Polygamy on the Pedernales

Johnson, Melvin C

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Introduction

The Wild Ram of Texas

good history is not magic—and not given to an elite few
—Herschel Harry Dixon Jr.

The history of the Wightites and the polygamous villages of the Texas Hill Country are relevant and timely today. Such stories as headlined in the *Eldorado (TX) Success*, “Arizona Man Says Prophet Stole His Family,” in July 2005, catch attention. The *Dallas Morning News* reported a year earlier about the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints’ new compounds “in tiny Eldorado, where fire-and-brimstone religion may be welcome but multiple wives tend to rankle.” Once again, more than 140 years later, the American issues of “fringe religions, moral relativism and separation of church and state” have come to Texas. Texas and Texans have seen many unusual denominations, but the Mormons always spark contention when they settle among those who have never been around them. Those Texans who call Eldorado and the Lone Star state home are concerned: “it’s because of worries . . . the group’s reclusive and powerful spiritual leader, Warren Jeffs, will move in permanently with a few thousand followers and take over the local government. Others say that is too alarmist, and the general consensus is that the polygamists’ arrival means life here will never be the same again.”1 Whatever the outcome at Eldorado in West Texas, Texans cannot escape their history.

Let me explain why by beginning at the end. This is an examination of Lyman Wight and his Texas colonists. As their community ended in 1858, this small group of Mormon religionists, led by their indomitable chieftain, had influenced frontier affairs far beyond their numbers. A much, much smaller group than the Latter-day Saints of Utah Territory, they were also fewer in number than other Mormon sects, such as the Strangites of the Great Lakes region and the Cutlerites of Iowa. Yet these Texas polygamists blazed the way for other settlers into the Texas Hill Country, building wilderness mills that became the cornerstones for frontier communities, creating buffer zones between the settlements and the native tribes, and erecting the first practicing Mormon temple west of the Mississippi River. They practiced the precepts of their unique religion without giving in to their neighbors and without going to war with them. Those former colonists who stayed in the Hill Country after their leader’s death continued to help to change the region into the dynamic part of modern Texas that it is today.

Known as the “Wild Ram of the Mountains,” Lyman Wight was a rebellious apostle of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), who led his polygamous community to the Republic of Texas in 1845. Historian Richard E. Bennett describes Wight’s mission as one to “teach Indians, attract southern shareholders to the Mormon cause, raise money, and in other ways hasten and facilitate the return of the Church to the believed staging site of Christ’s millennial return in Independence, Missouri.”

The history of Wight and his frontiersmen (described as Wightites) is little known. Their many journeys began at Kirtland, Ohio

2. The New York Sun records the first non-Mormon description of Wight as the “Wild Ram of the Mountains,” according to the LDS Journal History of the Church, 45:6 August 1845, 1 (hereafter cited as Journal History of the Church), Church Historical Library, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Church Office Building, Salt Lake City, Utah. The Journal History of the Church is an unpublished collection of scores of volumes containing many thousands of entries pertaining to nineteenth-century Mormonism. These sources include newspapers, diaries, letters, records of church meetings, etc. Other sources for the LDS church are located in its various libraries, museums, and archives in the Salt Lake City area. All will be cited as the LDS archives.
4. The reader should understand that such terms as Wightites, Rigdonites, Josephites, Brighamites, etc., are used informatively, not pejoratively. They accurately reflect the wording and definitions of the times.
and moved through Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin Territory, the Republic and State of Texas, Indian Territory, Utah Territory, Iowa, and California. This study is rooted in local and family history, and it focuses on the time and place as well as the family/kinfolk relationships of the Wightite colony. Larger issues associated with the history of the West, Texas, and the Mormon movement, in general, flow from these relationships.  

Lyman Wight’s character is important in understanding his community’s odyssey. The autocratic frontier leader, increasingly addicted to his alcohol and opium as time passed, still inspired others to follow him for more than fifteen years, in situations often grim and troubled, across America’s borderlands in pursuit of their common faith. To understand Wight is to understand that his persona characterized the dedication, the strength, and the personality of early Mormonism and its converts.

A true believer in primitive Christian practices, Wight replicated their rituals in latter-day Mormon communities unusual on the Wisconsin and Texas frontiers. He believed unreservedly in millennial Mormonism and in its founding martyr, Joseph Smith Jr. He literally believed Smith to be a prophet of God. Wight was unswervingly committed to establishing an American Zion in Jackson County, Missouri, and later in creating a gathering place in Texas for the faithful. In sanctified communities of Mormondom, Wight and others believed, the Kingdom of God would be created to prepare them for the Second Coming of Christ. Wight believed that Christ would come soon to Zion and establish an end-time millennial reign amidst His chosen people.

During the formative years of early Mormonism in Missouri, many of its leaders and followers grew to respect Wight, this religious chieftain who waged literal warfare against the enemies of Mormonism. Because of his martial dedication and steadfastness in support of Joseph Smith Jr., he rose to membership in its leading councils. Charismatic, intensely personal, and often domineering in his dealings with others, the Wild Ram became influential with Joseph Smith.

