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The Utah Pioneers

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Eighty-six years ago the Mormon pioneer company under the leadership of Brigham Young entered this valley as the vanguard of a people who were to build their own civilization in the Great Basin and beyond. They were the forerunners of a people admirably trained for the task of colonizing the intermountain valleys. The middle west was the proving ground for the Mormon movement. There they developed a missionary system through which they reached sufficient numbers for their far western venture, they originated such ecclesiastical divisions as branches, wards and stakes, which they were to use in intermountain colonization, they built their towns such as Kirtland in Ohio, Independence and other towns in Missouri and the culmination of Joseph Smith's work as a colonizer, Nauvoo the Beautiful, which were patterns to be followed in the formation of Salt Lake City. In seven years which marked the history of this settlement it passed from the cruder frontier stages of a scattered town to a well planned orderly city, which was the fruition of Mormon colonial enterprise during this period.

Furthermore, in the middle west such Mormon leaders as Brigham Young were developed. Joseph Smith evolved the position of the President to a height where that officer became a dominant figure in the Latter Day Saints movement. Prophet of God to his people he was able three times to direct unsuccessful attempts at colonization and each time retain the esteem of the majority of his flock. He raised the office of the President of the Church to such a high pinnacle that a successor with a dominating personality might become virtually a dictator. By virtue of his position as President of the quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Brigham Young was able to succeed Joseph Smith as leader of the Mormon movement. In the eleven years from the time of his conversion to the death of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young gained the experiences which aided him materially to become a successful leader. His missionary labors in the United States and Great Britain gave him first hand knowledge of the men he was to lead and provided him with first hand information concerning the direction of that most powerful agency - the mission - for adding converts to his cause; his direction of the evacuation of Missouri trained him to supervise further migrations and his close association with Joseph Smith assisted him in understanding the city plans and settlements of the middle west - a knowledge which aided him in the colonial enterprises in the intermountain country. Thus helped, when the leadership was vested in him at the death of the founder, he was able unhesitatingly to carry out the projects of Joseph Smith, the greatest of which was to build cities of refuge for Mormonism in the heart of the Rockies.

The conflict between the Mormon people and their neighbors in the middle west produced a united people. Those members who were not thoroughly converted left the church during the friction. In adversity the members were brought close together. They formed friendships with each other instead of with non-Mormon neighbors. As the writers of the period observed unity came out of friction. Captain Gannison wrote: "The violence in Missouri gave a new impetus to Mormonism. The people were concentrated thereby, an unanimity of views and opinions again prevailed. The dissenters were driven away, the weak in the faith were made strong under the harangues of teachers who loudly proclaimed that so Christ and his apostles were made to suffer."

Governor Ford of Illinois observed "The murder of the Smiths, instead of putting an end to the Mormons and dispersing them, as many believed it would,
it only bound them together closer than ever, gave them anew confidence in their faith."

And, as George Albert Smith, one of the early leaders of the church said, "After the Latter Day Saints have been shifted five or six times, driven from Kirtland, Ohio by persecution, driven from Jackson and Clay counties, Missouri, expelled from the state of Missouri, from Illinois and eastern Iowa, deprived of all their property in these several drivings, they had become to a considerable extent shifted, so that those who came to Utah were generally zealous and faithful in their hearts to the glorious cause in which they had enlisted."

The majority of Mormons, because they fought for their beliefs, because they suffered for their religion, and because they believed that they were followers of a true prophet who would lead them to the glories of eternal life, were willing to offer their lives and their fortunes for the formation of cities where they might live and worship according to their own desires. The main body was so firmly welded together by the time of the death of Joseph Smith that instead of their movement being destroyed they were willing and experienced enough to go out on the frontier and build another Mormon Commonwealth after three failures in the middle west.

