

## PETER JULIUS CHRISTOFFERSON: A VIEW OF DETROIT

By Gregory P. Christofferson

While as his great-grandson, I have a proprietary interest in the life of Peter Julius Christofferson (1843-1910), to the extent that his life-experiences are representative of Latter-day-Saint Church members of his era, they are of general interest to those who are involved in the study of Church history. He was, in fact, a participant in the five major movements of 19<sup>th</sup> century Mormonism: (1) a convert gathered in the net of the first Scandinavian missionary effort, (2) a member of a pioneer company trek across the Great Plains to the Salt Lake Valley, (3) a “settlement missionary” in Brigham Young’s program of colonizing the Great Basin, (4) a participant in the United Order, and, (5) a Prisoner for Conscience Sake”, persecuted and eventually incarcerated for plural marriage.

While each of these elements are of interest and deserve attention, the purpose of this presentation is to highlight the factors that led to his imprisonment for the practice of plural marriage and the prison experience itself. As is well known, following the passage of the Edmunds Act, over 1,300 Mormon men were imprisoned for polygamy, “unlawful cohabitation”, or both. The overwhelming majority of these individuals were incarcerated in the old Utah Territorial Penitentiary in Sugar House in Salt Lake City. A few were jailed in Arizona, Idaho and South Dakota. Peter Christofferson was one of a handful of prisoners who was sent to the far-away Detroit House of Correction with longer sentences than the norm. This was considered by those incarcerated to be a crushingly punitive measure, involving suffering by these unfortunate men and their wives and families far beyond that exacted on others.

In this presentation, we are building on an article published in *Michigan History*, by B. Carmon Hardy, in September, 1966, entitled “The American Siberia: Mormon Prisoners in Detroit in the 1880's by JoAnn W. Bair and Richard L. Jensen, published in *Arizona and the West* in Spring, 1977. Additional information has surfaced since the time these articles were published, including a holograph journal by Peter J. Christofferson about the experience, which merit revisiting the issue.

As a brief biographical sketch, Peter Julius Christofferson was born 16 February 1843, in Saerslev, Holbek, Denmark, the son of Hans Christofferson and Elizabeth Jacobson. He was one of four children. The family was converted by Mormon missionaries in 1852. Peter was baptized on 16 September 1852, at the age of ten. The family left Denmark in 1857 (*This date is wrong. It should be 1854*) to emigrate to the Rocky Mountain Zion. While they delayed in Omaha, Nebraska to earn money to outfit themselves for the final trek West, Hans served as branch president. They left Nebraska during the emigration season of 1859, travelling in Captain Robert F. Nelson’s ox-team Company. They arrived in the Salt Lake Valley on 15 September 1855.

On 10 September 1864, at the age of twenty-one, Peter married a diminutive, attractive fellow Scandinavian convert named Anna Peterson (1842-1927) in the Endowment House.

Peter took his young bride to Mt. Pleasant in Sanpete County, Utah where they resided for four and a half years. For three years he was involved in the Black Hawk Indian War. He was known for his physical size, strength and bravery. More than one source has reported that he was once caught crossing a river alone on horseback and was exposed to the arrows of Indians on the opposite bank, but Chief Black Hawk himself restrained his warriors from shooting because of his respect for Peter's bravery. While they lived in Mt. Pleasant, three children were born to them, of which one died in infancy.

In 1869, Peter moved his family to Lehi, Utah, where Anna's parents lived and, he built the first brick home in Lehi, on the site of the present First Security Bank. He was energetic and became a prosperous trader, making trips to Bingham and other outlying communities.

In 1876, he was called by Brigham Young on a settlement mission to Northeastern Arizona. He took a trip alone to scout the area and returned to Lehi for his family. The next year, in company with the James Robertson and John Bushman families, they made the long, difficult trip to Arizona. Known thereafter as "Peter, James and John", they settled in St. Joseph. During the initial period of settlement, the Saints in St. Joseph lived the United Order, having everything in common. Peter and Anna's oldest son, Joseph, was five years old at the time, but remembered well that era, [We] practised the United Order...We all ate at the same table [and] ate the same thing...we all milked our cows and poured the milk in a common container...We put our herd with the others."

Settlements were established on the headwaters of the Little Colorado River above St. Johns. The first one of these was at Round Valley. Visited in early 1879 by Peter and others from St. Joseph, the first Round Valley ranch was purchased during the same spring by William J. Flake. Other ranch property was soon acquired, and a community shortly came into existence. However, the Mormons were unable to acquire any of the large centrally located farms on which to base a village and were forced to content themselves with bits of peripheral land. (Peterson, p.33)

In the summer of 1879, Peter was called to serve a short-term mission of eight months to the Indians in Arizona, New Mexico and Northern Mexico. His companion for part of this time was Wilford Woodruff, who was on the "underground" from Utah, avoiding federal marshals who had recently sent George Q Cannon, among others to the penitentiary for violation of the Edmunds Act. Peter is mentioned seven times in Wilford Woodruff's journal between 13 August and 27 September. The first entry

concerning Peter also illustrates the keen eye of the general authorities for continued colonization of the Great Basin, “We drove to Round Valley & stopped with Br. Christopherson. 34 M. We saw 5 deer on the road & shot 5 ducks. I found Round Valley a very good place for a settlement of the Saints. There is about 100 Souls of the Saints there and room for 5,000 I think. There is many Mexicans there.” The entry of the next day is especially interesting as it shows Elder Woodruff combining two of his greatest loves on the same day - preaching and fishing! “I went up the creek with Br. Jacob Hamblin and Christophersen. I caught 10 trout that would average ½ a lb. Each. It was the first water I had seen in Arizona that contained trout. I was weary at night. I called upon Br. Bigelow. I returned to Br. Christophersen’s and held a meeting. Br. Perkins spoke 40 M, W Woodruff one hour <in the power of God>, I had a large congregation.” President Woodruff’s journal reports interesting trips with Peter as they preached to Navajo and Zuni tribes and visited cathedrals and interviewed priests in New Mexico and Old Mexico.

