

THE KNIGHTS WERE MILLERS

By Darrell Knight

The history of the Knights assisting the Prophet Joseph Smith, Jr., and the bringing forth of the Book of Mormon is legendary. Not much has been written or spoken about their labor and skills of building and operating gristmills or sawmills during the Restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Water, horsepower, and even steam powered some of the mills.

Some of the Knights served as branch president, bishops, and high council members. None of them were called to any position as a general authority. Their major contribution was temporal support for the Prophet, such as the use of a horse, buggy or a sleigh, as well as cash donations.

In the Doctrine and Covenants, Section 23:7, the position of Joseph Knight, Sr. (and family) stipulates, “And behold it is your duty to unite with the true church and give your language to exhortation continually, that you may receive the reward of the laborer. Amen.” In the Topical Guide, the word “laborer” is associated with “industry”. This word lists many examples of scriptures that describe laborers work with their hands, and perform service in a manual way. It seems logical therefore; that the Knights who were gifted millers were called to provide the Saints with needed flour, millet and lumber that were products of a number of mills they built or operated in New York, Missouri and Illinois. Father Knight built and operated a mill and two carding machines in Colesville as he raised three sons to become gifted millers also. Some of the mills were built and operated by requests from Joseph Smith; Jr.; this was because there were critical needs for food during movements, forced upon the Saints by persecutors. With providing the Church with such labor, they could not have traveled and directed their energies to missionary and ecclesiastical duties as was required by general authorities.

By searching closely, the pages of the book, *Stand by My Servant Joseph*, I isolated mentions of ten instances where Newel and Joseph, Jr., were most involved in building, operating or tending mills in the three states mentioned

above. The first one was in New York; six were in Missouri during the persecution years, and three in Illinois.

Mill #	Year	Place	Knight Son	Comments
1.	1811	Colesville	Joseph/Newel	Were Raised to work...
2.	1831	Jackson, Co.	Joseph/Newel	First mill in Jackson Co.
3.	1834	Clay Co.	Joseph/Newel	Rock Creek
4.	1836	Clay Co.	Newel	Two Jobs
5.	1836	Clay Co.	Newel	Two Jobs
6.	1836	Clay Co.	Newel	Government Job
7.	1838	Far West	Newel	Five Miles from F.W.
8.	1839	Nauvoo	Newel	Gristmill
9.	1840	Nauvoo	Newel	Saw Mill
10.	1843	La Harpe	Joseph	Escaped to Nauvoo

The following quotations come from the book, *Stand by My Servant Joseph*, as accurately as possible in describing some of the circumstances surrounding each of the mills.

Mill #1: Colesville: "Then about 1811, the Knights moved downriver for six miles into Broome County to Colesville, where they would live for the next two decades. " Joseph Knight Jr., said his parents "built a gristmill and two carding machines. I was raised to work them."

Mill #2: Jackson Co.: "When we got houses I went to work by the day, Joseph Knight, Jr. said, in order to earn money to purchase millstones and irons for a gristmill. I built the first mill in Jackson Co. that was built in the Church". He also built furniture for the printing office and a store. "Newel, like Joseph Jr., became a miller. 'Owing to the scarcity of mills in the country I had been induced to build one, Newel said" Both brothers worked on the same mill.

“On October 31, 1833 about fifty raiders attacked the Whitmer settlement, three miles from the Knights. They unroofed ten houses, beat several unarmed me with sticks and guns, and pelted others with rocks. Then they dispersed, boasting they would tear down the Knights’ gristmill. On November 1, Jackman and others from his neighborhood went to a small branch on the edge of the prairie, the Knights’ settlement—for safety and to try to help save the gristmill there. Newel said the mill had been doing a good business until then. To guard the threatened mill, Parley Pratt and about sixty men from the branch, despite rain, posted themselves at the mill. Joseph Knight, Jr. noted that many gathered around my mill to save it.”

Mill #3: Clay Co.: “Newel Knight was the first buyer, purchasing a forty acre lot from the land office in Lexington on March 20, 1834. The land was located ten miles southwest of Liberty on what is now called Rock Creek.” “My brother Joseph lived nearby and assisted me in the mill.”

Mills #4, 5: “A man named Shaver hired Newel to build a mill and a carding machine. Therefore, Newel moved to that property, thirty miles from Far West, hired two men, and started building. Mr. Shaver offered to let Newel stay and tend the mill that winter. Newel’s earnings by year’s end let him retire debts and buy eighty acres of land two miles east of Far West. Newel accepted another job in Clay Co. to construct a mill. Able to hire hands to help him erect the mill, he made a short job it and in less than a month returned home.”

Mill #6: “His stay was short, however, because he accepted yet another mill-building job in Clay County”.

Mill #7: “In August 1838, Newel had a serious accident at his mill site. Because he had accepted a contract to build another mill, this one for the federal government in present-day Kansas, he was hurrying to finish the mill for a Mr. Robinson, and accidentally struck the axe through ‘my foot’. He set up a bed at the Robinson site, from which he supervised the finishing, and putting up the gears. Then Newel said Robinson fixed his carriage in the best possible manner and sent his most trusty slave to carry him home; the distance was about 35 miles”

Mill #8: In Nauvoo, Joseph Smith, Jr., asked Newel for two favors. “He enlisted Newel’s writing skills. In June and July, the Prophet spent time working on his history of the Church. His diary notes that in July 4 and 5 he was dictating history assisted by Newel Knight. Second, to help the uprooted Mormon families feed themselves, the prophet asked Newel to build a gristmill as soon as possible. Newel confessed he had no capital to buy irons, stone, etc. but as to the mechanical part, ‘I was ready and could do it.’ Newel immediately stopped work on his house and moved his family’s tent to the mill site.” A brother Brown furnished the capital. “Within eight weeks, the badly needed Knight and Brown horse-powered gristmill started grinding flour for growing numbers of hungry settlers. ‘It performed well,’ Newel pronounced. ‘I ground four bushels per hour and it was a great help to the brethren.” Note: this mill was later sold and moved away from Nauvoo.

Mill #9: “Newel next formed a sawmill partnership with Davison Hibbard, purchased mill irons in St. Louis and by April 6, 1840, ‘we turned out some good lumber,’ he said” He sold his shares of that mill, built a house, sold it, and used the funds to start another gristmill in partnership with Levi Jackman and Brother Rolf.

Mill #10: (Newel) “He then built a mill for a Mr. Allen, seven miles below Nauvoo.” At the same time, Joseph Knight, Jr. was asked by the Prophet to move to La Harpe, twenty-three miles east of Nauvoo to operate mills there to feed the saints in Nauvoo. He moved there in 1843. He remained there until the last of the saints left, and was instructed to finally move back into Nauvoo for his family’s protection by Newel, and the Prophet, as the persecutions in La Harpe grew very threatening.

There were some other minor involvements of milling with repairs, tending mills and buying and selling shares that occurred, especially during the Nauvoo period that involved the Knight Brothers. However, the accounts above were the ones that best required their skills to build mills from the start to finish. It is not difficult now to associate the blessing in Section 23 to this history of being

“laborers” in the new Church. It can also be assumed, that their descendants have also inherited such a legacy today.