

2006-11-30 10:55

from: <<http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/Joel-J.-High-on-mout-top.html>>

The story of
High on the Mountain Top
by Joel H Johnson

This is the story behind the writing of "HIGH ON THE MOUNTAIN TOP" by Joel Hills Johnson as told by his wife Margaret Threlkeld Johnson to her grandson Bernard A. Johnson.

Joel H. Johnson established a sawmill in Mill Creek Canyon soon after arriving in the Salt Lake Valley. Sawing lumber for the "Building up of Zion" was Joel's church calling. This meant that he spent his time sawing prime lumber and delivering it to the tithing office. In lieu of wages, he would go to the storehouse and get what was needed for him and his family.

As he made his wagon trips up and down the steep canyon, he often thought about the flag that had been planted on Ensign Peak. He knew he had safely made it down the mountain with his load when he turned north and headed for the tithing office. He always breathed easier when he could look up at that peak and see Old Glory waving.

In the early spring of 1850, Joel loaded up a load of prime lumber and headed for the tithing office. As he headed into the lot that housed this office, he noticed that there were several other wagon loads of tithing offerings ahead of him. He stopped his team, unhitched the horses and turned them into "Brother Brigham's" pasture, and sat down to wait his turn to unload.

Being a warm spring day, Joel sought the shady side of his wagon, leaned back against the wheel and waited. As was his habit, he pulled out a piece of paper and prepared to write. He found himself thinking about the breeze and how it must be making 'Old Glory' ripple. In his mind he pictured how it must look there on the top of the peak under the clear blue sky as it waved and fluttered in the breeze. His mind painted such a wonderful picture.

Almost as if written by unseen hands, words began to appear on the paper:

"High on the mountain top,
A banner is unfurled.
Ye nations now look up;
It waves to all the world."
In Deseret's sweet, peaceful land-
On Zion's mount behold it stand!

For God remembers still
His promise made of old
That He on Zion's hill

Truth's standard would unfold!
Her light should there attract the gaze
Of all the world in latter days.

His house shall there be reared
His glory to display
And people shall be heard
In distant lands to say
We'll now go up and serve the Lord,
Obey His truth, and learn His word.

For there we shall be taught
The law that will go forth,
With truth and wisdom fraught
To govern all the earth;
Forever there His ways we'll tread
And save ourselves and all our dead.

Then hail to Deseret!
A refuge for the good,
And safety for the great,
If they but understood.
That God with plagues will shake the world
Till all its thrones shall down be hurled.

In Deseret doth truth
Rear up its royal head;
Though nations may oppose,
Still wider it shall spread;
Yes, truth and justice, love and grace,
In Deseret find ample place,

He originally titled his poem "DESERET". It was later changed to HIGH ON THE MOUNTAIN TOP.

Joel finished his poem, folded up the paper, put it in his pocket, and went about the task of getting his lumber measured and recorded. Much later in the day, he went home.

Sometime later he showed his poem to John Taylor, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. President Taylor liked the poem so much, he asked if he could keep it. In those days, words only were written down and then sung to familiar folk tunes. In just a short time it became one of the favorite songs where ever the Saints gathered

This poem was only one of hundreds that Joel H. wrote. But it became one of his most recognized ones. His poetry centered around four themes: His love and devotion to the gospel, his love of the Prophet Joseph Smith, his love of his family, and his desire to enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of

happiness for himself and all other human beings.

Because today there is some controversy over the exact date this song was written, this account is being written. In his journal he states that at eighteen years of age "I commenced writing religious songs and hymns upon various subjects, some of which may be found in Zion's Songster, or the Songs of Joel, a work of my own, but many are lost." Throughout his journal are many examples of his poetry. * See page 2 of JHJ journal volume 1.

(Bernard A. Johnson is now 90 years old. He tells of sitting at his Grandmother's knee and of her telling this story. As it was one of his favorites, he asked her to tell it many times. As far as we know now, he is one of only three living grandson of Joel Hills Johnson. I, Bertha J. McGee am Bernard's daughter. I am typing this account at his direction.)