Peter was originally called as branch president of Round Valley. As the church organization progressed, he was ordained a High Priest by Apostle Erastus Snow on 20 Sept 1880, and was called as the first bishop of the Omer Ward, where he served until 29 October 1882, when a division created the Eagar Ward of which he was bishop until some time in 1883. While he was Bishop they erected a log church building with a lumber floor. This was also used during the week as their equivalent of a modern-day cultural hall where they danced, bringing produce for tickets. To avoid trampled toes, those with boots danced one musical set, while those who were barefoot danced the next, alternating each set.

The tremendous challenges facing these early settlers in the inhospitable, arid country of Northeastern Arizona is well documented elsewhere. Suffice it to say it took people of special courage and persistence to create homes and farms there. Due to the economic need to be self-sufficient in agriculture in a land not readily productive and the dislocations cause by the polygamy persecutions of the 1880's, almost none of the Mormon colonists became even marginally affluent. Moves within the area were frequent as crops failed or the Little Colorado Flooded and wiped-out dams and the settlers tried to find more arable land. In his book *Take Up Your Mission: Mormon Colonizing Along the Little Colorado River, 1870-1900*, Charles S Peterson traces five moves by Peter J. Christofferson within the St. Johns area. At the time of his incarceration he and his family were living in Springerville.

On 25 June 1881, a meeting was held in Taylor, Arizona, where Apostles Erastus Snow and Brigham Young Jr., organized the Arizona equivalent of the ZCMI, the Arizona Cooperative Mercantile Institution. David King Udall and Peter J. Christofferson were called to the Board of Directors. A store was started, called the “Peoples Co-op” or “Round Valley Store” by locals, and Peter was the superintendent during the years prior to his incarceration in 1884.

While Peter was serving his mission to the Indians, he was instructed by Wilford Woodruff to take a second wife. Family lore has it that Peter responded, “Who would want to marry an old man like me?” At the time, he was thirty-seven years old. Elder Woodruff told him if he asked a certain young woman who worked in the Co-op she would accept his proposal. Her name was Sarah Hulda Dewitt (1863-1904), a daughter of a family living in Springerville, also recently called to settlement mission in Northeastern Arizona. Sarah, after much anxiety, accepted Peter’s proposal, for which I am eternally grateful as I am a descendent through that polygamous marriage. They were married in the St. George Temple on 13 February 1881. Sarah was five weeks short of her eighteenth birthday.

**A personal history written later in her life gives insight into Sarah’s emotions, which are undoubtably reflective of other plural wives of the time: “I did not stay with my parents [in the new log cabin in Springerville] I started to the St. George Temple and was married there Feb 13 (not as you may now, my daughters, my husband already had a wife). I hesitated, fasted, and prayed much before taking this most important step in life and through this course that I had taken was favoured of the Lord with a testimony of the truth of “The Principle”, for which I was to endure so much. I had married in the heart and heat of oppression and consequently could not confess my marriage and after the first three years I lived a sort of underground life. This was hard for me to bear at times but I was aided by divine power and enabled to endure even the scathing rebukes and gossiping criticisms I received...”**

Anna’s oldest son, Joseph wrote in his brief life history, “I remember when my father married his second wife. He went from Springerville some 700 miles to St. George. My mother felt horrible.” Wilford Woodruff has stated in 1875, “We have many Bishops and elders who have but one wife. They are abundantly qualified to enter the higher law and take more, but their wives will not let them. Any man who permits a woman to lead him and bind him down is but little account in the church and Kingdom of God” Anna gave her permission for the plural marriage and, while Sarah reports good relations with and real affection between she and Anna, entering into and living “The Principle” was an emotional challenge for the three participants.

**As greater numbers of Mormon settlers immigrated to Apache County, their influence at the polls grew. Fearing loss of political control a group of attorneys and long-time residents of St. Johns opposing Mormon influence organized to assure that all public office in the county remained in their hands. This group became known as the notorious “St. Johns’ Ring.”**

On March 27, 1884, Bishop David King Udall, bishop of the St. Johns Ward, wrote this to church president John Taylor: “Saint Johns is the County-seat of Apache County, and its population is composed of Mexicans, Jews, Gentiles and ‘Mormons’, our people number ninety families, being about one-third of the population. Probably in the County our people number one half of the population, but the outside element are so wicked, and are imbued with such a deadly hatred against the Saints that we do not receive any representation in political affairs. In fact the entire body

of officials of this [county] are men who are most bitterly opposed to us, and will in every instance rule against us. In proof of this we have never gained an election, water or any other suit, wherein we have sought to obtain our rights.”

The Mormons responded to the harassment and political domination in just the way **the Ring** feared most- by strengthening their numbers. In the spring of 1844, church authorities called 102 additional families from throughout Utah and sent them to St. Johns to reinforce the Mormons already there. The already deteriorating situation worsened with the launching of a newspaper by **the Ring** - the St. Johns Apache Chief. In an editorial on May 30, 1884, the position of **the Ring** was made clear.

It read in part: “How did Missouri and Illinois get rid of the Mormons? By the use of the shotgun and rope. In a year from now the Mormons will have the power here...Don’t let them get it...Desperate diseases need desperate remedies. The Mormon disease is a desperate one and the rope and shotgun is the only cure...Nobody but out-spoken, true blue anti-Mormons will hold an office in Apache Country...No Mormon should be allowed to cast a vote. He has no rights and should be allowed none...”

In the Spring of 1884, **the St Johns Ring** turned their invective into a legal campaign, **first in an attempt to discredit Mormon land claims. When frustrated in that effort, they enlisted the aid of the newly appointed chief justice of the Arizona Territory, Sumner Howard, in a legal campaign against polygamy.** Born in Massachusetts, Howard grew up and received his legal training in Michigan. He was later selected by President Ulysses S. Grant as a United States district attorney in the Utah Territory. He was active in prosecuting those involved in the Mountain Meadows Massacre in 1857. After returning to Michigan and serving a term as speaker of the house in the Michigan legislature, he was appointed chief justice of the supreme court in Arizona Territory in 1883. While doing circuit duty as a district judge in Prescott, Howard gave a public lecture on the massacre in the court chambers, thus fuelling the anti-Mormon sentiment in the town.

