
FROM THE PEN OF A COHAB

Dale Z. Kirby



WHEN I first put my Stripes or Striped clothing on," wrote Thomas Wright Kirby from the Utah Territorial Penitentiary in 1887, "I felt proud that I was counted worthy to be imprisoned and scoffed at for the gospel's sake." Kirby was only one of many Mormons imprisoned under the provisions of the anti-polygamy Edmunds Act of 1882. But Kirby's experiences have been preserved in unique detail because he kept a journal during his six-month stay—a journal which was hidden in a load of hay and smuggled from the prison shortly before his release. The story from the pen of this one "cohab" can perhaps provide a window into the experiences of many others.

Kirby joined the Church in England in 1852, served a mission there, and eventually followed his fiancée Ann Stokes to Utah where they were married in 1863. Within five years he had also married Ann's two half sisters, Amelia and Elizabeth Irons. By 1880 the Kirbys and their seventeen children were living in Cache Valley, where Thomas had accepted the job of carrying the U.S. Mail the mile and a half from Hyde Park to the railroad. Kirby considered the job, which paid one hundred dollars a year, a "blessing from Providence."

As the efforts of federal marshals to arrest Mormons living in plural marriage increased (under the provisions of the Edmunds Act), Kirby realized his mail job was not without its risks. With the "unholy raid" in process, many men went into hiding to avoid being arrested. "But many were not in circumstances to be able to leave their family, and although we knew full well the danger we were in, we could not help ourselves but had to stand our grounds and take what might come," remembered Kirby.

Riding alone to the mail drop made Kirby especially vulnerable. The train whistled and then stopped only when passengers got on or off; otherwise Kirby just threw the mail into the open side door. Whenever he heard the whistle, he wondered if the arriving traveler would be a federal marshal, though he never confessed these concerns to his family. So when he heard the whistle on October 8, 1886, he exclaimed aloud, "I am caught." The mail sack was thrown from the train as usual, but as he loaded it onto his mare, a marshal jumped out and presented him the long-feared arrest warrant.

Riding on to Hyde Park to deliver the mail to the Post

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Office, the officer chatted pleasantly. His was "an unpleasant job at best," he confided, though he had to admit that "they pay well for it." He also told Kirby that "a spotter, a bitter apostate" had helped him. Against the marshal's wishes, Kirby shouted to several children they passed that he had been arrested. The children scattered to warn others. The two then continued into Logan and a hearing date was set six weeks hence.

Certain he would be convicted, Kirby prepared to leave his "dear wives and innocent children to go to prison for having obeyed the law [he] knew God had revealed." The family plowed frantically until snow and frost stopped them and they hauled wood out of the mountains. His wives made warm quilts, assembled his belongings, and packed them into two boxes with locks.

On January 7, 1887, Thomas Kirby rode one more time to the train. This time he kissed his family good-bye and climbed aboard himself, knowing that he would be gone for at least six months and perhaps eighteen since there were three counts charged against him. When he arrived in Ogden, he went to Church lawyer C. C. Richards who handled all plural marriage cases in Weber County. Following his advice, Kirby pleaded guilty, presenting the following statement to the judge:

Your honor, I married my second wife very near twenty years ago. She have had Children by me and I have Worked hard to support them. I married her with an honest heart knowing it to be the law of God to do so and I cannot now turn my back on her and her children. . . . I cannot turn traitor to my own flesh and blood, they are mine and I feel that I should be a villain indeed to now turn my back on them. I know what is before me and I will not forsake them.

The Judge replied that Kirby was not being punished for marrying his wives but rather for continuing to live with them. Stop that and he would not be punished. Kirby would not make such a promise and was fined \$100 and sentenced to six months in the Utah Penitentiary.

He and several others convicted of the same charges were then loaded onto the Railway and sent to Salt Lake City. They reached the prison which was located in the Sugarhouse area by midnight the same day. "When we entered! What a sight presented itself," he wrote,

All were in bed and no one was supposed to speak to us but the man—a prisoner—called the housekeeper, who was to show us where to sleep. But many of the men would speak in a whisper, and joke us, saying that they were glad to see us and that we had come among a hard lot, but when we returned the complement, they laughed and . . . guessed we were welcome to stay, it was a strange sight indeed to see so many men . . . all close shaven, and their Stripped Cloths hanging around from under their heads, serving as pillows, I soon found some brethren I knew.

Kirby slept little that night.

But he soon felt more relaxed as he learned the rules governing prison life. He had with him a combination knife and fork and five dollars. The prison accountant let him keep the knife, which had only one good blade, but took the money. As part of initiation, prisoners could "sing a song, dance a jig or make a speech"; Kirby sang "The Old, Old Home." The prison barber shaved the beards, mustaches, and hair of the new prisoners, a practice repeated weekly thereafter. They were issued their regulation striped clothing and locked in their assigned bunk houses by nine at night. Each prisoner could bathe once every two weeks.

