

A
CHAUTAUQUA
KING

BY
C.M. REED

Perhaps but few Chautauquans know that within the confines of our county was reared a man who, some eighty odd years ago, became a real King; yet such is a fact and in his career he executed regal commands and maintained a monarchy, absolute during its brief term and within its narrow and isolated limits.

The Centennial History of Chautauqua County merely mentions the name Strang as one of the early preachers of this county but the man's history really deserves more extended consideration.

This man was the son of a Cayuga County farmer, he was born at Scipio on March 21st, 1813 and, in his plebian days, bore the name of James Jesse Strang. He passed his boyhood in the Town of Hanover and grew to man's estate in Chautauqua County. He received the usual education of a farmer's son of that day which was augmented by his habit of omnivorous reading and which a peculiarly retentive memory made especially useful.

As a lad he was a conspicuous figure in rural debating clubs and the open forum of the village grocery. Always of studious mind and diligent habit, he found his greatest pleasure and satisfaction in study of the Scriptures and the Law.

He is described as a young man of eccentric ideas and valuable tongue, entirely reputable in life, with large confidence in himself and morbidly anxious for distinction. His early manhood was one of restless activity. He worked on his father's and mother's farms, he taught school, he gave temperance lectures and in 1834 was admitted to the Bar.

For a time he practiced law in Mayville, he edited a newspaper at Randolph, he dabbled somewhat in politics, served as postmaster at Ellington and finally was caught in the current of western emigration and was borne to Burlington, Wisconsin where he formed a partnership and resumed the practice of law.

The remarkable career of Joseph Smith then was nearing its tragic close. During Strang's life in western New York, Smith's revelations and successful preaching has furnished frequent theme for chimney-corner gossip and village discussions. Young men of energy and plausible speech were welcomed to prominent positions in the new Church.

The remarkable growth of the settlement at Nauvoo and the banks of the Mississippi, the promise of abundant spiritual blessings and the tangible prospects of earthly honors as immediate rewards of Mormon membership, brought Strang within the influence of Joseph Smith soon after his coming to Wisconsin.

Undoubtedly, Smith saw useful material in the well-informed, ambitious and fluent young attorney who visited Nauvoo in January 1844 where he first met Smith, where he was baptized on February 25th and on March 3rd was ordained as an Elder.

He became at once an active and trusted member of the Mormon ministry, was soon appointed to a special field of labor in Wisconsin and authorized to there plant a stake in Zion.

Before this commission was acted on however Joseph and Hyrum Smith surrendered themselves to the Governor of Illinois and, on June 27th, 1844 were murdered by the mob which stormed the jail at Carthage.

No claimant of the succession to the position of Joseph Smith was more prompt and persistent than Strang, whose age in the Church was yet not five months.

He exhibited what purported to be an autograph letter from Joseph Smith dated June 18th, bearing the Nauvoo postmark of June 19th and declared by several witnesses to have been received in the mail at Burlington, Wisconsin on July 9th. This letter alleged to have reached Burlington nine days before news of the death of Smith, gave details of a vision in which the Mormon prophet and the voice of God said, "My servant Joseph, thou hast been faithful over many things and thy reward is glorious; study the words of the vision for it tarrieth not. Behold my servant James J. Strang hath come to thee from far for truth when he knew it not and hath not rejected it but had forth in thee and to him shall the gathering of the people be, for he shall plant a stake in Lian in Wisconsin and I will establish it; and there shall my people have peace and rest and shall nor be moved."

The Church officials promptly pronounced Strang an impostor and the letter a clumsy forgery, the excommunicated him at once, circulated printed attacks on his private character and speedily drove him from the field at Nauvoo.

However, Strange continued to assert his title in pastoral letters and in sermons in and about Wisconsin and soon obtained a band of devoted followers. With these he founded the city of Vooree at Spring Prairie, Wis. And organized the colony on the basis of 'community ownership of all property'.

The methods followed by him to strengthen his supernatural claims with hid disciples were close imitation o those of Joseph Smith. The Prophet James had his hours of rapt ecstasy when Divine Messengers, or Omnipotence itself, communicated revelations which were given to the faithful in a language closely following the phraseology of the Scriptures, very like the inspired utterances of

Joseph Smith but departing less frequently from the un-inspired rules of English grammar.

As Smith found the graven plates on the hill at Palmyra, so Strang discovered quite as remarkable ones on the banks of White River. Four of Strang's congregation declared they were led by him to the spot where as Sept. 15th they found, after digging through thick sward and solid clay which had manifestly never been disturbed, and cutting away the network of roots of a large oak tree, a case of baked earthenware containing three brazen plates bearing on each side an alphabetic and pictorial record. This miracle was followed by a trance in which the "Urim and Thummin" were brought by an Angel of God to the Prophet James, and the hieroglyphics were satisfactorily translated by him and wholly to his own advantage.

Subsequently Strang claimed to have discovered other metal plates, 18 in number, 7-1/2 by 9 inches, all bearing strange characters and declared to have been engraved before the Babylonish Captivity.

These plates supplemented by nine sections of direct revelation made up "The Book of the Law of the Lord" which title appeared on the first page of a volume issued late in 1845.

The title page declares the book to consist of our inspired translation of the most important parts of the law given to Moses and a very few additional commandments, and that the book is printed by command of the King at the Royal Press St. James A.R.I.

