

Jesse Knight and the Riches of Life

By Diane L. Mangum

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Uncle Jesse’s story is the western adventure of a poor boy finding great wealth. Yet he is remarkable not for what he had but for what he gave away.

The story of Jesse Knight is a western adventure—with wagon trains and mining claims and a poor boy finding great wealth. Yet Jesse Knight is remarkable not for what he had but for what he gave away. What set him apart was his generosity. He believed his wealth was not a personal reward but merely a responsibility he was to administer for the blessing of others.

Jesse’s father, Newell Knight, was one of the Church’s earliest baptized members. [1](#) He and his wife, Lydia, gathered with the Saints in Ohio, endured the mobbings in Missouri, and finally settled in Nauvoo, where they built grain and lumber mills on the Mississippi River near the Joseph Smith store and home. [2](#)

Jesse was born in Nauvoo on 6 September 1845. At the time, the family was in makeshift circumstances, without even a proper home. A contractor had been hired to build their home, but he had yet to start. [3](#) Perhaps it was just as well. By the next spring, the persecutions intensified again, and the family started packing once more.

The Knights were in the first company of Saints to leave Council Bluffs for the mountains of the West, departing in late 1846. The company was sidetracked, however, and chose to winter in Nebraska on the Niobrara River. Food was scarce, but the weather was unseasonably warm. Even so, as the new year began, Newell fell ill and died, as did twenty-two others in the company before spring. [4](#)

Lydia rejoined the main body of the Saints at Winter Quarters in the spring of 1847. Widowed and expecting a seventh child, Lydia sent her teams and wagons across the plains with others in need. The oldest boy, Samuel, went on ahead with another family to the Salt Lake Valley.

For a year, Jesse Knight’s mother cared for her children in a dugout home, laundering and sewing for others to provide for her children. [5](#) When at last her wagons and oxen were brought back, the animals were worn beyond use, so she obtained a loan from Church funds to get a new team to cross the plains. [6](#) Jesse was a boy of five years when he entered the Salt Lake Valley in 1850.

Jesse’s first memories were of Salt Lake City, where his mother taught school and he tended cows. Family resources were scarce. As a child, Jesse spent many hours gathering pigweed and sego roots to help the family’s food supply. But his mother, working as a teacher, was able to

repay her debt to the Church Emigration fund within two years.⁷ By the age of eleven, Jesse had arranged for a share in a team of oxen, which he used to haul firewood, getting large boys to help him load the wagon.⁸

In 1857, Lydia took her family to Provo, where Jesse worked gleaning potatoes and herding cows. His mother remarried, and by the age of fifteen, Jesse had a job for the Overland Mail Station, driving a loaded wagon to Ely, Nevada. The next dozen years of his life were spent hauling freight, building railroad lines, and even returning to Nebraska as a hired hand to help bring another company of Saints across the plains.⁹

Much to the anguish of his mother, somewhere in his travels through mining towns and railroad camps, Jesse lost the faith that had been so important to his parents. He once explained that he always championed the cause of the underdog, and it seemed to him that the “Gentiles,” who were much outnumbered in the early days of Utah, were the underdog.¹⁰

Nonetheless, Jesse met a lovely young Latter-day Saint, Amanda McEwan, and they were married on 18 January 1869. They built a two-room adobe home in Payson, and Jesse started a ranching business. He and Amanda did well enough and enjoyed raising their young children. In fact, when once asked how it was that he got his children to mind so well, he said, “Well, I try to find out what they want to do and then tell them to do it.”¹¹

Despite a wife who was faithful in the Church, and a mother who pleaded for her son to reconsider his beliefs, Jesse continued to claim antagonism to the Church—although in later years he admitted that among outsiders he had been known as “the young Mormon” and had defended the Church.¹²

Several years after his mother died, Jesse had an experience that changed his life. A dead rat contaminated water in the well near his home, and Jesse’s two-year-old daughter, Jennie, was the first to catch a fever from the water. Jesse adored little Jennie, and he was devastated when doctors told him there was nothing they could do to save her. Amanda begged Jesse to let the elders of the Church administer to the child, but Jesse wouldn’t hear of it, saying he had no faith in such things. Amanda persisted: “I have, and [I] think my feelings should be considered at such a serious moment.”¹³

Jesse relented, and soon after the elders administered to the dying child, Jennie regained consciousness. From that moment on, Jesse was a changed man. His son Will later wrote, “He had seen the power of the Lord made manifest and remembered the words of his mother. He began to plead with the Lord to forgive him.”¹⁴

Still, the sickness continued for several weeks in the family as the four other children, Minerva, Will, Ray, and Inez, all fell ill. In fact, the eldest, Minerva, died of the fever in late 1887, a few months after Jennie’s miraculous healing. Yet this did not cause Jesse to falter in his new faith. He later wrote: “I remembered now that when she was a baby she had diphtheria, and that then, almost seventeen years ago, I had promised the Lord that if he would spare her life I would not forget Him. I had not kept that promise. How keenly I felt the justice of her being taken from us!