KIRBY soon learned that correspondence was closely supervised. A prisoner could only write a single-page letter each Saturday and could not talk about religion nor could he write to a plural wife. Most got around this rule by addressing a "Loving Daughter." At one point Kirby refused to sign an agreement to let the prison warden open and read his mail. Regardless, the guards often read the prisoners' letters to make sure they followed the rules.

Even given these restrictions, letters were the central joy of prison life. "Received a letter from Ann, with a nice little sprig of Burgamont," wrote Kirby on one occasion, "and oh how nice and sweet it smells. God bless those kind hands that sent it. No one can appreciate such favors as can a poor prisoner." Another time he described two little picture cards and a piece of her new dress that his daughter had sent him for fun. "But poor little girl, she little think how long and with what interest Father sit and look upon such little trifles or how many times your letter is read and with interest every word is weighed."

Such letters reassured the men that all was well at home. "A most beautiful day," enthused Kirby after receiving a letter from his wife Ann describing a picnic at her home with the bishop, eighteen members of the Relief Society, and sister wife Lizza. "They had a good time talking and encouraging my family," he observed. "Tears of sympathy were dropped by all for me." He also noted that the Brethren put up his crops, brought material for dresses for each of his wives, and provided wood for the stoves in three Kirby households. In his journal he wrote detailed descriptions of the home he missed—family, farm animals, crops, and fruit on the trees. One night he dreamed that he and his families were moved to an ideal society.

Such visions of home life were especially prized because, though prison life was not cruel, it was uncomfortable and monotonous. Nearly two hundred men slept in three twenty by twenty foot bunkhouses, where beds were placed "one above another like shelves to a cupboard or as on the shipboard." Later a third tier of bunks was added. Kirby slept on the floor for several weeks until a prisoner was released. Even then he, like the others, shared his four-foot-six-inch-wide bunk with another man—and with the bedbugs. And poor Kirby's "bunky" was a snorer:

Oh My Goodness for a Snorer. I would back him against any two others I had ever heard. But a fellow can get used to almost anything. . . . I got so that if I could wake him up and get to sleep before he got started again I could sleep through almost any amount of noise.

ALAMP burned all night in each cell and a guard passed by every fifteen minutes. One of these guards told Kirby that despite such surveillance, he believed that there were at least a hundred men in the prison whom he would not be afraid to send to New York, for "if they told him they would be back on a certain day he knew they would be as good as their word." Kirby was especially fond of two guards who "are gentlemen in every sense of the word; very kind and Considerate to all, and there is not a man would see them come to any harm, and all try to do the best they can to show them respect."

Because of such friendly relationships, some prison-



ers were allowed to work on the prison farm, at times with no supervision. Work in general helped prisoners to pass the time. Each week they took all bedding and personal boxes outside and scrubbed the bunks with soap and water. In addition, seven men were chosen to sweep and clean the yard weekly. Actually this was sought-after duty:

I am on duty as yard police which mean sweeping the yard and carrying the dirt outside. I and Br. John Penman took the two wheel barrows and wheeled the dirt. It was quite a pleasure to see outside the walls. I saw horses and stock a short distance away. . . . The sight outside made me think of home. Still we were not allowed to put our wheel barrows down to take views but did so as we walked along. . . .

Prisoners also worked in the kitchen and dining hall, served the food, and washed the tin plates, cups, and spoons.

Unfortunately the food, though adequate, was as monotonous as the work schedule. The breakfast bell rang at seven each morning. The men then had one hour to wash and form two rows in the yard before they marched into the dining room. "Our food was bread and meat, Potatoes," wrote Kirby. "A coffee for breakfast (no

sugar) Bread and meat—always forequarters of the beef—and potatoes for dinner. And bread and tea for supper." The menu never varied. With so much bread, it is not surprising that the prisoners protested vociferously when it tasted bad. The angry baker walked out, and the prisoners took over the baking themselves—soon affirming by unanimous voice that they wished he had left sooner.

A prisoner with the required dollar per pint could purchase milk to go with the standard fare. Though Kirby could rarely afford such a luxury, he noted that he "did not take any harm for [want of] food." Prison rules did allow friends to supplement the menu. Butter, sugar, fresh fruit, and candy were allowed; molasses and fresh vegetables were not. Kirby's good friends, the Binders, brought him extras almost weekly. Each prisoner stored his personal food in a little cupboard in the dining room. Such food could be profitably bartered. Once Kirby noted that he had paid one pound of sugar, one orange, and one lemon to have a tooth extracted by a fellow prisoner, Dr. Rogers.

The Binder family also picked up Kirby's laundry each week since the prisoners' clothing had to be sent outside

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the prison to be washed. Sometimes they tucked such items as newly knit socks or a special hat for yard wear in with the returning bundle.