Early in the fall of 1884, a grand jury in Prescott indicted six prominent Latter-Day-Saints from the Littler Colorado settlements, including Peter J. Christofferson, Christopher J. Kemp and Ammon M. Tenney, for violating the Edmunds Act. It is not my purpose to discuss the history of the various anti-polygamy laws, as they are well known by this audience and Bob Freeman will detail the specific legal proceedings in his presentation. Suffice it to say that although the defendants could have been arraigned in St. Johns, they were taken from their homes in the middle of the night and compelled to appear before Judge Howard in Prescott, 275 miles away. After posting bail, they returned home at their own expense, at least one walking a significant portion of the way.

Five of the men subsequently returned to Prescott for trial. (David King Udall was tried later in June, 1885 and sentenced to the Detroit House of Corrections where he served four and a half months.) Some forty witnesses travelled from Apache County to

testify against them.

**Of these individuals, Peter later wrote in his journal: “Something that seemed to make it the more provoking to me, was the thought of the character of the men at whose instigation I now found myself here. They were men who would have improper association with a blind maid and pay her in counterfeit money for her charms. By stuffing the ballot-boxes, by causing the names of men who had been gone or dead for years and other illegal ways they had held control of the county for years.”**

Because their marriages had been performed in Utah, not Arizona, and enough years earlier that they might be exempt under the statute of limitations, the Mormons had hopes for a victory at court. This was not to be, however. “The trial was the first of its kind in Arizona, and without the benefits of legal precedents it took its own peculiar course.” (B&J)

**This is how the trial unfolded from Peter’s perspective, as written in his journal: Bros. A.M. Tenney, CJ Kemp , and the Author were tried for polygamy and unlawful cohabitation before Judge Sumner Howard at Prescott Ariz. Bro Tenney’s trial began on Nov. 24<sup>th</sup> of AD 1884, and lasted three days. Mine began on the 27<sup>th</sup>, and lasted two days. Bro Kemp’s trial began on the 29<sup>th</sup> and lasted two days. Judge Howard’s charge to the Jury was so commingled, and interwoven and misconstrued as to prevent the Jury from knowing what the law really meant, or whether it meant anything or not, except to convict. It was clearly proven by our enemies who appeared against us as witnesses that under the law we were not guilty of polygamy: more than three years having elapsed since any of us had married our second wives and in Bro Kemp’s case he had been married to his for more than twelve years, while Bro. Tenney had also honourably maintained his plural wife for over ?? years. The judge charged the jury that unlawful cohabitation in this Territory was Bigamy; that Bigamy was Polygamy hence if they (the Jury) found that we had lived with those women in this Territory, that we were guilty of Polygamy, and that they must find a verdict accordingly. Thus an offense that under the law was only punishable by six months imprisonment and 300 dollars fine was construed to mean an offense punishable by five years imprisonment and we were accordingly convicted of Polygamy. When the time arrived to sentence us the Judge said he wanted to give us a hard sentence, not for ourselves but in order to deter others from entering into plural marriage. We were then sentenced to three years and ½ hard labour in the Detroit House of Correction.”**

Seeing the way the wind was blowing, two of the defendants, William J. Flake and P. N. Skousen pled guilty and were fined \$500 and a six month sentence in the Yuma Territorial Prison. Christofferson, Kemp and Tenney refused to pled guilty and were

sentenced to three and a half years in the House of Correction, Detroit, Michigan. As Bair & Jensen noted, “Many observers considered the case a landmark in the power struggle between Mormons and non-Mormons in the Arizona Territory.” (p.33)

**To continue in Peter’s words: As soon as each one of us was convicted we were put into the Prescott Jail. Bro. Tenney was obligated to stay there 9 days, the author [?] days and Bro. Kemp 5. While in the Prescott Jail we were visited by a Rev. Hunt with whom I had an interview previous to our being sentenced. He remarked that he had read some of our works and that he had been informed by a very reliable friend of his that we were an honest industrious people. He asked if he could do anything for us. He said that he did not see what we did but he feared the Nation would disgrace itself in trying to put down polygamy. He seemed to be a kind sympathetic gentleman.**

The day after the convictions there was a tremendous political celebration in Prescott by the local Democrats, partly because of the victory of presidential candidate Grover Cleveland and partly because Judge Howard had found a basis to convict the brethren of polygamy.

William J. Flake recalled: The day after Tenney was found guilty the Democrats had a grand barbecue and a fine time at night. They had a torchlight procession and marched ten blocks. It was a grand affair. There were about 400 lights on the courthouse and the rest of the city was well lit up. Fire rockets were flying all over the town. Some were thrown 300-400 feet high. We did not enjoy it much for we knew that it would not be more than a week or two before we would be with Tenney according to the Judge Howard interpretation of the law... We thought it was better to get six months than five years, so we pled guilty...our attorney...was told that Brother Tenney, P J Christoffersen and C J Kemp would be fined to the extent of the law, that they would receive no mercy. (Flake)

**Sarah’s feelings at this time were recorded by her as follows: In June [1884] it was rumoured that indictments were out for several of our brethren who were called polygamists, my husband being one of the number. Accordingly in the August following, five of these brethren - my husband included - were arrested by the U. S. Marshall and taken to Prescott, Ariz for trial. From that time until he was convicted, I shifted from place to place secretly that I might not be required to appear in court. And because of the malice and injustice of the court, it had been advised that all who were in circumstances like myself, to keep out of reach. I parted with my husband about the last of July, 1884.**

The Three prisoners for conscience sake” were placed on a train for Detroit on December (?). They had another encounter with an interested non-Mormon along the way.