Primary source materials, public and private, reveal previously unknown details about the Wightites. Material artifacts of their sojourn in Texas are almost nonexistent. Sycamore Springs (1846), north of Austin, is now under water. Only a wheat field with a state marker commemorates Zodiac (1847–51), and decayed, deteriorating cemetery ruins mark the village at Hamilton Creek (1851–53). Medina Lake covers Mountain Valley (1854–58), the final Wightite village.

The colony’s population never reached more than 175 at any given time, yet Zodiac and its descendent communities were unlike anything ever seen before in the Texas Hill Country. Although the Wightites opposed Brigham Young’s rule in Nauvoo and Utah Territory, they still practiced those tenants marking them as a sect of nineteenth-century Mormonism: temple ritual, economic communitarianism, and polygamy. Polygamy, which here means polygyny, a relationship of one husband with more than one concurrent wife, is used as a neutral description in this work.

The Wightites were the first sizeable party of Mormons to enter the Republic of Texas. Smith Jr. had earlier dispatched an emissary, Lucien Woodworth, in the spring of 1844 to meet with President Sam Houston. Houston and Woodworth discussed establishing a large Mormon colony in the buffer zone between the Anglo-European settlements, the roving tribes of Native Americans, and the northern states of Mexico. Houston, expressing enthusiasm and preliminary approval, counseled Woodworth that the Texas Congress,

6. Estimates are based on research into the personal journals, diaries, and memoirs of the colonists; various private and public archives in the states of Iowa, Missouri, Utah, Wisconsin, Nebraska, and Texas; and the records and schedules of several federal censuses. The author has created several databases recording, collating, and identifying the writings, beliefs, and behavior of more than 300 individuals who played roles during the six eras that define the Wightite period: the Black River Lumber Company on the Black River Falls in Wisconsin (1841 to 1845); the trek to the Texas frontier and the wintering at Fort Johnston, Grayson County (March 1845 to March 1846); the trek to Austin and settlement at Sycamore Springs, Travis County (April 1846 to May 1847); the community of Zodiac, Gillespie County (May 1847 to the early spring of 1851); Mormon Mills or Hamilton Mills, Burnet County (late spring of 1851 to December 1853); and the trek to and establishment of Mormon Camp and Mountain Valley, Bandera County (December 1853 to March 1858).
meeting later that fall, would have to approve the Mormon request. Woodworth returned to Smith in Illinois. The Mormon leader, after discussing the matter with his advisers (known as the Council of Fifty), ordered Wight to take a small colony to Texas and make smooth and ready the path for a major migration of the LDS church to Texas.

The murders in Illinois of Joseph Smith Jr. and his brother Hyrum on a warm, muggy June evening, however, changed Mormon church history forever, and led to the intermixing of the histories of Mormonism and Western Americana. The Twelve Apostles gained the joint leadership of the largest group by far among the several factions of antebellum Mormonism. Within the Twelve, the senior apostle, Brigham Young, was the true leader. Young’s growing preference for moving the church to the Rocky Mountains inevitably frustrated Wight’s plans. Today, more than 160 years after the murders of the Smiths, the LDS church, with headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah, has a membership in excess of eleven million people.

Wight and his followers travelled fourteen months across the western borderlands from the Wisconsin pineries to the Texas Hill Country. They overcame the cool reception initially given them at Austin, and the next year (1847) moved further west to the Pedernales River, a few miles from Fredericksburg. Here the Mormon community of Zodiac and its mechanical mills became a valued asset. Frontier Texans appreciated the Mormons’ hard work and industrial skills and Zodiac’s possession of the only mechanical mill west of Austin. They also appreciated the peace the Mormons and the Texas Germans maintained with Comanche chief Buffalo Hump and his tribe.

Wightite socio-economic dynamics fused the sacred with the profane, which made the colony’s success possible. Their community

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7. B. H. Roberts, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, 7 vols, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Desert News, 1948–52), hereafter cited as *History of the Church*. For incidental details of LDS interest in Texas, see 1:176n; 3:289–90, 315, 420, 445–49; 4:341; 6:260–61, 356, 377; 7:250–52, 254–55, 261. Young was undoubtedly correct in eventually choosing the Rocky Mountains as the church’s destination, where it was able to grow with almost no federal influence or opposition for more than ten years. Those years were critical to the survival of the religion.
practices reinforced the union of individuals and families into a cohesive body of believers who maintained a separatist society distinctively aloof from fellow Texans. Communal strength and social cohesiveness were bedrocked on principles of polygamous kin relationships; thus, the individual desires were subjugated to needs of the whole. The socio-economic result was Mormon commercial domination of the Texas Hill Country by 1850. This came with a cost. Wightite socialization created powerful opposition in Gillespie, Burnet, and Bandera counties, based on the excited jealousy of their non-Mormon neighbors. However, unlike other Mormon controversies in antebellum America, the Wightite-Texan conflict never led to bloodshed.

