

Sketch of the Life of William Daniel Thomas

U.S. Mail Stage Driver

A nephew to Preston Thomas

.....written by Joseph Harrison Thomas, May 15, 1933

(This was read in the Eagle Rock Camp, Daughters of Utah Pioneers by (grandmother) Clara R. Brunt on October 24, 1955)

William Daniel Thomas was born May 8, 1834. He was the son of Joseph Morehead Thomas and Mary Ann Thomas Thomas. Her maiden was Thomas. He was born on the Thomas plantation on the east side of the Yadkin River, Richmond County, North Carolina. This plantation consisted of 3,000 acres. Thirty negroes assisted in operating this farm.

His grandfather, Daniel Thomas, died on this plantation on November 7th, 1830. His grandmother, Ann Morehead Thomas, at this time had relatives living in Tipton County, Tennessee. In 1835 the Thomas Planation was sold and the whole family moved to Tennessee. In 1836, wishing to engage in cotton raising on a larger scale, the family moved to Somerville, Kemper County, Mississippi.

On November 7, 1843, his grandmother died. Just thirteen years to the day after her husband's death. One month later some Mormon Elders came to their home, Benjamin Clapp and others. The first sermon that Daniel's parents heard they were converted and joined "the church." The next spring, they sold their farm in Mississippi and started for Nauvoo, Illinois, to join the main body of the church. They traveled by way of Jackson and Vicksburg, then up the Mississippi river by steamer to Nauvoo. They lived in

Nauvoo until the expulsion of the saints. His father assisted in building the Nauvoo Temple. "My grandfather on the Morehead side helped with the paintings on this temple". (He was an artist and did some of the paintings on the walls of the Temple. He also painted portraits. (last statement was added by Mrs..R.Grogerg (Grandmother Brunt's sister)).

In May 1845, his mother and her infant daughter, Rachel, died. They were buried in the Nauvoo Cemetary. Uncle Dan had the pleasure of seeing the prophet, Joseph Smith before his martyrdom. In February 1846, his father Joseph (Morehead) Thomas, along with the other saints were driven out of their homes in Nauvoo into the state of Iowa, where he died through exposure, September 17, 1846. He is buried in Bentonsford, Iowa cemetary by the side of his very dear friend and brother-in-law, James Madison Morehead.

Thus, Daniel was left an orphan together with his sister, Frances and two brothers, Harrison Ayers and James Claybourne. They were now taken care of by their two uncles, Preston and D. Claybourn Thomas.

In June 1850, Daniel Claybourn Thomas, his wife Jane Gather Thomas, together with his widowed sister, Elizabeth Thomas Morehead and her two children, Preston and Ann Morehead, started across the plains. They were well prepared for the trip compared with other pioneers. His uncle, Claybourn had come from Texas, bringing with him many useful things that made for the comfort of the trip.

Daniel, who was now sixteen, drove one of his uncle Claybourn's teams, which consisted of a yoke of oxen and a yoke of cows hitched to a covered wagon. While crossing the plains, Uncle Claybourn's and Aunt Jane's first child was born. They named him Claybourn. They arrived in Salt Lake Valley, in the fall of 1850 in Aaron Johnson's company. The family moved at once to Sulphur Springs, now Lehi, Utah. His uncle Claybourn Thomas being one of the first four settlers of that city. (*see history of Lehi for portraits, page 30.*) The next seven years, Dan lived with his two uncles here and at Cedar Fort.

MAIL SERVICES: In Utah in 1849, there was no regular mail services. The letters were wrapped in buckskin covers, tied round and round with the same material and were sent by chance travelers.

The first regular mail service to Salt Lake City, under a contract with the federal government, was contracted by Colonel Samuel H. Woodson of Independence, Missouri, the Eastern terminus of the route. It as a monthly service was started in July 1850. At first only the mail was carried, but soon the passenger service was added. Later, a mail contract was given to Benjamin Holloday from St Joseph, Missouri, to Sacramento, California, the center of the gold region at that time. The distance from Salt Lake City, Utah to Sacramento, California is about 800 miles, and to drive mail and passenger coaches over this route in that early day was a hazardous undertaking. The driver had to be brave, fearless, physically fit and a man of good judgement. He would have to be first class teamster, in order to be able to drive a four or six mule team over such dangerous roads.