**Peter reports: While on board the train going to Detroit a newspaper reporter interviewed us and asked us if we believed polygamy was right. Bro. Tenney assured him most emphatically that we did. He asked us how many wives we had.**

**We replied we were accused of having two each. After quite a lengthy interview he said he was really surprised to see that we looked just like other people. He said he expected to see a wild barbarous people. Bro. Kemp afterwards inquired why the interview was never published. The reply was that the answers were not as he had expected. That he had expected we would have changed our ideas in view of the long sentences we had just received. That he did not think it would interest the reading public to know that we were just as firm in our faith.**

Perhaps Peter was referring to someone else, because a reporter for the *Albuquerque Journal* did publish an interview he had with the three prisoners and it was republished in the *Deseret News* 27 December 1884, under the headline, “*On the way to Detroit. Brothers Tenney, Kemp and Christofferson Interviewed.*”

His write-up stated: The three bishops, Tenney, Kemp and Christofferson passed through town last night on their way to the penitentiary in Detroit, Michigan...[This] *Journal* reporter saw the trio at the depot, and at once sought an interview. They did not seem at all averse to being questioned, and in fact, were eager that they should be thoroughly understood... All three seemed to the reporter to be very much cast down at the position in which they now find themselves, and we could not help believing that they had little hope in the courts.

**Now Peter’s poignant description of his first night in prison: “We arrived in Detroit on Dec. 11<sup>th</sup> about midnight. The Deputy Superintendent of the prison came to the depot after us. It was a bitter cold night. We all suffered much from cold the first winter. The only heat was a few steampipes and even these were some distance from our cells. After entering the prison an officer conducted us to our cells for the remaining portion of the night. Each cell had a rock floor and ceiling. On an iron bedstead in my cell was one pair of blankets, a straw mattress, and pillow. I asked the officer if I could have another pair of blankets. He replied that I was big and fat enough to keep warm. Then he shut the large iron door and turned the key. I knelt down on the rock floor and poured out my soul to my Heavenly Father in humble reverence, and thanked him for my lovely family and for being permitted to come on the earth in a time when the true Gospel was being proclaimed abroad in the earth and that I had been made partaker of it’s blessings; and I asked him to help me to endure the severe cruelty inflicted on me, that I might remain true and faithful to my family and my brethren and sisters and to my God, and all connected with his great and glorious work on earth, no matter what I was called to pass through for surely this was the greatest desire of my heart. But, Oh, the thought of how I had been dragged 2000 miles from home and friends leaving my poor heart-broken family in their humble cottage on the prairie of a frontier country left to the charity of a cold world, while I was doomed to toil away my life in a gloomy prison, when my family needed the proceeds of my labour every day; and all this done contrary to law and justice. It made gushing tears steal down my cheeks in spite of anything I could do.”**

Prison records show that the three Mormon prisoners were immediately escorted by

police officers from the train station to the House of Correction on Russell Street. These were unusual prisoners. They were listed as able to “read and write” and as self-employed farmers by occupation. They insisted their religion be listed as Mormon, rather than “P” or “C”. As Hardy concludes, “Articulate and self-possessed, the three Mormons were more accustomed to act as leaders than as men in bondage.” (Hardy, p.203.)

**To continue Peters’s Journal: “But to return to our prison life on the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> they brought me a cup of coffee, a piece of bread and a dish of soup. The soup looked as if it had been eaten once; I did not like coffee so I left the whole of it for the waiter to bring away as I did not wish to break up the institution at the start and besides I thought perhaps if they saw I was a light eater they might give me a light job.”**

The conditions under which the prisoners lived were, in light of contemporary prison environments, were better than most.

As Bair and Jensen state: In its day, the Detroit House of Corrections, in which they were confined, was considered a model prison where clean and pleasant physical facilities were combined with strict discipline based on a rule of silence. It was also common for federal prisoners from the West to be incarcerated there. Nevertheless, the Mormons thought it cruel and unusual punishment to send their people to Detroit, and they called the prison an “American Siberia”. John Taylor himself may have coined the term when he remarked in a public address: “We have here in America today an ‘American Siberia’ in Detroit, to which place, upwards of two thousand miles from their homes - men are banished for a term of years.”

This quote reflects the paradox of their incarceration: fairly liveable conditions, but real mental anguish caused by the heartbreak of separation from families in need of husbands, fathers and providers. This was a very real torture to these men and those families left destitute on the frontier. I have already quoted Peter’s feelings in this regard, the thought of which caused “gushing tears to steal down [his] cheeks despite of anything [he] could do.” What of those left behind?

**Sarah, in her life story states: “The sentence once passed, I was liberated from my jails of hiding and returned home to share with my companion [Anna] and our children our present lonely condition. I had two children now...Anna had seven. We were left to battle with the world as best we might. We were often sorely tried and grieved over financial circumstances for although when our husband was taken from us we were flourishing financially, it was not long until every avenue seemed closed against us. Our land, on which we had previously raised our bread, was now ‘jumped’ by an outsider, a wicked man. Thus was ‘the staff of life’ taken from us.”**

Christopher J Kemp later recalled sarcastically: “We had a nice trip to Detroit, entered “the House” at night and next day changed our apparel for a nice gray suit and was Initiated in the most “Holy Institution” by having our hair and beards sent to the undertakers. We were then shown to our

fine parlour, a room nicely decorated with insect powder, etc. These parlour rooms were very safe and from the day we landed there until we left (22 months) we had no fear of either wild animals, Indians, shipwreck, nor calamity of any kind. Our food was pretty good, we had soup 10 or 11 times, sausage once and fish once. We had bread every night with the privilege of drinking all the water we wanted. We worked ten hours per day, never one minute over.”

The Detroit House of Corrections was built in 1861. By 1866 it housed an average of 585 prisoners, of whom one-seventh were women. No prisoners were allowed to talk, not even when locked in their cells, except when spoken to by someone in authority. There was no exercise except the work which involved the manufacturing of chairs, beds and tables.

