

Platte De Alton Lyman



Born: August 20, 1848

Died: November 13, 1901

Parents: Amasa Mason Lyman and Eliza Partridge

Married: Adelia Robison on May 18, 1867

Married: Annie Maud Clark in 1879

Childhood

Platte De Alton Lyman was born in a wagon box on the east bank of the Platte River (Nebraska) on the morning of August 20, 1848. He was not the first child to have been born to Eliza Partridge Lyman in a wagon box. Little Don Carlos, Eliza's first child, had been born in a wagon as she crossed Iowa with the Mormon Saints following their exodus from Nauvoo. Sadly, Don Carlos's life was short, and Eliza buried him in the sandy banks of the Missouri River. The next summer, when the Saints began their westward trek to the Salt Lake Valley, Eliza was well into her second pregnancy, and soon little Platte was born, restoring gladness to her heart.¹

Platte's childhood years were marked by poverty and want. His father, Amasa M. Lyman, was an Apostle of the Church at the time, and his church duties, as well as his responsibilities to his other wives and children, kept him away from Platte's family much of the time. Eliza provided the best she could for her children's temporal needs by spinning wool and making clothes. Spiritually, however, she nourished them with her unwavering faith in the truth of the gospel. Platte was deeply influenced by her example and testimony, and especially her love for the prophet Joseph Smith, whom she had known well. He was known to frequently say, both in public and in private, "I thank the Lord for such a mother."² And in his later years, under adverse circumstances that might have destroyed the faith of others, Platte remained true to the Church thanks to the foundations of belief that had been laid within him by his mother.

Platte received less than three weeks of formal education his entire life.³ His mother taught him rudimentary skills, but was left to his own to study and become widely read. But most of his experience was gained and his character developed in the great outdoors, for he loved to be outside in the fresh air under a boundless sky. He loved dogs, and always seemed to have one at his heels. One dog of his had a peculiar

interest in hunting skunks, a fetish which brought with it the obvious consequences. Yet Platte's family tolerated the dog and the smelly skunks simply because they loved Platte so much.⁴

For the first nine years of his life, Platte lived in Salt Lake City. His family moved briefly to Payson at that time, and then northward again to Farmington. As the years progressed, his family circle grew to include the families of two of his mother's sisters, who had also become wives of Amasa M. Lyman. Thus the three sisters, and their children, lived together pretty much as one family, and as the oldest son among them, Platte felt the growing responsibilities of helping to provide for them all. He did so through hunting for food and plowing the fields. In fact, the only thing he remembered ever asking his father for was a yoke of oxen to help him with his work in the fields.⁵

In 1863, Platte's family moved to Fillmore, Utah. It was about this time that his father was excommunicated from the Church for preaching false doctrine. It was a bitter experience for Platte's family, but his mother and her two sisters, also wives of the fallen Apostle, remained faithful to the Church and endured the humiliation brought on them with patience.⁶

Marriage, Family and Missions

At the age of eighteen, Platte became engaged to Adelia Robison. At about the same time, he also received a mission call to Great Britain. He and Adelia were married by Brigham Young in Brigham Young's office on May 18, 1867, and two days later Platte started eastward by wagon to begin his missionary labors. He became President of the London Conference, and served faithfully in his mission until his release on August 25, 1868. Upon returning home he was called to be a High Councilman in the Millard Stake. In 1874 he joined in the "United Order" with the church members of Oak City, but was called to serve a second mission in Great Britain the next year. This time he was assigned to the area of Nottingham, and became President of the Nottingham Conference until his release on October 25, 1876.

