Brigham Young and Hard Times Ahead

Pioneer Era Fades as Full Assault on Polygamy Begins
1869–1877

As moguls of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads puffed and postured in ceremonially hammering the final spike linking the transcontinental track at Promontory Summit north of Ogden, they also were knocking down the barrier known as the western frontier. Just as surely as America was opened by rail from the Missouri River to Sacramento that sunny May 10, 1869, the overland “plains-travel” era faded, and from that day on immigrants to Utah would no longer be considered pioneers as covered wagons gave way to rail cars. There were other major changes in the decade ahead; not the least of which were the unrelenting attack on the Mormon practice of polygamy and the death in 1877 of Brigham Young.

For now dignitaries representing East and West attended the “last spike” ceremonies, but Utah’s chief executive, Governor Charles Durkee, and the territory’s most prominent citizen, Brigham Young, were conspicuous by their absence. Durkee, governor since 1865, was in feeble health and had been in the East during the early part of 1869. He returned to Utah on the eve of the ceremonies, but the fatigue of travel prevented him from participating. Young on the other hand had decided to visit the southern settlements in April and, though invited to join the Promontory festivities, chose not to return to Salt Lake City until May 11. Critics believe he snubbed the Promontory ceremony and simultaneous doings in Salt Lake City because the railroads had chosen not to route the track through the capital, taking it instead north of the lake. If, indeed, Young ignored the spike-driving ceremony because of petulance, his failure to participate is all the more tarnished in the annals of this historic event.

However glorious the realization of coast-to-coast rail travel and transportation seemed, the connection between West and East now loomed as an ominous two-edged blade. For almost a year, church authorities had made it clear “that those who redeemed the country from the wilderness and had labored to bring it prosperity, had a right to protect what they had built.” To that end, Mormons pledged among themselves to strictly buy from each other and to ignore Gentile merchants. Young well understood that Utah-owned companies would now have to compete on their own home ground with eastern manufacturers. If the businesses were to survive, then the cost of production had to be lowered in order to be competitive.

To the Mormon leader’s way of thinking, the place to start was by cutting wages across the board. He urged representatives of all the trades to present to their fellow workers the idea of reducing
wages. It was a proposal that would affect the way of life in Zion into the next century, and against Brigham Young it and the Mormon economic monopoly stirred the bold opposition of some of the most able and brilliant men in the community life of Utah, prominent members of the LDS Church who also were its intellectuals.

Four among them—William S. Godbe, E. L. T. Harrison, Eli B. Kelsey, and Henry W. Lawrence—subsequently founded the Salt Lake Daily Tribune and Utah Mining Gazette. Also caught up in the dissent were their friends and associates: historian-author Edward W. Tullidge, newspaperman T. B. H. Stenhouse, and Ogden merchant W. H. Shearman. These men, too, became involved in varying degrees with the Mormon Tribune and the Salt Lake Weekly Tribune, both liberal cause newspapers, precursors of the daily, which made its debut April 15, 1871. In the end, they were excommunicated for apostacy. But before that, they took the side of the workers by criticizing what was perceived to be an effort to “fix wages” by the men who “paid the wages and not the men who received the wages.”

Young’s plan was to reduce the pay of common laborers to one dollar a day, and that of skilled laborers (mechanics, masons, carpenters, and painters), who had been earning as much as four dollars a day, to a dollar fifty. Tullidge, in fact, complained that an editorial in the Deseret News threatened to bring Chinese labor to Utah if “working men did not come to terms.” LDS Church historian Brigham H. Roberts brushed that aside, however, saying the News editorial had been misinterpreted. He also offered a rather vague explanation that the proposal to bring the trades into a lower wage scale seemed to have been left “to the adjustment of natural trades forces.”

On the heels of this opposition came an article in Utah Magazine, apparently written by a group of rebel merchants and Mormon elders, clamoring for the opening of Utah mines “for the social redemption of the Territory.” That corked it. Brigham Young was furious. At a session of the School of the Prophets, the malcontents and reformers were called to task for their opposition to Young’s leadership, a step in their expulsion from the church. The School of the Prophets, according to historian Roberts, was “a select gathering of the brethren of the priesthood, meeting regularly through these years to be taught in the doctrine of the gospel and in the policies of the church. Admission was by card and the sessions confidential. Here questions of practical affairs as well as of theological importance were freely discussed and instruction and council given according to the wisdom of the assembly or the presidents thereof.”

