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The Family File A Brief Life History of John Alexander Clark

By Ora Steed Larsen

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My information has been gathered from family records and histories; Susan Alice Bell Clark Steed's Life History (pages 3, 5-8); Ezra Thompson Clark's Ancestors and Descendants (page 120); the Biography of Ezra Thompson Clark (page 63); remarks given by Obert C. Tanner at the Ezra T. Clark Family Reunion, Farmington, Utah June 8, 1985; and a talk given by Michael Christian in the 12th LDS Ward, St. George East Stake, Sept. 8, 1991

From the time I was very young my mother told me of experiences she and her brother John, who was two years younger, had together and I developed a fondness for my Uncle John even though I never met him. Researching his life history has been a joy.

John Alexander Clark was born the 29th of February 1871, the fifth child in a family of 10, to Ezra Thompson Clark and Susan Leggett Clark, in Farmington, Utah. My mother, Susan Alice Clark Steed, was very close to her brother John. From my mother's life history I quote: "Of my six brothers and three sisters, a close companionship existed between my brother John and I. From our early childhood, the joyous days of playing games, competition in learning verses and multiplication tables were shared together. The Christmas I received the book "Lydia Knight" and "Jacob Hamblin" created a desire for good reading. Attending school and

teaching school together have been vivid and cherished memories."

From the biography of my Grandfather Ezra Thompson Clark, written by my Aunt Annie Clark Tanner (page 63) we read: "When John was called on a mission in 1894 he was teaching school in Minersville, Utah. After the Christmas holidays his brother Charles took his place. John was delighted to go to Palestine. He was ambitious for an education and offered to relinquish all claim on the family property if he could realize his desire.

An incident is told that illustrates John's personality and his father's understanding of him. One of the older boys manifested a little impatience in John's delay when they were getting ready to round up cattle in Bear Lake.

"Don't mind his careful preparation," said the father. "When John gets off on a trip he never comes back for something he should have taken."

John Clark was buried in a beautiful cemetery at the foot of Mount Carmel, Palestine, where a monument marks his grave. It was a great regret to his father that he could not bring the body home.

Again I quote from my mother's history: "My brother, John, and I attended summer school at Provo. He had attended school there the previous two years and had accepted an offer to teach school at Minersville, Beaver County, Utah, with me as his assistant. Our experiences were at times hard, but very valuable in that community. I had four grades with 50 pupils, and marvel how I kept so many busy.

"We both took active part in the auxiliary organizations of the ward. We had cultivated a love for books at an early age. This interest probably dated from the Christmas we received our first real books as gifts. We had read together: 'David Copperfield,' 'Ben Hur,' 'The Last Days of Pompeii,' 'Added Upon,' 'Ishmael Worth,' and the Standard Works of the Church. This interest in good reading led to John's organizing a reading club.

"Into every life comes sunshine and shadows and a cloud now darkened my sky. John received a letter, which ended our close association. It was a call to the Turkish Mission. He arranged for our brother who had just returned from a mission to take his place teaching. His leaving caused an indescribable loneliness and gloom for me, but when he asked me if I was sorry he was going, I replied with all the cheerfulness possible, 'No, I'll try not to be, as it is the Father's calling.'

"Here are a few excerpts taken from a letter I received while he was on his mission. His mission was a joy to him and he gave his all in the service of his Maker."

(His letters were written on parchment and are still in our family.)

Haifa Palestine

September 18, 1894

Dear Sister Alice,

And you are really in Provo at BYU....This is the year I was supposed to graduate, but the Lord willed it otherwise; and we were able to attend this year together, weren't we? But we are both where we should be.

During the last few days, I have thought often of a year ago. Tomorrow the 19th of September is the anniversary of the initiation into the schoolroom. I believe it was very essential to fulfilling of my next undertaking. I am having a very fine time now; am enjoying the blessings, which I have imagined mis-

sionaries enjoyed. Am as contented as you can imagine and enjoying my mission to a very great extent. Am getting along nicely with the language. In fact, I am blessed exceedingly in understanding and making myself understood. I scarcely ever speak English to anyone, save myself. I have been here one month and feel right at home; get along splendidly. Shall be very pleased to hear from you.