The Indians in this part of the country belonged to the Bannock

and Shoshone tribes. To show the condition (in regards to the Indians), I will relate the following historical events:

Smithfield, Cache Valley, at this date, 1858, was not settled, but was in the next year, 1859. In 1860, two men were killed and others wounded by the Indians in Smithfield - Ira Merrill and a Mr. Reed were killed. Ira Merrill was the first person buried in the Franklin Cemetary. Ira Merrill was the first person buried in the Smithfield Cemetary.

On January 29, 1863, Captain Conner of Fort Douglass, Utah, fought the Battle Creek in the north end of Cache Valley, killing about three hundred Indians. (Chief Bear Hunter was the leader of the Indians.) *(Last statement by H.R.Groberg). On September 5th, 1932 a celebration was held on the spot to commerate the event. The Bannock and Shoshone Indians had given trouble to the pioneers.*

Four years after Uncle Dan had acted as a mail carrier, President Abraham Lincoln send an order to Ex-Governor, Brigham Young, to raise, arm and to equip a portion of the Utah Miltia to guard the overland mail route and telegraph line from St Joseph, MO to Salt Lake City. Seventy-two mounted men under the leadership of Lot Smith took up the service for Uncle Sam.

Seven years later in 1865 the Black Hawk Indian War was begun. In this war more than one hundred white men were killed in and near Sanpete Valley. This gives you an idea of the true condition of the country at this time,1858.

I remember of father telling of a mail coach that was stacked by Indians on the same route that Uncle DanT was driving. The driver and passengers were all killed, the mails sacks were cut open and the contents scattered to the four winds.

Two trips over this western route that Uncle Dan made I wish to tell you about. One of which cost him his life.

In the summer of 1858, while Dad was driving, he was sitting in the driver's seat on top of the coach and the passengers were inside. They came to a creek that must be forded. This stream was in a hollow with brush on either side of the road. Suddenly twelve or fifteen Indian warriors sprung out of the brush into the road, placing themselves in front of the team. Instantly their bows and spiked arrows were raised to level with their shoulders and waited for a signal from their chief to shoot.

Reader, what would you have done at this critical moment had you been in Uncle Dan's position?

At his side was a loaded rifle and two heavy pistols, but of what use were they to him? A signal from their chief and a twang of their bow strings would have filled Dan's body with arrows. In a cool-headed manner and coupled with true western tact and splendid judgment, like a flash of lightning he caught the lapels of his coat baring his breast to the savages, he shouted in a loud voice, "Shoo, Squaws, Shoot."

Dan had acquired a fairly good knowledge of Indian language and their characteristics while living at Cedar Fort, Utah. Now at this time that knowledge served him well. The old Chief did not like to be called a "squaw." This meant the same as being a coward. The sentence shouted by Dan worked like magic, for in an instant the bows and arrows were all lowered. In an undertone Dan spoke to the passengers in the coach and said "men, put down our guns and allow me to handle the situation."

The Chief and part of his warriors passed around the frightened mules and came up to the coach saying, "Gimme biscuit."

"Alright," said Dan, turning his team over to one of the passengers, he proceeded to unbuckle the heavy straps that held the boxes on the rear end of the coach. As he began to divide the food, the chief said, "Gimmer heap o'biscuits." With words and gestures, Dan explained that they would starve if he gave them all, and this satisfied the old chief.

While the boxes were being replaced, a friendly conversation was kept up between the Chief and the stage driver. Before parting the Chief assured Dad that he would be allowed to go over this road unharmed unless he brought "Sogers" with him. With a brighter heart Dan springs to the high seat on top of the coach and the reins were handed to him. The passengers re-entered the coach and they were now allowed to resume their journey which they did, and reached Sacramento without any further trouble. In due time the return trip to Salt Lake City was made.

The Fatal Trip:

In the latter part of November 1858, Uncle Dan left Salt Lake City with the U.S. mail and with his coach filled with passengers, his destination as usual being Sacramento, California. This proved to be a sad and fatal trip for him.

