CLARK NEWS

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PIONEER FATHER

THE EARLY YEARS

Why a book about Thomas Henry Clark? He never led an army. He never governed a state. He never invented a machine. Not even all of the 2,000 people who today are descended from him know who he was. Moreover, writing a book about him presents some unusual problems. Since he was just an ordinary man, just an ordinary father, just an ordinary citizen, there is little of the glamorous about him that makes a man's story easy to tell.

As a matter of fact, there is little of the glamorous about most people, and therein we have our answer. Most people achieve no fame and very little fortune. They are born, they live and they die, and in a few years not even their own family remembers who they were. Thus in his story we have the story of all the little people who left their homes in the pioneering years to come to America. In our appreciation of him we have our appreciation of all our ancestors who built this country. In addition, in our understanding of him we have the key to understanding many of the problems which confront us today which never confronted them.

Like most family records, the letters, the diaries and the journals which have been handed down in the Clark Family are disappointingly incomplete, and more especially about his youth. There is nothing of the countless little details and anecdotes that would clarify our picture of him. There is nothing about the kind of a house he was born in or what his family did for a living or even of the kind of a town they lived in. We know that he was the son of Thomas Clark and Sarah Plain, that he was born on the seventh of May, 1805 at Acton, Herefordshire, England. These facts were recorded in the records of the parish church at his baptism and constitute our entire knowledge of his youth except for a single comment by someone who knew that characteristics are fully as important as dates and places. From him we have the information that as a young man he was athletically inclined and was "a boxer of no mean ability".

Today, a century and a half later, there falls to us the task of taking this informational skeleton and clothing it with the flesh of realism and breathing into it again the life that once animated it.

To begin with, let us ask some questions. What did it mean to be born in Acton, Herefordshire, England on the 7th of May 1805. What were the people doing? What were they talking about? What was happening not only elsewhere in England, but elsewhere in the world? How much of it had any effect on the life of Thomas Henry Clark?

Even a scanning of history shows that the most important event surrounding his early life was a very desperate war in which his country was engaged. It began a dozen years before Thomas was born, when the excesses of the French Revolution threatened all established governments. When Napoleon fell heir to the Revolution, his brilliant prosecution of the military struggle threatened not only England, but all of Europe.

British forces were sent to the continent to oppose him but they were badly led and were plunged into one disaster after another. Added to their defeats on the continent were a series of bad harvests at home and the loss of the British commercial traffic. There was great unrest and much actual want throughout the island. To make matters worse, Pitt, the prime minister, felt that the situation called for repressive measures and many of the traditional British liberties were suppressed. The right of free meetings was limited, arbitrary imprisonment was practiced and harsh sentences were often meted out to innocent persons. Never in the history of Englishmen was their morale so low or their situation so precarious as it was in 1798. The parish records at Bishop's Frome, Herefordshire, state that on April 23, 1798 Thomas's parents were united in marriage.

Knowing England's deplorable situation, Napoleon determined to add the tight little isle to his list of conquests. By 1803 he had massed an army of one hundred and fifty thousand men along the channel and multitudes of flat bottomed boats were made ready which could be towed across by warships. He boasted that he could get them across in forty eight hours and that was all he needed.

The British observed these preparations with great anxiety but with the greatest determination not to repeat their disasters. Two hundred thousand men were called to the colors and these were backed by three hundred thousand volunteers from the fields and the mills who made up for their lack of experience with their desperate earnestness.

Certainly among these volunteers must have been Thomas's father and perhaps his uncles and, of course, his neighbors. For two years the men waited and watched for the lighting of the beacons which were to announce that the French had begun to cross the channel. For two years the mothers and the wives guarded their little ones and prepared for the worst. In the very height of this great anxiety, Sarah learned that in the spring she would have a baby, a baby which she was to name Thomas Henry Clark.

Of course Napoleon's crossing never came off. The tides and the weather never seemed to reach that point where he felt the attempt could be made and as news came to him of England's increasing preparedness, he abandoned the plan. He determined to get possession of the channel by concentration of a great fleet in the Dover Straits.

England by this time was out of her doldrums and she sent Lord Nelson out to meet the French. This resulted in the battle of Trafalgar which has often been called the greatest naval battle of modern times. Before it was over, Napoleon's last hopes of conquering the British lay on the bottom of the ocean.

Thomas was less than six months old at the time and could have been little concerned with the exultation which filled all England but as he learned to understand he must have heard time and time again how the British fleet, with twenty seven ships, descended upon Napoleon's fleet of thirty three and gloriously, almost joyfully, shelled them into oblivion. He must have been affected by Nelson's last signal to his men as they went into battle, "England expects that every man will do his duty". He could not have escaped it as he heard them recount how Lord Nelson, mortally wounded, was carried below, and how he covered his face and his stars with his handkerchief so that his men might not see who had fallen.

As time passed, new events crowded in upon his world. When he was seven years old he must have heard his family talk of Napoleon's march through Europe and of the final and disgraceful retreat of the Grand Army from the frozen wastes of Russia. In that same year he would have heard even more talk of his own country's second war with her onetime colony in the New World. Before that war was over he would have been chagrined to hear them admit that the British Navy had suffered defeat after defeat at the hands of the Americans. Even the burning of the public buildings in Washington D.C. by the British Army could not have removed all the sting from that defeat. Then, two years later when he was nine, the greatest news of all came. Napoleon had been defeated at Waterloo. For the first time in twenty three years and for the first time in his entire life, his country was at peace.

Even though peace had come, the years following were not easy years. True, England suddenly found herself the great commercial nation of the entire world. The long years of war had resulted in the complete destruction of the fleets of other nations so that none but England could engage in oceanic commerce. Besides, Englishmen had invented the steam engine and other machines and these permitted her to manufacture without the slow handlabor of the rest of the world. Her goods were eagerly sought around the world.