David Udall wrote: “The rules and regulations are as follows: “At three taps of the gong at 5:30 am we get up, dress, wash, etc. At 6:00 am two taps of the gong we prepare for breakfast. At 6:30 am on one tap of the gong we go to breakfast, which we eat upstairs. At 7:00 am we go to work, taking with us our night-pails [chamber pots]. We walk in lines of about 50 with right hand on the shoulder of the man ahead of us. We are required to walk as close as possible, which is very humiliating. We go to night school nearly every Tuesday night at 6:30 where we study arithmetic and reading. Prisoners teach the different classes under one general teacher. In the first days of October a young man by the name of Tom attempted to commit suicide by stabbing himself in the side with a knife. This transpired at his work bench a short distance from where I work. One man had a fit the same day. There is no more notice taken of these things than though they were brutes. All these circumstances bring such evil bad feeling with them.”

Udall arrived at the House of Corrections in September, 1855. He wrote in his Journal: About nine am on the morning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> I was taken to the basement and shaved and shingled [hair cut off]. I also took a bath and then I was given back my garments and given my prison clothes, consisting of a hickory shirt, Kentucky Jeans, coat, pants and cap; also brogan shoes and cotton socks, all of which appeared to be new. From here I was taken to the shop where Brother Christofferson works. Bro Tenney works in shop B and Brother Kemp in shop C. I recognized Brothers Kemp and Christopherson but mistook another man for Brother Tenney. It was three weeks before we were permitted to meet and converse, as prisoners are not allowed to speak to each other...No prisoner is permitted to leave his bench or machine without the permission of the overseer, this he obtains by holding up his hand, even to go to the closet [bathroom] or get a drink. On one occasion, after being caught asking another prisoner a question, Tenney was required to stand silent for several minuets in front of the others as a punishment.”

None of the monthly letters Peter was allowed to write to his wife and family have survived, nor have any written to him by Anna. Only two of Sarah’s letters to him have turned up in family possession. Had all letters written between them during this time been preserved, we would have had a wonderful contemporaneous account of their experiences and feelings during this trying period.

One of Sarah’s letters, dated 25 April 1886, illustrates the danger of the furniture manufacturing work at the House of Corrections.

**Dear Peter,**

**Another Sunday has passed. One week passes after another until the time**

of separation will soon be sped. We are all quite well and hope this will find you alright when it reaches you. Dear Peter, why did you not tell us that you had met with an accident which has disabled you? I fear you have suffered greatly while we knew nothing about it. You must tell us when you write all about it. We worry to know the truth. You must not keep silent when anything is the matter. Now remember. We have also learned that Bro. Tenney has met with an accident. Oh Peter, do be careful. If your occupation is such that there is danger of serious wounds, Oh do remember to watch every move. It would be so hard to see you crippled in any way after so long and weary an absence. As the tears roll down my cheeks. I can only call upon God to protect you. My Heart aches for you all. God bless you. I know you have a hard time, still I believe you are favoured as much as the rules of the prison will allow. Bro. Udall speaks highly of the officers. It would be a pleasure to me to see and speak to your wardens. I believe they are kind. Mr. Parsons, a gentleman that visited you in January last [the Michigander?] is here. I was talking with him the other day in the store. He wishes to be remembered to you. He spoke highly of the jovial spirit you manifested. I feel to praise the Lord that you have borne up so well under this affliction.

Well Peter, don't be offended if I ask you again to take care of that dear self we long to see. God speed the time. The children all wished to send their love to you. God bless their far-away Papa. Some bright day you will see them at the window watching for Pa, when we meet to part no more. We remain with dearest love, your loving family.

*The Deseret News reported on May 1886: CJ Kemp and A.M. Tenney had accidents. Kemp had his foot severely crushed and almost severed from the limbs, in a wood-working machine. Amputation considered. Tenney working with the same machine had his hand badly mutilated. The Saints feel keenly.*

Kempton reported he ran a very dangerous bending machine, but not a specific injury in his later recollections of his incarceration. The nature of Peter's injury was not disclosed, however working with sawing, milling and finishing equipment a hundred years before OSHA was undoubtedly dangerous and would have resulted in many accidents over time.

A bright spot in the monotony of prison life were visits from Church leaders and friends who were sent to console the three inmates.

**On the inside back cover of his Journal, Peter wrote: Names of those who visited us while in Detroit. (Some visited us whose names we do not know). Many came from a great Distance; F[ranklin] S. Richards of Salt Lake City, Judge [George A.] Duzenberry [of] Provo, J[ohn]W. Young [of] Salt Lake City. Each of these brethren did all they could for us to obtain our freedom. Bro J. W. Young left us money to pay our way home & [m]inded us in many ways. When [Judge]**

**Duzenaberry came he brought a number of gentlemen with him [a] Dr. Pike & others. Brigham Young [Jr.] of Salt Lake City, David Evans [of] Lehi. Mr. Summerhayes of Salt Lake City, who told the officers of the prison who had refused to let him in, that he would consult the officers of the city and would enter the prison. —Dwyer's of Salt Lake City. C[harles] W. Penrose [of Salt Lake City] I feel sincerely grateful to all those who visited us while so unlawfully suffering imprisonment & to those who [were] so [concerned] for our welfare.**

John W. Young was Brigham Young's oldest son and, at age 32, was First Counsellor in the First Presidency for ten months, retiring at his father's death. He had become a prominent Utah businessman. He left \$12.50 on deposit for each of the prisoners to help with travel expenses home when they should be released. Following his visit, Brigham Young, Jr. wrote to Tenney, "Our pen [prison] here [in Utah] is a filthy hole and our innocent brethren have been thrust in with thieves vile and murders. Your condition is not so lamentable; you have cleanliness and order and are not abused." (B&J, p. 39.) Other visitors not mentioned by Peter included William M. Palmer, president of the Northwestern States Mission, and Seymour B. Young, a nephew of Brigham Young and one of the Seven Presidents of Seventy, and himself on the 'underground' to avoid arrest. He visited the prisoners in mid-August, 1886, where he found 'twelve brethren who were being detained as prisoners for conscience sake.' (Christofferson, Tenner and Kemp served twenty - two months, from 11 December 1884 - 13 October 1886. Udall served four and a half months, from 2 September 1885 - 18 December 1885. As many as twenty brethren from Idaho were in the House of Correction during this period, serving approximately ninety days.)

