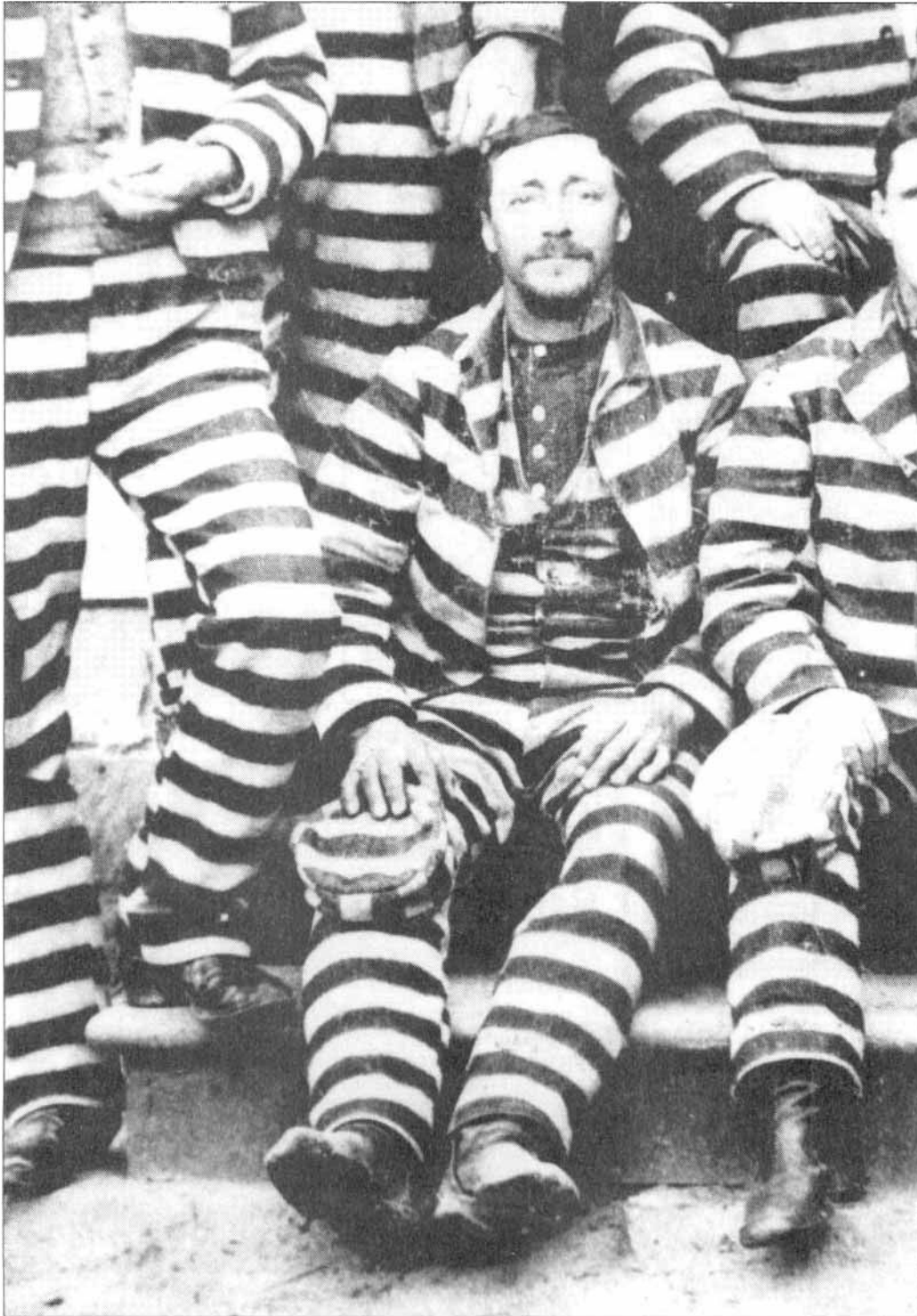


Benjamin Perkins: Father of a San Juan Multitude



Early settle Benjamin Perkins while incarcerated in a federal prison for practicing polygamy.

Benjamin Perkins was a leader of the Hole-in-the-Rock expedition. He pioneered Bluff and Monticello. His character and contributions to the building up of San Juan County are legendary.

