Preface

What follows are transcriptions and photocopies of the missionary diaries of Elder Walter Alma Sells. Now nearly one hundred years since the beginning of his mission, and around two years since Grandma’s passing, these writings provide some insight into our Sells lineage. Sadly but also fortunately, the written record is now all we have to trace this family history to its primary sources, other than sundry memories of grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Walter was born a third-generation member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints April 2, 1882 in Nephi, Juab County, Utah. His parents, Francis Sells and Priscilla Cato, immigrated to Utah in the late 1860’s, with Francis pushing a handcart for a portion of his journey. Their parents – Walter’s grandparents – had joined the L.D.S. church in England “at an early date.” Charles and Eliza Sells (Walter’s paternal grandparents), for instance, “opened their house to the Elders and built a little meeting house for the saints to meet in.” Noting Eliza’s death in 1884, the Millennial Star – the Church’s official periodical in England – emphasized that she would “be remembered by many of the Elders who have traveled in that region as a kind-hearted, worthy Latter-day Saint, beloved by all who knew her.”

Walter was the third of Francis and Priscilla Sells’ children to serve a mission. Francis Cato, Walter’s eldest brother, spent over two years in the London Conference of the European Mission. Wilford Joseph, Walter’s elder brother by two years, labored as a missionary for four-and-a-half years in the “Sandwich Islands” (i.e., Hawaii).

At the time of his mission call, Walter was twenty-six years old and held the Aaronic Priesthood office of Teacher. While records list his baptism in 1890 and his enrollment in a Theology course at the local Brigham Young University in 1904, details of his pre-mission years are scant.

Serving in the Leeds Conference of the European Mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints between 1908 and 1910, Walter proselytized during a tense

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2 “Family Record – Francis and Priscilla Cato Sells” (Priscilla Cato Sells, 1914).
3 Ibid.
4 The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star (L.D.S. Church, 46:128). “SELLS – At Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire, Feb. 7, 1884, Mrs. Eliza Sells; born at Hemel Hempstead, March 10, 1811; baptized April 7, 1852, and died in full faith. Sister Sells will…..”
5 Missionary Record Index, 1830-1971 (L.D.S. Historical Department, Film #1913089). Related information includes: Francis Cato (see C:22) set apart February 14, 1896 and returned April 14, 1898; Wilford Joseph (see C:168) set apart October 7, 1902 and returned May 19, 1907; Walter Alma (see D:39) set apart June 25, 1908 and returned August 12, 1910.
6 Annual Genealogical Report, Form E, 1907-1946. L.D.S. Church, Nephi Ward, Old (Utah) (L.D.S. Historical Department, Film #26224). “Sells Walter Alma, of the Nephi 2nd Ward…..” (see #63). This same report states that Walter’s stake – the Juab Stake – sent out 11 other missionaries in 1908: two to the Netherlands, one to the Southern States, one to California, two to Hawaii, and five to Great Britain.
7 Sells-Cato family group record (Maggie Maude Sells Hoyt, date unknown). Walter’s baptismal date is recorded as August 6, 1890.
8 Brigham Young University transcript. Also lists Walter taking courses in English, Psychology and Penmanship during the same semester.
period for the burgeoning worldwide church. With its recent polygamous past, U.S. publications, such as McClure’s and Cosmopolitan, disparaged the church through printed articles and editorials.\(^9\) Congress, likewise, attempted to bar two elected L.D.S. candidates to the House of Representatives and Congress, respectively, out of fear of the moral and political motives of the “Mormons.”\(^{10}\) Sentiments toward the church in Europe were also predominantly negative, largely out of fear of the moral character of a supposed polygamous sect that was rumored to kidnap women and ship them to Utah to join enclaves of polygamous outlaws. Germany, for example, “decreed [in 1906] that Mormon teachings were ‘subversive of morality’ and ordered the Church to withdraw from the country.”\(^{11}\) Six years later in England, a missionary was tarred and feathered; around the same time, the church’s European mission president was attacked by a mob.\(^{12}\)

Causes other than morality and politics also triggered animosity toward the church during Walter’s mission. Close to 1,400 missionaries from America alone entered Great Britain in the first decade of the 1900’s,\(^{13}\) a country with approximately 8,000 L.D.S. members out of a total population of forty-five million.\(^{14}\) Between December 1906 and June 1910, 18,056,257 tracts and 523,216 books relating to the Gospel were distributed in the British mission, with 3,641 persons consequently baptized into the Church.\(^{15}\)

