

Ephraim's Rescue. Written and directed by T. C. Christensen.

DVD. Excel Entertainment and Remember Films, 2013.

Reviewed by John Hilton III

A mark of good historical fiction is that it motivates people to study more about the original historical events. While academic history books are the most in-depth and accurate, some lay readers may find them difficult to digest without some impetus. Novels and films based on real-life experiences can pique the curiosity of audiences and motivate them to tackle more difficult material. In the quest to determine what “really” happened, the record of the events, the interpretation of the events, and the dialogue about the events can enrich lifelong learning when using a variety of media, especially in these times of such new-media enthusiasm.

Ephraim's Rescue motivated me to learn more about Ephraim Hanks and the experiences portrayed in the movie. The film begins with an account of an elderly Ephraim Hanks racing to the Johnson home to heal Sister Johnson, who is seriously ill. When Hanks arrives, Brother Johnson informs him that he is too late—his wife passed away two hours previously. Nevertheless, Ephraim washes his hands and proceeds to administer to Sister Johnson, who is raised from the dead. In the blessing, Ephraim promises her that she will yet give birth to seven daughters, who will stand by her in future times. While watching the movie, I wondered to myself, did this sequence really happen, or is it an exaggeration made for dramatic purposes? So I did some research.

In many instances, I found some corroboration in the book *Scouting for the Mormons on the Great Frontier*, such as the account of a heavenly message inviting Hanks to help the handcart companies.¹ This book, written by Ephraim's son and grandson, presents many events recounted in *Ephraim's Rescue*. As with most historical retellings, *Scouting for the Mormons* is not an unbiased account; nevertheless, it represents some of the historical materials available to Christensen as he made the film and

to those interested in other ways of framing this particular historical narrative. Perhaps a more historically rigorous source, which also verifies many of the details of the movie, is Richard K. Hanks's master thesis, "Eph Hanks, Pioneer Scout."²

On some occasions, I was disappointed to learn that a scene had stretched the truth. A particular blessing from Hanks has incredible verbiage that I felt was quite faith-promoting. Alas, upon further investigation, I learned that the specific words depicted in the blessing were an instance of dramatic license. This highlights a potential pitfall of historical fiction, namely that fictionalized events are too often assumed to be true. That history and narrative are intimately connected is not a new idea; however, the complicated relationship between event and record is especially brought to the foreground in this film.

There are also some events portrayed in this movie that we know *did not* happen (for example, a blessing stating that at some future time, through means unknown, people would hear of a certain miracle). These examples of dramatic license are represented alongside events that we know *did* happen and can be verified through a historical record. However, one cannot fault T. C. Christensen, the director of *Ephraim's Rescue*, for adding in details where few are known; in fact, he works magic with the materials available to him. Part of the work of filmmakers is to dramatize the past in such a way that it becomes present to viewers. Christensen has done so, further establishing his mastery of faith-promoting narrative.

Known also for his cinematographic expertise in films such as *The Testaments*, *Joseph Smith: Prophet of the Restoration*, and *17 Miracles*, Christensen has again found success in weaving together the stories of Ephraim Hanks and Thomas Dobson of the Martin Handcart Company in an outstanding film for the whole family, although small children may be troubled by the disturbing elements of pioneers in distress. As with *17 Miracles*, the cinematography is aesthetically pleasing and the musical score is moving. These cinematographic details draw viewers into the storyline and invite them to imagine being present for the events portrayed.

While the narrative structure sometimes demands a departure from historical events, I was impressed by the detail with which Christensen portrays Hanks. For example, after Hanks shaves off his beard, he refers to himself as a "peeled onion," a line that is attributed to Hanks in *Scouting for Mormons*. Later in the movie, Hanks spends the night at the home of a couple in Draper, Utah. Viewers overhear a few seconds of

conversation before they all retire; the conversation portrays Hanks recounting a story in which Brigham Young instructed him to tear down the foundation of the house he was building and make it twice as thick. While this story is not a focal point, it is an illustration of the faithfulness with which Christensen attempts to render the film; even a small side-conversation uses words that Hanks is purported to have said.

Memorializing the stories of the pioneers is not an easy or insignificant feat. President Gordon B. Hinckley said, “Stories of the beleaguered Saints and of their suffering and death . . . [and] of their rescue need to be repeated again and again. They speak of the very essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”³ With *Ephraim's Rescue*, Christensen provides motivation for many to learn more about these stalwart Saints. Perhaps most importantly, this film can instill, as it did in me, a desire to be a more faithful Latter-day Saint, which is a goal worthy of both history and narrative.

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1. Sidney Alvarus Hanks and Ephraim K. Hanks, *Scouting for the Mormons on the Great Frontier* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1948). [▲]

2. Richard K. Hanks, “Eph Hanks, Pioneer Scout” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1973). [▲]

3. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Reach with a Rescuing Hand,” *Ensign* 26 (November 1996): 86. [▲]