After meeting with them, he made a request of the assistant warden: Learning that the regulations of the prison permitted ministers of the different denominations to hold religious services in the prison chapel with the prisoners on the Sabbath day, I asked for this privilege, but was denied by the deputy marshal in charge. He gave as his reason for his refusal that the House of Corrections was an institution belonging to the city of Detroit, and that its managers were bitterly opposed to the Mormon people, and that they would not consent to my holding religious services with our imprisoned brethren.

In fact, Mormon missionaries had been thrown out of the nearby town of Spring Lake in 1884. Further, both of Detroit's newspapers had prominently supported fellow Michigander Judge Howard's efforts to suppress polygamy. (Hardy, p. 206) However, an opportunity presented itself to Elder Young while he was speaking with the deputy marshal. The superintendent of the prison entered the room to have his daughter examined by the prison doctor as she was suffering from an ear infection. Elder Young, trained as a physician, offered his assistance when it appeared the prison doctor was inept, and using instruments from his own medical bag, diagnosed the problem and suggested appropriate medication. The superintendent was so grateful for Elder

Young's aide that he took him in his carriage to his hotel. Feeling the moment to be propitious, Elder Young made the request of the superintendent and was immediately granted permission to hold a sacrament meeting with the brethren the following Sunday afternoon.

Elder Young continued: It would be needless to say that I punctually kept the engagement, and at the appointed time my brethren were permitted to assemble with me in the house of worship. We sang an opening hymn. I offered a prayer of thanksgiving to our Heavenly Father for thus being permitted to meet with the brethren, this being probably the first Latter-day Saint meeting ever held in the chapel of the Detroit House of Correction. We then sang another hymn.

Before the meeting began I had procured from the deputy in charge a plate of bread, a pitcher of water and a glass, and with these humble preparations we partook of the Sacrament. I called upon Brother Christian I Kemp, of Arizona, to bless the bread. I passed the sacred emblems to the brethren, who seemed deeply impressed with the solemnity of the occasion, and some were moved to tears. Brother Ammon M. Tenney blessed the water, and this I also carried to each of the brethren, thus completing the administration of the ordinance. Then in turn I called upon each of the brethren to speak for a short time. This they all did and bore a faithful testimony to the divinity of the work of the Lord, and the truth of the principles for which they were imprisoned; and within those prison walls were echoed for the first time ringing testimonies of the divine mission of the Prophet Joseph Smith and the truth of the everlasting Gospel which he, under the inspiration of the Lord Almighty, was instrumental in restoring to the earth for this dispensation. After all had spoken I bore testimony also to the truth of these sacred principles, and exhorted them to patience, to endure without murmuring the imprisonment that the Lord had permitted their enemies to inflict upon them, and never to forget that they owed their allegiance to God, and when the time should come, as come it surely would, that their prison doors would be thrown open and they would be permitted to return to their homes again, they would always maintain the same faith and bear the same fervent testimony to the principles of eternal truth. We then sang another hymn and Brother Peter J. Christopherson dismissed the meeting. The cheering effect of this meeting upon our brethren cannot be overestimated.

Church leaders also wrote letters of encouragement to the inmates. Wilford Woodruff's Journal entry of 17 December 1884 reads, 'I wrote letters to A M Tenner & John Henry Smith. I met in Council [Council of the Twelve] in the afternoon. The abuse and cruelties of some of the American Prison[s] were discussed and the situation of our Brethren in Detroit Michigan & Yuma Arizona were spoken of.' In addition to letters to the prisoners, Latter-Day-Saints responded in other ways.

The Deseret News of 19 December 1885 featured an article headlined, 'Genuine Charity': A benevolent lady whose name we were unable to learn came into the News sanctum yesterday afternoon and enquired how means could be sent to the Arizona brethren who are now

imprisoned in the House of Corrections in Detroit Michigan enduring the unjust and unlawful penalty imposed upon them by a bigoted and inhuman judge because they chose to be true to their religion and their wives. On being informed how anything can be transmitted, she begged as a favour that we receive from her the sum of \$10 and take the trouble to forward it to the brethren for her, as the gift of a friend who sympathized with their sufferings honoured their integrity and did not wish to be known. The fervour with which she spoke and the tears of sympathy that glistened in her eyes as she did so bore evidence of her sincerity and of the happiness she experienced in being enabled to do something, possibly by dint of sheer self denial, to alleviate the sufferings of her persecuted brethren...

Peter and Kemp also wrote letters to the Saints reporting their situation through medium of the *Deseret News*. A lengthy letter from Peter was published December 5, 1885 and was headlined, "From a Prisoner for Conscience Sake. Gratitude and hope Expressed by One of the Brethren in Detroit. Detroit House of Correction, Michigan, November 29, 1885."

**Editor Deseret News: Permit me through your paper to express a few of my thoughts. When I read of the kindness and sympathy of the Saints for our families, and when I thought of the many faithful brethren who have visited us here in prison and done all they could for us and are still continuing; it made gushing tears of gratitude and joy steal down my cheeks to think I was worthy to be numbered with the faithful Latter-Day-Saints. This is more precious to me than the wealth of the world. Our trial before S. Howard was a perfect mockery of the law, we were charged with having simultaneously, or on the same day on a certain date in 1883 married two wives and it was clearly proven in the evidence produced by witnesses who appeared against us that this was not the fact in any one of our cases and we were not found guilty of unlawful cohabitation, but in order to convict us law or no law, justice or no justice, the bigamy law of Arizona was read a number of times which had nothing to do with our cases for the simple reason that the indictments were not drawn up under that law. The extreme penalty for conviction under that law is two years in the county jail and a fine. We were sentenced to three and a half years imprisonment in Detroit. Just laws do not conflict especially under the same government. His charge to the jury was so commingled and interwoven as to prevent the jury from telling what the law really meant or whether it meant anything under the varying interpretations put upon it by its didactic expounders, Judge Howard and U. S. Attorney Zabriskie.**

