

Chapter 16: A Musical Mormon

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*This Small Corner: A History of
Pencader and District*

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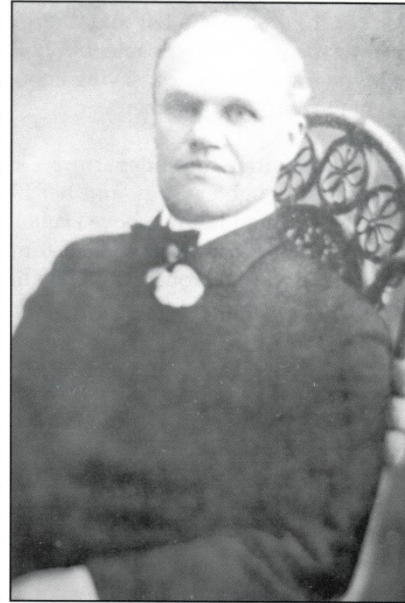
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16 A Musical Mormon

Only a few stones are left to show the birthplace of a man who became the most important musical figure in the Church of the Latter Day Saints of Salt Lake City, Utah. One Mormon writer said of Evan Stephens of Alltfechan, Pencader: "It has been said of Handel that he put the Bible to music. Stephens, with scores of songs and hymns put Mormonism to Music." He composed about one-fifth of the hymn tunes in the Mormon hymn book, also writing many of the words.

He was appointed to the most important musical post in the Mormon world - conductor of the Salt Lake Tabernacle Choir of 600 voices. He also founded, trained and conducted a huge children's choir. But Evan Stephens never forgot the land of his fathers. He returned to Pencader several times and made sure that every concert by his children's choir ended with *Hen Wlad Fy'n Nhadau* - in Welsh. When Joseph Parry visited Stephens during the second Mormon Eisteddfod in 1898, he described it as, "like a week of Wales in the Rockies." When Stephens died in October, 1930 a special anthem was written in his memory by Dr Joseph Bowen of Porth, Rhondda, a fellow Carmarthenshire man from Brynaman and a close friend.



Evan Stephens

Evan Stephens was born on June 28, 1854, in Allfechan, a tenanted farmhouse that now lies in ruins on the side of the road leading westwards up the hill from the old village of Pencader. His father, David Phillips Stephens, known as Deio, was a farm labourer who was born at Alltfechan in December, 1801. His mother was Jane, born in 1813 at Llyswen, Carmarthenshire, daughter of Thomas Evans and Elinor Jones, who both came from near Cardigan. He was the tenth child and occasionally referred to himself as "the tithe of his father's family".

At an early age he had to help support the family by shepherding sheep on the nearby hills. This experience probably accounted for his life-long love of the outdoors.

It was Evan's brother Thomas, 18 years the elder, who was responsible for enabling the Mormons and the world to benefit from his talents. Thomas left

Alltfechan farm as a young man and went to work in the coal mines of south Wales to earn enough money to emigrate to America. The family was already committed to the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints and Alltfechan had been the local Mormon meeting place ever since Deio was converted by the fiery Mormon leader Captain Dan Jones of Merthyr Tydfil - the first local Seion y Mormoniaid was held at Alltfechan in July, 1847. Thomas returned home when Evan was eight, in 1862, but he only had enough money for a single passage, and was reluctant to make the trip alone. So sister Anne, then 22 years old, persuaded Thomas to give her the money so that she could go in his place and prepare the way for the rest. Anne left for America, and Tom went back to the mines to earn his own passage. He was able to follow her a year later and together they worked for two years in America, saving enough money to send back to Pencader for the rest of the family to join them.

So two years after Tom's departure, Deio and his wife Janie, their sons David and Evan, their daughter Mary and her husband, Deio's sister Nani (Anne Daniels), then aged 54, and her two boys Daniel and James, arrived in Salt Lake on October 2, 1866. They had walked the 1,000 miles from the Missouri River. Evan was 12 years old, and was probably already literate, thanks to his days in the Old Chapel school room just down the road from his home.

Tom met the family in Salt Lake with a team of horses and took them to a town called Willard 60 miles to the north, where the family lived and worked on a farm for the next four years. It is said that during the first winter the family was blessed with a house full of corn which Deio had earned in wages by husking corn on stones.

Four years later a fertile new valley was opened up for farmers in the southern part of Idaho, about 125 miles north of Salt Lake and Deio and Janie were among the settlers. By now the Pencader contingent had grown, with more of the family's relatives arriving in Utah. These included Evan's eldest sister, the widowed Nellie (Helenor) Stephens and her three children, and his 64-year-old aunt Rachel Jones in 1869. They travelled by railway to Oregon, within ten miles of Willard. This new place was called Malad (now Malad City) and it was here that Deio and each branch of the family took up a quarter section of land, 160 acres, for the nominal price of \$1.25 - 5/- or 25p per acre, paid to the US government.

