



A M O R M O N

Family Memories of C. C. A. Christensen, His Great Panorama, and Two Special Paintings

By James Gordon Holmes Jr.

Our great-great-grandfather Carl Christian Anton Christensen (affectionately known as C. C. A.), has been referred to as “undoubtedly the finest 19th-century genre painter of Mormonism and Utah.”¹ An early pioneer artist from Denmark, he is best known for his Mormon Panorama—a series of 23 large oil-on-canvas paintings, each measuring 6.5 feet (1.98 m) tall by 9.5 feet (2.9 m) wide, sewn together in continuous runs. Each scene served as a pictorial record of one of the many poignant events in early Church history. I recall Grandmother sharing with me her memories of traveling with her father and C. C. A. to various Latter-day Saint settlements throughout Utah to show the panorama to local congregations. Grandmother told me that as a teenager she helped load the panorama into long wooden boxes, then into the wagon where they were covered with canvas and quilts to protect them. When they arrived at their destination, they enlisted the help of the local brethren



to unload the panorama and prepare it for presentation inside the meetinghouse.

The panorama was wound out vertically. Poles attached to tripods served as “reels,” which two men—one at each pole—rolled it out slowly so as to provide a synchronous presentation as if it were a motion picture. The direction and intensity of light thrown by the oil lamps was controlled by shades, screens, and mirrors.

Grandmother provided the background music by playing the piano. Her music consisted of a combination of various tunes and hymns, giving an added dimension of drama to each scene. It was not uncommon for the congregation to sing along with the hymns that Grandmother played.

Grandmother told me that C. C. A. “in a thick Danish accent, would then tell the story of our people. Invariably, the Saints were moved to a level of high emotion.” The experience “was especially moving for those who had actually participated in or witnessed the events being presented.”



RIGHT: PHOTOGRAPH BY R. SCOTT LLOYD, COURTESY OF DESERET NEWS; TOP, ALL PAGES: PAINTINGS COURTESY OF BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



P A N O R A M A



Far left:
Photograph of
C. C. A. Christensen,
courtesy of Church
History Archives.

Left: Paul
Anderson, curator
of the BYU Museum
of Art, stars as
C. C. A. Christensen
in a reenactment of
C. C. A. presenting
his panorama.

Across the top of
this page and the
next are 20 of the
23 paintings in
C. C. A.'s panorama,
courtesy of the BYU
Museum of Art.



Two Companion Paintings

Throughout my youth, the painting *Winter Quarters, 1846–47* (above), shared the space on the wall above the piano in Grandmother’s neatly kept home in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA. It depicts the temporary settlement on the west bank of the Missouri River in Nebraska Territory, USA, of the Saints who fled from Nauvoo, Illinois, USA. Hanging next to it was the painting *Sugar Creek* (above right), depicting another site specific to the Mormon exodus. These paintings hung side by side in Grandmother’s home for as far back as I can remember, seemingly enjoying an inseparable companionship. We believe that both paintings were created in the 1880’s in the upstairs studio of C. C. A.’s home, unlike the panorama scenes, which were likely painted in his nearby granary.

As is commonly the case with things of a sentimental nature, the pair of paintings remained in our



family for five generations. Years ago our aunt donated *Sugar Creek* to the Church. For the last 25 years, it has hung next to its longtime companion *Winter Quarters, 1846–47* in the main gallery of the Church History Museum. However, unlike *Sugar Creek*, which is owned by the Church, *Winter Quarters, 1846–47* has been on loan from our family.

In December 2009, we, as the five children of Jeanette Taggart Holmes (deceased), came together in a unanimous decision to donate the painting to the Church.

Now the two companion paintings, which had shared the space on the wall above the piano in Grandmother’s home for so many years, have been permanently reunited. I feel sure that our great-great-grandfather, my mother, and all others who have acted as generational custodians of this wonderful work would be pleased. ■

NOTE

1. Richard L. Jensen and Richard G. Oman, *C. C. A. Christensen, 1831–1912: Mormon Immigrant Artist* (1984), 31.

C. C. A. CHRISTENSEN: LEFT: WINTER QUARTERS, 1846–47 AND SUGAR CREEK. GIFT TO THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS FROM THE FIVE CHILDREN OF JEANETTE TAGGART HOLMES (2009); LEFT, BOTTOM: THE MAINTI TEMPLE; RIGHT, TOP: HANDCART PIONEERS’ FIRST VIEW OF THE SALT LAKE VALLEY, COURTESY OF SPRINGVILLE MUSEUM OF ART; RIGHT, CENTER: EMIGRANT SHIP AND RIGHT, BOTTOM: SCENE FROM FJORD ON NORWAY’S WEST COAST. COURTESY OF CHURCH HISTORY MUSEUM



C.C.A. CHRISTENSEN'S LIFE TIME LINE:

- November 28, 1831: Born in Copenhagen, Denmark.
- 1840: Amid poverty, C. C. A.'s mother developed hope and character in her children.
- 1842: Placed in an orphanage, where his artistic talent was discovered.
- 1847–53: Attended the Royal Academy of Art in Copenhagen.
- September 26, 1850: Baptized in Copenhagen. He said, "I felt like a newborn."
- 1850–65: Served five missions in southern Scandinavia, during which he organized the first branch in Oslo, Norway, in 1853. Spent one month in Drammen, Norway, jail for proselyting in 1854.
- April 24, 1857: Married Elise Scheel Haarby of Norway on the *Westmoreland* before they cleared Liverpool harbor in England.
- September 13, 1857: Arrived in Salt Lake Valley in the 7th Handcart Company.
- 1859–62: Eventually settled in Ephraim, Utah Territory.
- 1863: Painted scenery in newly completed Salt Lake Theater.
- 1868: Worked on roadbed in Echo Canyon for Transcontinental Railroad.
- 1879: Began exhibiting first seven scenes of Mormon Panorama.
- 1881: Painted murals for the St. George Utah Temple.
- 1886–87: Painted murals for the Manti Utah Temple.
- 1887–89: Served final mission to Scandinavia.
- 1890: Ordained a patriarch.
- 1901: Worked in Church Historian's Office preparing history of Scandinavian Mission.
- July 3, 1912: Died in Ephraim, Utah.