His posterity with his two wives as of 1975 numbered 22 children, four of whom died in infancy, 101 grandchildren and 325 great-grandchildren. Today, 34 years later, his posterity number in the thousands.

Because 15 of his 18 surviving children were daughters, the Perkins name is not as common in San Juan as some of the other founding fathers.

However, if you know people with surnames of Lyman, Christensen, Wilson, Bronson, Bailey, Barton, Young, and many others, it is a good bet they are descended from Ben Perkins. Many of his vast posterity reside in San Juan County today. The Perkins family has made an indelible mark on this county and the communities therein. Here is their Father's story.

Ben was born in 1844 in the tiny Welsh village of Schoot. His parents William and Jane joined the LDS Church when little Ben was nine months old. The people in that area hated the Mormons. For over a year William could not get work and the Perkins family were sent to the poor house, which was a prison of sorts where people unable to pay their debts were sent. Family members were separated in the poor house and little Ben lay for days at a time with nothing to eat, crying out, "Mama, Mama, why don't you come?"

When the Perkins family was released from that terrible experience, Ben was sent into the coal mines at age six. His job was to carry water to the miners. He stayed in the mines until he was 19 years old. He had no schooling and could not read or write until later in his life.

A mine explosion six miles away from the mine Ben was working killed 400 miners. It changed his life. He was asked to go to help extract the bodies from the mine. The experience was so grizzly that he decided he wanted nothing more of mining and made up his mind to go to Zion. He saved his money and finally had enough for the journey. The day he left was the toughest day of his life because he didn't know if he would ever see his family again.

As he waited at an Inn for his train to arrive, he noticed Mary Ann Williams, a girl he knew who was also a member of his LDS Church. Ben felt inspired to approach her and say "If I can make enough money when I get to America and pay for your passage, would you come?" In his diary he says, "She told me yes and for me to write her every chance I got along the way and as soon as she found out where I was, she would write to me. We were both true to that understanding."

Ben sailed from Wales to New York in steerage. He went by train from New York to North Platte, NB and then on to the Salt Lake Valley by ox-team.

He was hired to help build the railroad through Echo Canyon. When he had earned enough money for passage for his family he sent the money and told them to bring Mary Ann with them. She was 18 when they left Wales.

Mary Ann's father begged her not to go, but to wait and go to Zion with her own family when they could afford it. But she was determined to keep her promise to Ben.

The Perkins family, with Mary Ann in their company, traveled by train from New York. They were aboard the first train to arrive in Ogden after the completion of the trans-continental railroad, which arrived June 23, 1869. With good fortune

at every turn, Ben's family and his sweetheart made the trip from Liverpool to Ogden, in only 23 days.

Mary Ann and Ben were married by Heber C. Kimball in the Endowment House in Salt Lake City jobs as their family grew. They had four children by the time Mary Ann's family arrived in Cedar City from Wales in 1879. The Williams family had only been in Cedar City a year when Ben and Mary Ann received a call to go with a group of Saints to colonize the southeastern corner of Utah.

Even though Mary Ann's sister, Sarah, had come to Utah with her family, she was not a baptized member of the Church. Ben asked Sara if she would come with them and drive one of two wagons he planned to take. She was also needed to help Mary Ann with her four young children.

Sarah agreed to go to San Juan and later said, "Although we had to put up with many inconveniences and unpleasant situations, I thoroughly enjoyed the trip and was deeply impressed with the love and actions of those with whom I traveled."

From George Decker's journal, we get this insight into Ben Perkins: "Among those who loved to dance was Benjamin Perkins. His snappy Welsh jigs furnished no end of entertainment and enjoyment for the entire company."

Besides being one of the six captains of ten families, Ben's biggest contribution to the journey came at the Hole-in-the-Rock.

From Platte D. Lyman's account we read, "Ben Perkins, with his experience in drilling and blasting in the mines of Wales, was given the assignment of figuring out a way to build the road down the sheer cliff just below the top of the hole

"He conceived the idea of drilling holes 10 inches deep every 18 inches down about 50 feet of the sheer cliff face. Hanging from a rope, Ben marked the location for each hole, and other men came along and drilled the holes with hand held steel drill bits and sledge hammers."

