

Cemetery 25th Anniversary Remembrance

Nauvoo, Illinois – Smith Family Cemetery
Saturday, August 6, 2016

Lachlan Mackay is a member of Community of Christ Council of Twelve and a Trustee of the Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith Family Foundation.

Lachlan Mackay on Lewis C. Bidamon

On behalf of Community of Christ I would also like to express my appreciation for your support both in the past and for now and in the future in beautifying and helping to maintain the cemetery. It is a privilege to assist with that and thank you.

I want to take just a couple of minutes talking about Lewis Bidamon. We have talked for a number of years in the family about marking Lewis' grave. He is Emma Smith's second husband. He died in 1891 and his grave has been unmarked since. We began a few years ago about the possibility of marking his grave. We have newspaper accounts as well as family understandings as well as maps and finally ground penetrating radar that verified what we thought we knew about where that grave was. Courtesy of lots of help from Bob Smith – that is Provo Bob versus Omaha Bob Smith – that stone just went in the day before yesterday. So, please when you have a chance to see come see it over here.

Lewis Crum Bidamon was Emma Smith's second husband. Late in life, in a newspaper interview, Lewis said he came to Nauvoo for the first time before Joseph was killed. He came with a friend who was a phrenologist that was wildly popular at the time. They would look at bumps on your head and believed they could tell things about your personality. Lewis came with a friend to do a reading on Joseph. Lewis doesn't say if he met Emma or not but he does say he was really impressed with Joseph. He doesn't live here yet but he does come back as a new citizen. One of the non-latter day saints to move into Nauvoo to buy empty homes and properties.

By the time the battle of Nauvoo erupts in September of 1846 most of the latter day saints are gone. The few remaining end up in an artillery battle. Folks would say they were coming in to serve arrest warrants. The governor did not want them here. I don't use the word mob lightly but I think they are a mob. They come in with cannons. The remaining latter day saints join with the new citizens, like Lewis Bidamon, and were fighting back with cannons. We lose. As part of the surrender agreement every remaining latter day saint had to go.

Lewis was one of the leaders of that new citizen's community. That is the context of how Emma would have first gotten to know Lewis was he was fighting to protect the remaining latter day saints here.

Emma fled as that battle broke out and goes up river to Fulton, Illinois. After a couple of months, Lewis Bidamon writes her and said, "My brother would like to rent out your Nauvoo Mansion House Hotel. Would you be interested in leasing it?" Emma had unfortunately already leased it to Mr. Van Toole so wasn't able to accommodate Lewis but that struck up the relationship it seems.

I wish she would have rented to Christian Bidamon instead because Mr. Van Toole she learned after five months was about to steal all her furniture as soon as the river thawed and he could sail south on a flat boat. So Emma, rushed back, threw him out and moved back in.

She marries Lewis in 1847 and by 1849, Lewis gets gold fever and he heads to California. Emma at that point moves into the homestead while her daughter Julia and her husband are running the Mansion. Lewis comes back and he apparently made a fortune in California. He made it all the way back to Missouri with that fortune and then "he lost it to a swindler," he said.

He didn't make his fortune in gold. He was selling tools and things to the miners. He makes it back and then they move back into the mansion house. Lewis was kind of a jack of all trades. Just a few stories to illustrate his personality.

He was incredibly generous. If you were hungry there was always room at his table for you. Joseph Smith III said that his step-father “was quick to make friends and just as quick to lose them.” He loved playing practical jokes on people like you. He would tell stories about tunnels in the limestone of Nauvoo from the mansion house to the temple a mile away. People are still looking for those tunnels.

A newspaper editor said, “You know people are complaining that Lewis keeps playing tricks on Nauvoo’s guests and tourists.” The editor said, “If anyone is foolish enough to believe him deserves what they get.”

Lewis kept a pet bat. He was famous for keeping this pet bat. He kept it in a cigar box on the mantel with holes drilled in it so the bats could breathe. As you would get particularly interested in seeing his pet he would pop open the top of his cigar box and you would discover that it was a chunk of red brick, which is of course a brick bat.

Lewis loved to tell newspaper reporters that if he lived to next February 30 he would be 85. (How many days in February?)

Lewis was quite a dandy dresser – kind of a fancy dresser. Joseph Smith III remembered that as he was courting Emma he came one day to the home. It was probably the homestead. So Emma and little Joseph are in an upstairs room in the homestead. Lewis comes calling. He sees Emma in the window above and takes off the top hat he is always wearing and does a really stiff formal bow. As he raises back up he runs into the clothes line and knocks off his toupee. Emma married him anyway.

There was clearly love in that relationship. Like most relationships it also had its challenges but they were married for more than 30 years. Something that is not necessarily accurate but that is true is how they were described here in Nauvoo. It was often said that Emma was known as the widow Smith throughout her married life with Lewis. Lewis was known as the husband of the widow Smith. I think he didn’t mind that at all. I think he appreciated being married to the widow of the prophet Joseph Smith.

Here is what I appreciate most about Lewis. He was father and parent to the children of the prophet. For David he was the only father he ever knew. Of course, Emma was pregnant when Joseph was killed and David was born 5 ½ months after his father’s death. For raising those children, I will be eternally grateful. I am so thrilled that we are finally able to mark Lewis’ grave. Thank you for your help and thanks again to Bob Smith for that.