**Zabariske emphatically impressed the Jury with the idea that our not having witnesses to prove our innocence was a positive proof of our guilt. He called us misguided dupes of ecclesiastical charlatanism. He had much rather hear his own harangue that to do justice to the case.**

**Judge Howard also grossly insulted us; but when they smote us on one cheek we turned the other. When the trials were over and the sentences passed some of the officials rejoiced over having sent a few poor hardworking men to a far distant prison, over two thousand miles from our homes, to toil our lives away, leaving our poor heartbroken families to eke out a wretched existence in a frontier country, exposed to the merciless savage: but God help them went the cries of the**

**honourable, virtuous wives and little innocent children reach the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth against them.**

**We are extremely thankful for all the papers and letters we received from our brethren and sisters.**

**With kind regards to all the faithful Latter-day Saints I remain your brother in the gospel. Peter Julius Christofferson of Springerville, Apache County, Arizona.**

**P. S. As Brother Kemp and I through our own choice are now occupying the same cell one paper will do both of us. We feel indeed greatly obliged to you for the paper. We are all well.**

**“Although in lonely grief we sigh,  
For friends beloved no longer nigh,  
Submissive still we do reply,  
Thy will be done.” P. J. C.**

And, from the Deseret News, August 29, 1889: “Letter From a Martyr. Elder C. J. Kemp Imprisoned in Detroit. August 23, 1885.”: Over nine months have passed now since we left home. Our friends have greatly encouraged us with the hope of a speedy deliverance, and even our enemies predicted that six months would be the longest that we would be kept here, but week after week and month after month pass, yet our deliverance seems further off than ever. We are informed now that it is most likely that the court will do nothing before its next session in February, when they may take our cases under advisement for another year...Brothers Tenney and Christophersen have both been sick for quite awhile, but are better now. I have been able to do my work all the time, but I am not well. The continual worry of mind, together with our unfavourable circumstances can scarcely be expected to promote health.

As indicated in Peter’s letter to the *Deseret News* following the visit by Seymour B. Young, Peter and Kemp were allowed to be cell mates. A reporter for the *Detroit Tribune*, upon seeing them in that setting, reflected a common opinion of the day that the practice of polygamy in the Church was the result of unbridled licentiousness on the part of the Mormon men. After visiting the House of Corrections, he wrote an article titled “*Stories of Sinners.*”

It included the following: The Artist’s eye has been caught by the presence of two men of middle age who stand in front of their cells. Just look at them, for they are Mormons - real Mormons from Utah, Polygamists, and separated from their wives for the period of three years which they will spend in the Detroit Prison. Don’t say anything more about sentiment! Think of the romance back of those men, of the wooings and the weddings and all that! But the romance has gone out of those lives for the present. With the spirit of the fitness of things the Mormons cell together.

Another visitor, who signed his letter to the *Deseret News* as “A Michigander”, wrote an extensive report:

Deseret News, 12 January 1885: ...I have had the pleasure, if such a word is appropriate in this connection, of paying a visit to the trinity of martyrs suffering for the truth, and in consequence of the spite of a malignant judicial soul in the House of Corrections in Detroit Michigan...I found the brethren dressed in prison garb, but with no complaints as to their treatment. Brother Tenney was

quite cast down in spirit, the thought that prison bars were between him and the liberty that he enjoyed so bountifully at his home in Arizona, being quite dispiriting to his sensitive nature. The others were quite cheerful, Brother Christofferson especially, the assistant superintendent he said he was “the jolliest man in the place.” Brother Tenney is engaged running a small circular saw, the others in making chairs; or as Brother Christofferson said “spoiling furniture under government contracts”. They said they had plenty of food and not heavy employment. They may receive books, papers and letters without restriction, but may only write to friends once a month. The silent system prevails in prison, but visitors are allowed to see and converse with the prisoners in presence of an attendant...I had a pleasant chat with the brethren and believe I succeeded in cheering them with prospects of speedy deliverance. They expressed themselves freely on the iniquity of the unlawful proceedings against them, and all felt confident that retributions will overtake their persecutors. Brother Kemp’s only complaint was that his cell was so situated that he could not see to read, being there from 5:30 in the evening to 7:00 in the morning. He was promptly promised a change, so that gaslight could reach his room. The authorities seemed disposed to render every favour that the rules would allow...Our friends in Utah may rest satisfied that the “prisoners of hope” who for a season are committed to durance vile at Detroit, are better off in their easy employment during the day and their separate neat though small sleeping places at night, each man with a bed to himself with a table, and other conveniences, that their co-religionists in the Utah penitentiary forced to companionship of roughs and malefactors without definite work and without privacy of any kind.

**Through the diligent work of Hiram B. Clawson and others, a presidential pardon was obtained from President Grover Cleveland on 13 October 1886, after they had served nearly two years of their sentences.** Having created over time a favourable impression by their characters on their jailers. When the three were released, they received invitations from several prominent Detroit citizens to visit with them and discuss Mormonism. Two days were spent in the ‘fine mansion’ of Reuben A. Tidwell, general overseer of the House of Correction.

**Kemp recalled:** When we left the prison we were most thoughtfully and comfortably entertained by the general overseer of “the House”, General R. A. Twitchell, who, together with his noble family, did all in their power to make our stay [post prison] in Detroit pleasant, and our visits with several leading men of Detroit most agreeable. The president and officers of “the House” were all most courteous toward us, and expressed themselves highly pleased to see us free men. Our journey home was very pleasant and, thanks to Brother Hart, we had a cheap and comfortable passage. In Chicago, Brother Christofferson and I visited the Schettler Wagon Works.

**Mormon leaders counselled against public praise for the pardons.** When he learned of Cleveland’s action, church president Taylor, who was himself in hiding to escape prosecution for polygamy, gave directions that the following telegram be sent to Udall: “Repress exultation by newspapers or people, over the brethren’s release. (B&J p.44.)