Others from outside the prison also visited. Members of the Salt Lake Choir came to entertain. They often brought flowers to decorate the dining hall where they gave concerts. Sometimes children came with them. "How I did want to take the little soul and others about the same age as my own and hug and kiss them," wrote the homesick Kirby, "but as prisoners we were not allowed to notice or speak to them."

THE cohabs organized several cultural and educational groups of their own. These prison groups sponsored such lectures as "The Great Pyramids of Egypt" by John Stoddard. Inmates also organized a Penitentiary Glee Club and an orchestra. Music, marching, and dancing helped pass the evening hours. One prisoner, whom Kirby described as a "chinaman," flew a strange-looking kite for amusement.

At first, the Mormons were not allowed to hold religious services. All their "prayers had to be strictly silent," Kirby noted, "but swearing could be indulged in to any extent and one could not move anywhere . . . but he could hear the name of God and the Savior blasphemed horribly." Other churches were allowed to hold services, however, and the Mission Association sponsored lectures in an attempt to reform the Latter-day Saints.

But most Mormon cohabs preferred to read their scriptures in private. Kirby spent many solitary hours in a sunny corner of the yard, book in hand, rocking in a chair brought from home. Shortly before Kirby's release, Mormon elders were finally allowed to preach in the prison. The Prison Choir often sang as many as ten numbers during these services.

Two events stood out for Kirby against the recurring pattern of prison life. Elder Lorenzo Snow, a member of the Council of the Twelve Apostles, was imprisoned with Kirby. "I met Lorenzo Snow in the yard today and told him I did not feel at all disgraced," wrote Kirby one evening. "He said, 'Why Brother Kirby you are highly honor'd and you will live to see that more than you can today, be of good cheer, all is well if we do our duty in the church and Kingdom of God.'" A few days later, the Supreme Court reversed its previous decision, and the Apostle was released:

I shall never forget seeing him leave the prison. There were many brethren on the wall who had come to meet him. "Lorenzo Snow" was shouted by the guard on the wall and when I saw Bro. Snow walk toward the big gate I said to myself, God bless you Bro. Snow, May you never come here again. Many had gathered in groups to say good-bye, but I could see his heart was too full to say much. . . . When he passed me as I stood alone he said "God bless you Brethren if I do not come back."

Later, Kirby's prison visage was immortalized when photographer C.R. Savage visited the penitentiary.

Hoping to be "conspicuous" in the long line of prisoners, Kirby took off his prison hat in one pose and, in a later shot in the dining hall, was the only one who left on his white apron.

Realizing that he would soon be released, Kirby hid his journal and autobiography in a load of hay he had helped harvest. When he delivered the hay to a nearby ranch, he asked the Crisman family to keep it until he was released. That day finally came on July 8, 1887. He packed up his bedding, boxes, and rocking chair and, for the first time in six months, dressed in his own clothes. His boxes were opened and searched. "Have [you] any writing in there?" he was asked. "Not a scratch of the pen, sir," he could truthfully reply.

Before he left, he was taken before the Prosecuting Attorney since his fine was still unpaid. Although he couldn't pay the fine, he was released anyway; he signaled this happy information to his fellow inmates, many of whom were facing similar fines.

FRIENDS and relatives met him as he drove a horse and buggy into Hyde Park the next afternoon. The reunion was bittersweet, however, because his wives and family were not there. If they met publicly, he could be arrested again. Luckily it was Sunday, and his wives and children, as well as most others from the village, were in church. Kirby slipped into his place in the choir, and his wife Amelia asked the leader to sing his favorite song. He addressed the meeting. After the closing prayer, he knew that many were watching to see how he would greet his plural wives. "I kissed them heartily not caring for what anybody thought," he wrote.

But he found that many things had changed. Amelia and Elizabeth had each rented separate houses. Bishop Daines and others from the branch had gone to Canada with Charles Card in order to avoid arrest. Saddened, he went home with Ann. "It was very hard to see my plural families go one way and me another. And hardly daring to speak to Each other." Though forced to visit his wives in secret, this proud man concluded his journal with the following declaration of conscience—one shared by many men who lived in fear but remained committed: "I did not feel to desert my families for Anything that might follow, nor did I. I felt I would live half my life in the Penetentary and the other with my family rather than leave them. As I felt they had been sealed to me and I had promised to be Husband to them and God being my help I intended to try and carry out that contract to the best of my ability and risk whatever might follow."

Note

All the material in this article comes from the handwritten Journal of Thomas Wright Kirby and from his handwritten Autobiography. Both of these documents, written during his imprisonment in the Utah Territorial Penitentiary, are in possession of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Historical Department, Salt Lake City, Utah. Original spelling is maintained in the quoted material.