For the manufacturers, the shipowners, and the government who taxed them both, these were prosperous years. For the common people they were years of grinding poverty. The oldtime handcrafts of the people were no longer wanted, and employment in the mills, the mines and the factories was often worse than slavery. Trade Unions were outlawed, wages were criminally low and hours were as long as the human body could endure. The working people crowded into miserable tenement districts where they lived in absolute wretchedness. Poverty, disease and immorality stalked through the land.

Perhaps the most unhappy condition of all was that of the children of England. Boys and girls alike were sent into the mills and the workshops at a very tender age and grew up without knowing anything of play and recreation and laughter. Many were disposed of under the apprentice system, where they were doomed to years of virtual servitude under a needy master who had taken them in the first place because of the payment of some small premium.

With these conditions prevailing in the England of 1825, we of

today wonder how any young couple could think of marriage, but we often forget that even the most miserable burden is lightened if shared. Thomas was twenty years old that year. His bride was Charlotte Gailey, the daughter of William Gailey. She was two years older than Thomas, but here again our records fail us. We know nothing else about her. Was she pretty? Was she talented? Was she a good cook? A good neighbor?

We only know that the young couple settled down at Bishop's Frome where John, Elinor, Eliza, Hannah Maria, Ann, Thomas and Sarah were born to them. We do not even know how they fared financially. If we knew what line of work he followed we might better picture conditions in their home, but we do not. Our only clue is that as a young man he was interested in athletics and was something of a boxer, which seemingly rules out complete poverty. This is also borne out by the fact that he had an education, little of which could have been possible to the poorer classes.

Sometime during this period Thomas determined to take up the ministry. We know nothing of his training for the work. Presumably he attended a theological school of some sort and graduated. We do know that for a number of years he traveled through his neighborhood preaching for the Weslyan Methodist church.

This is not strange when we consider another effect the long years of war had had upon the British people. The years of privation and threatened invasion had had a sobering effect upon them and when peace came there was a definite groping after religion. The whole of England was effected by it. The great work done by Wesley to make religion a personal thing bore fruit as never before.

After a period we find Thomas becoming more and more disatisfied with Methodist religion. He was becoming convinced that it did not follow the teachings of the Bible. Many other people in his area began to feel that same way but we do not know whether it was a result of Thomas's preaching or whether it was a natural result of the times. We do know that over six hundred of them finally broke away and organized a church which they felt conformed more completely with the Scriptures. This church they called the United Brethren. Thomas Knighton presided over this church and Thomas was second in command.

It seems wise at this point to mention another event of religious importance which had an effect upon Thomas far more profound and more lasting than anything else, not only upon hi but upon his family and his descendents even to the present time.

It began when he was only six months old, not in England, but across the Atlantic ocean in the snow covered hills of Vermont, U.S.A. On December 23, 1805, in Sharon, Windsor County, there was born to a humble farmer and his wife, a baby boy. The father was Joseph Smith and the mother was Lucy Mack. The boy was named Joseph also. As a boy Thomas probably never heard of Vermont and the boy Joseph probably never heard of Herefordshire, but they were destined to know each other due to this matter of religion, in which both of them were very much interested.

How that meeting came about and the circumstances leading up to it is the important story of Thomas Henry Clark. It is the one event which gives him claim to eternal honor. It is the one fact in his life which raises him above the common people and makes of him an ideal, a light for all those who sit in darkness to follow.

HERE IS A PROBLEM FOR YOU.

I don't get to see anyone from the family very often any more but the other day Colleen Tate Kling was here and we spent several hours together going over what we have on the family records. Colleen is one member of this family that has genealogy at heart and she has done so much work on it that I feel ashamed when I look at what I have not done this past year. She brought me a whole book full of family group sheets on just one branch of the Clark family, the Murdock branch. These are not sheets of names of ancestors, they are the sheets of the families yet living.

She also brought me a whole list of family names that are not receiving the Clark News--No funny remarks--I know that no one is receiving the Clark News as well as you do, but these families have never received it at any time. The upshot of the whole deal was that it meant increasing the circulation of the Clark News by about 200 copies every issue. That runs into a bit of money just for printing expenses and mailing costs.

I told Colleen that I thought that we would have to arrive at a little different method of operation if the Clark News is going to run into 300 or even 400 copies per issue. One person couldn't hardly afford to pay the costs himself and if we took it out of research funds it would take money that was donated for research and ought to be used for that. The only alternative would be to put the Clark News on a subscription basis, selling it for the cost of printing and mailing since no one wants to make anything out of it.

That brings up another problem that ought to have been brought up a long time ago, the problem of putting out the Clark News on a more or less regular schedule. I feel that once every two months is about right for publication and once more I am going to set that as my goal. I can do it. I haven't done it in the past year because I let a lot of less important things interfere. I can do better and I shall.

When I discussed the matter with Colleen about subscription rates I told her it cost about 6¢ per copy to print and mail and she took the idea up with a number of the family and all agreed. I have checked my figures a little more closely and it costs about 7¢ but that isn't anything to argue about.

Since we cannot get the family together for a vote on it, at least right now, I am going to mail this issue to all the old names plus all the new names and then ask all of you to send me 40¢ for the next six issues if you want them. I think you will want them because I have some interesting information that has come to me and I hope we soon get some research in England to write about. If you are not interested in the next six issues, do not send the 40¢ and I'll draw a little red line right through the middle of your John Henry.

------Tear_off_and_mail_if_you_want_the_next_6_issues.----------

Dear Bernard:
I am enclosing 40¢. Send me the next six issues of the Clark News.

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ State_____

(Send cash or 2¢ stamps--one is as good as the other)