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The Utah War

The Hold Mormons Had on Utah Is Broken

1857–1858

If any particular period could be considered critical in Utah’s history, it likely would be 1857-58, when the U.S. Army marched on the Mormons and forever cracked their shell of isolationism. In the brief span of two years, Brigham Young would be deposed as governor of the territory, troops would be sent to protect his successor, and a horrific episode known as the Mountain Meadow massacre would cloak the Mormon Church in a black shroud of shame and disgrace.

The army eventually withdrew, leaving behind millions in materiel, which the Mormons bought for pennies on the dollar. On the surface it seemed an unalloyed Mormon triumph, but in truth Brigham Young lost the total domination he once enjoyed over the citizens of Utah. It was far from a fair exchange. Who gained the advantage? It depended on which side was asked.

The confrontation had been long simmering, starting in the early 1850s with the runaway officials—those federal appointees who vacated Utah after clashing with Governor Brigham Young on how things should be run in the territory. In the next few years, the situation became complicated when Jim Bridger was forced out of the trading post he built on Blacks Fork in present Wyoming. The Mormons accused him of intriguing with the Indians. Brigham Young offered to buy the property but dealt with Louis Vasquez, Bridger’s partner. Young paid Vasquez $4,000 in 1855 with a promise of another $4,000 to close the deal.

At the same time, Albert Carrington, editor of the Deseret News, railed against William M. F. Magraw, the U.S. mail contractor, accusing Magraw of dereliction in delivering eastern mail to Utah. So vociferous were the complaints that Magraw, sullen and vindictive, finally threw up his hands and abandoned the contract to a much lower Mormon bid.

Then, of course, there was Associate Justice W. W. Drummond, in 1855 the latest federal appointee to the Supreme Court of the Territory of Utah. Drummond was related by marriage to a Mormon, and he rated them somewhat lower than horse thieves on the social ladder. If anything, the feeling was mutual. Brigham Young, in one of his more solicitous moments, referred to Drummond as “a rotten-hearted loathsome reptile.”

Drummond became a stench within his jurisdiction once he introduced “Mrs. Drummond” to Mormon social circles and it was discovered that she was, in fact, Ada Carroll, a prostitute he had picked up in Washington. It also became public then that Drummond had deserted his wife and children at Oquawka, Illinois. A letter from the real Mrs. Drummond was published in the Deseret News, exposing his scandalous behavior with the Carroll woman and “his general perfidy.” During
Drummond's tenure among the Saints, he was hard pressed to keep Ada interested; there just wasn't enough action in Zion to entertain a city woman. So on the days Drummond held court, she joined him on the bench and, according to several diarists, offered her counsel on handing out sentences.

Dale Morgan summarized the problem succinctly in stating, "Drummond launched a wholesale assault upon the Mormon courts as being founded in ignorance, and he discovered an ally in Judge George P. Stiles, who had at one time been a Saint in good standing but who had, as the Mormons saw it, gone lusting after strange gods." Stiles, the wavering Mormon, was excommunicated for immoral conduct—adultery.

Then Bill Hickman, who divided his time between being a desperado and a lawyer, let it be known if Drummond pulled any such shenanigans on him, he would inflict on the judge painful bodily injury. The message reached Drummond, who decided it was time to hold court in a more distant corner of Utah Territory—Carson City, for instance. From there he and his lady Ada went to San Francisco and booked ship passage to the East. Stiles's abrasion with Utah lawyers came in February 1857 when James Ferguson and Hosea Stout, a couple of true hard cases, raised Cain in the court and intimidated Stiles into adjourning. The judge's law office was ransacked and certain papers in his office burned in a nearby outhouse,
giving rise to subsequent charges that Stiles's law library and court records had been destroyed. (They had not been.) The judge appealed to Brigham Young as governor to protect him in the discharge of his office but was told that if he could not sustain and enforce the laws, the sooner he adjourned the court the better. Stiles closed shop and also packed to leave the territory.

The national election in November 1856 had seen James Buchanan defeat John C. Frémont for the presidency. Bitter reports brought east by those who departed Great Salt Lake City proved to be a last straw, writes Dale Morgan in *The Great Salt Lake*. Characterizing the Mormons as being in open rebellion, Buchanan ordered a sizable military force to Utah as an escort for new federal appointees (including a governor to replace Brigham Young) and to reestablish the supremacy of government.

