Over The Rim

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Whether the men of Parley’s expedition appreciated his remembering them for more toil, labor, and sacrifice is hard to say. For most if not all of them, with or without the recommendation, labor and sacrifice there would be. For Parley himself there was no rest; within a month of his return he was back at work on the toll road he had begun building through Parleys Canyon. The road earned $1,500 in tolls in the summer of 1850. By the following March, Parley, with his earnings, was en route to Chile to open South America for Mormon missionary work. That was his tenth full-time mission. His eleventh, in 1854, took him back to Chile. On his twelfth, in 1857, he was murdered in Arkansas.

Some of the expedition veterans became Mormon bishops, stake presidents, and mission presidents. Some were mayors or other civic officials. Several served in the territorial legislature. Many served LDS missions, some of them several, many overseas. One of them, Chauncey West, served as far from home as Ceylon and India. George Nebeker colonized the Moab area, then Carson Valley—both failures—then spent thirteen years in charge of building the Mormon Church in Hawaii, acquiring the property on which the church’s temple, the Polynesian Culture Center and Brigham Young University Hawaii now stand. Some, besides Parley, died early, violently. Isaac Brown was killed by Indians, Josiah Arnold murdered in a break-in attempt, Sterling Driggs killed in a threshing machine, William Willes in a sawmill.

But what mostly characterizes the later lives of the Southern Expedition veterans was the willingness with which so many of them answered the calls to colonize—and to accept the hardship and sacrifice that colonizing demands. Brigham Young’s goal was to establish a Mormon empire stretching from the Rockies to the Sierras and beyond. The expedition itself was an early step in that effort, but only a step. Its veterans took many other steps, colonizing from San Bernardino to the Carson Valley to the Salmon River to the Elk Mountain and dozens of communities in between. Many
of them returned to establish or build the Iron Mission and the Cotton Mission and other places they had explored with Parley. One was Isaac Haight, called to manage the new iron works in Cedar City. He served there as mayor and stake president until the Mountain Meadows massacre. He was cut off from the church for his part in that tragedy. Though his membership was later restored and he continued to serve the Mormon Church, the last third of his life was spent in hiding or at least exile from the scenes of his major labors. By contrast, there was doughty, old Samuel Gould, the expedition’s seventy-one-year-old patriarch, who, ignoring Indian threats that drove everyone else off, lived into his late eighties alone on his ranch on Hurricane Mesa.

What motivated the courage, commitment, and sacrifice of so many? Perhaps Isaac Haight expresses it best. Barely two months after he returned home with Parley, he learned in the April general conference of the church that his stay at home would be brief. His journal reports that “I with six other Elders were appointed to go to England on a Mission and leave our Families which seems rather hard after enduring the fatigues of the winter. Yet I am willing to go and forsake all [for] the Gospel Sake and go to work to prepare for the journey.”

Which seems as appropriate an expression as any of the spirit behind the Southern Exploring Expedition.