Your true brother, John A. Clark

Coming back to my mother's own writing: "It was while engaged in hard study at BYU I received the tragic news of John's death. This was the first great sorrow I had known. After only a year of missionary work he had died of smallpox and was buried in Haifa. His memorial services were held in Farmington and I returned to Provo to continue my course, but the reality of knowing he was never coming back almost caused my failure.

"One day I returned from school in a despondent and listless mood. The following morning I experienced a very unusual manifestation. John's voice, as plainly as when he was alive, quoted the same words he had spoken just before he left saying, 'You said you were not sorry I was going on a mission, now why are you?'

"I replied, 'I'll try not to be anymore.'"

This manifestation helped my mother to overcome her sorrow and she was able to study with a light heart and did get her diploma.

Uncle John died at the age of 24 while serving a mission in the Holy Land.

From the book, "Ezra Thompson Clark's Ancestors and Descendants" (page 120) I quote: "John Alexander Clark died in Haifa, Palestine, February 8, 1895. He was teaching school in Minersville, Utah when he was called to a mission to Turkey. He landed at Liverpool in February, met his co-workers in Leipzig, Germany, and in the summer started to work among the German population of Beirut, Syria while starting to study Arabic. In August he went to Haifa where he started to work

among the Arabs. He contracted smallpox and was buried in a cemetery at the foot of Mt. Carmel, Palestine."

My cousin, Obert C. Tanner, gave some remarks at the Ezra T. Clark Family Reunion, June 8, 1985. I quote "...Susan Leggett, my grandmother, and Ezra T. Clark lost a son, John Alexander, who died of smallpox while on his mission to Palestine in 1895. I was the first of the family to visit the grave in 1927. I talked to a man who knew Uncle John well and had great affection for him. He was a Lutheran Minister. He told me he and Uncle John would meet and would quote favorite Bible passages to each other. This friend of John's showed me the room where John lived and died.

"His death was a great shock to all members of the family. Uncle John was distinguished for his love of books. My mother, (Annie Clark Tanner) considered him the scholar of the Clark family. He accepted a mission call and died while tracting in the Moslem area of Haifa, Palestine."

My last reference is to the remarks of Michael Christian given in my ward's sacrament meeting, September 8, 1991. Michael, along with others of the Clark Christian family, had just returned from visiting his parents, Clark and Laurel Christian, in Jerusalem, where his father was teaching at the Brigham Young University Learning Center. Michael was the last speaker. The others had talked about historical sites, but Michael talked about the building and the opposition from the people there in building the center. He said when Orson Hyde first dedicated the Holy Land in 1841 he felt there would be a Church Learning Center in Jerusalem. Wilford Woodruff mentioned the same message. President Kimball was there when the Orson Hyde Park was dedicated, and he felt the need so great that he searched out nine locations for the proposed center. He was inspired to pick the one on the Mount of Olives. The Church then started to make arrangements to begin building.

The Jewish people and churches caused trouble. They asked why our church should be allowed to have a building there, that our church never had

been established there, and they did not want us there either. Then it was discovered that two Mormon missionaries were buried in a cemetery in Haifa, which proved our church had representatives in their country years before and had indeed established a foothold in the Holy Land.

As Michael spoke, goose pimples started up my back for I knew one of the graves was my Uncle John Clark. He was so anxious to do missionary work he went into a home where they had smallpox, contracted the disease and died there. My Grandfather Clark had a headstone of a half-grown tree put on his grave signifying only half of his life had been lived. Though my Grandfather Clark was unable to bring Uncle John's body home for burial, staying where it was served as a witness for truth, enabling our church to establish a learning center in Jerusalem. The scriptures tell us that by witnesses He will prove His word and the two missionaries were witnesses. The building was started with much opposition. In fact, when it was half built it was necessary that President and Sister Holland be sent there to talk with government officials. The eight-story building was completed in a magnificent location overlooking both the new Jerusalem and the old city of Jerusalem.

I am thankful to belong to the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, which has us give histories of our ancestors. By searching out information about our ancestors who have passed on, we get to know and love them.

I like this thought about ancestors from an unknown author: "Ancestors are one of the most valuable and satisfactory possessions. They are nontaxable and can't be stolen. Their upkeep is practically nothing, and they don't deteriorate with age or neglect. In fact, they increase in value as they grow older."