This Utah Expedition was to be commanded by Brigadier General William S. Harney, but he was temporarily reassigned to Kansas and Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston named to take his place. Because of this change in orders, the expedition—consisting of the Tenth Infantry Regiment, the Fifth Infantry Regiment, the Fourth Artillery, and elements of the Second Dragoons—got off to a late and erratic start from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Civilian contractors Russell & Majors were hurriedly called upon to supply the expedition as well as the western army posts. The short notice resulted in mass confusion along the frontier as wagons, mules, oxen, and men were recruited and assembled for the massive campaign.

The Department of the Army dispatched Captain Stewart Van Vliet, an assistant quartermaster, to Utah to arrange for supplies. He contacted Governor Young and turned over a confidential communication from Harney explaining the expedition's mission: to escort the new appointees and to act as a *posse comitatus*. Later instructions would allow at least two and perhaps three new U.S. Army camps in Utah. Van Vliet reached Great Salt Lake City September 8 and sought out Young. In the maelstrom Buchanan had made a critical slip; he had failed to notify Brigham Young officially that he had been superceded. Young—who had once declared: "We have got a territorial government, and I am and will be the governor, and no power can hinder it until the Lord Almighty says, 'Brigham, you need not be governor any longer,' and then I am willing to yield to another"—made the most of Buchanan's blunder. He chose to regard the troops as a mob and on September 15, 1857, declared martial law in the territory. His now famous proclamation began "Citizens of Utah—We are invaded by a hostile force. . . ."

Two weeks later, Young learned that an entire wagon company—men, women, and all children over the age of six—had been slaughtered in southern Utah. Only seventeen youngsters had been spared! Not until September 29 did John Doyle Lee arrive in Great Salt Lake City from Cedar City with his "awful tale of blood." According to Lee, Indians had massacred a wagon train. Brigham Young grieved for the victims, but by early October details began trickling out of California. It was Indians, yes. But whites, too—Mormons, who had betrayed the emigrants. Lee later claimed to have told Young this as well.

The wagon train was principally made up of Arkansans from Carroll County who had pulled up stakes for a fresh start in California. The company would be treacherously slain at a place called Mountain Meadow on the old Spanish Trail southwest of Cedar City. Full identities of the victims have never been totally determined and probably never will be, but it is generally accepted that some of the 120 or more slain had traveled in companies led by John T. "Uncle Jack" Baker and Alexander Fancher. Seventeen youngsters under the age of six were spared and parceled out to Mormon families. They later were recovered and returned to Arkansas. It is believed by some historians that at least one additional, unidentified surviving child remained in Utah to be reared by a Mormon family.

The history of the massacre is complex and in great measure hopelessly contradictory. Books have been written and will continue to be written on this black, bloody chapter in Utah's past. But for now, the most balanced account is *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* by Juanita Brooks. New facts continue to surface with the passage of time because of dogged research on the part of historians and scholars. But in essence, the Arkansas train was composed of well-to-do families from the Carroll County area. It has been said theirs was the richest outfit to have crossed the Plains.

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They left in April of 1857 and followed the Arkansas River, crossed the Santa Fe Trail, then coursed north until they reached the Platte River in mid-June, moving slowly with a trail herd of some nine hundred cattle. Two other wagon parties—the Turner-Duke outfits, primarily Missourians—also were on the trail and traveled with the Baker-Fancher companies from time to time for mutual protection against Indians; the Turner-Duke bunch also trailed a sizable cattle herd.

Nearing Great Salt Lake City in late July, they encountered groups of Mormons making preparations to fend off the U.S. Army they now knew was on the march for Utah. There were still other scattered emigrant companies on the road, at least one from Texas, and these wagon trains, too, sought pasturage in the Salt Lake Valley for their herds. But the Mormon population, girding for an expected “invasion by a hostile force,” was in no mood to banter or barter with non-Mormon “Gentiles”—especially Missourians and Arkansans (whom they now held responsible for the ambush murder of their apostle Parley P. Pratt by an angry husband west of Fort Smith the previous May). The emigrants were ordered to move their livestock off Mormon pastures and warned to keep them off!

During the next few weeks, the Baker-Fancher company first drifted north, thinking to take the upper route around the Great Salt Lake, then in late August turned about for the southern corridor to California (along today’s I-15). And so, in the eye of a hurricane of Mormon war planning, the Arkansas company proceeded south on a road that would take them through outlying settlements. Trouble began almost immediately beyond Provo when they were rebuffed in efforts to buy vegetables and other hard-to-get trail provisions.

