

In fall of 1845, Thomas E. Ricks, only 17 years old, worked alongside his father and others to complete the temple in Nauvoo, Illinois. In February 1846 as the Saints began their exodus west, he helped some of the first families cross the frozen Mississippi.

Thomas E. Ricks



pioneer spotlight

Bold, intrepid, daring, he stands as one of the notable figures of the pioneer days, being ever at the front whenever danger presented itself, ready to face death to protect his people from hostile attacks or the perils of starvation, when battling with the forces of . . . nature."

*By Steven D. Bennion,
President of Southern
Utah University*

Steven D. Bennion, then President of Ricks College, gave this devotional address at Ricks College on January 7, 1997. Only those portions dealing with the life of Thomas E. Ricks are printed here. Quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from Thomas E. Ricks: Colonizer and Founder by Wanda Ricks Wyler. This address was first reprinted in the Ricks College Summit 1997, pages 8-11.



A Legacy of Faith and Sacrifice

That [the pioneers] maintained "a . . . brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men" (2 Nephi 31:20) is a priceless legacy for all Latter-day Saints—whether you are a direct descendant of the pioneers or not.

All of us are blessed by their matchless legacy of faith and sacrifice. . . .

I fear we haven't done an adequate job of telling the story of Thomas Edwin Ricks, the man for whom [Ricks] College is named.

He was born in the southwestern Kentucky frontier on July 31, 1828, to Joel and Eleanor

In October 1856, only 10 days after Thomas returned home from a Church mission, he and others were called to rescue the Martin and Willie hand-cart companies stranded in Wyoming by an early snowstorm.



Ricks. "Tom (as he was called) learned the rough-and-ready survival skills that would help him meet the challenges of a hostile frontier and people hostile to his adopted religion. He learned to work hard, farm, ride horses, fish, hunt, and read the messages of nature. He became known as an outstanding marksman; an associate of his noted that 'because of his unusual skill with his gun he has been compared to the Indian. . . Hiawatha, according to his biography.'"

In 1843, Tom accompanied his father on a visit to Church headquarters in Nauvoo to acquire land so the family could join the Saints there. These were difficult days. About a year earlier Joseph and Hyrum had been martyred by a mob at Carthage. Wanda Ricks Wylie, author of a biography on Thomas E. Ricks, reported:

"Hatred and violence were ever threatening. Despite this threat, Church members worked to complete the temple in Nauvoo in obedience to the Lord's command, even though by then it appeared that they might be forced to forsake their beautiful temple and flourishing city. During the fall and winter, Tom and his father were among those who worked faithfully on the temple to fulfill the Lord's command to complete it."

It was Tom's privilege to attend the first conference held in the Nauvoo temple, October 5-7, 1845. Later that month he was ordained an elder in the priesthood, although he was only 17 years old. Thomas Ricks was proving his remarkable loyalty and devotion to the Church.

The Ricks family spent two years in Iowa and Winter Quarters and then left with the Heber C. Kimball company, which consisted of 662 people on May 29, 1848:

"At 8 o'clock on the morning of June 6, 1848, an alarm sounded in the camp. One of the herd boys shouted: '... The Indians are driving off the cattle.' Tom Ricks, Howard Egan, William Kimball, and Noah Bartholemew jumped on their horses and traveled rapidly about six miles down the river.

"They searched for the Indians in hopes of retrieving their livestock. Suddenly, they came upon a party of about ten Indians who immediately fired at them. Tom was hit with three rifle balls; two lodged in his kidneys

and another hit his backbone. He fell from his horse and lay on the ground.

"The three friends of Tom, still on horseback, were driven away by the Indians . . .

"Looking back as they fled, they saw one Indian moving towards Tom, apparently intending to scalp him. When the Indian raised his knife, Tom put up his arm to protect his head. This so startled the Indian that he changed his plan, grabbed Tom's gun, and hurried down the river with his companions."

Years later, Thomas, speaking at a family reunion, told of a special spiritual experience that comforted him as he lay on the ground:

"While I lay there weltering in blood, I thought of the condition of my father and family and how badly they needed my assistance in crossing the plains and making a home in a new land and wondered if I was going to die. While thus engaged in thought, I heard a voice say audibly and clearly, 'You will not die; you will go to the valley of the mountains and there you will do a great work in your day and generation.'"

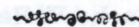
The Lord was mindful of Thomas E. Ricks. He indeed had a great work ahead of him. [He and his family arrived safely in the Salt Lake Valley in 1848, where they settled into the new land.]

At general conference in April 1855 Thomas E. Ricks was called with 29 others to serve a mission to Las Vegas. He returned from that mission about 18 months later, just prior to the October 1856 general conference. At that conference Brigham Young announced that the Martin and Willie Handcart Companies were stranded and men, horses, food, and clothing were needed to rescue them . . .

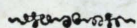
Thomas had only been home from his mission for 10 days, and he and 40 other volunteers left that same day to rescue the suffering Saints.

Later reports indicated that adults in these handcart companies were allotted only four ounces of food per day and children a mere two ounces. The rescuers reached the Willie Company first, located at Willow Creek on the Sweetwater River. When they arrived, the men built roaring fires and handed out clothing, bedding, and food.

**I heard a voice
say audibly
and clearly,
'You will not die;
you will go to the
valley of the
mountains and
there you will do
a great work in
your day and gen-
eration.'**



In 1859 Thomas Ricks and his family moved to Cache Valley where they lived until 1883. Among other things, he served as sheriff of the county for a number of years and was colonel of the cavalry with the Cache Valley Minutemen.



