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Wilford⁸ Woodruff, a Welles Descendant,
Fourth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints
And Founder of the Genealogical Society of Utah

By Barbara J. Mathews, CG

The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints is celebrating this year the life and work of Wilford⁸ Woodruff, the Fourth President of the Mormon church.¹ It was Wilford⁸ Woodruff who dedicated the completed Salt Lake City Temple, who issued the 1890 manifesto ending polygamy as a practice of the church, and who established the Genealogical Society of Utah. In a sense, then, we all owe gratitude to cousin Wilford⁸ for the microfilming performed by the Genealogical Society of Utah, and for the wonderful resources that we genealogists use at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City and at local Family History Centers.

Wilford Woodruff was born 1 March 1807 in Farmington, Connecticut, the son of Aphek⁸ and Beulah⁷ (Thompson) Woodruff. Both of his parents have lines to Anne² Welles through her marriage to Thomas Thompson. This means that Wilford had very deep roots in Farmington.

His father's line to Gov. Thomas Welles is:

Gov. Thomas¹ Welles m. Alice Tomes
Anne² Welles m. Thomas Thompson
Thomas³ Thompson m. Elizabeth Smith
Thomas⁴ Thompson m. Elizabeth Judd
Elizabeth⁵ Thompson m. Lt. Samuel Hart
Elizabeth⁶ Hart m. Joseph Woodford
Dinah⁷ Woodford m. Eldad Woodruff
Aphek⁸ Woodruff m. Beulah⁷ Thompson

His mother's line to Gov. Thomas Welles is:

Gov. Thomas¹ Welles m. Alice Tomes
Anne² Welles m. Thomas Thompson
John³ Thompson m. Mary Steele
Samuel⁴ Thompson m. Hannah Lathrop
Samuel⁵ Thompson m. Hannah North
Lot⁶ Thompson m. Ann Hart
Beulah⁷ Thompson m. Aphek⁸ Woodruff

Wilford Woodruff was an early member of the Mormon church. Apparently religious issues had often occupied his mind as a young man. He had traveled to Richland, Oswego Co., New York, and was baptized there by a Mormon missionary on 31 December 1833. Not long after, he traveled to Kirtland, Ohio, where Joseph Smith and other Mormons had settled, arriving in April 1834. He immediately participated in church activities. In 1834, he took part in Zion's

¹ R. Scott Lloyd, "Wilford Woodruff, Fourth President of the Church Links Early to Modern Church, Kirtland to Salt Lake City," *Church News*, issue of the week ending November 26, 2005, pp. 8-10. This article includes photographs of Wilford and his homes in Kirtland and Salt Lake City.

March to rescue Mormons in Jackson Co., Missouri. Then, in 1835 and 1836 he served as a missionary to Arkansas, Tennessee, and Kentucky; and again in 1837 and 1838 in Maine. His election to a governing body called the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles brought him back to Nauvoo, Illinois. In 1838 he led a wagon train to Far West, Missouri. He served as a missionary in 1839 in England. Back in Illinois, he was chaplain of the Nauvoo Legion and sat on the Nauvoo City Council. He returned to England in 1844 to lead missionary activities.²

Wilford left on his missionary trip to England almost immediately before Joseph and Hiram Smith were killed in Illinois. He notes:

May 9th 1844 ... I this day took the last parting hand & look with the Prophet [Joseph Smith] and the Patriarch [Hiram Smith] at their own dwellings. O O what a look Joseph gave me. Ah he knew what I did not...

[June] 27th I had an interview with Elder B. Young ... We sat together in the [train] depo[t] while Joseph & Hiram were killed ... I found on my arrival in Boston quite an excitement...³

In 1847, Wilford was in the first wagon train of settlers to reach Salt Lake Valley.⁴ It is said that, "It was his carriage that carried an ailing Brigham Young at the time President Young first gazed upon the valley. It was Elder Woodruff who preserved for history President Young's immortal words on that occasion: "This is the right place; drive on."⁵

Wilford's own joy at seeing Salt Lake Valley was preserved in his diaries. The entry for 24 July 1847 reads:

This is an important day in the History of my life and the History of the Church of JESUS CHRIST of Latter Day Saints. On this important day after trav[eling] from our encampment 6 miles through the deep ravene, valley, ending with the canion through the last creek we came into view of the great valley or Bason [of] the Salt Lake and land of promise held in reserve by the hand of God for a resting place for the Saints upon which A portion of Zion of GOD will be built.⁶