Young’s proposed cutback does not seem to have been discussed again publicly; but because it came from him, the idea enjoyed a certain added clout. The implication is that employers used the opportunity to exercise a measure of restraint in setting pay scales. Utah has always been below the national average in wages.

With the appearance of the Salt Lake Daily Tribune in the spring of 1871, the citizens of Utah were treated to the liveliest (many would call it vicious) exchange of editorial insults between the
editors of the Tribune and the Deseret News since the Valley Tan closed up shop in February 1860. To this mix was added the pro-Mormon Salt Lake Herald, seen as a buffer between the News and the Tribune.

Now that Utah was readily accessible by railroad, and an opposition newspaper voice to Brigham Young was making itself heard throughout the territory, antipolygamy forces stepped up efforts to eliminate the practice within the LDS Church. Unfriendly congressional legislation increased. The antichurch Liberal political party was born, said Brigham Roberts, and its first heartbeat had come from the Godbe-Harrison-Kelsey-Shearman-Tullidge revolt, the so-called Godbeites. The onslaught from Congress took the form of the Cullom Bill, a cruel measure that aimed at severely punishing bigamy by destroying families created by such marriages. Even the Missouri Republican, never a friend of the Mormons, complained of the bill's sweeping unfairness:

"The superfluous wives of Young and his followers are declared concubines and their offspring bastards and both women and children are literally turned out of doors and consigned to the cold charities of the world. The punishment of these comparatively innocent parties is actually more severe than that inflicted upon the more guilty. The male polygamist may escape scot free by simply giving up his female companions, but in any event [the wives and children] are reduced to pauperism at once, and forced to beg, starve, or do worse."

"The New York World" recognized that if the Cullom Bill passed, it could mean war:

"If we force them into a hostile attitude, the Mormons can give us a very disagreeable, a very wearisome, and tremendously expensive war. . . . The government should not forcibly interfere with polygamy or Mormonism at all."

And the "New York Times" editorialized:

"The whole Mormon population of Utah Territory does not much exceed 100,000 and in a very few years [because of the railroad] this little band will be outnumbered by the crowd of Gentiles who will surround Salt Lake. There will be no need then to make laws against polygamy, and until then there will be no use in doing so."

The Cullom Bill passed the House but died in a Senate committee; perhaps the avalanche of similar opinion from throughout the country had buried it.

In another maneuver to quash polygamy in Utah, members of Congress acted on the notion that, since Mormon women were held in bondage by plural marriage, this "degrading" practice could be eliminated by giving them additional power. Reasoned Congress, the way to do this was by granting women suffrage. With it, the women of Utah would soon vote their way to freedom. But bills did not come to a vote in either house because members of Congress became suspicious when Utah's delegate expressed hearty support of the measure. Back home, acting governor S. A. Mann took the opportunity and signed a suffrage bill, allowing Utah women to become the first in the nation to vote. Utah's new chief executive, appointed by President Ulysses S. Grant, was J. Wilson Shaffer. He wasn't in favor of enfranchising Utah women and intended to wire Mann to veto the bill, but failed to do so.
In the latest batch of federal appointees were individuals from Illinois, Alabama, New York, and Michigan—politicians from all over the country thrown into Utah to decide what was good for Utahns. This continual turnover of outsiders in positions of authority proved a constant source of frustration to the citizens and business leaders of the territory. Once more the territory was to become an arena for the same old fight by Utah citizens to determine the right of local self-government versus federal impingement on that right.

Shaffer tangled almost immediately with Chief Justice Charles C. Wilson over judicial matters; then the governor set out to dismantle the Nauvoo Legion, embroiling himself in a sharp exchange of letters with Lieutenant General Daniel H. Wells over the legality of Shaffer’s action. Shaffer’s intended suppression of Mormon influence in Utah was successful in regard to the legion; the thirteen-thousand-man militia ceased to drill after the governor’s order, and seventeen years later it was annulled by Congress as well. Shaffer’s health failed. He had suffered from tuberculosis, and he died in October 1870.

Scarcely had Shaffer’s casket been placed on the train for burial in his home state of Illinois than Vernon H. Vaughn, secretary of the territory, was appointed to fill the gubernatorial vacancy. Vaughn, an Alabaman, held the office until March, when George L. Woods, whose term as governor of Oregon had recently expired, was named to the high office in Utah. Historian H. H. Bancroft pointed out that Woods was a Missourian by birth and a pronounced anti-Mormon by nature. Utah, it seemed, was in for more rough sailing.