Mormon apostle George A. Smith was on a circuit of those southern settlements preparing them for the approaching Utah Expedition. In his “war talk,” he warned the army might try to drive the Mormons from their homes, and, he emphasized, Utahns should husband food and provisions and not trade with Gentiles. “Store your harvest for the hard times ahead,” he counseled. The stubborn refusal to part with even the smallest amount of greens and garden vegetables infuriated the wagon companies, who retaliated with threats to return when the army reached Utah and help in teaching “the damned Mormons” a lesson. It was also said the travelers turned their herds into Mormon fields and trampled fences in the towns beyond Salt Creek (Nephi) and Fillmore. Later it was reported they insulted and cursed the settlers, and some claimed the emigrants dumped strychnine into a spring at Corn Creek (Kanosh) and poisoned an ox carcass, which subsequently sickened Indians who ate the meat. Though they have become fixed in Mormon lore, such claims are difficult to prove or disprove today.

The Fancher-Baker outfits camped in Mountain Meadow to rest their animals. They reportedly left in their wake a seething string of settlements, including Beaver, Paragonah, and Parowan. Isaac C. Haight, a Mormon stake president, angrily told a church meeting on September 6 that “the Gentiles will not leave us alone. They have followed us and hounded us . . . and now they are sending an army to exterminate us. So far as I am concerned I have been driven from my home for the last time.”
Years later, John D. Lee confessed that Piede (Paiute) Indians in the region had been encouraged to attack the wagon train for its plunder. The Mormons, he said, became involved out of revenge for past grievances and to lash out at the belligerent attitude of the emigrant companies as they traveled through the settlements. Indians opened fire on the wagon camp at the south end of the meadow the morning of September 7. (Like so much else about the massacre, there is good reason to believe this commonly accepted date may be wrong.) Those first shots caught the Arkansans completely off guard, killing and wounding a dozen or more before the emigrants could circle their wagons and throw up a dirt barricade.

The cattle herd pastured a mile or so north of the camp was run off the first day. Shooting was sporadic thereafter, with the emigrants returning fire and the Indians forced to snipe from a distance. By midweek the Piedes had lost patience with the siege; two of their chiefs had been seriously wounded by the sharp-shooting whites, and the Indians demanded the Mormons help finish the job. Lee, who was a “farmer to the Indians,” changed tactics to deal with the situation, while Mormon authorities—Haight in Cedar City and William H. Dame in Parowan—organized the Iron County militia to put the emigrants “out of the way,” according to historian Brooks.

Accompanied by William Bateman, who carried a white flag, Lee walked to the open country near the emigrant redoubt, where white had already been hoisted (a child wearing a white dress had been lifted to view). Two men from the camp strode out to meet the Mormons. After a brief conversation the four went to the wagon camp, where Lee persuaded the emigrants to surrender their weapons “to placate the Indians.” In return he would provide safe conduct out of the meadow.

Three Mormon wagons were ordered up. The youngest children were placed in one, all the guns in another, and three or so wounded emigrants in the third. The women and older children of the camp walked out and followed the first two wagons in a disorganized march. After a quarter mile, the men started out in single file, each with an armed militia “guard” at his side. Major John Higbee of the Iron militia, on horseback, was in charge. After approximately a mile, the women and children were way out ahead, and the men had reached a point east of what is now known as Massacre Hill. Here Higbee shouted, “Halt! Do
your duty. Each Mormon turned to shoot the emigrant at his side. Up the trail, the Piedes leaped from hiding places in the brush to begin killing the women and children.

Mormons who protested the killing were to fire in the air and kneel down, remaining quiet while the Indians finished off their men. It was Friday, September 11. The bloody business, by all accounts, was over quickly. The Indians stripped and plundered the corpses, but the whites made off with most of the loot, including the wagons and surviving cattle. The whites left the scene until the next morning, when they made a half-hearted effort to bury bodies, chucking them in shallow trenches and covering them with dirt and brush.

Arguments about who should accept responsibility erupted at once. A rider, James Haslam, had been dispatched earlier in the week to notify Brigham Young that the Indians planned to attack the train. He arrived in Great Salt Lake City on Thursday, September 10. Young, who had been in meetings with Captain Van Vliet, sent the exhausted Haslam on his return south the same afternoon with instructions that the Indians must be restrained. Haslam reached Cedar City on the thirteenth, two days after the massacre.