Upon his return to Arizona, Peter found that land jumpers, claiming “squatters rights” had taken over his farmland and **the Ring** still controlled the legal system, so he was unable to gain it back. Additionally, management of the Co-op had been given to another man, so he started from scratch yet again.

The St. Johns Stake was organized 23 July 1887 with David K. Udall as president. Peter was called to the high council.

In November of 1888, the dreaded scarlet fever struck the children of the families. Three-year old Lafayette, Anna's youngest child was left a cripple when the disease lodged in his spine. They decided he would get better medical treatment in Utah, so Peter sold what land he still possessed and some horses and cattle and arranged for Anna and her children, except Joseph, to return to Utah. Anna eventually settled again in Lehi.

Still plagued by those attempting to suppress polygamy, Peter decided to move his second family to the Mormon colonies in Mexico. Consequently, they (Peter, Sarah, four children, including an infant baby girl, and fifteen year-old Joseph) moved to Colonia Diaz, Mexico in 1889, where they built an adobe home with their own hands and farmed forty acres.

The Mexican Revolution forced most of the Americans back across the border, so Peter moved his family back to Arizona, settling in the town of Woodruff on the Little Colorado in May of 1894. Following a trip to Lehi to visit Anna and their children, he moved Sarah and children back to Utah in 1899, reuniting the two families after an eleven year separation.

**Sarah died 7 November 1904, at the age of forty-one, leaving eight children. Peter followed her 3 February 1910, two weeks before his sixty-seventh birthday. Anna lived to be eighty-five years old and passed away 10 November 1927, the mother of nine children.**

In conclusion, it should be noted that the root of the prosecution of Peter and the others sent to the Detroit House of Correction was not wholly due to the religious or moral convictions of those members of **the St. Johns Ring**. The real battle was never over polygamy.

The real question was control of the land and local government. Moreover, the appointees of Grover Cleveland realized that it would be to the advantage of the Democratic Party to restore the franchise to the Mormons and treat them with consideration, knowing their natural inclination was to gravitate toward the Democrats. Soon thereafter, Mormons in Arizona, encouraged by their leaders in Salt Lake City, sought to increase their political leverage by encouraging the Saints to split their votes between both major parties. Thus the threat that Mormons would form a monolithic power bloc disappeared. (Bair & Jensen, p. 45.)

If the excuse to retain economic control of the Little Colorado settlements was prosecution of Mormon polygamists, nevertheless those most affected perceived a good came from it in the form of proving their allegiance to God and the Restoration,

and, having passed through the refiner's fire left their example as a testimony to others. George Q Cannon made this point in a 1 September 1886 essay in The Juvenile Instructor: "What is the use of punishment if it does not punish?" he argued, "Any attempt to degrade a man is a miserable failure if he accepts the intended degradation as an honour." Cannon added that the men were viewed by the Saints not as criminals, but as religious martyrs and, "suffers for righteousness..."

**Upon the former prisoners return to Arizona, Christopher Kemp wrote: I am at last at home and at liberty, and though today I would rather take a ten years' mission to the Gentile nations of the savage Indians than go back to Detroit for another year, I thank God for my experience for the last two years. I am well satisfied that if my Brethren, Tenney and Christofferson, had travelled for many years from state to state in this country, and used all diligence in proclaiming the principles of life and salvation to the people, it would have removed less prejudice than did our unlawful imprisonment in Detroit...It is truly humiliating to contemplate that such cruelty can be done to men in this age of enlightenment, yet such are the facts: though our treatment was illegal from the very commencement we have now no chance for redress. But we have this consolation, the world at large had received a testimony that can never be erased from the pages of history. We are united with our brethren in Georgia, Tennessee, The Utah Penitentiary, The Idaho, Yuma, and Detroit prisoners to show that neither death, imprisonment nor suffering of any kind can make the Saints of God deny their religion!**

A final letter, undated, but near the end of Peter's prison term, written by Sarah capsulized their faith in the face of adversity and the motivation for their suffering without despair. Throughout her short life, Sarah wrote original poetry and she concludes the letter with an original verse:

**Dear Peter,**

**I am pleased to say we received your dear, dear letter all safe last Tuesday. We were ever so glad to hear you were well. Yes indeed. We wait with anxiety to hear from you every month.**

**I have been neglectful in writing to you of late. I hope you will excuse me but I was quite certain every letter would be the last. I seemed sure the judges would not fail in giving the decision this time. All the happiness imaginable we had anticipated at seeing and meeting you but we must with patience wait a little longer. There is a good time coming if we are obliged to wade through much tribulation to obtain a rest. I hope we will always feel there is no trial too hard to bear for our holy religion.**

**I hope as you say, dear Peter that it will not be long until we see each other face to face. Let us continue to be cheerful and trust in God. He alone can deliver us from this bondage.**

**To clasp thy hand again at home**

How blessed we shall feel,  
To have thee with us once again  
Seems something more than real.  
Oh! How oft we watch in the twilight hour  
The lonely time of your coming,  
Till it seems as though by magic power  
We hear thy dear voice humming.  
Then alas! The dread thought comes to mind  
And our reverie but tells  
That the heart we love is far from us  
In a lonely prison cell.  
It seems our lot for clouds to rise  
In the horizon of life  
Until above, the darkening clouds  
Seem bent on trouble, rife.  
We feel this parting hard to bear  
To us it seems as night  
But the darker clouds do always wear  
A silvery lining, bright.

And finally, from Sarah's history: We were thrown entirely upon the mercy of our Great and only Helper and were made to know the condition of those who would put their trust in the arm of flesh. We had but one source of aid and that was our Heavenly Father. We all did what our hands could find to do, and by economy, industry and earnest prayer, we did not suffer for the necessities of life and were comforted and assisted to endure the sore trials that had come upon us. Our husband bore his confinement bravely and with remarkable fortitude and our prayers, together with all the faithful Saints of Zion did not ascend to God in vain.