

24

John Wesley Iliff

(1831-1878)

Remember Pocahontas? Then I won't have to remind you about John Smith. By the early 19th century, a direct descendant of his, Sarah Elizabeth Smith, was living in Delaware, Ohio. Meanwhile, in McLuney, Ohio, over Zanesville way (just south of Stringtown on what is now Route 93; you can't miss it), there lived Thomas Iliff, a prosperous and conservative Methodist farmer, who was married to one Salome née Reed. A son was born to them in McLuney on 18 Dec 1831, and was given the inevitable Methodist name John Wesley Iliff. It was a fortunate omen for Methodism, though not, as things were to turn out, for Methodism in the Ohio country.

John attended Ohio Wesleyan, the college of choice at that time and place for all seriously Methodist persons, but did not graduate. He did, apparently, meet Sarah Elizabeth Smith, though nothing came of it at the time. John's father wanted to set him up as a farmer, and offered to buy him a farm worth \$7,500. John instead asked for \$500 with which to seek his fortune out West. With the \$500 he went to Ohio City, Kansas in the spring of 1857, presumably with a lot of other fortune seekers from Ohio, including Sarah Elizabeth Smith and her parents. John opened a store. Two years later, gold was discovered in Colorado, provoking the Fifty-Niners Gold Rush. John joined the rush, but not for risky gold. No. He took with him two partners, and enough supplies to open a store in Denver: In this way did Fenton, Auld, and Iliff come into existence at the foot of Cherry Creek, at Larimer and F and G streets.

This was John's insight: People don't necessarily find gold on a given day, but they do, by and large, have to eat. The store prospered. John sold his share in 1861. With the profits, and thinking to become a producer rather than a middleman in the eating business, John bought a cattle herd, establishing his first ranch in 1862, on the Platte River northeast of Denver. After a couple of years (the Civil War was then going on back east, but that was a long way off), he went back to Ohio City, Kansas, where on 11 Jan 1865 he married Sarah Elizabeth Smith. The couple resided that year in Ohio City, and their son, William Seward Iliff, evidently named for Lincoln's Secretary of State, was born in October. Sarah died two months later. Leaving baby William with his grandparents, John returned to the cattle frontier.

Public lands were available., and John pushed the possibilities. By 1867 he had established a cow camp in Wyoming Territory. He sold beef to the government for the army detachments in nearby forts; he shipped several carloads of cattle a day to the Chicago stockyards. He bought a hundred miles of land in Colorado, from Julesburg to Greeley along the South Platte River, laying the foundations of his reign as the Cattle King. It was said that he could travel for a full week on his own range, without needing other accommodation than one of his own ranch houses.

By 1869 this operation had so prospered that he moved his headquarters to Cheyenne, and brought his son William, then four, out from Kansas to live with him. A law was presently passed preventing the enclosure of public lands, one of the devices by which the cattle barons had monopolized the water supply. The fences came down, and the cattle business became notably less profitable. John shifted his center of personal gravity to the financial side. In 1869 Iliff and Company opened the first bank in Cheyenne. In 1871, John was made one of the directors of the National Bank in Cheyenne.

He then married Elizabeth Sarah Fraser, a Canadian of Scottish stock, who had grown up in Chicago and by 1868 was working as a representative for the Singer Sewing Machine Company in Denver. Their first child, Edna, was born in 1871. The next year, Elizabeth, in search of more culture than Cheyenne then provided, and (so the legend goes) fearing that the newly inaugurated female suffrage, which made her a voter, and thus a possible juror, would require her to sit on juries with persons of lesser status, persuaded John to move to Denver. Management of the cattle business was handed over to a friend, J W Snyder. John once again diversified his interests by going into Denver real estate.



His and Elizabeth's last two children were born in 1875 (Louise) and 1877 (John Wesley Jr). In the latter year, perhaps moved by dynastic feelings on the birth of a second son, John bought the Shaffenburg Mansion (now remembered as the Iliff Mansion) on 18th and Curtis Streets for his family's residence.

But as so often happens when one finally moves into the house of one's dreams, at the end of that year John became ill with a gall bladder condition, thought to have been caused by years of drinking alkali water on the Colorado plains. He died on 9 Feb 1878, aged 47. He was the largest landowner and the greatest cattle baron of his day. Or in the polite parlance of modern Colorado, "a Colorado pioneer."

Elizabeth was left with four young children (presently reduced to three when John Wesley Jr died in 1879), a still huge cattle business, and a fortune. These were challenges, and she was up to all three of them.