I suffered in my feelings. I prayed for forgiveness and help. My prayer was answered and I received a testimony.” [15](#)

From the time of Jesse’s conversion, he concerned himself with finding ways to pay back the Lord for his years of unbelief. The means were at hand.

The Knight family lived in Payson, about twenty-five miles from the Tintic mining district. Herding cattle sometimes took them to that region, and occasionally Jesse and his boys tried their hand at prospecting. Generally, they had no more success than other prospectors.

But one day while Jesse was in the mining district, he learned of a friend’s intentions to cheat him in business. Frustrated, he went to the mountains to think. [16](#) As he sat under a pine tree on Godiva Mountain, he heard a voice clearly say, “This country is here for the Mormons.” [17](#) Startled and fully awake, he felt he knew exactly what the words meant. He believed that the Lord was telling him the immediate vicinity held riches intended to benefit the Latter-day Saints. [18](#)

Soon after that, Jesse staked out a small mine that he called the June Bug. In 1890, he sold it for fourteen thousand dollars. [19](#) Always generous, Jesse became even more open-handed with his newfound prosperity. He offered help to everyone who asked, and often cosigned on loans for them. More often than not, Jesse was left to repay the debts. His money and credit quickly slipped away, and he even had to mortgage the home he had built for his family in Provo. [20](#) He painfully learned lessons about generosity, doles, and human nature.

Still believing the voice he had heard, Jesse was drawn back to Godiva Mountain. The areas he had previously prospected appeared to be all claimed. But he had a careful eye for geology and spotted some promising limestone outcrops. He asked a brother-in-law and expert miner, Jared Roundy, to evaluate the property and even offered him a partnership in the location. Jared declined, saying that he wasn’t interested in an “old humbug like this.” [21](#) But Jesse was. He filed a claim and named it the Humbug.

Jesse was in debt and had trouble securing a loan to work the mine, but he finally found financing and two men willing to work for him. He convinced his son Will to also work on the Humbug. One night while Will and his father were walking up the steep slope near the mine, Jesse turned to his son and said, “Will, I want to tell you something. We are going to have all the money that we want just as soon as we are in a position to handle it properly. We will someday save the credit of the Church.” [22](#)

Will took issue with his father, pointing out their own debt and the fact that the Church was in debt over a million dollars. Jesse simply reaffirmed what he had said and asked his son to remember his words.

Work on the Humbug tunnel began. The men worked in three shifts, around the clock. For two months they continued with jackhammers and wheelbarrows, until one morning a worker came down the mountain with a piece of lead ore, saying he had hit a vein.

In the morning light of an August day in 1896, the men went back up to the tunnel. Will said Jesse was not very excited but rather matter of fact, having believed all along that the ore would be there. When Jesse brought out a wheelbarrow loaded with rich ore, he said, "I have done the last day's work that I ever expect to do where I take another man's job from him. I expect to give employment and make labor from now on for other people." [23](#)

The vein struck in the Humbug mine was one of the richest lead-silver deposits ever found in the West. The second shipment of ore alone brought in more than eleven thousand dollars, and within a short time the money was coming in rapidly. [24](#) This time Jesse had a more seasoned perspective on how the riches of Godiva Mountain would benefit the Saints. He acquired other nearby properties and soon was known in the mining camps of Utah as the "Mormon Wizard" for his uncanny ability to know just where to turn a mine tunnel to strike ore. [25](#)

Jesse had spent much of his early years in mining towns and knew their debilitating influence. He reasoned that the Saints would need a town where they could work and still live their religion. So he built a mining town all his own. Up on the hills above the town of Eureka, Jesse built Knightville, the only mining town in the West without a saloon. He had always been appalled that many miners drank away their earnings, leaving families destitute. He therefore hired workers only on condition that if a man was ever found drunk or neglecting his family, he would be fired. [26](#)

It wasn't easy building a town outside of the tight monopoly of the local mine owners. Knightville was refused electrical power, coal, railroad lines, and water. So Jesse built power lines, water lines, a railroad line, and even dug a coal mine, all of which employed still more people. [27](#)