Meanwhile, the Missouri wagon companies—Turner, Duke, and others—had been detained on the trail and, after paying Mormons to lead them, were guided on a route skirting the meadow. They had been preceded by a mail train driven by two Mormons, Sidney Tanner and William Matthews, in company with three emigrant wagons. They traveled the meadow at night a week after the massacre and arrived in San Bernadino October 1. It was from these various emigrant wagon parties that newspapers in Los Angeles and San Francisco pieced together a story of the attacks that so outraged the nation.

Twenty years later, John D. Lee alone would pay the supreme penalty for his role in the massacre. After two trials, he was condemned to die by firing squad on March 23, 1877, at, of all places, Mountain Meadow. In 1859, elements of the U.S. Army from Camp Floyd visited the massacre site and erected a cairn and monument over the collected skeletal remains. “Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, I shall repay!” was inscribed on a cross at the cairn.

Back in Great Salt Lake City, Brigham Young was telling Captain Van Vliet he would not assist the army in any way to occupy the city; and if “Squaw-killer” Harney led his expedition into Utah, Young and his followers would reduce their homes to ashes and fight a relentless guerilla war against the troops. “Five times we have been driven—no more!” was the rallying cry by George A. Smith, and echoed by church members. Van Vliet promised on his return to present the Mormon position in his report and to halt further advance of Utah Expedition supply trains on his own authority. In the Mormon view, the problem was savagely elementary: If Harney crossed South Pass, the buzzards would pick his bones.

Brigham’s first action after proclaiming martial law was to order Nauvoo Legion scouting parties into the field. Colonel Robert T. Burton was to take a detachment as far east as South Pass on the Continental Divide, Colonel Lot Smith was to command a company of guerrillas to harass and delay any government advance near the Green River crossing above Fort Bridger, while Porter Rockwell and Bill Hickman and their companies would do the same.

When, in late September, the first detachments of the Tenth U.S. Infantry Regiment, commanded by Colonel Edmund Alexander, made its
way over South Pass and camped at Pacific Springs, four miles below the summit, Rockwell and a half-dozen of his men took the initiative. As the soldiers slept, Rockwell’s raiders—whooping and yelping, firing their guns in the air, and clanging large cowbells—came galloping among the tents like buffalo with their tails on fire. Their objective was at once psychological, to rattle the troops (which they surely did), and tactical, to run off the huge mule herd packing troop supplies. Colonel Alexander’s quick reaction in sounding stable call halted the stampeding mules.

Ten days later Lot Smith compounded the Utah Expedition’s woes by surprising two civilian supply trains camped for the night at Green River crossing and setting the fifty-two wagons ablaze; at noon of the next day he encountered another train near present Farson, Wyoming, and torched all but two wagons, which he allowed the teamsters to keep. In one stroke, the Mormons had dealt a body blow to the federal force. The third train alone contained enough ham, bacon, flour, beans, coffee, sugar, canned vegetables, tea, and bread for more than one hundred thousand individual meals—provisions for an army for a winter.

Within a month Albert Sidney Johnston would overtake the advance elements of the expedition and, with the new federal appointees—including Governor Alfred Cumming—in tow, pitch a winter quarters encampment he named Camp Scott near Fort Bridger. The trading post itself had been put to the torch by its Mormon occupants before abandoning it to U.S. troops. Johnston was effectively stalled in the mountains, and the worst winter in decades was whistling over the Uinta Mountains. Without adequate clothing and with virtually no rations, the soldiers began butchering oxen and mules for food.

The army bivouac turned into a frozen hell on the night of November 6, when Camp Scott became known as the Camp of Death. Temperatures plunged to minus thirty. Horses, mules, and cattle died in their tracks. Some wandered into campfires and refused to move though they were literally roasting. Death was everywhere. The governor’s lady, Elizabeth Cumming, could not finish a letter because the ink froze; but, she noted, two thousand government animals perished in that storm, and her own frostbitten foot pained excruciatingly until the skin burst. Colonel

Lot Smith, Mormon guerrilla leader against the Utah Expedition. Utah State Historical Society.

Philip St. George Cooke’s report compared the final miles of the march to Fort Bridger to “horrors of a disastrous retreat.” “It has been a march of starvation,” he wrote, “the earth has a no more life­less, treeless, grassless desert; it contains scarcely a wolf to glut itself on the hundreds of dead and frozen animals which for 30 miles block the road.”