Her picture shows the standard upcoiffed pince-nez'd lace-wristed matriarch of the time. She had her own Denver properties, and she owned stock in two Denver banks. The Iliff fortune grew under her administration, and she promptly indulged her taste for the amenities. In 1880, the year after John Wesley Jr's death, she put the three remaining children in boarding school (William Seward Iliff in a military school in Wisconsin, and the two girls in Hebb's school in Brighton, England), and went off on a tour of Europe. On her return to Denver, she met, and on 27 Dec 1884 married, Bishop Henry White Warren, producing a leadership dynamo which did much for the Methodist religion and for the educational institutions of Denver. The couple contributed to the construction of several church buildings, and in 1884 moved to realize an unfulfilled intention of John's by founding an Iliff School of Theology in his memory. They offered the University of Denver \$100,000 to establish the School as a graduate department, on condition that this sum be matched by \$50,000 from other sources. The University of Denver was then in a parlous state, without even a permanent location, and figures of that size, even if only figures in prospect, had a certain effect. For a start, Elizabeth and her husband were appointed to the University's Board of Trustees.

Elizabeth's stepson William Seward Iliff, having served his educational time in Racine, Wisconsin and then at the Chester Military Academy in Pennsylvania, had entered the University of Denver in 1883, where he distinguished himself as a member of its first football team. He too had the look of command and the stiff upper lip that characterized his father and (especially) his stepmother. He took time off to accompany his stepparents on an 1888 trip to China, graduated from the University on his return, and immediately entered upon a business career with the City National Bank of Denver.



In 1889, the University moved to its present University Park location. William now stepped in to provide the still pending \$50,000 donation which completed the agreed sum and permitted the construction of Iliff Hall as home for the newly endowed graduate department of the University. The Iliff School came thus at last into existence in 1892, at the quarters which it still occupies: 2201 South University Boulevard.



Other and more personal construction also occurred. At this point, Bishop and Mrs Warren built themselves a new residence in Denver, called Fitzroy Place after the town in Canada where Elizabeth had been born. She would be luckier than John in this business of Denver dream houses, and would live in Fitzroy Place until her death 28 years later.

Over the ensuing years, the University faced repeated financial crises, and was repeatedly bailed out of them by new cash contributions from the Warrens. The Warrens, for their part, became concerned that the University would raid the School's endowment in future years, for its own needs and purposes.

Not only that, but the Dean of the School, himself connected to the Iliffs as the husband of Elizabeth's first child Edna, was assuming considerable, and in their view, undesirable, independence and authority. And so in April 1900, the Warrens "temporarily" closed the school. It remained closed while Elizabeth negotiated the separation of the School from the University. The price for this deal was a further, but final, donation of \$25,000 from Elizabeth, \$5,000 from Bishop Warren, and another \$20,000 raised by them together from other sources. The total sum which was needed to found, and then detach, the School thus came to \$200,000. We seem to have come a long way from Thomas Iliff's offer to endow his son John as a farmer, at a cost of \$7,500.

The institutional separation of School and University became final in 1903, at which time Elizabeth, her second daughter Louise, and her stepson William Seward became its Trustees. Refurbishing of the property occupied several more years, and included the installation of an organ in Iliff Hall, paid for by prosperous William. The School reopened in 1910. At this writing, it is still thriving at the old location, a beacon of Methodism (with a seasoning of other things) to the surrounding lands, and boasting the largest theological library in the Rocky Mountain region. A grant has recently been received from the Colorado Historical Society for restoration of the now landmark Iliff Hall, which is included in the National Register of Historic Places. The amount of the grant is \$200,000, exactly what was needed to found and detach the entire enterprise, 114 years ago.

Bishop Warren retired on 12 July 1912, and died less than two weeks later. Elizabeth remained on the scene until she too died, on 14 Feb 1920, and yes, it was at Fitzroy Place. William Seward Iliff had served from 1891 onward on the University of Denver Board of Trustees.

Having prospered in his banking phase, William moved on to start his own private investment business in 1910. In 1926 he led a fund-raising campaign for a football stadium for the University. He closed his investment business in 1929, the year of the great crash. By the time of his own death on 19 Oct 1946, he had become Treasurer and Vice President of the National Fuel Company. The Iliff family instinct for where the next fortune was going to be made evidently continued in him.

None of these Ohio and miscellaneous Iliffs are more than distantly connected with the Ohio Iliffs in whom we are here interested. But isn't it a nice story? And aren't we glad to have settled that notorious genealogical crux, the matter of our relations with the Iliff School?

Maybe the Rocky Mountain Region of the Society of Biblical Literature, when next they meet at the Iliff, will look favorably on my paper proposal.