He had no difficulty on this trip until after he had reached his destination and had made his return trip as far as the Sierra Nevada Mountains. It was now the 10th of December and the snow had fallen to a great depth which retarded his progress. He managed somehow to get through the mountains and reached the station at the north end of promontory where there was a spring of water. At this station Dan expected to change teams, but to his

surprise there was no team there. The mail route had been changed by the contractor without his knowledge to pass around the south end of the Great Salt Lake. They had no way by which to communicate with him and thought he could make the remainder of the trip without fresh animals. What was to be done? His mules were jaded, the snow was deep and not a sign of a track to follow, a heavy load of passengers and mail, and only about two days left to reach Salt Lake City or he and his employer would have to pay a heavy forfeit. As usual Dan was equal to the occasion. He decided to leave the passengers, the coach and his wheel team at the station. He would use one of the lead mules for a pack animal on which to put the heavy packs of mail, and he would ride the other. The passengers were not pleased with this arrangement, but finally agreed to it. Dan explained to them that as soon as he reached Call's Fort, he would send help back to them.

The next morning before sunrise Uncle Dan was ready to start. As he placed the two heavy sacks of mail upon the pack mule, he remarked to those standing near – “Fellows, I'm sorry to have to leave you here, you have paid your fare and should not be treated in this manner, but this is the only way I see of getting the mail through on time.”

As a young man he was very proud and delighted in being well-dressed. He has a silk brocade vest and a stick pin for his cravat, made of a gold nugget which had bought in Sacramento. He had silk handkerchiefs of many different colors. This particular morning he was warmly dressed, having several shirts on and also several pairs of pants.

His mule was packed. He swung his two heavy horse pistols over the horn of his saddle, he then mounted his mule and turning to the men, he said, "Goodbye, fellows, you can trust me to get help to you soon."

It was the 15th of December 1858. An eventful day for Uncle Dan. A cold, crisp breeze from the north stung his face as he started eastward across the trackless waste. The sun rose above the snowy peaks of the Wasatch Mountains. These mountains served as a main guide to pilot his way to Call's Fort, the nearest point of civilization. Upon reaching the Malad River, he found it frozen over. The north wind was now blowing harder than ever and much colder. Dismounting, he tested the ice and decided to attempt to cross it, although the ice was not very thick. He fastened the leather strap of the pack mule to the horn of his saddle, then taking hold of the leather strap of the saddle mule he started out across the icy stream, leaving the mules as far apart as possible so the ice would not give way.

When he reached the center of the small feet of the pack mule with his heavy load broke through the ice and down he went to the bottom of the river. Dan quickly untied the unfortunate mule and led the saddle mule to safety, fastening him to the bushes on the bank. Returning to the pack mule he at once removed the mail sacks to make it easier for the mule to get out. The Malad is not a large stream and at that time of year, there was not a great deal of water passing under the ice. It was difficult for the mule to get out for the ice kept giving under his feet. Not wishing to leave this faithful mule in this plight, Dan stayed with him and finally succeeded in helping the mule to extricate himself. In doing so however, Dan got his legs wet above the knees and his arms to

the elbows in the icy cold water. The pack was replaced on the shivering mule. The mail was still dry, having been protected by the heavy leather sacks, but Dad began to wonder if these letters would every reach the mothers and lovers living eastward of the Rocky Mountains, some of whom were anxiously waiting to hear from their dear ones who were laboring in the gold fields near Sacramento.

Dan was now very cold, but knew he must forge ahead if he was to reach Call's Fort alive. Thinking to warm himself, he began to walk, leading the mules in single file. As he ploughed through he deep snow his wet clothing froze to his arms and legs. The extra pieces of clothing he had put on for protection were now only a detriment. His greatest fear ahead now was crossing the Bear River, which is much larger than the Malad.

Reaching the western bluff overhanging the river he could see that the river was not completely frozen over. I don't know how he got across but he managed in some way to reach the opposite side. As Uncle Dan climbed the east bank of the river he was happy to think he had crossed safely the two streams, but by this time he realized that his hands and feet were frozen stiff, but he knew he must go on. Slowly he ascended the hill on the east side of the river. When on top he saw in the distance a horseman coming toward him. Uncle Dans keen eye soon told him that it was an Indian carrying a gun.

