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Folklore and the Literary Generation of the 1930s

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The decade of the 1930s marked the beginning of serious and continuing folklore study in Utah, a decade when Thomas Cheney, Austin Fife, Wayland Hand, and Hector Lee all began their careers. Several factors influenced this awakening of interest in Utah folk traditions. A growing number of people were gaining university educations and developing literary, historical, and sociological skills. Improved roads and more or less dependable automobiles were making remote communities more accessible. At the same time, the last of the pioneer generation were dying out, and with them the direct link of human memory to the period of first European settlement. This passing of a generation stimulated a desire to research and record their stories, as demonstrated, for example, by the extensive collecting activities of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers under the direction of Kate B. Carter, whose efforts resulted in the multivolume Heart Throbs of the West (1939–51), Treasures of Pioneer History (1952–57), Our Pioneer Heritage (1958–77), and An Enduring Legacy (1978–89).

The heightened awareness of folkways during the ’30s was not merely a Utah or a Mormon phenomenon. Louis C. Jones, in Three Eyes on the Past, has described “the decade from 1931 to 1940” as “the period in which America suddenly became aware that it had a folk tradition. President and Mrs. Roosevelt, the Federal Writers Project, the Index of American Design, the Federal Arts Project, and scores of other New Deal forces brought to the attention of a confused and struggling people an awareness of their native culture” (p. xix). Simon J. Bronner has noted that the art and literature of that period “was devoted to the common man, the heroic figure of the Great Depression,” at the same time that folklorists celebrated the legend of “other common-man heroes such as Davy Crockett, Sam Patch, and Mike Fink. Folk songs and folk arts were no longer a sign of backwardness, but a source of pride in a forbearing American spirit” (American Folklore Studies, p. 98). Among the products of this interest were the American Guide Series, produced under the direction of the federal Works Progress Administration, and several book series devoted to the nation’s regions: American Folkways, American Trails, American Lakes, and American Rivers.
Utah authors made significant contributions to all of these series. Indeed, the pioneering Utah folklorists were part of a larger group who were exploring hitherto unrealized possibilities in local and regional material. In his introduction to Juanita Brooks’s memoir *Quicksand and Cactus*, Charles S. Peterson speaks of an exciting intellectual ferment then working among a group of native and adopted Utahns who were approaching regional and Mormon themes from the perspective of new moods and with new methods of study. From diverse backgrounds and with little more than regional attachments to hold them, they were brought together by Depression-sponsored projects and by a common interest in letting the record of the past speak candidly and fully. They never associated closely and have indeed not been recognized as representing a movement. Yet in the richness of their production, in their ties to a place, in their shared access to records, and in their efforts to help each other find publishers, may be seen a meaningful interaction that enhanced the individual value of their writing and gave it added impact. (pp. xxii–xxiii)

Among this group Peterson includes Brooks, Bernard De Voto, Dale Morgan, LeRoy Hafen, Nels Anderson, Wallace Stegner, Fawn Brodie, Maurine Whipple, Russell Mortensen, Charles Kelly, and Cecil Alter, as well as folklorists Austin and Alta Fife and Wayland Hand.

The beginning of Juanita Brooks’s career clearly illustrates the combined effects of a deep sensitivity to folkways, the stimulus of a Depression-relief program, and the encouragement of an established writer. In 1933, Nels Anderson, a University of Chicago-trained sociologist who had lived for a time in southwestern Utah, came back to St. George on a grant from the Social Science Research Council to do research for his book *Desert Saints*. Anderson had connections with the federal Emergency Relief Administration and he recruited several local women, including Brooks, for an ERA-sponsored project to collect diaries and oral histories. He also invited Brooks to write up her memories of her polygamous grandfathers and their families for possible inclusion in his book. By the time she had finished, however, Anderson had returned to the East, and she did not know how to reach him. On an impulse, she sent the article to *Harper’s* magazine, where it was published in 1934 under the title “Close-Up of Polygamy.”

Brooks continued throughout her career to draw upon her knowledge of rural Mormon folkways. In addition to her recollections of community life in Bunkerville, Nevada, collected in *Quicksand and Cactus* (published in 1982 but written much earlier), she published “Water’s Int!” in *Harper’s* (1941) and “Memories of a Mormon Girlhood” in the *Journal of American Folklore* (1964). She also edited a special issue of the *Utah Historical Quarterly* (1961) devoted to the folkways of “Utah’s Dixie”—the southwestern part of the state, so called because of its hot climate and early attempts to grow cotton and other southern crops. Her insights into the people and traditions of her native region and her years studying pioneer diaries served her well in what was probably her most
important work, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (1950), the first serious scholarly treatment of that still-disputed episode in Mormon history.

