

BROKEN SILENCE

The greatest void of this saga, and that which is to me the most tender part of their life's struggle, is that MATHIAS and BENGTA never got to tell their own story. After all they had sacrificed for their posterity, they could leave no explanation, no encouragement, no blessing - just their silent, yet resounding example.

As their granddaughter BENGTA WHEELER explained, "We children could never talk with them, they could understand us, but we couldn't understand them..." There were two reasons for this communication gap. First, "Grandfather was deaf in his last years, and it was hard to talk to him and to make him understand." "Secondly, "they spoke Swedish and Danish," but very little English (A. Nelson, 1-2).

Since the grandchildren apparently weren't taught to speak Danish and Swedish, MATHIAS and BENGTA were likely among the many Danish immigrants who insisted that in their family "Danish be immediately dropped in favor of English for the sake of speedy assimilation...in their new country" (Hvidt, 264). They quietly sacrificed their rich past for their grandchildren' (and our own) future.

Imagine how heartbreaking it must have been for MATHIAS and BENGTA not to have been able to share firsthand with their own grandchildren the stories from their lives and from their heritage; not to be able to complain with a twinkle in their eyes of trudging thirteen miles through waist-deep snowdrifts.

If they could have left a message for us, they would probably have said something simple yet important like "be happy, be good." So I'll take the liberty of saying it for them. "Vaer lykkelige, vaer gode!"

I imagine MATHIAS might close his farewell by reading anxiously to us, from a record he held very dear, the farewell of another dying father to his sons shortly after their arrival in this land of promise:

"And it came to pass that after I, Nephi, had made an end of teaching my brethren, our father, Lehi, also spak many things unto them, and rehearsed unto them, how great things the Lord had done for them in bringing them out of the land....

And he also spake unto them concerning the land of promise, which they had obtained--how merciful the Lord had been....

But, said he, notwithstanding our afflictions, we have obtained a land of promise, a land which is choice above all other lands; a land which the Lord God hath covenanted with me should be a land for the inheritance of my seed. Yea, the Lord hath covenanted this land unto me, and to my children forever....

And if it so be that they shall serve him according to the commandments which he hath given, it shall be a land of liberty unto them; wherefore, they shall never be brought down into

captivity; if so, it shall be because of iniquity; for if iniquity shall abound cursed shall be the land for their sakes, but unto the righteous it shall be blessed forever.

And now that my soul might have joy in you, and that my heart might leave this world with gladness because of you, that I might not be brought down with grief and sorrow to the grave, arise from the dust, my sons, and be men, and be determined in one mind and in one heart, united in all things, that ye may not come down into captivity.

2 Nephi 1:1,3,5,7,21

Shortly before Christmas, 1904, MATHIAS, the great patriarch of this family passed away. Having no existing record of his funeral, I've taken the liberty of borrowing from the funeral of Beowulf, ancient hero of the Danes:

A huge heap of wood was ready,
Hung around with helmets, and battle
Shields, and shining mail shirts, all
As Beowulf had asked. The bearers brought
Their beloved lord, their glorious king,
And weeping laid him high on the wood.
Then the warriors began to kindle that greatest
Of funeral fires; smoke rose
Above the flames, black and thick.

And while the wind blew and the fire
Roared they wept, and Beowulf's body
Crumbled and was gone. The Geats stayed,
Moaning their sorrow, lamenting their lord:

A gnarled old woman, hair wound
Tight and gray oin her head, groaned
A song of misery, of infinite sadness
And days of mourning..
And Heaven swallowed the billowing smoke.

Then the Geats built the tower, as Beowulf
Had asked, strong and tall, so sailors
Could find it from far and wide; working
For ten long days they made his monument,
Sealed his ashes in walls as straight
And high as wise and willing hands
Could raise them.

And then twelve of the bravest Geats
Rode their horses around the tower,
Telling their sorrow, telling stories
Of their dead king and his greatness, his glory,

Praising him for heroic deeds, for a life
As noble as his name. So should all men
Raise up words for their lords, warm
With love, when their shield and protector leaves
His body behind, sends his soul
On high. And so Beowulf's followers
Rode, mourning their beloved leader,
Crying that no better king had ever
Lived, no prince so mild, no man
So open to his people, so deserving of praise.
(Beowulf, lines 3137-3182)

This record of MATHIAS, not built as straight nor as high as he deserves, also stands to witness his passing.

BENGTA didn't have to mourn for long. Her ties of love were so strong that she followed her husband to the grave barely three weeks after his passing.

There in the harbor was a ring-prowed fighting
Ship, its timbers icy, waiting,
And there they brought the beloved body...
No ship had ever sailed so brightly fitted...

High up [overhead] they flew
[Their lord's] shining banner, then sadly let
The water pull at the ship, watched it
Slowly sliding to where neither rulers
Nor heroes nor anyone can say whose hands
Opened to take that motionless cargo.

