Parade participants and onlookers commemorating the 1947 pioneer centennial—a more complex history than meets the eye.
That Lengthening Shadow
CELEBRATING THE SESQUICENTENNIAL

In 1935, Bernard DeVoto observed, "The instinct that leads us to honor the memory of our great dead is buried deeper in the racial mind than exploration can trace it down. Nevertheless, such commemoration is precarious. For if our great men replenish us, it is also true that we insist on their confirming us. ... Out of the richness of the dead we may select what is most conformable to our needs, and the shadow that lengthens down the years comes more and more to be our own shadow."

DeVoto, a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and expatriate Utahn, had it right. Commemorations are precarious. They serve the present while purporting to preserve the past, creating history even as they celebrate it. They are mortal exercises to define human existence as durable, even universal, when it is neither. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on," Shakespeare reminds us. But, alas, perchance to dream ... a myth.

History is so valuable in Utah because we have so precious little of it and because it is so highly contested; Mormons and non-Mormons vie for the public telling, and the resulting myths deepen our distrust. Admittedly, this an overly pessimistic and simplistic assessment of our proprietary practice of history, but pessimism (to quote DeVoto) "is only the name that men of weak nerves give to wisdom," and simplicity is the very essence of commemorations, of centennials, of sesquicentennials. We celebrate, therefore we are.

While our statehood centennial year went out with a giant yawn by all accounts, it warmed people up for a second year of celebration, one more familiar to the majority because of the endless recitation of the events of 1847 since ... well, since 1847. The Sesquicentennial Committee has shoehorned the commemoration into every existing county fair, Dutch oven cookoff, and elementary school pageant in the state. By stressing "The Spirit of Pioneering," the committee has tried to co-opt others into the celebration without incorporating their memories and commemorations. Then it feigns astonishment when Indian groups in the state are angry and unwilling to read from the script handed them. According to native creation narratives, Indians were always here, the original people, not some Asian refugees pioneering Beringia, or Lamanites acting out a genocidal sibling rivalry. What should they commemorate—a history of land loss and exploitation at the hands of pioneers? Perhaps just cultural persistence against all odds.

Of course the celebration will go on without them because it’s designed to. The focus is the Mormon adventure. The news media are generating endless stories of the overland journey. They’ve condensed the experiences of numerous diarists in numerous companies during numerous years into a single parable against which to chart the progress of re-enactors leading the modern sesquicentennial wagon train. I appreciate the performance art aspect of this re-enactment, and I truly admire their willingness to hit the trail in polar fleece, wagons, and the occasional handcart.

But the history presented here conflates the entire overland trail and settlement experience into one year, weaving twenty years of history into a single seamless cloth in which to rewrap church and state. Lone pioneers, rickety handcarts, and burning government wagon trains unified in a Master Narrative fit for public consumption. Granted, it’s hard to sustain historical perspective and public excitement in an age when the average attention span equals an MTV video or a two-and-a-half minute talk. Still, given all the hoopla, given all the emphasis on what little past we have, maybe we should expect more from our sesquicentennial.

In thinking about the historical complexity of the Mormon Trail, I turned to the work of another Pulitzer Prize winner and adopted Utahn, Wallace Stegner. The Gathering of Zion (1964) is good reading and better history than anything you’ll see re-enacted this year. Stegner reminds us, "The most detailed histories of the trail itself have been written in the spirit of celebration and faith, and though most of them make extensive use of journals, they end by dehumanizing the immigrants almost as much as do the debunkers who see the migration as a movement of dupes led by blackguards. For the celebrators characteristically enlarge and mythify, and hence falsify, people who in their lives were painfully and complicatedly human." Stegner’s trail is full of very human individuals—men and women of incredible physical and spiritual strength who prayed and prophesied, cried and cursed, drank and danced.