A disproportionate share of the literary activity in the 1930s and ’40s emanated from southwestern Utah. Nels Anderson’s sociological study *Desert Saints* (1942) was one of the first such works to focus on rural Mormonism rather than Salt Lake City. As a teenage hobo in the early years of the century, Anderson had been thrown off a freight train near the Utah-Nevada border. Given a home by a Mormon ranching family, he attended Dixie Academy in St. George and received a degree from Brigham Young University before going on to graduate study at the University of Chicago. Anderson’s opening chapter describes the 1908 Pioneer Day celebration in the village of Enterprise, likely a recreation of his own first introduction to Mormon village life.

The most significant imaginative work to come out of the St. George movement was Maurine Whipple’s *The Giant Joshua* (1941). In a 1971 interview, published in volume six of the journal *Dialogue*, Whipple claimed that she had had the idea for this novel “as long as I could remember.” The completed work, however, was the product of extensive research: “Some of the old people were alive then—Uncle Charlie Seegmiller was ninety-five, Aunt Jane Blake was ninety-something—and I just went and talked to them. I got so immersed in that era—reading everything and wandering the hills and sitting upon the red hills and visualizing everything—that it was almost as if I had lived through it

Juanita Brooks, historian, novelist, and collector of folklore in southern Utah.
myself” (pp. 56–57). In the acknowledgements Whipple appended to the novel, she gave first honors to Juanita Brooks and went on to list no fewer than ninety other individuals by name, among them the pioneer poet Charles L. Walker, whose verses she quotes throughout the novel. Interestingly, she does not mention George Hicks, even though anyone who knows his gritty, biting song of the settlement of Dixie, “Once I Lived in Cottonwood,” cannot help but see its influence on the early part of the narrative.

William A. Wilson has said in his article “Folklore in The Giant Joshua,” that it is “one of the best collections of early Mormon and Western lore yet published.” Wilson notes that the novel “contains scores of proverbs, superstitions, remarkable providences, folksongs, legends, and humorous anecdotes. It is equally rich in descriptions of material culture and particularly of folk practices—of games, of dances, of holiday celebrations, and of arts and crafts. It contains, for instance, over sixty references to foodways alone, thus providing us with a fairly clear picture of the daily fare of the impoverished Dixieites.” The greatest strength of Whipple’s novel in terms of folklore studies, Wilson adds, is that the author sets “practically every folklore item . . . in cultural context that helps us understand more about the force of folklore in the lives of people than do many of the scholarly works in the field” (pp. 57–58). Other southwestern Utah writers of this era include the novelist Jonreed Lauritzen, who drew upon his knowledge of cowboy life on the Arizona Strip, and the historian Andrew Karl Larson, whose

The realization that Utah community life and folkways could provide a basis for literary work was not limited to the residents of a single region. Virginia Sorensen, whose formative years were divided between Utah County and Sanpete County, published five novels on Mormon themes, including *A Little Lower than the Angels* (1942), on the Mormon exodus from Nauvoo, Illinois; *Many Heavens* (1954), on twentieth-century polygamy in northwestern Utah’s Cache Valley; and *Kingdom Come* (1960), on Mormon immigration from Scandinavia. Her most durable adult fiction, however (she also wrote children’s books), is to be found in the two novels and the collection of short stories set in Sanpete County: *On This Star* (1946), a romantic melodrama; *The Evening and the Morning* (1949), a moving account of a woman who rebels against community mores; and *Where Nothing Is Long Ago* (1963), a collection of short stories. Sorensen’s work does not provide the treasure-trove of folkways that Whipple displays, but she evokes in convincing detail the life of a Mormon town during the 1920s. The title story in *Where Nothing Is Long Ago*, which recounts the murder of a water thief and its impact on the community, is perhaps the best literary treatment of the distinctive social institutions and values attached to water and irrigation in Utah. “The Ghost,” in the same volume, is a sensitive examination of Mormon racial attitudes.

Samuel W. Taylor had an active career as a magazine and film writer but is perhaps best known in Utah for *Family Kingdom* (1951), a book about his father’s polygamous households. Taylor’s most charming fictional work is the humorous novel titled *Heaven Knows Why* (1948), set in a ranching community in the West Desert. The action is set in motion by the visit to earth of deceased patriarch Moroni Skinner in an effort to put his wayward grandson, Jackson Skinner Whitetop, on the straight and narrow path. Taylor pokes gentle fun at the Mormon penchant for organization by picturing heaven as a vast bureaucracy where the reward for a life well-lived might be an assignment in “the Compiling Office of the Accounting Section of the Current History Division of the Records Department.” Much of the business of the plot revolves around the quest for a beverage that will satisfy the thirst for coffee without violating the Mormon Word of Wisdom.

