

AUGUSTUS W. BELNAP

THE FATHER OF SALEM UNION CANAL

By Joseph Francis Belnap

“Brethren, the time to act is now!” The low pulpit in the little Salem log meeting house trembled under the force of Brother Belnap’s closed fist.

“God gave us the gift of the great Snake River for this valley. The fertile soil of our land and the water of that river belong together. When they do come together, there won’t be a more bounteous harvest gathered anywhere in our whole land than right here in Salem, Idaho. How is this great union to come about? Brethren, there is only one way! God gave us the natural resources. He also gave us our strong bodies. He expects us to go to, now, and by the sweat of our brow and with our own two hands to turn these great natural powers for our own good.”

As Brother Belnap went on, every person in the room was busy with his own thoughts. Everyone, to a man, knew he spoke the truth. Such a hard truth it was to face, though. It was one thing to dream the dream of a fine canal running through the land, but with the canal head twelve miles away through lava rock and sagebrush, and the people! Why, the people were such a handful, and only one another knew how poor they were. A canal project like that would take a lifetime! Surely it was better to wait awhile.

It did not enter into the mind of one listener to question the propriety of the second counselor in the bishopric closing his Sunday sermon with a plea to the families to build a canal over the land. They lived in the daily faith that God was pleased to lend his ear to a prayer for the plow about to be set in the furrow, and for prayer for the building up of Zion. Indeed, the building of Salem was part of the building of Zion. The living of the gospel depended upon establishing homes in this free, wild land unwanted by the gentiles.

Back in the corner near the door sat young Alma Larsen, where he had spent most of the meeting time trying to keep his long legs tucked under the bench to cover the distance from the bottom of his trouser cuffs to his shoe tops. He did not know that his now intently listening face glowed. He only knew that Brother Belnap’s talk sounded like a great prophecy. If the time should come that the sage covered acres would be fields of abundant crops and comfortable homes, he wondered if he would live to see it. Brother Belnap said it all depended on their getting the water to the land. If that was all, why didn’t every able bodied man go to work tomorrow morning?

He knew that Brother Belnap had given sermons like this before. He knew he had visited every home and talked canal. Folks would say that it was the same when the Bishopric made their annual visit to every home in the Ward. When it was Brother Belnap’s turn to talk, he would stand behind his chair and exhort the members of the family to live the gospel all right, and he always finished by making a plea to the man of the house to look out for his water rights for his farm. “Can’t you see, Brother, he would plead, “how we’ve got to get prior rights of filings on the water? When the river is low, it is the early filings that get the water. You know we can’t even keep ourselves alive if we don’t get water on the ground.

Some of the men said it was just an idea born in Gus Belnap that he couldn’t get rid of, so kept talking about it. Bishop Harris was one who spoke right up for the plan. “Think what it would mean for the Salem Townsite”, he would say. “And think of the squirrels.

Men, the only way we can fight them is to water them out.” As for Alma, he liked the way Brother Belnap never gave up.

The boy’s father said he didn’t know whether Alma grew with the country or the country grew with the boy. Anyway, they were both getting over the ground. New settlers came into the country. Each new family was received as a new recruit to fight the elements of a new frontier for the good of all.

The day finally came when five other men stood behind Gus Belnap for his canal and signed filing papers at the County Seat in St. Anthony. Brother Belnap got four men and two boys to begin the work. Although Alma had done a man’s work for more than two years, he tingled with delight, when Uncle Joseph Larsen came and asked him if he would go in his stead.

On an early Monday morning, this sixteen year old youth turned his team and wagon onto the road toward St. Anthony along with four other outfits. Hans Hansen, the other youth, shared a wagon with his brother, Pete. Gus Belnap, his brother, Amasa, and James Olsen each drove a separate outfit. In each wagon was packed a bed and provisions to last until Saturday night. It was easy to put a few dozen eggs into the horses’ oats, and find room for a frying pan and other utensils, grease, some potatoes, wild meat or pork. Only enough hay was taken for noon for the horses, as Mr. Hopf had offered his pasture for the horses at night.

About twelve miles northeast of the Salem Townsite, just below the lava, two groups of scrapers were guided into the first furrow of the new canal. Each of the three teams worked in an oblong circle of two or three hundred feet, going down into the canal and bringing the dirt out on to the bank. Each flat, one piece wooden scraper had a four inch piece steel blade across the bottom and a pair of handles at the top. An adjustable chain led from the top of the scraper to the tongue to hold the scraper at the desired tilt. The scraper was loaded by holding down on the handles while the horse pulled it to the bank where they were unloaded by tipping the scraper forward. It was hard work for both man and horse. As the canal grew deeper, the bank became too high to drive the horse upon. So, for each circle, runways had to be made. In a mile many runways were made. So anxious were the men to finish the canal that they didn’t fill the runways properly at that time, which caused trouble later.

