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Mormon Western Colonization

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"MORMON WESTERN COLONIZATION"

Radio talk given by Dr. Joel E. Ricks, Head of the Department of History, Utah State Agricultural College, over station KSL, July 23, 1935

On the banks of City Creek eighty-eight years ago today or July 23, 1847, Orson Pratt, leader of the vanguard of pioneers wrote in his journal;

"Here we called the camp together and it fell to my lot to offer up prayer and thanksgiving in behalf of our company, all of whom have been preserved from and Missouri River to this point; and after dedicating ourselves and the land unto the Lord and imploring His blessings upon our labors, we appointed various committees to attend to different branches of business preparatory to putting in crops, and in about two hours after our arrival we began to plough, and the same afternoon built a dam to irrigate the soil, which at the spot where we were ploughing was exceedingly dry."

This is a description of the beginning of Mormon Western colonization. Like the pilgrims of New England prayer and labor were united in founding a commonwealth in the west. Then too this was a pattern followed in the Mormon settlement which soon extended in all directions from Salt Lake valley. From the small camp in the valley as Brigham Young later stated were extended "the curtains of Zion."

A threefold task confronted the great Mormon leader, Brigham Young. It was to bring the thousands of Mormon refugees from the Missouri River as well as from other parts of the United States and Europe, to build a real center of Zion in Salt Lake valley and to explore the country beyond and form centers of settlement on the distant frontiers where his people might plant crops and erect houses--a region large enough to care for the needs of the incoming thousands of immigrants. The indomitable leader was well qualified for the task before him. Captain Stansbury who was making a survey of the Great Salt Lake at the time the settlements were being formed and who had ample opportunity to observe the actions of Brigham Young from a non-Mormon point of view described the leader as follows:

"Intimately connected with them from their exodus from Illinois, this man has indeed been their Moses, leading them through the wilderness to a remote and unknown land. Resolute in danger, firm and sagacious in council, prompt and energetic in emergency, and enthusiastically devoted to the honor and interests of his people, he had won their unlimited confidence, esteem and veneration,, and held an unrivaled place in their hearts....he combined in his own character the triple character of confidential advisor, temporal ruler, and prophet of God. Intimately acquainted with their character,, capacities, wants and weaknesses; identified now with their prosperity as he had formerly shared to the full in their adversity and sorrows; honored, trusted, the whole wealth of the commonwealth interests of the infant settlement--he was, surely of all others the man best fitted to preside under the auspices of the General Government, over a colony of which he may justly be said to have been the founder,"

The country which Brigham Young proposed to colonize was magnificent in size. The area of his proposed State of Deseret included all the present Utah Nevada, Arizona and part of Colorado, Wyoming, New Mexico and southern California.

This domain was imperial in extent. It was to produce the products necessary for the self sufficiency of the people, its climate was varied enough to give comfortable habitation to the peoples of the Seven Seas.

In this area to be settled Brigham Young hoped to develop his kingdom of Heaven by combining temporal and spiritual activities. His State of Deseret was to be a place where his people might gain a livelihood by vigorous, cooperative toil and spend their leisure in regulated community pleasure, relaxation and religious worship. His sermons reveal his ideas. He said: "The labor we perform produces principally the spiritual wealth. There is no such thing as dividing temporal from spiritual labor. It is all manual labor whether it is to preach, baptize, lay on hands, to and fence a field, or sow and ater it for the Kingdom of God on earth." Again he said: "We are not going to wait for the angels, or for Enoch and his company to come and build up Zion but we are going to build it. We will raise our wheat, build our houses, fence our farms, plant our vineyards and orchards, and produce everything that will make our bodies comfortable and happy and in this manner we intend to build up Zion on the earth, and purify it and cleanse it from all pollutions," Again "Earthly wealth and greatness should only be used to subserve the purposes of God."