For them, 1847 begins in Nebraska, squatting illegally on Omaha Indian land. These Mormons were already a disciplined lot, their numbers having been pared down by schism and apostasy before a prairie winter shrewed others’ resolve. From their numbers, Brigham Young selected his Pioneer Company: one hundred forty-four, twelve times twelve, biblical in propor-
tion. Young chose them for their skills and their ability to bear chastisement, just as he included Porter Rockwell to dispense it. It was, notes Stegner, "as humanly various as any company," but "in the myth, they can hardly be told apart." Among them was Thomas Brown, wanted for a murder and robbery in Iowa. Brown traveled to Utah to escape hanging, only to return and die in a brawl later that year. There were three African Americans—Green Flake, Oscar Crosby, and Hark Lay—not clearly free or Mormon but not acknowledged as the slaves they were. There was even a handful of backsliders in the group—doubtful Mormons pioneering Utah’s future.

The Pioneer Company dribbled out of its Winter Quarters. Young made several false starts, obsessively reorganizing those left behind and the fifteen hundred to follow in the Big Company, an experience obscured by the "lone pioneer" myth. Out on the trail, one dispirited pioneer resigned, and Lorenzo Young insisted on taking his wife, Harriet, and their two boys. Anyone who has traveled cross country with kids can appreciate Young’s dismay. (Imagine hearing "Are we there yet?" for three and a half months.) Since his 144 ideal was history, Young decided to take one of his own wives, Clarissa Decker, and allowed Heber Kimball to bring Ellen Sanders. Off they went, 148 individuals, 72 wagons, 93 horses, 52 mules, 66 oxen, 19 cows, 17 dogs, and some chickens.

The Omahas might have commemorated the Mormon exodus from their land had they not, in turn, faced imminent removal. But imagine a native phone call from Omaha to Salt Lake in April 1847: "Hello? Ya gotta speak up; we’re celebrating here. Hey, just wanna warn ya that they’re coming your way. Kids an’ chickens an’... Jeez! Looks like the Joaquin family. By the way, count your fingers after shakin’ hands while being part of it.

The company organization Young outlined was elaborate, even fussy, but as the country rose and cowpries became buffalo chips, order lapsed. The company celebrated reaching Chimney Rock as other overlanders did, with music, stag dancing, and card games, but Young blistered them in a soul-singeing sermon. “I have let the brethren dance and fiddle and act the nigger night after night to see what they will do,” he thundered. “I now tell you, if you don’t stop it, you shall be cursed by the Almighty, and shall dwindle away and be damned.” Of course Young blamed the backsliders and swore if they didn’t shape up they’d “never go back to tell the tale.” One can visualize Porter Rockwell, rocking heel-to-toe, patting his pistols.

Chastened, the pioneers raced across Wyoming because... well, that’s what Wyoming is for. Crossing South Pass, they encountered a procession of Mormons, mountain men, and eastbound immigrants. Young interrogated each of them about trails and settlement sites. Sam Brannan, who had landed a group of Saints in California the previous year, recommended Modesto as a nicer place to wait for the millennium than the Great Basin. Homesick Mormon Battalion members wished to return to their families in Iowa. Moses “Black” Harris advised Cache Valley; Miles Goodyear suggested Weber Valley; Jim Bridger told

**HISTORY IS SO VALUABLE IN UTAH BECAUSE WE HAVE SO PRECIOUS LITTLE OF IT AND BECAUSE IT IS SO HIGHLY CONTESTED. MORMONS AND NON-MORMONS VIE FOR THE PUBLIC TELLING, AND THE RESULTING MYTHS DEEPEN OUR DISTRUST.**

*Chinese immigrants celebrating the pioneer semi-centennial, 1897.*
them anywhere but Salt Lake Valley. Legend has it that Bridger offered a
thousand dollars for the first bushel of corn raised there, a bet unrecorded by
contemporary diarists. "It would have been a rash statement," Stegner notes,
"for when a Mormon community wants to prove something to the Gen-
tiles it can grow corn in a cement sidewalk." Undeterred, Young drove on.