The most prominent Utah-born man of letters in the 1930s was Bernard DeVoto, who grew up in Ogden. At the beginning of that decade, he would not have seemed a promising model of a writer making sympathetic use of native materials, since he had begun his career in the 1920s under the influence of H. L. Mencken and had published several articles attacking the provincialism of his home state. The ’30s became a decade of discovery for DeVoto, however, as he began to use his western background as the foundation of his most important work, the historical trilogy *The Course of Empire, Across the Wide Missouri*, and *The Year of Decision: 1846*. It is interesting to note that in the summer of 1933, when Nels Anderson was researching *Desert Saints* and Juanita Brooks was
fording southern Utah streams in quest of pioneer diaries, DeVoto was writing his appreciative essay on the life of his Mormon pioneer grandfather, “Jonathan Dyer, Frontiersman.”

Unlike DeVoto, Charles Kelly was born in the Midwest and came to Utah as a printer in the years after World War I. Caught up by the region’s landscape and history, he remained for the rest of his life, despite (or perhaps because of) his distaste for all things Mormon. In 1934, with Hoffman Birney, Kelly published Holy Murder: The Story of Porter Rockwell, a biography of the notorious bodyguard (and, some say, assassin) employed by Brigham Young. This was followed by an edition of the journals of John D. Lee and a book on Butch Cassidy and his outlaw band. Over the next thirty years, Kelly published numerous magazine articles on his favorite topics: Indian legends, mountain men, outlaws, lost gold mines, and the canyons and rivers of southern Utah, where he served for many years as the unpaid supervisor of Capitol Reef National Monument (now a national park).

Another nonnative Utah writer for whom the region provided a powerful imaginative stimulus was Wallace Stegner, who lived in Salt Lake City through his high school and college years. Stegner’s stature as a major American writer has been fully appreciated only since his death in 1993, as the environmental themes that played so large a part in his work have become more prominent in the national consciousness. Stegner’s knowledge of Utah and western folkways informs many of his books, including his autobiographical novel The Big Rock Candy Mountain (1943) and its sequel Recapitulation (1979).

None of his works, however, fits the spirit of the 1930s better than Mormon Country, published by Duell, Sloan, and Pearce in 1942 in its American Folkways series. Stegner divides the book into two parts: “The Rock Our Fathers Planted,” which is devoted to Mormon culture, and “The Might of the Gentile,” which treats some non-Mormon strands of Utah life. In both parts, he draws upon folk legends such as the Welsh Indians, the Three Nephites, and the great Buenaventura River, supposed to flow west from the Rockies to San Francisco Bay. He writes of regional heroes and antiheroes: J. Golden Kimball, Uncle Jesse Knight, Butch Cassidy, Rafael Lopez. In “Arcadian Village,” Stegner memorializes the United Order experiment at Orderville. In “Fossil Remains of an Idea,” he turns a penetrating eye on twentieth-century Mormon fundamentalism and polygamy at Short Creek (since renamed Colorado City) on the Utah-Arizona border. The opening sketch in the book, “Meet Me at the Ward House,” is a masterful evocation of the rhythms and images of Mormon village life on the eve of World War II. “Artist in Residence” is a poignant account of Everett Ruess, the twenty-year-old wanderer who disappeared in the Escalante canyons of southern Utah in 1934. Ruess has been the subject of renewed interest in the last few years, but there is still nothing to equal Stegner’s dozen pages on him. Despite its age, Mormon Country is a book that wears very well.

The writers who emerged in the 1930s opened the lode of Utah folklife to literary treatment, but they did not by any means exhaust its possibilities. It
Wallace Stegner’s *Mormon Country* examined the lore of both Mormons and Gentiles.

would remain for later pioneers such as Helen Papanikolas to explore the contributions of the state’s ethnic minorities. Like Wallace Stegner before him, Ron Carlson has found in Salt Lake City the material for serious fiction that can reach a wider audience, and Wayne Carver’s Plain City, Douglas Thayer’s Provo, and Don Marshall’s more generic small-town Utah all represent fresh visions of Mormon culture. And since the publication of Levi Peterson’s *The Back Slider* (1986), Taylor’s *Heaven Knows Why* is no longer the best (or the only) Mormon humorous novel. But anyone who attempts to make literature out of Utah life owes an immense debt to the generation of the 1930s.