

Joseph Stanford Smith and Arabella Coombs Smith

Born: 23 June 1850; Tipton, Staffordshire, England

Died: 6 April 1941; Ammon, Bonneville, Idaho

Married: (1) Arabella Coombs; 23 October 1871; Salt Lake Endowment House
(2) Agnes Eardley; St. George, Washington, Utah
(3) Matilda Bleak; 17 June 1918; St. George, Washington, Utah

Father: Joseph Hodgetts Smith

Mother: Maria Stanford

Born: approx. 1853; California

Died: 19 January 1883; Mancos, Montezuma, Colorado

Married: Joseph Stanford Smith; 23 October 1871; Salt Lake Endowment House

Father: Abraham Coombs

Mother: Olive Olivia Curtis

Childhood

Joseph Stanford Smith (called Stanford) was born on June 23, 1850, in Tipton, Staffordshire, England to Joseph Hodgetts Smith and Maria Stanford Smith. He was the youngest of their three children, and the only son. His parents had converted to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints prior to his birth. In 1854 Church leaders in the British Isles counseled all Church members to immigrate to Utah. In obedience to this counsel, Stanford's family left England on April 22, 1855, aboard the *Curling*, a ship named after its captain, Samuel Curling, who was remembered as a man who was friendly to the 581 English Mormons who were aboard his vessel.

Sailing across the Atlantic was no doubt a great adventure for young Stanford. In later years he could still recall one particular moonlit night when the *Curling* seemed to be surrounded by an army of fish – perhaps dolphins – that playfully followed the boat. As the fish surfaced, the moonlight reflected off their fins and tails, causing the water to sparkle and shine to the delight of the passengers who stood watching on deck. A kind man lifted Joseph to his shoulders so that he would be able to see the amazing site.

The *Curling* arrived in New York on May 27, 1855. From there the Saints proceeded by railway to Pittsburgh and by steamboat up the Mississippi, passing through St. Louis on their way to Atchison, Kansas.ⁱ Stanford's family purchased two yoke of oxen, a yoke of cows, and other necessary supplies before beginning the long trek to the Salt Lake Valley during the hot summer months. Stanford's older sisters, Emma, who was 13, and Ann, age 11, both walked the entire way. His grandmother, Letitia Stanford, however, was in poor health and so rode in the wagon. She was determined to reach the valley alive, having declared to her concerned family that she would "neither be food for the sharks nor for the prairie wolves, but [that] she knew that she would be able to reach the Valley."ⁱⁱ Her indomitable spirit was rewarded the day the wagon reached the mountains surrounding Salt Lake and the wagon cover was lifted for her to see the view

of the valley below. With a happy sparkle in her eye, she affirmed that she was now ready to die, which she did just a few days later.

Looking back on the experience of crossing the plains, Stanford remembered one exciting day when the men riding in advance of the wagon train came hurriedly back to warn the pioneers of a buffalo stampede that was headed right for them. As quickly as they could, the men faced their wagons northward, so as to create space between the wagons for the buffalo to pass through. In a powerful rush, the buffalo stream went through the wagon train, snorting and bellowing as they went by. Thankfully, no one was injured during their passing, but the incident left an impression upon young Stanford's mind. His father killed one of the cows and her calf that were lagging behind and the pioneers thankfully feasted on the meat for many days afterward.

The Smith family arrived in the Salt Lake Valley in October, and were soon sent to settle in Iron County. Stanford's father was knowledgeable on the manufacturing process of pig iron, which process was being developed in Cedar City at the time. Growing up in Cedar City meant Stanford did not have much opportunity for formal schooling. Most of what he learned, he learned through hands-on experience. He helped his father with the farm work and chores, and when he got older he shared in guard duty and road building. When the telegraph was invented he and his father helped haul telegraph lines for the Deseret Telegraph Company.

Marriage and Family

At the age of 21, Stanford married Arabella Coombs (called Bella). She was almost 18 years old at the time, and had dark-hair. The young couple journeyed to Salt Lake in a stylish new wagon pulled by a team of ponies. They were sealed in the Endowment House on October 23, 1871.

After their marriage, Stanford and Bella settled in Cedar City. Sadly, their first baby, a little girl, died at birth.ⁱⁱⁱ Two years later, they were blessed with twin girls, who they named Ida and Ada. But once again heartache entered the Smith home when Ida passed away at the age of just two and a half. Arabella was pregnant at the time, and a few months later gave birth to little Joseph Elroy, called Roy by his family. Three years after that a second boy was born, named George Abraham, on June 8, 1879.