Then half of the original rescuers, including Thomas, went on to meet the Martin Company at the North Platte River. Some of the people had no clothing other than what they were wearing, and children went barefoot in the snow. All were weak from hunger, and the trip had been strenuous for the rescuers too.

Brigham Young felt strongly about these young men who had helped the struggling Saints arrive in the mountains. He said:

"Every boy that has gone out to save those handcart pioneers and endured that cold and frost and snow and those frozen rivers; every one of those boys will be saved in the celestial kingdom of God."

In 1859 Thomas Ricks and his family moved to Cache Valley where they lived until 1883. Among other things, he served as sheriff of the county for a number of years and was colonel of the cavalry with the Cache Valley Minutemen. That he was colonel of the only cavalry regiment among the Cache

Valley Minutemen bespeaks his skills with horses and wagons.

He had implicit faith in the Lord and His chosen leaders. "Twice he went on missions for the Church after he was married and had a family. Five times the Church called him or he volunteered to bring Saints from Nebraska. Three times he traveled on expeditions to find new places for the Saints to settle," according to his biography.

In fact, in December 1882, he was called while living in Logan to be the bishop of the Bannock Ward.

William Preston, president of the Cache Valley Stake, had consulted with President John Taylor and his counselors about settling that area. When the First Presidency asked for Preston's suggestions regarding a man to lead the settlement, his recommendation was Thomas E. Ricks.

Brother Ricks was now nearly 55 years of age and very comfortable with his large fam-



ily in Logan. He had done more than his share of service on the frontier. Did he rest on his laurels? No! He and his family would uproot themselves once again to build a new community from scratch. They went forward with faith.

After selecting the site we now know as Rexburg, they needed to name the town to be. President Preston, on March 11, 1883, with Thomas E. Ricks and William F. Rigby, suggested [naming] the town Rexburg in honor of Bishop Ricks, giving preference to Rex, the German equivalent of the name Ricks. Then Brother Rigby officially dedicated the settlement of Rexburg to the Lord. That is how Rexburg received its name.

In February of 1884, Bishop Ricks attended stake conference in Logan. The Bannock Ward, headquartered in Rexburg, was in the Cache Stake, headquartered in Logan 185 miles away. "It was announced that the Bannock Ward would now be the Bannock Stake and that Thomas E. Ricks was called as the new stake president. He was set apart to that calling by President John Taylor on that same day," his biography states. His two counselors, who were subsequently called, were William F. Rigby and Francis C. Gunnell. The boundaries of the Bannock stake encompassed virtually all of what we now know as the Upper Snake River Valley.

Thomas E. Ricks worked with Church leaders and the first commissioner of Church Education, Karl G. Maeser, to establish an academy at Rexburg on November 12, 1888. This was an era when the Church was finding accommodation with government officials increasingly difficult.

Education and the academy remained a major priority to President Ricks. For 13 years, he chaired the local Board of Education until his death on September 28, 1901. . . . In 1900 permission was given to build a sizeable three-story building for the academy. President Ricks did not live long enough to see it completed, which was accomplished by the fall of 1903. . . .

In the late 1890s, the Bannock Stake was divided and the Fremont Stake was created. This was the stake that included Rexburg and points north and east. The academy was then renamed the Fremont Stake Academy. By early 1902, with additional stakes in the

area created, it became apparent that a different name for the academy was needed beyond that of a single stake.

The local board recommended the name Smith Academy in honor of the Prophet Joseph and the current prophet at the time, Joseph F. Smith. A letter was written to the General Board of Education requesting the name of Smith Academy.

"At the February 27, 1902, meeting of the First Presidency and Twelve Apostles, the matter of Smith Academy was discussed. Elder John Henry Smith's motion carried that the academy be renamed Ricks Academy honoring and memorializing Thomas E. Ricks.

"At the local academy board meeting on March 5, 1902, a letter was read from the First Presidency suggesting that the school be named the Ricks Academy in honor of the late President Thomas E. Ricks. A motion was made and carried unanimously." (*History of Ricks College* by David Crowder.)

And so, since 1902, this college has been known by the colonizer and stake president who led the people here to settle this area. He was a man of great faith and resolute determination to serve the Lord and his church. Listen to this description of Thomas E. Ricks:

"Bold, intrepid, daring, fertile in plans and resources, with magnificent physical proportions and forceful mannerisms, which compelled the willing cooperation of others, he stands one of the notable figures of the pioneer days, being ever at the front whenever danger presented itself in the shape of wily foemen, ready to face death to protect his people from hostile attacks or the perils of starvation, when battling with the forces of . . . nature on the bleak plains of western wilds." (*Life of Thomas E. Ricks* by Thomas E. Bassett.)

While the demands of his work and Church leadership kept him from home a good deal of the time, Thomas E. Ricks was nevertheless devoted to his family. He had 231 grandchildren and knew and loved them all.

When President Joseph F. Smith spoke at President Thomas E. Ricks' funeral, he said: "It may be a long time before we find another man his equal in honor, mind, and unswerving loyalty to the cause of God and his people." ▼

Brother Ricks was now nearly 55 years of age and very comfortable with his large family in Logan. He had done more than his share of service on the frontier. Did he rest on his laurels? No!

