Castle Valley America

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Introduction

The poet wrote, “No man is an island . . . every man . . . is a part of the main.” The same can be said for places, literally and figuratively, and how and when they become connected indelibly shapes their history. Castle Valley remained an uninhabited island in the American West for generations, as more inviting areas were “discovered,” inhabited, and “civilized.” When occupation finally occurred, industrialization followed within a handful of years. Then, in quick succession, came the sort of change called progress, then cultural innovation, the effects of world-wide upheaval and, finally, self-recognition. Like so many people, in its maturity, after three score years and ten (more or less), Castle Valley started discovering what sort of place it was and where it fit into the continent of the nation and on the map of American and global ideas, creating new, multi-layered identities.

Visions of American history normally come pre-scripted: the march of “progress” from Old World to New, from sea to shining sea, from autocratic institutions to true democracy. Traditionally, as a result, historians have viewed this process from the power centers (usually New England, New York, or Washington, D.C.) whether the approach is geographical, political, or philosophical. This book views a slice of America from a different perspective, in Utah’s last-settled hinterlands. Even in the twenty-first century, Utah is a sparsely inhabited state (third in amount of public lands after Alaska and Nevada) and the last to be admitted to the Union in the nineteenth century. Only Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, Alaska, and Hawaii joined afterward, but each of them had their own connections to other worlds—Spanish, Russian, or Pacific. Utah had none of those ties. It was (and is), in many respects, the edge of America, and Castle Valley is its last frontier.

But isn’t Utah history all about Mormons? This skewed perception explains much of the persistent historical neglect of Castle Valley. Yes, it is, but also about Utes and Paiutes and Spanish and Mexicans and Finns and Greeks and Japanese and Italians—in fact, many of the peoples of the world came to Castle Valley at one time or another. And most were not Mormon. Some even stayed. So Utah history itself traditionally ignored this area—too late to be part of the usual Mormon pioneer story, too different to fit into the sweeping generalizations with which Utah is usually
characterized. Even in the saga of Utah history, Castle Valley has remained an historical island.

Then how can Castle Valley exemplify America? As recent scholarship attests, America’s story is not so much of a movement of white European stock westward as it is a flow of peoples into the interior of the continent from several directions, impelled by motives more varied than simple progress or conquest. In historic times, continental penetration began first from the south, as the Spanish empire stretched out to claim increasing fingers of territory. Aside from Florida, ceded to England in 1763, much of Spanish expansion could be tied to the Old Spanish Trail. In 1776, Fathers Dominguez and Escalante initiated what became this well-traveled route. Their goal: the new missions of California; at their back, the 160–year-old entrepot of Santa Fe. The Old Spanish Trail runs through Castle Valley.

The next expansion came from competition between distant commercial empires. Their polyglot fur trappers associated sometimes with the French, or with the Americans, or with the powerful, long-lived Hudson’s Bay Company. Men like the American Fur Company’s Etienne Provost (for whom Provo, Utah, is named) traversed the region, trapping and later escorting caravans westward to the annual fur trade rendezvous. Compatriots left their names painted on a rock on the west bank of the Green River in the 1830s, at the very northeast edge of Castle Valley, and on the cliffs at its western border. Finding little of value there, they, like the Spanish, traveled on.

The third wave of strangers led to settlement—people of northern European heritage who usually star in the first act of America’s historical pageant. Here, they came later. In Utah’s case, most were Mormons—members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who had been driven from their homes by a succession of enraged neighbors. Their fellow Americans had been offended by Mormon clannishness, by their self-righteousness, and by rumors of repugnant practices: theocracy and polygamy. The flip side of these qualities—community solidarity, self-reliance, piety, and centralized authority—made the Saints successful in the West, and led to a well-rooted settlement in Utah’s Great Basin. But while many of the Mormons initially sought a separate refuge in their protected Zion, American history would not let them rest long. While they ignored Castle Valley because of its awkward geographical location and desolate lands, they extended westward to California. In 1848, at Sutter’s Mill, a handful of Mormon men helped discover gold, stunning the world and rearranging a good portion of its population. Trying to keep travel routes open, Mormons sought a corridor to the sea, founding San Bernardino—and between the excitement of Sutter’s Mill and the hustle of California colony-building, Castle Valley’s two leading pioneers got their early training.

With California gold came the clamor for a national railroad, which was completed in Utah in 1869. This monopolistic octopus wrapped its tentacles around Utah transportation until the coming of the Denver and
Rio Grande Western in 1883—right through Castle Valley, settled less than a decade earlier. The frontier was now open for settlement, up to its very edge.

A short decade later, historian Frederick Jackson Turner announced that the frontier had closed (in a much-disputed perception). At least the West was so settle[d] that a frontier line could no longer be discerned on a map generated by the 1890 census. He noted the passing of several distinct frontiers: the Indian Traders Frontier, the Ranchers Frontier, the Farmers Frontier, and Army Posts (also, presumably, a sort of frontier). Castle Valley’s history, while experiencing some of these types, proceeded in its own order as the grand American parade got somewhat jumbled by the time it reached this far-off region—definitely an island of barrenness among the checkered, settled lands of the West.

Once most lands were taken, American energy turned largely to their development and/or exploitation. The nation was buffeted by successive waves of change brought by the Industrial Revolution, progressive reforms, World War I, and the supremacy of business. These waves surged and crested in the national mainstream, and their crescendos crashed over the edge into Castle Valley in quick succession. No harbor of tradition existed to cushion the force of these blows, and Castle Valley had to devise its own ways to weather these cross currents. In the 1920s, national cultural norms and attitudes began to sink in, due, in part, to improved transportation, communication, and an increasingly mobile set of local residents. By the Great Depression of the 1930s, Castle Valley’s history was entwined with the life of the nation, and the federal government had become a mainstay rather than a hindrance. National ties only strengthened in the 1940s and 1950s as Castle Valley minerals truly made the area “the arsenal of democracy.” In this epoch, the “ties to the main” became two-way: not just outside influences rushing in, but contributions to the national welfare flowing out. As residents started assessing their home and its main significances, Castle Valley developed its own version of 1960s liberation, 1970s discontent, and 1980s economic revival.

In the most recent decades, Castle Valley has edged toward an economic precipice. Now very much entwined with energy production, its economy faces the practical dilemma of what to do when coal and gas reserves run out, as they are likely to do in the near future. Fortunately, Castle Valley has another kind of virtually untapped reserve: its history, geology, paleontology, archaeology, and its people, who have connections to virtually everywhere else on earth. The past remains near and palpable—you can almost hear it breathing. The future, however, remains a question, as it so often has in unpredictable Castle Valley.