Oaks were cut, and pounded into the holes and then brush and dirt were piled on to make a roadway wide enough to accommodate the widest wagon, with the left wagon wheel in the rut which had been chiseled and blasted out of the cliff, and the right wheel on the suspended portion, which the company named "Uncle Ben's Dugway" in honor of its engineer.

On January 26, 1880, with the back wheels on the -wagons chained and several men hanging on to ropes tied to the back of the wagons, they lowered each wagon slowly down through the Hole-in-the-Rock, with Ben Perkins being the first to go. Not a single animal or wagon was lost.

Those who visit the site today, and view the route they had to take marvel that it was even possible. But to do it with complete success was truly a miracle. Those hardy pioneers crossed the Colorado river on a large raft they had built, and by nightfall, they were all safely on the east side of the river in what is now San Juan County.

On April 6, the exhausted company arrived at present day Bluff. Too tired to go another 18 miles to their intended destination at Montezuma Creek, they immediately set about making assignments and selecting the site of their new town. On April 13, the first baby was born in Bluff to the wife of Alvin Decker.

Ben was called to take another wife. He married Sarah Williams, the younger sister of his first wife Mary Ann. It nearly broke Mary Ann's heart, but she accepted it better as time passed and the Perkins family continued to grow.

When lawmen were sent into Utah to arrest and incarcerate polygamists, Ben was forced to spend much of his time evading those who were trying to catch him. Eventually Ben was caught and put on trial and convicted. He was sentenced to prison and given a \$300 fine December 18, 1888. After the sentencing, the man who arrested him, by the name of Armstrong, wrote a glowing letter to the warden of the prison in Salt Lake attesting to Ben's character and integrity. Three days after arriving at the prison he was made a trustee and had many liberties not enjoyed by other prisoners. On June 17, 1889, he was released for good behavior and excused from paying the fine.



Ben refused to abandon either of his wives and was on the run for several years after being imprisoned. He moved his two large families several times during those terrible years. As the furor over polygamy subsided, he moved back to San Juan and built homes for Sara's family in Bluff and Mary Ann's family in Monticello.

Ben had a farm near Monticello and freighted whenever he could. Besides those jobs he took mail contracts between 1905 and 1910 between Monticello and Bluff and between Moab and Monticello. In his own words, "the mail contracts were before the days of the automobile and it involved lean, jaded horses, trips through blizzards and mud with rattletrap buckboards toggled up with bailing wire."

Benjamin Perkins was the first assessor of San Juan County. He was the first treasurer of the San Juan Co-op. He served for many years in the San Juan Stake High Council and was always active in his Church.

He was a small but sturdily built man, 5'5" tall. He had an iron constitution and never knew a sick day until after he was 65 years of age. His eyes were round and piercing black and always reflected a good and cheery nature. He wore a long, heavy black beard most of his life.

Benjamin Perkins died at his daughter, Catherine's, home in Hollywood, California March 30, 1926, at the age of 82. His body was brought back to Monticello and buried there on April 6. The following was said of him by those who knew him best: He was a profound lover of music, with a keen ear for hearing and a good rich base voice. Singing was a major part of entertainment in San Juan's early days and he and his wives were always in great demand. Music was the language of his soul. Every emotion he preferred to release through the medium of song.

He loved games and sports of all kinds and was skilled in many of them. Old timers said he could throw a stone farther than any man in the County.

Always an early riser, he arose at 4 a.m. in the summer and 5 a.m. in the winter. If he went to bed late from dancing or a church meeting, he would still arise at the appointed hour.

He was deeply religious. He had great faith in fasting and prayer and many times his family experienced miraculous blessings of healing and help. Respect for authority was religiously practiced and taught to his family. So loyal and true himself, that confidence or trust in another, once betrayed, he found hard to forgive or forget.



He loved his large family and demanded that his children treat their mothers as he did, by always speaking kindly and respectfully.

Benjamin Perkins lived a life that is a rich testament and example of courage, faith, integrity and stickitativity. All who come to know his story will be inspired by his example. To the thousands of souls who walk the earth today as descendants of this man and his two remarkable wives, you should be tremendously proud.

Writer's note: While researching this article, I was tremendously impressed with Mary Anne Williams Perkins and Sarah Williams Perkins, the wives of Benjamin Perkins. The next installment will be about them.