This political bickering reached the point of absurdity in July of 1871 when Salt Lake City’s citizens held rival Independence Day celebrations—one for Mormons and the other for non-Mormons. And for a year or more the pressure to “get Brigham Young” was pronounced. He was indicted on charges of “lasciviously associating and cohabiting with women, not being married to them.” This in connection with his plural wives. It was a variation of an 1852 law to punish adultery, and it was invoked to fight the institution of polygamy “in the person of Brigham Young.”

While that case was pending, R. N. Baskin, newly appointed acting U.S. District Attorney and a fiercely rabid anti-Mormon, succeeded in indicting Brigham Young on charges of murder in the death of Richard Yates during the so-called Utah War of 1857–58, based on the confessions of the notorious William A. Hickman. But after months of contentious maneuvering in the courts, all indictments issued in the territorial courts during the previous eighteen months were quashed by the U.S. Supreme Court because jury selection was deemed unlawfully drawn and invalid. One hundred and thirty-eight defendants and prisoners were released, Young and his co-defendants—Salt Lake City mayor Daniel H. Wells, former territorial attorney general Hosea Stout, and W. H. Kimball—among them.

By the mid-1870s the courts in Utah had become so embroiled in politics that Grant-appointed officials were accusing each other openly in eastern newspapers of corruption in Utah. What followed was a round of resignations and repercussions. One Utah judge, Cyrus M. Hawley of Illinois, had been charged with bigamy in his home state; another, Judge O. F. Strickland of Michigan, “bought his appointment” to the bench. Both jurists resigned. In 1874 Congress passed the Poland Bill, which, though less drastic than many others proposed, did sharply curb the jurisdiction of Mormon courts. And in the fall of the year John Doyle Lee was arrested in southern Utah after nearly twenty years on the dodge and, after an abortive first trial, was executed for his role in the Mountain Meadow massacre of 1857.

It was not until the early 1880s that the body blow was struck on the issue of Mormon plural marriage, with the passage of the Edmunds Act (1882), which disenfranchised polygamists, added to the crime of polygamy unlawful cohabitation, and provided for legal action against violators. As Dale Morgan aptly described it, “U.S. deputy marshals began ‘polyg hunts’ the length and breadth of the territory. The polygamists were forced into hiding, some even going to Canada or Mexico in hope of finding a haven, but the raids kept a constant flow of [such] cases moving into the courts. The penitentiary was filled with resisting Saints.” Then came the coup de grace. It was called the Edmunds-Tucker Act. Designed to smash the Mormon Church to a floor stain, it dissolved the church as a corporation, and allowed the federal government to confiscate the church’s property. It was the death blow.
Brigham Young was not on hand to suffer it. He died August 29, 1877, “in the gabled Lion House.” The strain of directing the ordinary business of the church, coupled with the warfare in the courts, had taken its toll. On August 23 he was seized with the illness that would later prove fatal: Doctors of the day called it *cholera morbus*, but it is thought to have been appendicitis. Brigham Young likely died of a ruptured appendix.

To the end he displayed the organization that ruled his life. He had prepared strict instructions regarding his burial:

I want my coffin made of plump 1/4-inch redwood boards, not scrimped in length, but two inches longer than I would measure, and from two to three inches wider than is commonly made for a person of my breadth and size, and deep enough to place me on a little comfortable cotton bed with a good suitable pillow in size and quality. My body dressed in my Temple clothing and laid nicely into my coffin, and the coffin to have the appearance that if I wanted to turn a little to the right or left I should have plenty of room to do so; the lid can be made of crowning.

At my interment I wish all my family present that can be conveniently, and the male members to wear no crepe on their hats or their coats; the females to buy no black bonnets, nor black dresses, nor black veils.

Twenty-five thousand people paid their last respects to the Lion of the Lord as he lay in state in the Salt Lake Tabernacle. An era ended for Utah in a private cemetery on 1st Avenue, a half-block northeast of the Eagle Gate.
The Lion House, ca. 1890, home of the Brigham Young family. Photo by C. R. Savage; LDS Church Archives.

Unveiling of the Brigham Young Monument in Salt Lake City in 1897. Photo by C. R. Savage; LDS Church Archives.