

# Handiwork

## Thoughts on Sylvester Q. Cannon

by D. James Cannon



My father's hands were expressive, reflecting his chief love: *Work not words*. He was a *doer* more than a *sayer*. The world honors the doer but quotes the sayer. The latter's life story may not be as gratifying as the career of the former, but who is remembered? The sayer.

This essay is meant to balance the scale a bit, and to be a complimentary remembrance of one who produced tangible things, mainly through his remarkable hands.

From his birth in 1877, his father, George Q., and his mother, Elizabeth H., were aware that there was something special about this boy. I now see its fulfillment, mainly through his hands.

One of my most treasured photos is a snapshot taken when I was 2-1/2 years old, holding my father's hand as if it were a pipeline to heaven. Another marvelous photo is a more formal 8x10 portrait of his hand signing a "Standard Quorum Award" (Aaronic Priesthood) at his Presiding Bishop's desk in the early 1930s.

His hands were a reflection of his total personality: a doer, an accomplisher, and by inclination, a true-blue person, a loyal friend, a devoted servant.

Although I was not there, I can imagine his hands working on a problem at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1899 (I've seen some of his field notes), or writing Dutch in Rotterdam in 1902; or clasping the hand of my mother over the marriage altar in the Salt Lake Temple in 1904.

Those hands not only blessed his wife, but seven children as well, between 1905 and 1919. Every Christmas Day he arranged a line-up of the family to march into the living room, starting with the youngest and littlest to the oldest and tallest (then my father). We knew that he loved us all.

During his mortality of almost 66 years, his busy hands also expressed his love of people through imaginative and careful work. His artistry is seen today—70 years later—in the Mountain Dell dam in Parley's Canyon. Even in simple matters, his hands were helpful, such as writing dates on the backs of snapshots and photos — or writing letters — or signing documents — or cutting my hair in Depression days with hand clippers.

He wasn't much in saying things; but he was grand and noble in doing things. What he did was not for show or glitter, but simply to help make life better and more enjoyable.

I remember when his big hands held my two elder brothers at arm's length when they were disputing over a radio selection. I saw both love and force exhibited between these two tall sons, who were calmed and chastened by my father's grip. They knew that he meant business.

I remember his hands teaching me how to use a hammer, a wrench, and a saw. Although I never enjoyed fishing, I responded to his instructions on how to hold a fishing rod. Earlier, his hands taught me how to hold a transit pole for his surveying work, and how to use a plumb-bob.

In 1938, when he was called to be an Associate Apostle, his hands responded to a new challenge: blessings, temple sealings and counseling sessions, and advice. His busy hands turned away from temporal matters — away from engineering and building problems to spiritual things. And his hands responded to a new challenge.

Best of all, I remember his hands on my head as he gave me an apostolic blessing preparatory to my LDS mission to Hawaii in 1940. He quietly advised me to "always work with the people, and not get too involved in theoretical matters." All of the time he was talking, I felt like his hands were still on my head, adding some valuable advice to me in prayer.

Then, finally, there were a few hand-written letters, expressing his concern for my well-being in Hawaii. When I came home in late 1942, the first view at the train station was my father's hands, still remarkable, still potent, but somehow lifeless. Even so, I had missed them. But they stopped working in 1943 when he left us in death.

As if it were a bonus, I received a number of pictures of him, plus some memorabilia, and my work 50 years later has reminded me of him, and those marvelous hands. ♦