Knightville grew steadily, and Jesse even built a school at his own expense and hired a teacher. The second year of the school, he looked into whether the county could send a teacher. When he discovered there were not enough children to receive school taxes, Jesse promptly went down the hill to Diamond Camp and hired Jim Higginson to work for him. The eight Higginson children enabled the school to receive county tax money. [28](#)

Jesse was an unusual employer. Local mine operators usually charged arbitrary hospital and insurance fees and required workers to take an antipolygamy vow. Jesse charged no fees and would not allow his superintendents to question a man about his politics or religion. [29](#) However, it was said that any returned missionary could get a job at the Knight mines. And true to Jesse's convictions, the Sabbath was strictly observed. Although other mines worked seven days a week, Jesse paid his men the same weekly wages for only six days and gave them Sunday off. While other mine owners jokingly referred to the Knight properties as the "Sunday School Mines," Jesse's miners affectionately called him "Uncle Jesse." The title followed him the rest of his life. [30](#)

Ever concerned about his debt to the Lord, Jesse figured out what would have been his tithing for all those years when he was less active, added the compounded interest, and paid it to the Church. [31](#)

He also met his self-imposed obligation in other ways. Jesse's wealth came at a time when the Church was in great financial difficulty. At the October 1896 general conference, a special priesthood meeting was held, and one of the topics discussed was the Church's urgent need for a loan. President Woodruff reported some very pressing demands on the trustee-in-trust; the credit of the Church was at stake. Joseph B. Keeler, Jesse Knight's bishop, was at that meeting. Bishop Keeler said he thought little of the matter until he returned home and was impressed to visit Uncle Jesse.

Bishop Keeler reported that he "went to the home of 'Uncle Jesse,' and found him in his parlor reading. After a few preliminary greetings, I rehearsed to him what ... President Woodruff had said about the Church being financially embarrassed. But before I could ask him whether he would make the loan, he said instantly, 'Yes, I'll lend the Church \$10,000.'" [32](#) Jesse made a similar loan, for the same sum, on at least one other occasion. [33](#)

It was not just the Church institution that was financially strapped. The depression of 1893 had been hard on many workers and western communities. On 1 January 1901, Church President Lorenzo Snow asked "men and women of wealth" to use their riches "to give employment to the laborer. ... Unloose your purses, and embark in enterprises that will give work to the unemployed, and relieve the wretchedness that leads to ... vice and crime." [34](#) Such counsel matched Jesse's inclinations exactly.

Jesse responded by opening a cooperative store and revitalizing the Provo Woolen Mill. He opened banks and sugar factories and established farming communities. His son Ray, with his wife, Isabelle, headed for Alberta, Canada, to establish a cattle and sugar industry under Jesse's direction. That community is now called Raymond. [35](#) At one point when unemployment in the Provo area was high, Jesse built a road between Provo and Springville, complete with ornamental roadside plantings, just to provide jobs. [36](#)

Perhaps Jesse's favorite beneficiary was Brigham Young University. Originally, the school was a small Church academy with limited financial means. As Provo residents, several Knight children received training from the Brigham Young Academy, and Jesse saw firsthand the school's needs. Over the years, Jesse gave the academy more than five hundred acres of land, bonds, cash, and trust funds. His generosity significantly contributed to the growth of the school into the university it is today. [37](#)

Jesse was not only at the economic hub of the community but active in civic affairs as well. He was a lifelong Democrat, and in 1908 his party asked him to run for governor. Jesse declined. He felt that he was too uneducated for the job. [38](#) Nonetheless, when William Jennings Bryan, the national Democratic candidate for president, came through Utah, he gave his speech from the steps of the Jesse Knight home on Center Street in Provo. [39](#)

Interestingly, Jesse seemed to be in the middle of everything in Utah Valley except ecclesiastical leadership. Although he was a friend of the Church and of Church leaders, ward records show no evidence of Jesse ever holding any Church job other than that of ward teacher, the 1900 equivalent of a home teacher. [40](#) His sons Ray and Will served full-time missions for the Church. Jesse's daughter Inez and future daughter-in-law Jennie Brimhall were the Church's first single,

full-time proselyting sister missionaries. [41](#) His wife, Amanda, was always faithful in Church attendance and was involved in the family civic and business decisions as well.