Hole-in-the-Rock – the Last Wagon

Only a few months later, when little George was just four months old, Stanford and his young family were called to the San Juan Mission. They packed up their belongings in Cedar City and gathered in Escalante with the other families headed for the San Juan. Perhaps dismayed, but nevertheless undaunted, by the task of proceeding through what became the Hole-in-the-Rock, the Smith family did what they could to make it possible. For Stanford, that meant working tirelessly to help blast and build a way down through the Hole. For Bella and the kids, it meant waiting patiently in camp with other women and children while the weeks stretched on and winter drew near. Stanford recalled:

My wagon stood just where I drew up when we came to the hole in the rock, for seven weeks, while we worked like beavers to get the road through. I never turned a wheel on my wagon for these seven weeks and there my wife was with her three small children. . . . It was not much of a place to spend Christmas. However, we did have a real Christmas celebration.^{iv}

For Christmas, one of the men in the company slaughtered a steer and offered the meat in exchange for a shooting contest. So on Christmas Day, for the price of a dollar, each man who wanted to participate got to shoot three shots at a target. The man who scored highest was given first choice of the beef for his family. It was quite a treat, considering that food supplies were already rationed carefully and to supplement their diet, Stanford and others would catch gophers for food. Other tournaments, games, races, and wrestling matches helped to make Christmas Day a much needed holiday from the rigorous labor of blasting and building that had consumed the previous two months.

Finally, at the end of January, the men began to lower the wagons down the Hole. Stanford was right in the thick of the action, helping to lower the wagons and move them on towards the ferry. He was dismayed to discover, however, that after all the wagons had supposedly been lowered down the canyon, his was nowhere in sight. He climbed up the Hole-in-the-Rock and discovered Bella wrapped in a quilt with baby George in her arms. She explained that their wagon had been moved out of the way while all the other wagons were let down the Hole. Now all that was left was their wagon, and no one left to help. Stanford was put out that after all he had done to help the others' with their wagons, no thought had been given to his own family's welfare. He had assumed someone would see to it that his wagon was brought down safely.

Seeing no other choice but to lower their wagon themselves, Stanford and Arabella hitched up their team of horses and tied a third horse to the back, hoping the horse would act as a counterweight to the downward pull of the wagon. Bella wrapped the children in quilts and instructed them to sit quietly on the snow while she and their father took the wagon down, assuring them that it would not be long before Stanford would return for them. With childlike faith, Ada, barely six years old, offered a simple prayer: "Father in heaven bless me and Roy and baby until our father comes back."^v

Bella wrapped the lead ropes of the hind horse around her hands as Stanford climbed onto the wagon seat. He started the horses forward to the crevice, and seconds later the wagon began its dangerous descent down the steep canyon. Bella and the hind horse were sharply jerked forward and over the edge of the Hole. The horse lost its footing in an attempt to resist the wagon's pull. Likewise, Bella fought not to be pulled from off her feet, but she tripped on a rock and fell, clinging tenaciously to the horse's ropes as she was dragged down the crudely fashioned rock road. The wagon bounced violently down, finally crashing into a bolder. The impact of the crash yanked Bella back to her feet and slammed her into the canyon wall. Dazed, she stood lamely against the rock as a fierce pain throbbled in her leg. She had been slashed by the rocks all the

way down her leg. Stanford, shaken by the rough ride, climbed down from the wagon and turned to ask his wife how she had managed the descent, unaware of her condition. ““Oh, I crow-hopped right along!”” Bella answered smartly. ^{vi} Only then did Stanford notice a flutter of white cloth on the rocks a hundred feet above, combined with the pool of blood forming at Bella’s feet, and realize that his wife had been dragged down the 100-foot incline. He hugged her tight while tears of pain and relief flowed. Then, once Bella was secured in the wagon with her wound tended to, Stanford hurried back up to the top of the Hole to retrieve the children. As he climbed his heart was filled with love and admiration for his courageous and spirited wife. He lifted his hat to her as a gesture of his esteem. Atop the Hole, he found the children right where Bella had left them, and carefully helped them climb down the rocks to their mother.

Move to Mancos – Arabella’s death

Though not without serious hardship and difficulty, the rest of the journey to Bluff was not as dangerous for the Smith family as was their initial ride. After they arrived there Stanford decided to move his family to Montezuma Creek where they lived with the Davis family for a while. Disappointed with the lack of good farmland there, Stanford traveled on to Mancos, Colorado, which was about twenty-five miles away. Mancos was a small settlement at the time, with an economy just beginning to bloom thanks to local mining efforts there. Stanford found a job working on a mining flume, which lasted a couple of months and helped to put a little money in his pockets.

