

“A Day of God’s Power” by Heidi Bennett

For early members of the Church, the summer of 1839 was a season of both suffering and miracles. Forced from their homes in Missouri earlier that year, they found refuge among the residents of Illinois and Iowa, who helped to care for their immediate needs. Soon the Church purchased property in Commerce, Illinois, which the Prophet Joseph later renamed Nauvoo, based on the Hebrew word for “beautiful.” He encouraged all Church members to gather there.

But Nauvoo was not yet “the city beautiful.” A swampy portion of the land needed to be drained before it was habitable, and in the meantime mosquitoes thrived in the area. The mosquitoes carried malaria and infected hundreds of people.

Joseph and Emma Smith took many of the sick into their home to care for them—so many that Joseph

and Emma moved into a tent in their yard to free up space.¹ Wilford Woodruff recalled, “The large number of Saints who had been driven out of Missouri, were flocking into Commerce; but had no homes to go into, and were living in wagons, in tents, and on the ground. Many, therefore, were sick through the exposure they were subjected to. Brother Joseph had waited on the sick, until he was worn out and nearly sick himself.”² Joseph did become ill, but after several days he rose from his bed, feeling prompted to minister to those who were suffering. Brigham Young wrote:

July 22, 1839.—Joseph arose from his bed of sickness, and the power of God rested upon him. He commenced in his own house and door-yard, commanding the sick, in the name of Jesus Christ, to arise and be made whole, and they were healed according to his word. He then



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continued to travel from house to house from tent to tent upon the bank of the river, healing the sick as he went until he arrived at the upper stonehouse, where he crossed the river in a boat, accompanied by several of the Quorum of the Twelve, and landed in Montrose.³

Wilford Woodruff was with Joseph that day. While they were waiting to cross the river, a man asked Joseph for help. Wilford recalled:

A man came to [Joseph] and asked him if he would go about three miles and heal two of his small children, who were twins, about three months old, and were sick nigh unto death. He was a man of the world, he had never heard a sermon preached by a Latter-day Saint. Joseph said he could not go, but he would send a man.

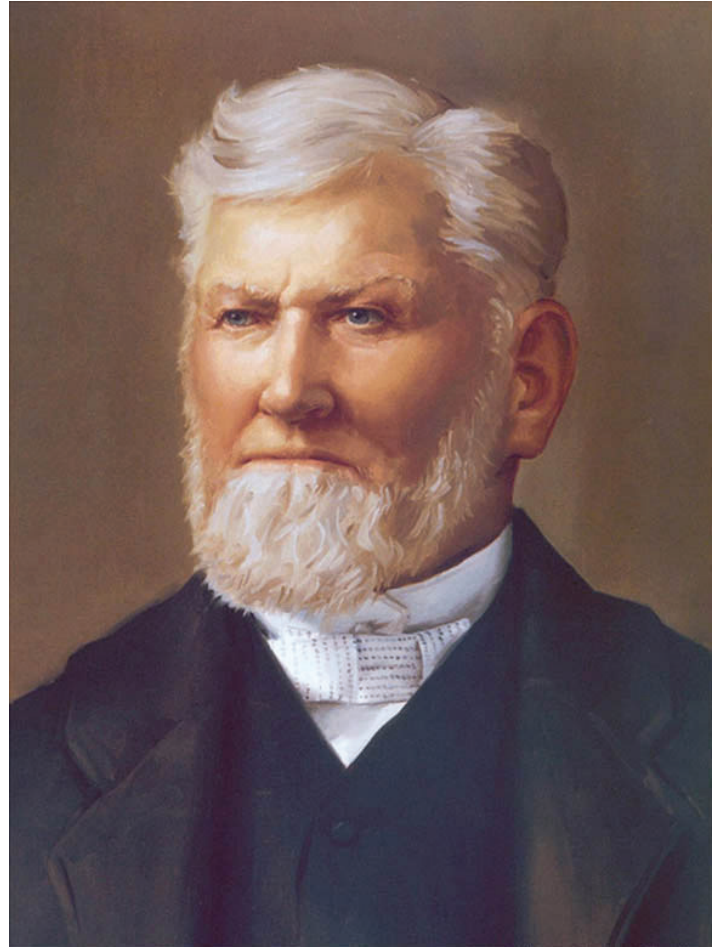
After hesitating a moment, he turned to me and said, “You go with this man and heal his children,” at the same time giving me a red silk handkerchief, and said, “After you lay hands upon them, wipe their faces with it, and they shall be healed; and as long as you will keep that handkerchief, it shall ever remain as a league between you and me.”

I went and did as I was commanded, and the children were healed.⁴

Wilford Woodruff kept this handkerchief as a reminder of this great experience and of Joseph’s compassion toward the sick, including those who were not of his faith. A corner of the handkerchief has been cut off, possibly by someone wanting a memento of the Prophet.

Although many were healed that day, sickness continued to afflict others in the area for months. Joseph continued to care for the sick, sacrificing his own needs to tend to the needs of others. John Lyman Smith recalled a visit from the Prophet in September 1839:

The Prophet Joseph and his brother Hyrum visited us and administered to us all, father being delirious from the effects of the fever. Their words comforted us greatly, as they said in the name of the Lord you all shall be well again. Upon leaving the hovel Joseph placed his slippers upon my mother’s feet and sprang upon his horse from the doorway and rode home barefoot. The next day Joseph removed father to his own house and nursed him until he recovered.⁵



Wilford Woodruff

As the weather turned colder, the mosquitoes died off, and the people recovered from their illness. Men drained the swamps, and Nauvoo became a beautiful city. But that summer of sickness and healing will always stand as a witness of Joseph Smith’s compassion and the power of God given to him to heal and bless God’s children.

Footnotes

- [1] Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 379.
- [2] Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Wilford Woodruff (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 142.
- [3] Brigham Young journal, in Debbie Birch, “July 22, 1839: A Day of God’s Power,” *New Era*, Mar. 1971, 17.
- [4] “History of Wilford Woodruff,” *Millennial Star*, vol. 27, no. 1 (May 27, 1865), 326.
- [5] John Lyman Smith diary, in Birch, “July 22, 1839,” 17.