His return home was a joyful one. His children, Alton, Eliza and Evelyn, were more precious to him than gold, and eager to open the presents he had brought them. Sickness soon overtook poor Alton, however, and within a month of Platte's return home, the little boy died. Tragically, two more of Platte's children passed away within the next three years, which brought great sorrow to the Lyman home and enticed Platte to consider relocating what was left of his family to Southern Utah. He was serving as the bishop of Oak City at the time he was called to be part of the San Juan Mission. He had also recently married a second wife, Annie Maud Clark, with whom he had become acquainted with in England. Unfortunately, Annie was never able to bear children, a sorrow to her all her life.⁷

Hole-in-the-Rock

Platte De Alton Lyman set out for the San Juan on October 21, 1878. He was formally called as a Counselor to Silas Sanford Smith, the President of the San Juan Mission, on August 13, 1879, and received word of his appointment by letter a week later.⁸ When it

became apparent to President Smith that the settlers would need additional supplies and funding in order to travel through the Hole-in-the-Rock, he set out for Salt Lake City to do the lobbying himself, as he had many ties to the legislature from twenty years of experience as a member of it. This left Platte, the “Assistant Captain” of the expedition, in charge of the wagon train for the majority of the arduous journey.⁹

The journal that Platte kept during the trek is the most reliable, complete and informative source about the Hole-in-the-Rock expedition that exists today. In fact, it is the only record of the expedition written at the time, as all other accounts of Hole-in-the-Rock were put on paper years later.¹⁰ After surveying the “Hole-in-the-Rock” and rugged country around it, Platte described his impressions of it in his journal:

“The country here is almost entirely solid sand rock, high hills and mountains cut all to pieces by deep gulches which are in many places altogether impassable. It is the certainly the worst country I ever saw, some of our party are of the opinion that a road could be made if plenty of money was furnished but most of us are satisfied that there is no use of this company undertaking to get through to the San Juan this way.”¹¹

Nevertheless, in spite of his initial feelings against the journey through “Hole-in-the-Rock,” Platte supported President Silas S. Smith’s decision to press forward, and soon assumed the mantle of leadership in Smith’s absence.

One member of the company, Cornelius Isaac Decker, remembered Platte as “a man that every body liked.”¹² Platte proved to be a level-headed and fair-minded leader throughout the excursion. He gained the confidence of those around him, and acted judiciously when decisions needed to be made. One such incident occurred along the way as the wagon train began to move beyond the Colorado River into the arid and desolate country beyond. Enough fodder for all the company’s animals was difficult to find. Many animals perished from starvation as well as dehydration and pure exhaustion. However, a group of men within the group pressed on ahead of the main company with their band of horses, intending to have the first shot at any grass and forage to be found along the way. This angered some who were following behind with their wagons, as their animals would have to survive on what was left, if anything. Tensions between the horse owners and the teamsters flared. Platte acted as a wise mediator, and was able to bring about a compromise that appeased both parties. In so doing, he also “established himself in the confidence of both sides so that they remembered it with relish in years to come.”¹³

After the pioneers began to settle Bluff, Platte was chosen as a Selectman, and also elected President of the San June Co-op that was formed in 1882. Also in 1882, he was also called to be the first Stake President of the San Juan Stake. It was difficult to make a living farming in Bluff, so for four years he worked hauling freight between Bluff and Colorado, in addition to watching over his cattle.¹⁴

“The Abomination of Desolation” – Fourteen Years of Hardship

At the time the Bluff settlers were formally released from the San Juan Mission, so was Platte De Alton released from his call as President of the San Juan Stake. According to Platte’s son, Albert R. Lyman, his father’s release came in response to a misunderstanding of conduct that occurred between the General Authorities of the Church and his father, who happened to be away from home at the time. Upon his return, Platte felt the sting of his release as an invitation for him to leave Bluff, so he moved Adelia and his children to Scipio and invested in a herd of cattle. However, he bought the cattle when prices were high, and shortly thereafter they plummeted, leaving him in debt. Ironically, the only place where he could think to keep the cattle until the time he could sell them profitably was back in the Lake Country of San Juan County, about a hundred miles from Bluff. For fourteen long years he rode the range of the Lake Country in partnership with Joshua Stevens, struggling against debt and poverty, and only able to see his family in Scipio but once a year for the first seven years until he moved them back to Bluff.