Walter noted in his diaries the tenuous social and political environment in which he lived and worked as a missionary. “They just take the tract and say they will read it, but they are afraid to talk to you. The name, ‘Mormon’ scares them.”\(^{16}\) Another time he wrote, “A gentleman opposed me and called me just as good as a liar, but I talked to him and got him to take my tract and gave him a pamphlet….He was prejudiced against us….We meet some hard old nuts. They oppose a fellow on every line. Some are as mean as can be.”\(^{17}\) Yet, along with the antagonism came the joys and beauties of England. “The English people are good honest truthful people,”\(^{18}\) he wrote early in his labors. Likewise, “The scenery is grand. England can not be beat for green trees, etc.”\(^{19}\)

While a portion of Walter’s entries included weather forecasts and statistical recaps of his missionary life, he also wrote about the less mundane: theatrical performances, market auctioneers, fickle church members, dog attacks, and trips to Paris.


\(^{10}\)Church History in the Fulness of Times (L.D.S. Church Educational System, 1989:465-70). One New York newspaper – the New York Commercial Advertiser – made the accusation that L.D.S. “missionaries were paid by head for their converts, a meager $4.00 for a male, but up to $60 for a girl over 16 whom they could and did place in polygamy” (p. 469).

\(^{11}\)The Church in the Twentieth Century (Richard Cowan, 1985:35).

\(^{12}\)Improvement Era (L.D.S. Church, 40:153).

\(^{13}\)A Century of “Mormonism” in Great Britain (Richard Evans, 1937:217).


\(^{15}\)“Penrose, Charles William” in Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia: A Compilation of Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men and Women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Andrew Jensen, 3:769).

\(^{16}\)March 16, 1909.

\(^{17}\)February 18, 1909.

\(^{18}\)July 12, 1908.

\(^{19}\)June 10, 1909.
and London. Perhaps most interesting amongst Walter’s text are the traces of his personality. One notices his love for nature and, especially, flowers. “Oh! such pretty trees, grass, a little old church etc. Ferns by the score.” Further, “We gathered some fern, daisies butter-cups, bluebells and other flowers. The flowers (wild ones) are just lovely.” One also detects his love for God and humanity: “Feel fine in regards to the Gospel. May God bless me and make me humble is my prayer. God bless the saints.” “How good the saints do treat us. They think an elder is little below an angel. Would to God that we were.”

Sadly, little direct mention of Walter’s immediate family is given in his diaries. He did, nonetheless, record his visits to Hemel Hempstead, the hometown of the Sells family. While overall sparse, these few entries still provide salient family history clues, such as the name of the street (Chappel Street) where his father was born.

Walter’s mission ended honorably in 1910. Three years later he wed Mary Nuttall, also of L.D.S. heritage, and eventually fathered five children. An alumnus of the University of Utah, Walter worked as a teacher and school principal in Utah and, after the Depression, as a café operator and a farmer in Idaho. He died in 1953 “after a long illness,” just three days short of seventy-one years.

I hope that you will enjoy Walter’s words as much as I have in the two years since I first began transcribing them. Many immediate and extended family members provided valuable assistance during this process. Uncle Frank loaned me diaries I and II. Jim Morse (Mom’s cousin) gave me diary III, along with scanned pictures and the patriarchal blessing of Walter. Marshall Boyd (also Mom’s cousin) provided me with copies of Walter’s “Certificate of Ordination,” travel instructions, and “Letter of Appointment;” additionally, Marshall gave me Walter’s missionary Book of Mormon. Mom loaned me Walter’s missionary record book, along with a picture of Walter taken while he was on his mission. Finally, Sarah granted me valuable time to “spend with Walter.”

Before concluding, I should note that one last diary is missing from Walter’s missionary writings. It would span from January 1910 to the end of his mission. I have attempted to locate it, yet it remains to be found.

Jared
24 May 2004

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20 August 13, 1908.
21 June 11, 1909.
22 August 9, 1908.
23 July 28, 1908.
24 August 7, 1909.
25 University of Utah transcript. Coursework included: Art, Physics, Sociology, Physical Education, History of Education, Pedagogy, Hygiene, etc.
26 “Family Record—Francis and Priscilla Cato Sells” (Priscilla Cato Sells, 1914).
27 “Walter Sells, 70, Dies At Home” (newspaper and date unknown). “...They came to Idaho Falls and opened and operated the New Chesapeake Café. Later they moved to Ammon where he farmed for a time before moving back to Idaho Falls....”