

On a Cold and Glorious Night

By Lyman Hafen

On a magical December night every year, back in the mid part of the previous century, my parents used to load our family in the old Ford Fairlane for a tour of the town's Christmas lights. Next to Christmas Eve, it was the most wondrous night of the year.

Dad would tell us stories related to places along the way, but there was one story tied to that route that I did not hear for the first time until I was an adult. It is a story that many of you know, but one that every resident of Southern Utah should know. It is one of our most sacred connections to the season.

It occurred on a cold winter's night in a humble little adobe house at what became 294 E. Tabernacle St. (now the home office of The Village Bank.) The year was 1869, just eight winters since the original LDS company of 300 families arrived in the St. George valley.

Those who had remained were barely surviving in the desolate corner of the territory. The town's ecclesiastical leader, Erastus Snow, was looking for a way to lift the people out of the tedium of hunger and dreary gray days of winter. He began to plan a holiday celebration, something for the townsfolk to look forward to, something to brighten their spirits and lighten their loads. There wouldn't be much food, but there was plenty of musical talent in the valley, enough to stage the kind of program that might carry their spirits through to spring.

Snow called two of the town's leading creative lights to his office — poet laureate Charles Walker and choirmaster John M. Macfarlane. The two had collaborated on a number of compositions, Walker writing the words and Macfarlane the music. Now their charge was to write something special for the upcoming Christmas celebration.

Walker went right to work and composed several verses that he passed along to Macfarlane. As the day of the event drew dangerously near, John Macfarlane found himself stumped. As wonderful as Walker's verses read, he could not put them to music.

Then one night it came to him. In the one-room adobe house on Tabernacle Street he awoke in the

darkness with not only the tune, but a set of words swirling in his head. Macfarlane was a large and handsome man. His wife, Ann Chatterly, was a fine and diminutive woman, barely 5 feet tall and less than 100 pounds. John roused her out of bed and asked her to light the lamp and start pumping the bellows on the organ. The two of them, in their robes and nightcaps, shivered against the night as music permeated the chill air of their home and began to warm their hearts.

John played and wrote and hummed as Ann held the lamp in one hand and pumped the bellows with the other. Not until the first rays of morning broke through the frost-glazed window did John M. Macfarlane declare it finished.

After breakfast he hustled down Tabernacle Street to show his work to Brother Walker. Charles Walker was the first to declare its excellence. Macfarlane signed both their names to the finished copy, but Walker modestly insisted his name be removed. He later stated there wasn't a word in the song that was his. In fact, neither man was all that concerned about getting credit. Like much

of their other work, they assumed it would be performed once then fade away.

This song would never fade away. It was performed to the delight of everyone at St. George's Christmas program that year, and repeated by popular demand the next year and the year after that. As Christmases came and went, the carol spread throughout Mormondom, and in 1889, 20 years after it was composed in those cold night hours on Tabernacle Street, it was published in the Church's Juvenile Instructor Magazine. By 1896, it had made its way officially into the LDS Hymn Book.

Now the song belongs to Christian people everywhere who sing its simply profound words and heartwarming tune from the depths of their souls every Christmas. As you draw near the corner of Third east and Tabernacle on your Christmas light tour this winter, try to imagine the golden glow in the window of a little adobe house from which the joyous strains of "Far, Far Away on Judea's Plains" first sounded. 🎵

One of Christendom's most beloved carols was composed in St. George