For awhile, Alma was not sure whether his real struggle was the lava and the hard, unyielding earth, or the bay colt he drove in his team for Uncle Joseph. He had promised to break that colt on the job. The family had come by her in a horse trade, and ever since she came on the place she was known as the “mean one”. The first hooking up of the harness was a touch off to set her kicking and attempting to run away. To handle her, Alma applied the war hobble, a rope fastened to the horse’s right front leg, down by the ankle, and run up over the withers, through a ring just back of the collar, and down to the left front leg. From then on the minute the colt started to kick or run, Alma, with one tug on the rope, could bring her instantly to her knees. Thus, they took their place in the scraping team, an eight hour shift every day, with 15 minutes off in the morning and again in the afternoon, for the driver to get a drink of water. By the time two or three weeks passed, horse and man had learned to work together. “The ‘mean one’ may yet be the best horse Uncle Joseph has”, thought Alma in a prophecy truer than he realized.

“It’s good to work, to be one who was helping with building a canal. It was also good when the end of the day brought release with a supper of fried potatoes and eggs, to be eaten around a camp fire, and time for sports afterwards. It would be fine to be liked by everyone as Gus Belnap was”, thought Alma. Just like he was the leader in the work, he was the leader of the sports at night. Hans and Alma did a lot of wrestling and

Gus Belnap wrestled right along with them, most of the time. There were some nights when the men sat around and talked in a worried way. They discussed one plan and then another to get a channel through lava to the river to make the head. They didn't have a dollar to buy powder and not one of them knew a thing about blasting. They nearly always ended by saying the thing to do was to go forward with the digging, leave the blasting. Somehow there would be away. Gus Belnap would usually add what piece of luck it was that Mr. Hopf had filed on water at the head, that he had selected himself to water his own crops and was now turning his filings and priority right to the Salem Union Canal Company. Gus would remind them how that put their priority ahead several years of what it would have been. How good that was!

At first, Alma worked proudly in the self conviction that Brother Belnap and others knew he would do a man's full labor in a day. The same hard routine repeated itself day after day until he almost longed for the special privilege of being too young to do a man's full load. A canal, he decided, was made by hard, hard, slow, slow work. Some days he spent most of the time rolling rocks as large as he could move. The work moved forward only foot by foot, it nevertheless moved forward. Distance, nor rock, nor lack of tools or money, in the end, kept it from moving forward. On days when they had the most trouble, not one gave a thought to give up.

The men always found a way. To survey the course, they used a shot gun laid across the land and sighted along the barrel of the gun. Alma heard them say more than once that it was pure luck for them that the fall of the land was westward. He was proud when they decided to get the help of Joseph Larsen for this part of the work because he was good with figures. It seemed that every one got to talking about the canal now, like what a good size it was for scraper and Gus Belnap and his crew were doing all right up there. It became easier to get a crew.

Even after two years had gone by, they had worked only as far as the side hill, but Gus Belnap felt that he could go to bed and sleep nights now. It was one thing to be body tired and bothered with weary aches, but the real work was to try to change men's minds. He had never been able to understand why every landholder on the bench couldn't see the canal would be their life line. There was old Mr. Eliot and his woman and crippled boy, Pete, about to starve to death on the one hundred sixty acre homestead of theirs because they could get no water to the land. As far as soil goes, theirs was the pick of the country. When Gus first talked to the old Irishman, the old timer spat and said: "Faith and begorra, if the canal was to make me rich tomorra, I couldna dig one shovelful. I'm crippled with age. I'm not much better than Pete, and that's how it is, begorra!" Good reason or bad, Gus chalked him up as one more defeat.

It was a different story now, the crew was never as big as needed, but how the men did work. One quarter of a day was spent on Monday going to work and another on Saturday going home for the Sabbath, but the rest of the time they wrung from every hour its full measure. Most of the rules the men made themselves. At four in the morning one alarm sounded, hammered on an old tin kettle. Any dawdler clinging to the comforts of a few extra minutes in his bunk found himself, suddenly sailing out over the sagebrush, with his head and back the running gears and his legs a v shaped pair of tugs drawn by two lusty fellow crewmen. No man needed his lesson more than once. It took an hour to care for the horse and chores. Then every man was on the job at five o'clock.

The canal first run water in the year of 1900.