The community at Voree grew steadily in the numbers and in 1848 Strang determined to plant a (unreadable) in the archipelago of Lake Michigan. In May 1847 he and four others decided on Beaver Island as a suitable site and, by winter, five families were comfortably settled there.

In 1848 that number was quadrupled and in 1849 they were numbered by hundreds,

The City was built on a cove called Beaver Harbor and was named City of Saint James.

A road was cleared, a saw-mill built and a schooner launched.

With the opening of navigation in 1850 converts came in great numbers, St. James was made permanent headquarters of the new Church and in July the colony was organized as a Kingdom with Strang as King, his office uniting those of Apostle, Prophet, Seer, Revelator and Translator.

Strange possessed rare executive ability and plenty of good sense admixed with many impractical ideas. Work and responsibility were divided among numerous subordinates but the King's restless energy dominated everything. The communal plan was abandoned and the Church land was apportioned among the members -- taxes were raised by a system of tithing. Schools were established for the children and debating clubs for the adults. Roads, docks and general improvements were instituted, a tabernacle was begun and a printing office, called the Royal Press, not only executed orders of the monarch but issued, weekly for some years and daily at last, a paper "The Northern Islander."

Prohibition was applied to tea and coffee as well as to liquor, tobacco and immorality. Observance of Saturday as the Sabbath, and church attendance were compulsory. Polygamy was sanctioned, but little practiced; the King had five wives but none else had more than three, and ability to support a large family was a condition precedent to a plural marriage.

The Bloomer costume was prescribed for women and the Church assumed the right to dictate the conduct of many private and domestic affairs. A Strang house, which was not called a Jail, was erected and sometimes used for serious offenders, but the petty misdemeanants were punished at the Whipping Post.

The Kingdom rapidly grew to about two thousand population with comfortable though unpretentious homes, enjoying friendly relations with the Indians, having some commerce with the whites, and accumulating considerable wealth.

The Mormons practically crowded all Gentiles off the island which led to fierce and often bloody feuds and jealousy and hatred along the entire coast.

Offenders who had been flogged often deserted the Realm and related tales to the mainlanders and fishermen. Which excited much animosity toward the Mormons. Complaints were made to the Federal Government that the Islanders were pirates and smugglers and were plotting treason, and in 1857 a war steamer came and took Strang and his court to Detroit and tried them for treason.

King Strang was head counsel for the defense and secured an acquittal, but it was the beginning of the end.

The downfall however came not from foreign foe but from domestic sedition and conspiracy. One of King Strang's most capable disciples was Dr. H.D. McCullock from Baltimore, an educated physician, an ex-army surgeon, once of good social position at home, but a man of unfortunate habits. In 1855 the King deposed him from office in the Church and McCullock became head of a Nihilistic band of dissenters. He left the island in the spring of 1856 and visited various lake ports where he infused fresh eagerness into the desire of mainlanders to overthrow the Mormon kingdom. Little is known of the plotting, but on June 16th as he was about to make a call upon the officers of the U.S. Steamer Michigan, at anchor in Beaver Harbor he was shot by two of his rebellious subjects, receiving two rounds in the head and one in the spine of which he died on July 9th.

The Kingdom did not survive him. Some of the Mormons left on the boat that carried the dying King back to Voree where he was buried, and before the remaining followers had decided on any plan of action, a band of lawless armed men from the mainland descended upon the island, burned the tabernacle, destroyed the royal printing office, sacked the king's library and pillaged his house. The Faithful were given one day in which to leave the island with their stock and moveables and even then were driven on the boats, mostly without their property. Axe and torch were freely used, by the homesteads and improvements and most of the stock were seized and usurped by the invaders.

How like the touching story of Evangeline and the despoiling of Arcadia.

The exiles made their way into the deeper west and found a home among other disciples of Joseph Smith, descendants of whom to this day venerate the name of King James Jesse Strang.

Thus, after six brief and fitful years, passed into History the only Kingdom ever established on the soil of the United States as, to quote from Longfellow's immortal poem, "The freighted vessels departed bearing a nation and all its household goods into exile.

Since preparing this paper I have read Curwoods's novel "The Courage of Captain Plurse". His story puts so much emphasis on cruelties inflicted by orders of the King that it seems his information must have come from stories handed down from an earlier generation and which have grown larger as they became older.

Mr. William J. Doty, our County Treasurer, relates an interesting story. His father was Captain of a lake boat in the fifties and on one occasion his and some other boats put it to Beaver Harbor during a storm.

While waiting for the storm to abate great excitement arose on one of the ships where the cook alleged that the Mormons had kidnapped his wife.

A posse of husky sailors from the different boats was formed and went ashore to rescue the stolen wife. King Strang and his Court received them pleasantly, and graciously lent their aid in locating the woman and her captor. They soon were found but, alas for romance, the lady averred in all seriousness that she had left her husband voluntarily, that he had misused and abused her past all tolerance, that she had been looking and longing for a chance to escape, that she had found a safe and pleasant haven and here she was going to stay.

Thereupon the posse agreed that they were satisfied if she was and promptly withdrew, with much thanks to King Strang for his courtesy and many hand shakings with all the King's men for their generous assistance.

**READ AT THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY
HISTORICAL MEETING AT MAYVILLE, OCTOBER 6TH, 1928.**

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