

Far Away in St. George - by Mary Phoenix

The melodious strains of the famous Christmas carol, Far, Far Away on Judea's Plains, have rung around the world. But did you know that this immortal song was written and first performed in St. George?

Several years ago, when Rockefeller Center began what has since become a traditional part of Christmas in New York City they paid tribute to what they called 'the only two true Christmas carols composed in America,' Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem by the Reverend Phillip Brooks, and Far, Far Away on Judea's Plains by John M. Macfarlane. Probably no one in the audience had heard of John M. Macfarlane and they certainly did not know the hymn had been composed in the tiny hamlet of St. George in the southwestern corner of what was then the Territory of Deseret.

How did a work of such superiority come from such a location?

During the pioneer days of St. George, LDS Church Apostle Erastus Snow tried to help his sorely tried people through the winter by giving them something they could look forward to, could participate in, to relieve the tedium of actual hunger and dull, gray days.

The year of 1869 was unusually hard, so to compensate, Apostle Snow wanted his people to have a particularly happy Christmas observance. Food was so scarce it would be impossible to stage any kind of feast; he knew he must look elsewhere for his holiday cheer, talent was the one thing his loyal flock possessed and he would use it to stage a program that would not only be enjoyable, but would give them something to talk about until spring came.

As a first step he called to his office Charles Walker, poet laureate of the Cotton Mission and John M. Macfarlane, recently called to St. George by Brigham Young to serve as choirmaster. He set them apart to compose a special Christmas song. The two men had been collaborating almost from the day they first met, Walker composing verses and Macfarlane composing or arranging music to go with Walker's work.

Walker returned home, wrote some verses and took them to Macfarlane, who found that try as he might he could not fit them to music. Christmas was imminent and Macfarlane found himself suffering from a mental block that he could not shake. Afterwards he said that if he wasn't actually sleeping, he was mentally composing or praying for the ability to do so.

Then one night the breakthrough came. Macfarlane and his wife, Ann Chatterley, had a small, one-room, adobe house with a lean-to on what is now 294 East Tabernacle. They retired early as all good pioneers did to conserve both fuel and light. Sometime during the night John awakened with both a melody and words running through his mind. He shook his sleeping wife.

"Hurry up Anne! Light the bitch and pump the bellows! I've finally got it!"

Sleepily and obediently, Ann did as she was asked. The bitch was a very primitive form of lighting, a knot of flannel in a saucer of grease. The bellows was a pump that must be worked to make it possible for the organ to function.

What a sight they would have presented had any onlookers been present! John, a handsome man, five-foot-ten, weighed 235 pounds. Ann was not quite five-feet tall and never in her life tipped the scales at 100 pounds. Both of them wore the voluminous nightgowns then in vogue and because they shared the general belief that night air was injurious to one's head, they wore nightcaps. John M. played, hummed and wrote. Ann shivered, held the light in one hand to illuminate his work and valiantly pumped the bellows with the other. Afterwards she remembered asking him once if he wasn't far enough along to get back in their warm bed and finish it in the morning, but he was so engrossed that he merely shook his head. Just as the first rays of the sun shot across the western hills, he pronounced it finished.

After breakfast he walked to the Walker home to sing his song. Walker was the first to extol its excellence. When Macfarlane signed both of their names to the finished copy, Walker generously insisted his name be erased because, as he later explained, there wasn't a work of thought of his in it. But neither one of them thought that it mattered. Like their other songs, they believed it would be performed once and then fade away.

But it wouldn't fade away. The song seemed a perfect expression of the joy, the awe and the reverence people felt towards Christ's birthday and too, it could be sung by even an average voice. Every year the Christmas program committee was urged to include "Brother Mack's" song and those who moved away wrote asking for a copy and permission to use it on their program. Thus it spread through Mormondom.

It was published for the first time in the official Sunday School magazine, The Juvenile Instructor, on December 15, 1889, 20 years after it was composed. The cover featured Macfarlane in the act of composing and it was clearly meant as a tribute to him. But Macfarlane and his large family, while both pleased and surprised at the honor, felt that it carried poetic license a little too far.

In the place of a nightshirt, John M. was clad in his Sunday best. He was seated at an elegant organ, far more lavish than any in Southern Utah, and a far cry from the little three-octave instrument Ann had so vigorously pumped that night. Family legend had him using a pencil but the illustration placed in his hand a quill pen not in use for at least 100 years, and the bitch was replaced by an ornate kerosene lamp, and impossibility when only the richest in the mission had more than a stump of a candle to be used and then only in a time of real emergency. But the most glaring error was the appearance of the St. George Temple through an open window. The temple was not even conceived until two years after the song was composed and it was not finished until a decade later.

In the final analysis that does not matter. What is important is that the publication gave the song to the world. In 1896, four years after the death of John M. Macfarlane, the song made its initial appearance in the official LDS Hymn Book.

Far, Far Away On Judea's Plains, No. 212

1. Far, far away on Judea's plains, Shepherds of old heard the joyous strains: Glory to God, Glory to God, Glory to God in the highest. Peace on earth, good will to men! Peace on earth, good will to men!
2. Sweet are these strains of redeeming love, Message of mercy from heaven above, Glory to God, Glory to God, Glory to God in the highest. Peace on earth, good will to men! Peace on earth, good will to men!

3. Lord, with the angels we too would rejoice, Help us to sing with the heart and voice, Glory to God, Glory to God, Glory to God in the highest. Peace on earth, good will to men! Peace on earth, good will to men!
4. Hasten the time when, from every clime, Men shall unite in the strains sublime, Glory to God, Glory to God, Glory to God in the highest. Peace on earth, good will to men! Peace on earth, good will to men!