At Fort Bridger the pioneers veered off the trail to follow the lonely track of
the 1846 Harlan Young and Donner parties who created, in fact, what had
been a paper trail, the Hastings Cutoff. Even here, Young was uncertain about
their ultimate destination, sending messages back to the Big Company that
he was heading toward Salt Lake "for the present, at least, to examine the
country." Rest stop or Zion, he hadn't decided.

The last thirty-six miles of the jour-
ney were epic. Young was raving from
fever, discipline lapsed, and the com-
pany broke into smaller groups. Fear of
ending up like the Donners gnawed at
their bones. Negotiating the existing
rough track from the Weber River up
and over to Emigration Canyon
required the most back breaking labor
of the entire trip. They hauled up and
skidded down. On July 22, advance
scouts Orson Pratt and Erastus Snow
entered and explored the valley. The
next day their group plowed a field
along City Creek, heeding Young's
orders "not to crowd upon the Utes
until we get a chance to get acquainted
with them ... it would be better to bear
toward the region of the Salt Lake
rather than the Utah, and find some
good place for our seeds and deposit
them as speedily as possible, regardless
of a future location."

("Hello, Omaha? Yeah, they're here,
subdividing the north forty. They look
a little confused—planting in July! It
may be a quick stay. Bye!"

Even then the location of Zion
wasn't a done deal and some pioneers
were unhappy. That night, Willard
Richards gave a rousing sermon calling
the advance party to repentance and
rededication. William Clayton wrote,
"It was a sermon of [hi]t from end to
end, some felt a little insulted but all

Another mode of pioneer transportation—a vintage Cadillac delivers parade roy-
alty to the 1947 Pioneer Day celebration.
BY STRESSING "THE SPIRIT OF PIONEERING"
THE SESQUICENTENNIAL COMMITTEE HAS TRIED TO CO-OPT OTHERS INTO THE CELEBRATION WITHOUT INCORPORATING THEIR MEMORIES AND COMMEMORATIONS.

What crops sprouted were frosted and than trampled when the Big Company arrived in late September. No problem, they had plenty to see them through the winter. Freed from the need to harvest, the men organized a competition to exterminate every predator they could find, and then hunkered down in their adobe fort to battle displaced field mice for space and stored Iowa grain. Of some twenty-one hundred Mormons who entered Utah in 1847, more than sixteen hundred spent an uncomfortable but mild winter preparing for the flood of Saints to come. So did the original Utahns.

There is nothing really new about the story I’ve presented. It highlights the dissonant human elements that Stegner recognized and celebrated in all of his works, things downplayed in our commemorative Master Narrative. We continue to ignore the Utes and Shoshones who visited the Mormon camp, and offered to share their knowledge and dried crickets when all that the Mormons wanted was Indian land—and to be left alone. Mormons barred them from the wagon circle in 1847, but today they drag them in as symbols of the pioneering spirit. Such majority commemorations are understandable attempts to universalize group experiences, but when they co-opt diverse pasts, sanitize and manipulate them to dominate others, they yield bad politics and worse history. (“Hello, David? Yeah, you didn’t tell our story—1847, Utah before those illegal aliens trundled in here with their kids an’ chickens an’...jeez, BEFORE!”) Indeed, while challenging the mythic unity of this commemoration, I’ve perpetuated a variant Master Narrative of my own.

So it goes. The majority will celebrate “Pioneering” anyway, expecting everyone to join in because it justifies a church/state holiday that eclipses all others. But let’s openly acknowledge that this commemoration is precarious, emotionally contested terrain, and let’s be honest about who, what, and how to celebrate something that is a modest slice of history. We are complex and contradictorily human, the product of our physical and cultural worlds, and despite all efforts to alter that condition by modifying our past, the lengthening shadow we commemorate will always be our own. SLC