Each family built a log house and the group formed the nucleus for a village or colony from Pencader. They were joined by other families including Scots and Danes and soon the settlement built a school. The place was later organised into a branch of the Mormon church and named St John after an old man of that name who was the first to be buried in a cemetery set up on a plot of land donated by Deio Alltfechan.

Young Evan, meanwhile, stayed in Willard where he worked as a farm labourer and later as a packer and section hand on the railroad, all the time educating himself in music. At the age of seventeen, Evan was asked to direct the local Church choir and in 1879 he was asked to play the Logan Tabernacle organ. Along with this he gave voice and organ lessons to others. In doing so he was able to save enough money to study in Salt Lake City under Joseph J Daynes, a well known pioneer musician of the period. He also studied for a year at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston.

Then he moved to Salt Lake City, capital of the Church of the Latter Day Saints, where he organised the Stephens Opera Company, which later became the Salt Lake Choral Society. The success of this venture led to an invitation to direct the Salt Lake Tabernacle Choir.

His leadership was greatly admired and in 1893 his choir was awarded second place at the World Fair, in competition with other outstanding choirs from the United States. He remained the Tabernacle Choir conductor for twenty-six years during which time he led many trips and concert tours and sang for the President of the United States.

Following his retirement he composed two cantatas, "The Vision" and "The Martyrs", based on the life of Joseph Smith. He published over one hundred and fifty pieces.

Evan was a solidly built and powerful man with a ready smile. He is said to have delighted in the open air and in people, especially children. Music and literature were the two great loves of his life, and he added more hymns to the Mormon hymn book more than any other.

Evan's leadership of the famous Tabernacle Choir brought him wide recognition, but another family member, Sarah Daniels of Ffwrndy, Pencader, who arrived in Utah on June 18, 1906, said it was not his greatest achievement.

"While it's true that he made this choir the largest childrens choir in the world, he had become chief musician of the west before he was appointed to this position as a composer, both poet and musician. As conductor of great musical festivals, as teacher, trainer of thousands of children, he had won his place when the Mormon church set him the task of organising and training the great Tabernacle Choir. Of over 500 enrolled members, less than half went to the World Fair to compete in the World Choral Contest in 1893, winning second place in this first contest they had ever attended. Evan now is exclusively engaged by the Church to write choral music, cantatas etc on church historical subjects. His first cantata, The Vision, brought out at the great Tabernacle by a chours of 450 select voices before a vast audience crowded in every corner of the building, who accorded the

composer and conductor ovation after ovation many times all rising to their feet during the performance to show their appreciation of the work. He has five others in hand partly completed. These cantatas being strictly Mormon topics or subjects are published by the church are not expected to be taken up by musical organisations at large though of course no one would be prevented from performing them if they so desire."

When Sarah Daniels wrote this in a letter back to Wales - to the Rev Josiah Rees of the New Inn Rees family - in 1930, only Thomas, Mary, David and Evan remained of the original Alltfechan family. Evan died on October 27, 1930.

Sarah Daniels said Evan never married, but brought up a number of boys who became prominent members of the community. She said 50,000 people claimed him as their musical father.

Evan Stephens wrote the words, and/or the music to 19 hymns in the current Mormon hymn book. The titles include: What Was Witnessed in the Heavens; Awake, Ye Saints of God, Awake; The Voice of God again Is Heard; Our Mountain Home So Dear; For the Strength of the Hills; Lo, the Mighty God Appearing; O Home Beloved.

Evan was not the only member of the Stephens family of Pencader to make a success of the move to the United States.

His cousin Dan Daniels, was a noted scholar with lovely handwriting. He was given a prominent position in the Church office under the Mormon leader Bingham Young and worked there until his death. Dan's mother Nani (Anne), and brother, James Daniels, had joined the St John settlement where Nani's sister Rachel and her son Henry Jones also took land and built homes. Henry later became probate judge and was elected to the State Senate. He left an estate worth \$75,000.

Evan's eldest sister Nellie and her two boys (one had died soon after their arrival in Utah), David and Tom, took up a claim in their own name to be divided among the boys later. Thomas Stephens lived simply till 40 years of age, then married Emma or Emily Leigh Morgan, a 28-year-old from Llanelli. He had three boys and two girls. The two eldest sons, John Morgan Stephens and David Edmund Stephens became prominent agriculturalists, one taking charge of a government farm in North Dakota, the other a similar post in Oregon.

Evan's sister Anne, the first to emigrate, married a French-Canadian Mormon convert, Louis Deschamps and had three sons and five daughters. The husband of the second daughter became Bishop of the settlement.

Evan's sister Mary, born 1843, and her husband David Jones (Saer) had five boys and four girls. David junior, after developing a ranch at St John, moved to a dairy valley in the mountains of Montana 400 miles away. One son and five daughters all married and lived there alongside one of Nellie's daughters by her second marriage (she buried her first husband Morris before leaving Wales). This daughter and her family owned a large stock farm in Montana.