Platte’s son, Albert, in writing about his father’s life, believed these years were the most difficult and distressing years of Platte’s life. Platte himself referred to the cattle rangelands as “the Abomination of Desolation,” a reference to the prophecies of Daniel, who compared the cursed state of the wicked to lands left bleak, desolate and without hope. His friend, Kumen Jones, described Platte’s cattle lands as “wild, broken country” that “made what he so fittingly termed ‘the abomination of desolation.’ The job of moving cattle out there . . . was [for Platte] a time of passing through hades, demanding heavy [toll] of starving, choking live stock [sic] and famishing, worn-out humanity.”¹⁵ Combined with the estrangement that had come between him and church leaders, and compounded by the mountain of discouraging debt he toiled under during those years, Platte pondered deeply upon his seemingly cursed situation. To his credit, however, his son Albert asserts that Platte’s faith and commitment to the gospel never waned, neither did he become bitter or resentful. During some of these years, he served as a Counselor in the San Juan Stake to President Francis A. Hammond.¹⁶

European Mission President

In 1898, Platte received an unexpected letter from the Church calling him to preside over the European Mission. He realized with great joy at that time that his debts were finally all paid, and he could with clear conscience answer the call. As he met with Church leaders in Salt Lake on his way to Europe, the issues of the past were likewise resolved, and he was thereby set free from the burden of misunderstanding that had clouded the last fourteen years of his life. He served a meaningful mission, and was joined for a time by Albert, who had been called to be a missionary there too.



European Missionary Albert R. Lyman with his Father & Mission President Platte D. Lyman

Platte De Alton Lyman returned honorably from his missionary assignment in Europe in mid-1901 and was immediately called to serve once again as President of the San Juan

Stake. Sadly, however, he did not serve long in this capacity, as he soon was diagnosed with cancer that overtook his body within a few months. He died November 13, 1901, at age fifty-three, “loved and respected by all who had come within the scope of his acquaintance.”¹⁷

*Researched and written for the Hole-in-the-Rock Foundation by:
C.S. M. Jones LLC, Family Heritage Consulting.*

¹ Albert R. Lyman, “Platte De Alton Lyman, Born on Platte River 20 Aug. 1848. Written by his son Albert Robison Lyman, Typed by Alice K. Hatch, Historian D.U.P. Manti Camp, Sanpete Co., (nd),” *Daughters of Utah Pioneers*, 2. Albert was Platte’s oldest living son, who greatly revered him, and also became a prolific historian and writer about the Hole-in-the-Rock expedition.

² *Ibid.*, 4. Albert noted, “The faith and hope and love of Eliza Partridge Lyman lived in her son Platte, not only in his heartfelt declarations that he thanked the Lord for such a mother, but he cherished her standards and held proudly to them wherever he went.” 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

⁸ David E. Miller, *Hole-in-the-Rock; An Epic in the Colonization of the Great American West* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1966), 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 109

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹¹ “Journal of Platte D. Lyman,” Mon. Dec. 1, 1879.

¹² Cornelius Isaac Decker, “Excerpts from: Sketch of My Life by C.I. Decker,” in David E. Miller, 193.

¹³ Albert R. Lyman, “Platte De Alton Lyman, Born on Platte River 20 Aug. 1848,” 18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

¹⁵ Kumen Jones as quoted in Albert R. Lyman, “Platte De Alton Lyman, Born on Platte River 20 Aug. 1848,” 59.

¹⁶ Albert R. Lyman, “Platte DeAlton Lyman,” *Daughters of Utah Pioneers*, submitted Iva Dell Sheldon, Feb. 7, 2005, 2-3. This is a second, much shorter biography of Platte written by Albert housed in the D.U.P. files.

¹⁷ Kumen Jones quoted in Albert R. Lyman, “Platte De Alton Lyman, Born on Platte River 20 Aug. 1848,” 59.