Thus Brigham Young outlined and analyzed the Kingdom which his people were to build. He dispatched explorers throughout the arid West to select suitable sites for settlements and their reports formed the basis of the numbers and types of settlers chosen to colonize the region. Missionaries to the Indians sent accounts of prospective lands and Brigham Young himself examined many of the possible locations. If the reports of the explorers were adverse as to the conditions in a valley or if they found only a small stream of water or a limited range for cattle then Brigham Young would not send a colony or would send only a small group to settle in that particular valley.

When the region for the settlement had been selected, the next serious problem was the choosing of a leader who was adequately prepared and experienced to direct the migration and to lead in the solution of the numerous material difficulties which would face the infant community. The importance which Brigham Young and his advisors attached to the prospective settlement was often shown by the selection of the leader, concerning which Brigham Young said, "shen we establish a town or city we set apart a man to preside over the affairs of that place. He is to dictate in all the affairs of that place." This reference is to the choosing of a leader for the settlement of Parowan and similar methods were used for other settlements.

To occupy the distant lands men were called by Brigham Young or other leaders. Near to Salt Lake the colonies were often founded by volunteers. The advantage of the method of calling men was that Brigham Young was able to choose men who were vocationally prepared to build up the center according to the economic needs for which the settlement was established. This was essential where the settlers were a distance away from the observation of Brigham Young.

The prospective colonists were given careful instructions prior to their journey. To the Parowan settlers George A. Smith said, "I hope our ears will not be saluted with swearing or the taking of the name of God in vain. We want no gambling. We re going to gather the saints and build up the Kingdom of God. We should act as though we are on a mission to preach the gospel." To the settlers of Saint George, Brigham Young gave detailed instructions for selection of dry not damp areas for the houses, the samitary care of drinking water, the selection of building materials and the cultivation of the soil.

The journeys to the distant areas were usually accomplished without serious mishap. This was because of several factors. In the first place, the obedience to orders and the careful guarding of the camp at the different stopping places, and the work of the vanguard on the march prevented Indian ambush and massacre. In the second place, the expeditions when going into the Indian country were usually preceded by explorers or missionaries who made friendly overtures with the Indians and thus prepared the way for a kindly reception. Furthermore Brigham Young was cautious enough not to send settlers where the Indians appeared menacing.

Thus prepared, centers of settlement were established in desirable valleys to act as strainers, to receive the population and scatter it into the surrounding country for purposes of colonization. In the ten years from 1848 to 1858 certain important locations were chosen for the purpose of holding the vast region which had been included for a time within the boundaries of the State of Deseret.

The centers north of Salt Lake were Ogden founded in 1848, Brigham City settled in 1851 and Wellsville in Cache Valley which in 1856 was on the northern frontier. South of Salt Lake Fort Utah or Provo built in 1849 on the shores of Utah Lake. Manti settled the same year, Fillmore founded in 1851 as the territorial capital of Utah; Parowan beyond on the California road in 1851 was planted as the distant outpost in Southwestern Utah and San Bernardino in 1851 was constructed in the Cajon Pass in the Sierra Nevada mountain fronting the Pacific as the western center of Mormon colonization.

Thus by 1858 Brigham Young had designed and established his outposts to hold his inland empire. Events were happening which modified his plans and limited his commonwealth. The coming of Johnstons army to Utah for what Brigham Young feared would be a war to exterminate the Mormons caused the leader to abandon these far flung settlements north of Salt Lake and south and west of Parowan. The war alarm passed however and peace was established but western Nevada and southern California were not colonized again.

The coming of the Civil War and the resulting need of cotton turned the attention of the Mormon leader to the Virgin and Colorado River regions. Thus in 1861 Saint George was founded in southwestern Utah in Dixie and in 1876 Brigham Young sent four companies to found Mormon settlements on the Little Colorado in northern Arizona.

Thus in 1877 that which Brigham Young had visualized in 1847 had been accomplished-- the stakes of his empire had been driven--the centers of colonization had been founded.