

Torleif S. Knaphus' Life Pursuit of Genealogical Research

Compiled by Allen Gerritsen, grandson of Torleif

A reporter from *Life* magazine was interviewing noted sculptor Torleif S. Knaphus in his art studio in Salt Lake City surrounded by a myriad of projects of statues, oil paintings and clay sculptures. When asked what his greatest work was throughout his life, Torleif pointed to a picture of his family then motioned towards the giant family pedigree chart on the wall and responded that his family and his genealogical research has been his greatest work in life.¹

In 1903, at age 21, when he became a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Oslo, Norway, Torleif also became converted to the research of his family history. He wrote: "My interest and great desire...has been to find my ancestors, their names and history, their place of birth, and the service they rendered."² Regarding genealogical work he stated:

"The first and most important thing in this work is that we get a desire and then have sufficient love to go ahead and do something about it. As we carry on, things unfold themselves before us; and we find more and accomplish more than we ever dreamed to accomplish. As we proceed four and five hundred years back, it becomes extremely interesting. The dark clouds which have rested over our ancestors lives and existence have nearly altogether disappeared; and the Middle Ages seemingly become so near to us."

"As we find our forefathers who lived that long ago and read about their good work, it gives us a feeling of joy similar to that of having a child or a grandchild born unto us; and we love them as our own family. As we find our ancestors, we also find their history; what offices they held in the church and state; and the service they rendered. This gives us joy. As time goes on we love them more and more. And as we make some preparation toward raising a family, so, likewise, we should be willing to give something toward this research work."³

Before leaving Norway to come to America, Torleif left Oslo, where he had studied art for three years, and went back to his home in Vats in western Norway. The purpose of his trip was to do genealogical research of his family.⁴

"I then said farewell to my parents to go back to Oslo. And as I got aboard the steamboat and walked on the deck that beautiful autumn day, carrying with me about 350 of my relatives' names which I had obtained. I definitely felt that there is nothing according to the time spent so valuable for the eternal good of men as this work."⁵

After immigrating to Utah in 1905 at age 24, Torleif decided that after he paid his tithing to the Church, he would dedicate 5% of his income to do genealogical work. He wrote of sending \$36.00 to Jens Jensen, a Danish genealogist, to help in the efforts.⁶ This seemingly “small amount” in 1905 would be worth over \$2,000 in today’s standard.⁷ His sacrifice was made despite the meager earnings of an artist. Later he would have the challenge of making ends meet with several children to raise and facing the great depression of the 1930’s. Regardless, Torleif continued his financial sacrifice and commitment for this great work. His brother Andrew also helped fund the genealogical research for their family names and was able to help tremendously with the temple work for their ancestors.⁸

Several individuals assisted Torleif in the genealogical research efforts. With his influence, he was amazed to see the willingness of individuals to help him in his pursuit.

“In my native land of Norway, books have been written; genealogical societies have been organized; and their leaders have become my friends, all of which has helped me to get many names and data through contacts and friendly correspondence.”⁹

With the names Torleif obtained, he spent much time in recording and getting things ready for temple work. He had a strong testimony of the salvation of the dead.¹⁰ Torleif states:

“I got a recommend to the temple and spent there all my time doing baptisms and endowment work for my dead. After I had done so for about four months, I was severely criticized by friends and Church members for doing so. I took their criticism and rather good advice, decided to quit temple work and go out and get a job.

“But the following morning about twenty minutes to seven, I was awakened by someone knocking at my door. I threw the covers aside, arose to a sitting position, and was just going to ask who was there, as a voice came from the direction of the door saying, ‘Get up, make your self ready, and go to the Temple. Quit the work on your father’s line and start on your mother’s line. Begin with Torleif Hedland on your mother’s mother’s line.’ I have now found this line fifteen generations back, and many of them have served the people and the country in many high and valuable capacities. After this experience I went to the Temple, felt unusually fine, and continued to work there for several months.”

“On Thanksgiving Day, 1909, I got married to Emelia H. C. Christensen who then attended the LDS High School. She quit the school and spent the following winter doing Temple work. And so together we carried on and did the best we could with this work.”¹¹

In the fall of 1913 (at age 32) Torleif went to France to study art for 1½ years. The next year he again visited his parents in Norway for 2½ months for the purpose of doing genealogical research work. He was successful and obtained about 700 more names. He then relates:

“And as I then had to cross the ocean in the most dangerous time of World War I, I was most deeply concerned for the additional record I had obtained because it is to me, next to my family, the most precious thing I have.”¹²

Torleif’s family also knew how valuable his genealogical records were to him. His daughter Olive remembered: “All of us (children) were admonished to ‘save’ the genealogical records first in case of a fire. We laughed and ridiculed about it, but were proud of him and his great accomplishment.”¹³

In 1939 when Torleif was 58 years old, he was sent to Hawaii by the Church to do further art work at the LDS temple in Lahie. He wrote regarding an experience he had in Hawaii:

“One day while there, I took a hike high up in those beautiful mountains and as I prayed, words came to me which never before had entered my mind. When I uttered these words asking that I could find my ancestors’ lines back to the ancients, I was chastened by a voice speaking to me saying, ‘You fool, going to give \$5.00 and expect to find your ancestors back to the ancients.’ I understood, immediately arose, ran more than walked down the mountain trail, and just came in time before the post office closed, and sent off \$25.00 instead of the \$5.00 which I had intended to send.”¹⁴