On the question of polygamy, Wilford Woodruff's personal experience spanned the church's complete history of multiple wives. First, he married an 1834 Mormon convert named Phebe Whittemore Carter on 13 April 1837. Later, after polygamy was revealed, Wilford married in 1846 three women: Mary Ann Jackson, Mary Carolyn or Caroline Barton, and Sarah Elinore Brown. In 1852 following arrival in Salt Lake City he married Mary Giles Meeks Webster and (in some accounts) Clarissa Hardy. In 1853 he is said to have married Emma Smoot Smith and Sarah Brown. In 1857 he married Sarah Delight Stocking and in 1877 Eudora Lovina Young.⁷

However, the climate changed dramatically in the 1880's. The US government sought out polygamists and imprisoned them. Wilford spent time giving the issue deep thought. In his diary entry for 3 October 1885, he states:

Oct 3, 1885 ... The Congress Passed Laws in 1862 against the Saints for practicing poligamy it being a tenit of our religion. The nation was not ripe enough to enforce it untill of late... As a

² Dean C. Jessee, "Wilford Woodruff," at website:

www.lightplanet.com/mormons/daily/history/people/woodruff_eom.

³ *Waiting for World's End: The Diaries of Wilford Woodruff* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), Susan Staker, ed., p. 75.

⁴ Dean C. Jessee, "Wilford Woodruff," at website:

www.lightplanet.com/mormons/daily/history/people/woodruff_eom.

⁵ Lloyd, "Wilford Woodruff..." p. 10.

⁶ *Waiting for World's End: The Diaries of Wilford Woodruff* (1993), p. 122.

⁷ "The Wives of Wilford Woodruff," www.geocities.com/athens/oracle/7207/WWfamilies.htm.

Historian [emphasis his] I would say I would *rather be shot* [emphasis his] dead in the Streets or struck with lightning than to Desert my Children Break my Covenants turn my wives into the Street & desert them with whom I have made sacred Covenants Deny my religion & Dishonor God.⁸

Wilford was forced to keep his distance from his wives in order to stay out of jail. The enormity of his sacrifice became vivid just a week later. In his diary for 9 and 12 October 1885, Wilford writes:

9 At 6 o'clock I Called to see my wife Phebe who was vary low. I laid my hands upon her head & Blessed her And annointed her for her burial and at 2 o'clock she died. Thus we part after living together 48 years & 6 months in the Marriage Covenant.

12 The funeral of my wife Phebe was attended to day at the 14 ward school House. I saw the procession as it Past the office. I saw the hearse that Carried my wife Phebe Whittemore Carter Woodruff to the grave. I was not permitted to attend her funeral without being arrested for my religin, & Imprisoned for Cohabitation with my wives as many others are.⁹

The US government was cracking down on polygamy in Utah by 1887 when Wilford became President of the church. He and other church leaders “had gone into seclusion to avoid imprisonment under provisions of the federal anti-polygamy legislation... For weeks President Woodruff ‘wrestled mightily with the Lord’ then, on September 24, 1890, after seeing in vision the consequences of inaction, he issued his now-famous Manifesto of 1890”¹⁰ On 17 July 1894, Wilford was able to record in his diary, “President Cleveland Signed the Bill this day which gave Utah admission into the Union as a State Government.”¹¹

Wilford⁸ Woodruff died 2 September 1898 while on a church trip to San Francisco. Those traveling with him telegraphed the church offices in Salt Lake City, stating, “He left us at 6.40 this morning. Break the news to his family. He slept peacefully all night and passed away without movement.”¹²

⁸ *Waiting for World's End: The Diaries of Wilford Woodruff* (1993), p. 367.

⁹ *Waiting for World's End: The Diaries of Wilford Woodruff* (1993), p. 368.

¹⁰ “Wilford Woodruff, March 1, 1807 – September 2, 1898,” at website: www.familyforever.com/temples/prophets/wwoodruff.htm.

¹¹ *Waiting for World's End: The Diaries of Wilford Woodruff* (1993), p. 400.

¹² *Waiting for World's End: The Diaries of Wilford Woodruff* (1993), p. 425.