Johnston called on Captain Randolph Marcy to lead a volunteer party from Fort Bridger to Fort Massachusetts in New Mexico for relief supplies and livestock. All the while, Mormon scout parties continued to harass the expedition, running off what few cattle remained and infiltrating the camp itself with men disguised as teamsters. Among the thousands of soldiers and camp followers, it was impossible to tell friend from foe, and the Mormon outriders were able to keep close tabs on the federal troops and the latest rumors, while the rest of the Nauvoo Legion spent the winter at home, except for a token force in Echo Canyon.

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The canyon had been fortified to some extent by the Mormons, who used it primarily as an observation point in case the soldiers moved toward Great Salt Lake City.

In February, a “Dr. Osborne” arrived in Utah from San Bernardino. He was an old friend of Brigham Young, traveling incognito—Colonel Thomas L. Kane, acting as an unofficial emissary from President Buchanan to arrange a peaceful settlement between the Mormons and the U.S. government. Kane had journeyed from Washington to San Francisco, by way of the Isthmus of Panama, with letters of introduction from Buchanan; he also was armed with a letter from Brigham Young to Cumming. In March, he rode on to Fort Bridger to meet Governor Cumming and offer to serve as an intermediary. Cumming agreed to accompany Kane into Great Salt Lake City, despite Johnston’s repeated warnings that the Mormons should be considered hostile.

Kane and Cumming, with a Mormon escort, traveled through Echo Canyon at night, but the wily Nauvoo Legion commander, Daniel H. Wells, arranged to have sentries conspicuously near campfires atop the canyon walls, giving the party the impression that hundreds of legionnaires, rather than a handful, were entrenched along the fifteen-mile corridor. In his approach to the city, Cumming saw multitudes of Mormons on the road with wagons and baggage. They were moving south toward Provo. Brigham Young had announced the “Move South”—abandonment of Great Salt Lake City and preparation to burn its homes. It was Young’s threat to leave the city in ashes if General Harney led the army into the valley. (Young had received word that Harney had been relieved of his Kansas duties and Johnston was en route to take over command of the Utah Expedition.)

Once in the city, Cumming was greeted by Brigham Young and recognized by all as the new governor. He was given the official territorial seal of office and shown the law library that the Mormons had been accused of destroying. In the discussions that followed, Young assured Cumming that he would allow any dissidents or apostates who wanted to leave Utah that opportunity. A galling point with officers of the expedition had been the stories that hundreds of disenchanted Mormons were being held against their will in Great Salt Lake City by “the despot Brigham Young.” It was in part the reason so many of the “young turks” of the Tenth Infantry spoiled for a fight with the Nauvoo Legion. They wanted to march on the city and put Young and his Twelve Apostles in chains for treason and anything else the government could think of.

In Washington, President Buchanan had been prevailed upon by Utah congressional delegate John Bernhisel to send a peace commission to Utah to investigate the facts. Bernhisel’s persistence and warnings from respected senators such as General Sam Houston, who cautioned Congress that “if the Mormons fight, [the Utah Expedition] will get miserably whipped,” had been effective. So it was that Lazarus W. Powell, former governor of Kentucky, and Major Ben McCulloch of Texas were appointed peace commissioners by Buchanan, who entrusted them with a “Proclamation of Pardon” dated April 6, 1858, ironically the twenty-eighth anniversary of the founding of the Mormon Church. The document offered amnesty to all “who would submit to the authority of the federal government.”
The peace commissioners arrived at Camp Scott within days of the return of Captain Marcy from his relief expedition to New Mexico. The captain returned with hundreds of horses for the cavalry and mules for the wagons. Shortly after the commissioners journeyed to the city to meet with Governor Cumming and Brigham Young in the Council House, Porter Rockwell arrived from Echo Canyon with a message that Johnston (now a brigadier general by virtue of a brevet promotion during the winter) planned to march his troops to the valley on June 14. The news was disquieting, but was resolved by Governor Cumming in a dispatch to Johnston urging discretion.

The presidential pardon was accepted after some discussion. Johnston announced he would move his troops through the city on or about June 26 and encamp “beyond the Jordan on the day of arrival in the valley,” which accommodated Brigham Young’s insistence that the army move some distance from his city. Governor Cumming wrote a proclamation declaring “peace is restored to our territory,” and Young counseled his church members to return to their abandoned homes. The U.S. troops ultimately marched forty miles south to establish Camp Floyd—named for Secretary of War John B. Floyd—and the Utah War was history.

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