

ZACHARIAH BRUYN DECKER, SR.

Zachariah Bruyn Decker was born June 22, 1817 at Sha-wan'gnnk, Ulster County, New York, about one hundred miles up the Hudson River from New York City. His parents were Cornelius J. Decker and Gertrude Bruyn and his forebears were Dutch Protestants and French Huguenots.

By the time of his birth, six generations of Deckers had lived in Ulster County, and they bore such large families that the original estates became too crowded. They had been divided and subdivided until each farm was small. It was no longer possible to raise large families and maintain them on the inherited property. Zachariah, the second son, not being needed on the farm, left home at fifteen to help on a larger estate. The hired men were ambitious, and having had their imaginations fired by the Western trecks, made plans to go West themselves and obtain squatters rights to large tracts of land West, included Illinois.

Before making the venture, Zachariah talked things over with his family and as a result, he and two brother, Johannes and Asa, made their way to Illinois. When they reached McDonough County in western Illinois, they called it a goodly land, and were satisfied to make it their new home. Johannes married in 1839 at the age of 24 and settled on a prairie farm; later he and Asa owned neighboring farms. But ready cash was needed and Zachariah went out to work for wages. He was caring for the horses of a Landed Esquire when he became the close friend of Lafayette Sheppard who was performing like service on the adjoining estate. This friendship lasted all their lives.

Later the mother and father and most of the family also journeyed westward, settling at Macomb, the county seat of McDonough County, where some of the family descendants reside to this day.

Layfette Sheppard had become a Mormon in the thirties, and was well acquainted with mob disturbances. When the Nauveo Legion was withdrawn, and the Mormon people were left to the mercy of the mob, Zachariah naturally went to the assistance of his friend's people. When their guns were stacked, and the Mormons were ordered across the Mississippi River, Zachariah was sent with them, and his lot was cast with the Mormons. At the call of the United States for 500 men for the Mexican War service, he was one of the first to volunteer. He was baptized into the church and then marched off with the Mormon Battalion to California. His name is included with the organization on the monument at the State Capititol grounds, Salt Lake City.

Zachariah B. Decker was frequently referred to as a man who knew no fear. Perhaps this grew from an interesting story which has been told of an experience in which he figured during the Mormon Battalion trek across the plains. Officers of the troupes were given to discriminating against the Mormon members denying them even their fair share of the available food.

One day the Mormon Boys killed a buffalo and were busily preparing to feast upon the roasted meat when they were approached by an officer who angrily demanded that they relinquish their prize to the rest of the army or he would fire upon them. The Mormons were very hungry, they they knew that they had every right to this food but they dared not protest. One by one they were solemnly giving it over to the demanding officer when they were suddenly startled to hear the voice of Zachariah Decker refusing to submit to such shameless treatment. "Shoot me if you will," he was saying in a low steady voice, "I'd just as leave die one way as another and we are starving to death. This meat rightfully belongs to these men and we're going to keep it." And he levelled his gun upon the officer daring him to take the food. There was a moment of tense silence while the two men eyed each other, and suddely the officer turned and hurriedly left the Mormon Group to the buffalo meat they needed so badly.

In 1847 the Battalion was disbanded, but Zachariah re-enlisted for a second year's service. When the boys were finally discharged in 1848, he went to the

Sacramento Valley and happened to be at the Marshall Mill Race when gold was discovered there. Shortly after this event Brigham Young called the Battalion home. With the rest of the Mormon boys, Zachariah, when requested, turned his three bags of gold dust (worth Five thousand each) into the general church fund.

According to another version of the gold story, Zachariah started for Utah with a burro load of gold nuggets. It was too heavy a load and the burro's back became sore. So Zachariah buried his gold save for a few exceptionally valuable nuggets which he carried with him to pay his expenses. (Grandpa showed his grandson, Eugene, a diagram of the place where he buried the gold. But it has never been found.

When Zachariah reached Salt Lake, Nancy Bean was already divorced from John D. Lee; and their meeting was a happy occasion for them both. They were married at Mill Creek in 1849, on March 11, 1850, Zachariah B. Jr. was born in Salt Lake City. Colonization was going strong among the Utah Mormons; and in 1851, they went with a company of colonists to Center Creek, later called Parowan where they established a home and raised a large family. Like other pioneer settlers they acquired by hardest toil a home, a large farm, cattle, horses and sheep.

When the Mission to San Juan county was called, Zachariah and three of his sons went with their animals expecting to establish a new home in the wild region. Nancy remained to sell the farm. In the meantime, the Navajo Indians burned her husband's log cabin to the ground destroying his valuable books which included the famous Journals of Discourse. They also stole his 150 head of cattle and horses and left him with but three teams and four extra horses. The teams he sold and returned to Parowan where he used the money to start another herd of cattle. He also freighted salt from the Little Salt Lake country to Silver Reef in order to augment the herd and begin life again.

Zachariah was an expert in the use of a gun, and because he never was seen without it, it was often called his "second wife." Because of his expert marksmanship he was frequently sent on Indian missions during disputes with the early red men.

He served Parowan as Marshall for a number of years and is referred to as such in George Albert Smith's diary of the settlement of the community.

He died at his old home April 13, 1903 just six weeks after Nancy's death. Lafayette Sheppard of Deaver, his boyhood and life-time friend was the principal speaker at the funeral service.