The Wightites built the first Mormon temple west of the Mississippi. Clothed in holy garments, the celebrants performed sacred rituals singular to their faith. These rites included marriages for time and eternity; baptisms for the salvation of their dead; the anointing of religious priests, kings, and queens; and adoptions that bound families and members in time and eternity. The Wightite ceremonies were intended to link eternity with the present and past, creating a continuum of family structures that extended beyond the veil of death. These facets of their history are almost completely unknown today.

The Wightites in Texas did not function in complete isolation from their neighbors. They, like most Mormon groups, proselytized among the Texas communities. Many Texans did not want Mormons (Wightites or other kinds) in their land; thus the missionaries faced much opposition, and, on occasion, violence. Memoirs of both LDS and Wightite missionaries recorded kidnappings, mobbings, and beatings in East Texas and along the Gulf Coast. Polygamy and its practice were the normal excuses for attempts to drive Mormon missionaries from the field. Homer Duncan, an LDS missionary from Utah Territory, thought the Texans’ outcry about polygamy hypocritical, because “every negro quarter” in Panola County, Texas, “is filled with blue-eyed children.” Despite resistance from many Texas religious leaders and churches, more than 800 Texans converted to Utah Mormonism during the 1850s, particularly in the region of Grimes, Harris, and Montgomery counties. Other preaching successes were recorded in the piney woods of Panola and Rusk
counties in deep East Texas. Most of the converts journeyed to Utah Territory as soon as they were able to outfit and travel.8

Lyman Wight and his followers, after leaving Zodiac in 1851, continued to establish settlements on the frontier. These included Mormon Mills in Hamilton Valley, Burnet County, and after debts and schism forced them out, the final settlements at Mormon Camp and Mountain Valley, in Bandera County, from 1854 to 1858. Depredations and raids by the Comanches, as well as internal pressures, whittled away the community’s vitality and numbers. Wight, growing old and wanting to return to Jackson County, Missouri, declared in February of 1858 that he had received a revelation directing his return there. His movement, reduced to about eighty individuals, struggled only a short distance before he died on 30 March 1858 near Dexter, Bexar County.

His followers dispersed, and their history became fragmented. One group continued north to Iowa, some returned to the Texas Hill Country, and others emigrated to California to escape the coming war. Those living in the Hill Country served the Confederacy and Texas. Ezra Alpheus Chipman, the final polygamous, patriarchal male of the original Wightite colony, died at Bandera City, Texas, in 1913.

An overwhelming majority of the Texas Wightites joined the newly established Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS), formally organized in 1860. The movement, also known as the Reorganization, drew its members from dissident Mormon congregations in Iowa, Missouri, and eastern Nebraska. Their opposition to Brigham Young and the primacy of the LDS Church led the RLDS to accept Joseph Smith III, the son of Mormonism’s slain founder, as its prophet and priesthood leader for millennial Mormonism. Disagreements between the LDS and the RLDS concerning succession, polygamy, and other theological issues have continued for more than 140 years. The RLDS movement has evolved

8. Diary of Morris J. Snedaker (1855, 1856), 39, 79, LDS archives; John Hawley, “Autobiography of John Hawley” (original and typescript of the handwritten manuscript, 1889), 8, 9, Historical Department archives, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Community of Christ), Independence, Missouri (hereafter cited as RLDS archives); Homer Duncan, Deseret News (Salt Lake City), 2 April 1856, also quoted in the Journal History of the Church, 119:2 April 1856, 4.
into what is now known as the Community of Christ, centered at Independence, Missouri.

This history then is a reconstruction of the life and times of Lyman Wight and his followers. To appropriate the words of a local Texas historian, creating a history of the Hill Country Mormons is possible only with a careful “sifting and weighing [of] the raw material for fruitful historical pursuit.” For example, Wightite records have been found in the Bandera County courthouse; those dusty registers describe the collapse of Lyman Wight & Company’s economic collective and serve as a witness to the ongoing dissolution of the colony itself. Other documents have been located in Texas, Iowa, Nebraska, Wisconsin, California, and Utah.

The story of the Wightites and Lyman Wight is the story of human perseverance in the face of adversity. An old man’s manuscript noted that the trek from Wisconsin to Texas was for him, in part, always framed in the stark memory of near starvation—he remembered a little boy so hungry that the discovery of a discarded biscuit in a rat’s nest became a wondrous treasure. Such matters bring alive the words “that good history is not magic—and not given to an elite few with the knack, but it is available and there for the taking for anyone who is willing to get to his or her hips in sleuthing.”

The history of Lyman Wight and his followers on the American frontier continues in the next chapter, and it has been “there for the taking.” Whatever error that exists in this work, of course, is my sole responsibility.

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