On his way back to Montezuma he chanced upon some farmers hauling in a crop of grain. Impressed by the quality of the grain, Stanford began asking them questions, hoping to secure work as a farm hand. One of the farmers, a man by the name of James Ratcliffe, did not know much about irrigation and was interested in Stanford’s experience with it. He agreed to let Stanford take over the management of the farm the next year, in return for providing a place for the Smith family to live. So by the next spring, the family had moved to Mancos, and in addition to overseeing Mr. Ratcliffe’s farm, Stanford purchased some property of his own not far away. His family thus became the first Mormon family to settle in the area, though it was not long before many others joined them. The growing mining industry in Mancos created a steady demand for commodities the Mormon settlers could produce, such as oats for the miners’ mules. Unfortunately for Stanford, the first oat crop he had planted and was just beginning to harvest was ruined by an unexpected hail storm. But thankfully the wheat and other crops survived the storm alright and he was still able to make a profit.

The Smith family lived in Mancos for three years. No doubt they felt their future looked bright with Stanford’s successes in farming, a happy family at home, and a new baby on the way. But then tragedy struck. Twenty days after the baby’s birth (which occurred on December 30, 1882), Arabella passed away. The child, a girl named Mabel, was sent to live with her aunt, and sadly passed away at age two and a half.

Moving on

Stanford must have felt the loss of his dear wife, Arabella, keenly. He chose not to remain in Mancos for long and moved his children to Jackson, New Mexico, where he

raised fruit for four years. During the first winter there, he returned to Utah for a visit and renewed acquaintance with a woman named Agnes Eardley. She had a daughter, Estella, from a previous marriage. Stanford and Agnes were married in St. George and then returned to New Mexico. A family history written of Stanford notes that Agnes gave birth to a child in New Mexico, but the child died.^{vii}

Population growth along the La Platte river soon affected how much water residents of Jackson received. Unable to get enough water for his orchards, Stanford saw the writing on the wall and found employment at a smelter in Durango, Colorado, instead. While living there, his eldest son, Roy, died from illness at the age of 17. A few years later Stanford was forced to quit his job at the smelter due to lead poisoning. He moved his family to a farm in the Animus Valley where they raised crops and livestock for about twelve years. After that they moved to Ammon, Idaho, in the spring of 1900. Agnes died there in November of 1909.

One by one, Stanford's remaining children married and moved away, except George Abraham, who eventually took over the farm from his father. Stanford returned to the St. George area, and spent time working in the temple. There he became acquainted with a widow named Matilda Bleak. They were married on June 17, 1918, and lived comfortably together for nineteen years. After Matilda's passing, on August 25, 1937, Stanford spent the next few years visiting with family and friends. While staying with relatives in Springville, he became ill and was taken home to the family farm in Idaho by his son George. It was there that he died on April 6, 1941. He had lived an admirable life filled with joy and sorrow, success and disappointment. Yet throughout the good and the bad Stanford had remained loyal to his faith. At the end of his life he spent a lot of time doing proxy-work in the temple, and was proud of the fact that he had attended 3,324 endowment sessions. He was a courageous pioneer, a hard-working husband, and a dedicated member of the Church who left behind a rich legacy for others to learn from.

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

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ⁱ Andrew Jenson, comp., *Church Chronology: A Record of Important Events Pertaining to the History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret News, 1914, 53. Available digitally through L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.

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The life history of Joseph Stanford Smith written by his step-niece, Lydia Fielding Hammond, indicates that the Smith family ended their steamboat travels in St. Louis, instead of just passing through on the way to Kansas. But it is more likely that they stayed on the steamboat to Kansas with the rest of the Mormon travelers, and from there purchased the ox team and wagon needed to cross the plains. See Lydia Hammond Fielding, "Biography of Joseph Stanford Smith, Came to Utah 1855," unpublished manuscript from the files of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers, Salt Lake City, UT.

ⁱⁱ Lydia Hammond Fielding, 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ RootsWeb.com lists two baby girls who died at birth in 1872. However, Mary Ann, listed as born in California, seems not to match with family records compared to Ellen, born 29 Sept., 1872 in Cedar City. Other children are listed which likewise seem questionable given their dates and places of birth, namely Arabella Smith (1881 in California) and Joseph S. Smith (in 1883 in California). There is no mention in other sources of the Smith family ever having lived in California.

^{iv} Lydia Hammond Fielding, 3.

^v Raymond Smith Jones, "Last Wagon Through Hole-in-the-Rock," *Desert Magazine*, June 1954, 24. Jones was a grandson of Stanford Smith. His engaging narrative of Stanford and Arabella's dangerous descent down the Hole-in-the-Rock is based upon Stanford's telling of it to family members prior to his death.

^{vi} Raymond Smith Jones, 24.

^{vii} Agnes Eardley's marriage to Stanford is hard to trace. It is mentioned only in Lydia Fielding Hammond's history of Stanford Smith, but does not appear in other sources.