Beowulf, lines 26-52

Due to the gospel message they recognized, received, and thereby passed down to us, we know whose hands opened to receive BENGTA. Since her beloved MATHIAS, little TINA, and five of her eight children had already passed on before her, it is certain there were many loved ones anxious to greet BENGTA as she left this world.

Then, I believe, freed from her tired and weary body, the eyes of blind BENGTA beheld the ones she loved for the first time. I imagine her embracing MATHIAS, taking his face gently in her hands, gazing into his eyes, and as she shook her own head slightly from side to side saying with a soft smile, "I always knew you were handsome." I imagine her gathering her children in her arms and saying tenderly, "It's wonderful to SEE you!"

Had any of us been there, we wouldn't have been surprised to see MATHIAS lean forward

and tenderly whisper in her ear what she had likely heard many times before - that their children obviously got his good features....because she still had hers.

They praised her now,
For her generous heart, and her goodness, and the high
And most noble paths she walked, filled
With adoring love for that leader of warriors,
Her husband; he was a man as brave and strong
And good, it is said, as anyone on this earth.

Beowulf, Lines 1951-1956

THE WHEELWRIGHT AND HIS WIFE

MATHIAS labored for years as a wheelwright. His work was important for transportation, and he fulfilled his role in helping others rapidly reach their intended destinations. He learned in his own way how to serve others' needs.

It was exacting work, suitable only for a perfectionist, for should one spoke differ in length a fraction of an inch, or should those spokes be spread unevenly even to a small degree, the whole wheel would soon wobble and collapse under the uneven distribution of weight. For years, his hands deftly joined the carefully-crafted spokes to the hub, then secured the other ends of the shaft with a flattened circular wooden band and holes carefully drilled in the proper places for the spokes. The task was often completed with an outer steel band, which ensured the wheel would stay intact despite heavy loads or rough roads.

Like the wheelwrights and builders they were, MATHIAS and BENGTA worked for years to create a family unit with the strength and balance to endure the tests of time. Yet just as in their building of the Logan temple amidst the storms of uncertainty, their faithfulness acknowledged the need of the Lord's hand in their work, having the wisdom to realize that "unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain" (Psalms 127:1). As strong and stable as their family was, they had the foresight to seal their work in the temple of God with a band which would last for all time.

Now, like the spokes of a wheel, each of us now radiates out from this common, or rather uncommon hub. Their work has proven to be a sturdy model, worthy of duplication. As we pattern our own lives and create our own families, may we follow their wise example by crowning our work with the band which will weather rough roads and heavy loads.

May we avoid the example of the last doomed Nephites, whose downfall was that they "did struggle for their lives without calling upon that Being who created them." May we realize that there is a greater craftsman at work, one who is willing to sand out the rough edges of our lives. The Carpenter of Nazareth is eager to shape us into a pattern which will allow us to serve others in reaching destinations. When we submit our lives into his hands, the Master will complete the work

he has begun in us.

As I complete their story now (their tower, as the author of Beowulf put it) I realize that perhaps MATHIAS and BENGTA, more than anything else, might want something other than a tower built in their memory - they may want something of ourselves instead. May we build upon the solid foundation they have already laid for us.

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My hope is that your children will grow up familiar with the stories and sacrifices of the wheelwright and his wife. Likewise, may we draw from the courage of our forefathers and take full advantage of the blessings awaiting us.

THE MERE BEGINNING

Although some of the background, experiences, and perhaps a few of the feelings and challenges of these two great heroes have been captured here, the majority of their lives has slipped by unrecorded, and unappreciated. Their story for the most part remains untold.

But one day, we'll have the opportunity to catch up on their lives. One day, we'll be able to sit at their feet and hear firsthand of their challenges, failures, dreams, and accomplishments. Then we'll gain a greater appreciation for everything they sacrificed for our futures. Perhaps then they'll tell us with trembling excitement what they had wished for us and our children.

And then it will be our turn to unfold the story of our lives for them. May our story retain the gleam of pride in their eyes. May we live lives worthy of their toil and sacrifice.

Carved on the Lincoln Memorial is this excerpt from his famous Gettysburg Address:

“It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to that great task remaining before us - that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion - that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain - that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom...”

May God bless our lives, as he has the lives of our heroes. May we live to realize the “air castles” they and our Father in Heaven have imagined and desired for us, as we build them upon the solid foundation of love and sacrifice which they have provided.

“And now that my soul might have joy in you, and that my heart might leave this world with gladness because of you, that I might not be brought down with grief and sorrow to the grave, arise from the dust, my sons, and be men, and be determined in one mind and in one heart, united in all things, that ye may not come down into captivity.”

2 Nephi 1:21

Just as their story ends, ours now begins.