed. He broke off some willow bows and sat down on them to rest. From that seat, he never again arose. That trapped, brave and independent man, who had braved so many dangers and who had spent nine years as a faithful missionary on the Islands in the Pacific Ocean where his constitution no doubt was greatly impaired during the nine years spent in that tropical climate. After a day spent in wallowing through deep snowdrifts and in that arctic wind, he went into that clump of willows at the head of Silver Creek in Summit County and there froze to death.

Failing to reach Heber City as expected, his friends became alarmed and sent out a searching party. After a long time, finally discovering some faint tracts leading toward the willows that went to the nearest clump, and there they found the body frozen solid like a chunk of ice. He had only eaten a small portion of the lunch that Mrs. Kimball had put up for him. It was evidently frozen so hard he could not eat it.

What a sad ending of such a courageous, persevering and faithful man as Alva Hanks had proved himself to be.