In that year, that \$25.00 would have been worth \$1,700 in today’s dollar.¹⁵

Not only did Torleif just find out the names, birth dates and places of his ancestors, he came to know them as if they were his close friends. To help his descendants know of his ancestors as individuals, instead of just names, he wrote much about their lives.¹⁶

“It is wonderful to know of so many of our forefathers from that long ago, to know where they lived and served, know of their relationship to each other and the fun they had together.... My love has been extended to everyone I have on this record as though they were my living family, so I have used the greatest of care in recording them correctly and attending to their temple work.”¹⁷

This list summarizes the list of professions or services rendered by his forefathers:

- 23 lagretsmen (court members)
- 11 Lutheran ministers
- 2 Lutheran Bishops
- 3 Prosts
- 3 Mayors of big Norwegian cities

- 2 lagmen
- 3 raadmen
- 14 lensmen (sheriffs) – 5 of which were selected by the people to represent the county of Rogaland to attend the King’s crownings¹⁸

In encouraging others to also become excited and involved in genealogical research, Torleif taught that the qualifications for doing this great work is to have: desire, love, sincerity, determination, and patience. In about 1954 at age 74, he spoke at an LDS Ward and encouraged all to do genealogical work.¹⁹ He taught:

“This work is so great and so essential for our salvation and for those who have put their trust in us. So I urge you to sincerely start this work. It is not too early, but for some of us it may soon be too late.”

At 80 years old, three years before his death Torleif wrote:

“So with this unanimous effort aided by divine guidance, I have now found 782 of my grandparents’ names connecting me rightfully on many lines with my forefathers of 500, 600, and 700 years ago, as shown on my big pedigree chart which serves me as a blueprint in this work. I have also found the names and dates of about 9,400 additional relatives. So I have now about 10,132 names recorded and nicely kept in my three big loose-leaf record books.”²⁰

For many years his large family pedigree chart was mounted on the wall in the Church Office building as a showpiece, as one of the most complete records at that time.²¹ Elder LeGrand Richards, of the quorum of the twelve apostles spoke at his funeral. He stated that he knew of no single man in the church that has done more work in genealogy than Torleif Knaphus did.²²

Torleif concluded his description of his great genealogical work by stating:

“I have also taken the greatest of care for this record’s safekeeping, as I value it very highly. And I trust that it will always be preserved and someone of my descendants will likewise care for its safety and the continuation of this important work”²³ A crowning joy has come to me on account of this work...I have been grateful above words of expression that the Temples have been built and the condition has been so that I have been able to do this great work. And although I have spent an immense amount of time concentrating and working, yet it has seemed like the blessings of the Lord have been with me so my family or my art work have not been neglected on account of this great work accomplished.”²⁴ (Italics added).



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- ¹ Interview with Anne Marie (Knaphus) James, daughter
 - ² *My Life's Hobby, Introduction*, page 1, by Torleif S. Knaphus, October 4, 1961
 - ³ *Genealogical Research, The greatest of all Hobbies* by Torleif S. Knaphus
 - ⁴ *My Life's Hobby, Part I*, page 1, by Torleif S. Knaphus, July 22, 1937
 - ⁵ *My Life's Hobby, Part I*, page 2, by Torleif S. Knaphus, July 22, 1937
 - ⁶ *My Life's Hobby, Part I*, page 3, by Torleif S. Knaphus, July 22, 1937
 - ⁷ Assuming a 4% increase each year since 1905.
 - ⁸ *Brief Report of My Genealogical Work*, page 2, by Torleif S. Knaphus, July 22, 1937
 - ⁹ *My Life's Hobby, Part II*, page 1, by Torleif S. Knaphus, October 4, 1961
 - ¹⁰ *T.S. Knaphus after his Daughter Grace's Birth* by Grace (Knaphus) Humphrey
 - ¹¹ *Brief Report of My Genealogical Work*, page 1, by Torleif S. Knaphus, July 22, 1937
 - ¹² *My Life's Hobby, Part I*, page 3, by Torleif S. Knaphus, July 22, 1937
 - ¹³ *My Early Remembrances of Dad* by Olive (Knaphus) Miller
 - ¹⁴ *My Life's Hobby, Part II*, page 1, by Torleif S. Knaphus, October 4, 1961
 - ¹⁵ Assuming a 4% increase each year since 1939
 - ¹⁶ *My Life's Hobby, Part II*, by Torleif S. Knaphus, October 4, 1961
 - ¹⁷ *My Life's Hobby, Introduction*, page 1, by Torleif S. Knaphus, October 4, 1961
 - ¹⁸ *My Life's Hobby, Part II*, page 4, by Torleif S. Knaphus, October 4, 1961
 - ¹⁹ *Service they Rendered*, Speech delivered by Torleif S. Knaphus in an LDS Ward about 1954
 - ²⁰ *My Life's Hobby, Part II*, page 6, by Torleif S. Knaphus, October 4, 1961
 - ²¹ *My Early Remembrances of Dad* by Kimball Knaphus
 - ²² *My Remembrance of Dad – Torleif S. Knaphus* by Anne Marie (Knaphus) James
 - ²³ *Genealogical Research, The greatest of all Hobbies* by Torleif S. Knaphus
 - ²⁴ *Brief Report of My Genealogical Work*, page 2, by Torleif S. Knaphus, July 22, 1937