Again even the plans of migration had been developed in the middle west. The instructions given to the pioneers on the banks of the Missouri prior to going west were quite similar to those used in the exodus from Kirtland to Independence and from Missouri to Nauvoo. With the experiences gained in the sixteen year period ending on the banks of the Mississippi these seasoned pioneers, now forced by their neighbors to leave Nauvoo turned westward to accomplish the difficult task of building another colony in the distant Rockies. As the main body gathered on the banks of the Missouri, Brigham Young selected and instructed the small vanguard which was to blaze the trail for others to follow, to select a site in the distant west and to prepare a colony to welcome those who should come later. It was a great undertaking, and on April 14, 1847, the small company of about 148 persons left Winter Quarters for the west. They were organized under the leader Brigham Young into companies of 100's, 50's and 10's. Vigilant watch was kept at all times, especially when they reached the Indian country. They kept near the Platte river for water and for cottonwood branches to feed the cattle. Fish and buffalo were abundant as food. May 6, Orson Pratt recorded in his journal "I think I can safely say I have seen 10,000 buffalo during the day." At night they bivouched in corrals formed by their wagons, and guarded by alert pickets they gathered around camp fires and sang songs to encourage them for the performance of the dreary job of making homes in the distant wilderness.

Brigham Young was keenly alert for any signs of discontent and near Chimney Rock, not satisfied with the spirit of some of the pioneers the leader called the company together and sharply lectured those assembled. He proposed the type of pioneers needed and the spirit desired as follows: "Give me the man of prayers, give me the man of faith, give me the man of meditation, a sober-minded man, and I would far rather go amongst the savages with six or eight such men than trust myself with the whole of this camp with the spirit they now possess...Joking, nonsense, profane language, trifling conversation and loud laughter do not belong to us." He called upon them to repent and they did so unanimously. Brigham Young knew apparently that the tasks ahead of building a civilization called for the highest morale during the journey and he was not further disappointed.

The spirits of the pioneers were high as they gathered on the mountains near the valley of the Great Salt Lake. This is reflected in the journal comment of Thomas Bullock. He wrote July 22, 1847, "and we came into full view of the Salt
Lake in the distance, with its bold hills on its islands towering up in bold relief behind the silvery lake - a very extensive valley burst upon our view, dotted in 3 or 4 places with timber. I should expect the valley to be about 30 miles long and 20 miles wide. I could not help shouting, hurr, hurra, hurra, here's my home at last. The sky is very clear, the air delightful, and all together looks glorious, the only drawback appearing to be the absence of timber - but there is an ocean of stone in the mountains, to build stone houses, and walls for fencing - if we can only find a bed of coal we can do well..."

The vanguard of the pioneers entered the valley July 23, and late that day on the banks of a stream subsequently called City Creek, they selected the land for their first crops and in Pilgrim fashion these travelers prayed to God, dedicating themselves and the land to Him and imploring his blessings upon their labors and upon the seeds to be planted. Having done this, through united effort they began the planting of crops and the construction of the first irrigation ditch. This scene, with its prayerful beginning, the planting and cooperative irrigation, was typical of early Mormon economic enterprise. Since it was decided by the camp to remain in the valley, Brigham Young proposed that the small company construct their houses in the form of a fort. This proposal was accepted by the pioneers and they voted to put up a stockade of adobe houses. August 11 construction of the gray walls of the fort began and by December that work was completed.

July 28, 1847 the plan for Salt Lake City was suggested. Wilford Woodruff records it as follows: "We walked from the north camp to the center between the two creeks when President Young waved his hand and said: "Here is 40 acres for the temple. The city can be laid out perfectly square, north and south, east and west. It was then moved and seconded that the Temple lot contain forty acres on the ground where we stood. It was also moved and carried that the city be laid out into lots of ten rods by 20 each, exclusive of streets, and into blocks of eight lots, being ten acres each block and one and a quarter in each lot. It was further moved and carried that each street be laid out eight rods wide, and there be a sidewalk on each side twenty feet wide, and that each house be built in the center of the lot twenty feet from the front. It was also moved that four public squares of ten acres each be laid out in various parts of the city for public grounds." It was from these plans through the united efforts of these doughty pioneers that this beautiful Salt Lake City came to be a reality. In comparison with other westerners these pioneers stand high. The colonists to Oregon received a kindly reception and supplies from the Hudson's Bay Fur Trading Post, Fort Vancouver on the Columbia, and from the Methodist Mission on the Willamette. The American pioneers to California partook of the hospitality of the Spanish ranches, but the Mormon refugees from the middle west found only Indians and arid lands at their trail's end.