Although he had his heavy pistols hanging to the horn of his saddle, his hands were too badly frozen to use them. Death seemed to be facing the "heroic westerner" in two ways instead of one. Suddenly the Indian stopped. Dan beacons to him to

come nearer which he did and then within talking distance, Dan said, "Howdy, shonta cold." The old Indian replied, "Heap cold."

In the conversation that followed Uncle Dan explained to the Shoshone his sad condition and that he desired to reach Call's Fort. The Indian proved to be a friend instead of a foe and helped him in every way he could, assisting him to mount the mule and leading the way. They set out in single file for the fort. The Indian induced the suffering man to place his hands and feet in the warm water. They then went on and soon reached the fort.

There were four things that needed Uncle Dan's immediate attention. They were: First, a proper reward to the Indian who had befriended him. Second, dispatching a message of help to the passengers left at Promontory station. Third, getting the mail bags on the Salt Lake City as soon as possible and fourth, securing medical help to relieve his own suffering.

The kind pioneers of Fort Call and Brigham City furnished a good outfit to take him and his mail to Salt Lake City. They aided him in every way and did everything for his comfort. He secured some good men to go back with the lead mules and bring the coach and passengers left at Promontory and they, in due time reached Salt Lake City.

Uncle Dan's condition grew worse. His suffering was so intense, it was decided upon reaching the Session Settlement (now Bountiful) ten miles north of Salt Lake, to leave him at the home of Judson Stoddard.

The mail was sent on time to Salt Lake City so there was no forfeit to pay.

Word was sent on to Lehi, informing Dan's relatives of his sad condition. Several of them came to see him. His brother, Harrison and his dear Aunt Elizabeth Morehead (my grandmother) stayed with him to nurse him.

A good doctor was secured by the mail contractor and was sent to Dan's bedside at Bountiful. After an examination, the doctor reported that it would be necessary to amputate his hands and feet in order to save his life. Father asked the doctor to break the sad news to Dan, which he did.

As the doctor stated the facts, Dan's face plainly showed the mental strain through which he was passing, but with a firm voice, he replied, "if my hands and feet must go, I will go with them."

No amount of persuasion could induce him to change his mind. After two weeks of intense suffering, he passed away on the 28th day of Decemer 1848.

He was buried in the Salt Lake Cemetary. No stone marks his grave, but records of graves since the year 1847 have been kept by the sexton in this cemetary. The Landmark Association put a marker at the spring where the Stage Station was located at the north end of Promatory Points. The stage-line was located at the north end of the Salt Lake at the time, but soon after Dan's death the route was changed and went around the south end of the Lake.

The head mail contractor came to see Uncle Dad many times while he was sick and told him all expenses would be paid by the company. On one of these visits the contractor said to Uncle Dan, "your salary will be paid in full during your illness and as soon as you are able to travel we should like you to go along with the mail, but you will not be required to do any driving, simply take charge of affairs."

Thus another brave heroic man had sacrificed his life in helping build up the Golden West.

Note: Since writing the above sketch, I have learned the following facts from two of Aunt Frances' daughters, Lucy Woods and Emily Greehall that Uncle Dan' full name is William Daniel Thomas, and that Uncle Dan's father, Joseph Morehead Thomas was called on a mission from the City of Nauvoo by the Prophet Joseph Smith just before the Prophet's martyrdom. Also, that Uncle Dan had a sweetheart (Lerena Little).

This sketch of the life of William Daniel Thomas was dictated by Joseph Harrison Thomas and written by his sister, Stella Thomas Groutage in Preston, Idaho on May 15, 1933

and was read by Clara R Brunt in the Eagle Rock Camp – Daughters of Utah Pioneers on October 24, 1955.

Search Results from Historical Records

1-20 of 226,785 results for Name: **William Daniel Thomas**, Event: **Birth**, Event Range: **1834-18**
Joseph Thomas, Mother Name: **Mary Ann Thomas**

Number of results to show: 20 50 75

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Name	Events	Relationships
Daniel William Thomas Illinois, Hancock County, Nauvoo Community Project, 1839-1846 (BYU Center for Family History and Genealogy)	birth: 8 May 1834 Rockingham, Richmond, North Carolina death: 28 December 1858 Ogden, Weber, Utah Territory residence: from 1839 to 1846 Nauvoo, Hancock, Illinois, United States	father: Joseph Morehead Thomas mother: Mary Ann Thomas