Jesse was particularly fond of attending sacrament meeting. One young man in Jesse's ward reported that upon arrival at a meeting, Jesse always looked at how many deacons were available to pass the sacrament. If there were not enough, he immediately went to the bishop and asked if he might assist. [42](#)

Uncle Jesse's great heart was stilled on 14 March 1921. His funeral was attended by President Heber J. Grant and seven other General Authorities. In his funeral procession marched scores of civic and Church leaders, the BYU band, and streams of students and Utah Valley residents. [43](#)

Some of the Knight wealth and enterprises lingered on after his death. But if Jesse had a flaw, it was that he gave as if there were no end. Even the richest of mining veins can be played out, and even great fortunes can be divided only a finite number of ways. He wasn't always financially careful or shrewd, and he knew it. Many of his investments lost money, but they always gave somebody a job with a fair employer. The financial devastation of the Great Depression eventually wiped out all that remained of the Knight family fortune. But the money had already accomplished the things Jesse believed it should.

He once stated, "The earth is the Lord's bank, and no man has a right to take money out of that bank and use it extravagantly upon himself." [44](#) His life bore out that belief.

[photos] From the time of Jesse Knight's conversion, he concerned himself with helping the early Utah Church, which was then laden with debt. (Photo courtesy of Utah State Historical Society.) Far left: Jesse's mines provided jobs and income for many workers. (Photo courtesy of Utah State Historical Society.) Above: Amanda McEwan Knight, Jesse's wife. (Photo courtesy of LDS Church Archives.)

[photo] Above: The town of Knightville, which may have been the only mining town in the West without a saloon. (Photo courtesy of Utah State Historical Society.) Inset: Uncle Jesse, second from right, conducts business from his desk. (Photo courtesy of LDS Church Archives.)

[photo] The Brigham Young Academy in Provo, Utah, was the recipient of much of Jesse Knight's generosity. His gifts helped the school grow into the university it is today. (Photo courtesy of LDS Church Archives.)

Notes

1. See William G. Hartley, *"They Are My Friends": A History of the Joseph Knight Family, 1825–1850* (Provo: Grandin Book Co., 1986), pp. 17–49.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 146–47.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

4. Ibid., pp. 172–78.
5. Jesse William Knight, *The Jesse Knight Family: Jesse Knight, His Forbears and Family* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News Press, 1940), p. 22.
6. Orson F. Whitney, *History of Utah*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1904), 4:512.
7. Ibid.
8. *The Jesse Knight Family*, p. 25.
9. Ibid., pp. 25–26.
10. *History of Utah*, 4:513.
11. *The Jesse Knight Family*, p. 31.
12. Ibid., p. 33.
13. Ibid., p. 34.
14. Ibid., pp. 34–35.
15. Ibid., p. 35.
16. *History of Utah*, 4:513.
17. Ibid., p. 37.
18. Ibid.
19. Gary Fuller Reese, “Uncle Jesse: The Story of Jesse Knight, Miner, Industrialist, Philanthropist,” master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, June 1961, p. 22.
20. *History of Utah*, 4:514.
21. *The Jesse Knight Family*, pp. 37–39.
22. Ibid., p. 39.
23. Ibid., p. 40.
24. “Uncle Jesse,” thesis, p. 25.
25. George A. Thompson, “The Mormon Wizard,” *Frontier Times*, Apr.-May 1969, p. 27.

26. *History of Utah*, 4:514.
27. Fredrick M. Huchel, "Utah Valley's Visionary Prospector Who Found the Mother Lode," *Pioneer*, May–June 1991, p. 21.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *History of Utah*, 4:514.
30. "The Mormon Wizard," *Frontier Times*, pp. 26–27.
31. Rodger Dean Duncan, "Wealth: A Means Not an End," *Instructor*, Sept. 1970, p. 329.
32. *The Jesse Knight Family*, p. 84.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
34. James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966–75), 3:334.
35. *The Jesse Knight Family*, pp. 52–80.
36. "Utah Valley's Visionary Prospector," *Pioneer*, p. 21.
37. "Uncle Jesse," thesis, pp. 36–53.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
39. Kris Radish, "Turn-of-the-century memories Sena can reach out and touch," *Deseret News*, 19 Oct. 1983, p. C1.
40. "Uncle Jesse," thesis, p. 87.
41. Alice Louise Reynolds, "Inez Knight Allen," *Relief Society Magazine*, July 1937, p. 403.
42. Joseph L. Wirthlin, "Jesse Knight—The Man and His Goodness," address given at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 20 May 1958, p. 6.
43. "Uncle Jesse," thesis, pp. 82–83.
44. *History of Utah*, 4:514.

Notes

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