Anthem from the Mud

Let’s get the objectionable stuff out on the table, okay? William Clayton had nine wives. Not nine *lives*, like the Tom catting around out back, but nine *wives*. William Clayton was a Mormon, baptized in his native Great Britain, a man of some rank among the saints, a man who worked alongside none other than Joseph Smith the Prophet.

Some folks like to say that it was Brigham Young who pressed William Clayton’s poetic talents into service, proposing that Clayton, a man well-versed in verse, pen a new hymn the pilgrims on their long, hard trek to the Great Salt Lake could sing in renewed dedication to their arduous task. Some folks like to say that, but fact-checking Mormon historians say it’s likely not true.

What’s more likely is that William Clayton got the news one night right here in Iowa, that back in Illinois, his wife—that would be his fourth wife, history tells us—had given birth back to a healthy, bouncing baby boy. Eventually, he would father—hold on to your chair—43.

He didn’t take nine wives because he was any more randy than any other mid-19th saints—Mormons called themselves *saints* so I’m not being sarcastic; he took nine wives because he listened to the Prophet, who, back then, okayed polygamy and practiced it heartily himself. Clayton was a “recorder,” a church administrator, who lived by every word the prophet ordered.

That’s the objectionable stuff. If, like me, you’re not Mormon, try, as I will, to put it behind you.

Imagine, for a moment, what Omaha, a pioneer village in 1846, must have thought when, as if overnight, a suburb of 800 frame homes went up, an incredible project large enough to house 2500 Mormon pilgrims. There’s nothing there to mark the spot anymore, but a temple and a museum still grace the western hills above the Missouri River, where you can hear the incredible story and pick up a *Book of the Mormon* at the same time—no charge.

Seriously, this Winter Camp was not to be believed.

But William Clayton sits at the heart of things here, the church Recorder. The Iowa spring in 1846 was anything but—cloudy, rainy, cold, constant wintry mix falling all around as a couple thousand pilgrims, en masse, moved across those rolling prairie hills on their way to the Missour. Mud like you wouldn’t believe. Wagons slipped and slid when they weren’t stuck fast. Handcarts turned the men and women lugging them into beasts of burden for six or seven miles a day at best. Spring blizzards swept discouragement into the entire woebegone enterprise. It’s impossible to imagine the hardship.

Brigham Young had cause to ask Clayton to put his pen to work. The saints were suffering, dying, and Utah was an unimaginable half continent away. Clayton himself was ill with discouragement: "I have been sick again all day especially towards night,” the recorder scribbled in his diary. “I was so distressed with pain it seemed as though I could not live.”

But then, this:
"This morning Ellen Kimball came to me and wishes me much joy. She said Diantha has a son. I told her I was afraid it was not so, but she said Brother Pond had received a letter. . . he read that she had a fine fat boy on the 30th, . . . but she was very sick with ague and mumps. Truly I feel to rejoice at this intelligence but feel sorry to hear of her sickness. . . .”

And then this: “This morning I composed a new song—'All is well.' I feel to thank my heavenly father for my boy and pray that he will spare and preserve his life and that of his mother and so order it so that we may soon meet again.”

Look, I’m not nominating William Clayton to dethrone Meredith Wilson as the Hawkeye Music Man. But anyone who’s ever listened to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir go through “Come, Come Ye Saints,” in all its regal glory can’t help but believe that what William Clayton created—“recorded”—his boots thick with sticky Iowa mud can’t help but believe that hymn a miracle and a triumph.

And it was penned in dismal weather and profound discouragement, not all that far from here. Not all that far at all.