Who Are We Really?

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I was raised hearing stories of my ancestors. As a little boy, I was particularly intrigued and scared by those my Grandma Jake, Ada Robinson Jacobson, told of her grandfather, James Oliverson. I remember her sharing the memory of her only contact with Grandpa Oliverson, of an incident which occurred when she was two or three years old. By that time a widower, Grandpa Oliverson came for dinner at her family’s home. He expected to eat when the family sat down to dinner. He did not want to hear the whining, bickering, or even giggling of children when it was time to eat. When this commotion occurred he raised his strong hand, pounded the table and loudly declared: “Danna bust to it!” As mealtime progressed, the children once again began horsing around, tickling each other, and laughing. Grandpa Oliverson warned with his words: “If you laugh at the table, you’ll cry before you go to bed.”

When my Grandma told me this story I was intrigued because I thought it was rather funny that he would say such things. I remember being scared because I thought that I would not have wanted to eat dinner with him. I often wondered why a person would cry before going to bed if he or she laughed at the table. This memory of my Grandma’s always made me feel that perhaps her Grandpa Oliverson was a mean man. Then I saw his photograph!

Figure 1. James Oliverson

When I first saw this picture as a child, I was quite certain that he was mean. I was raised in a family and religious culture that valued ancestors so I was familiar with their pictures. By the time I became a teenager, I could recognize all of the pictures we had of our ancestors. I could also recite the names of my grandparents, great grandparents, and even most of my great, great grandparents. I knew how they were related to me.

Here is how I’m connected to James Oliverson:

John Wright (me)
Marvada Jacobson Wright (mother)
Ada Robinson Jacobson (grandmother)
Matilda Oliverson Robinson (great grandmother)
James Oliverson (great, great grandfather)

In addition to these names, I could give basic information about other family lines. I knew a lot of their birthdates, where they were born, and some of their family members but that’s about it. Every one of my direct ancestors older than grandparents were already gone so I never knew them personally, only their names on a page, a few facts about each one, some stories about them, and perhaps a picture. That all changed in 1992 when I was able to transcribe James Oliverson’s diaries.

Grandma Jake had two volumes. The first contained entries from 1884 through 1886 and the second, 1886 through 1888. I found it interesting that Oliverson made entries for almost every day during these four years and I supposed there must be other diaries available. After a process of investigating, searching, and finding that would take too long to describe here, I learned of ten other volumes. Over several months, I acquired copies of these ten and transcribed all of them along with the two volumes owned by Grandma Jake. When completed, I had a compilation of his diaries running from 1852 through 1893, referred to collectively throughout the rest of this paper as the Diary. There are some sizeable gaps in the Diary, largely because I have not been able to find any other volumes, but this was quite a wonderful find for my family and me.¹

Diaries, journals, letters, and memoirs are examples of important sources for the historian and are commonly understood to be personal documents.

The diary has been called “the personal document par excellence.” What is special about diaries is that they are written for strictly personal use and at the same time as the events described take place.… The fact that the diary records the writer’s actions, opinions, feelings and points of view at that specific moment in time makes this type of document a precious and unique testimony to the individual’s inner life (as well as providing a precise description of the unfolding of the events in which he is involved). (Corbetta 2003, 290)
While transcribing the *Diary*, I quickly became aware of the fact that Oliverson persistently wrote in it almost every day of his life. Though his spelling was not very consistent, he read a lot and tried to educate himself on various subjects. He immigrated to the United States from England as a young man. He migrated west in 1852, eventually settling in Kaysville, Utah. In 1860, he and his family moved north into Cache Valley with several other families to establish a new town that eventually became known as Franklin, Idaho. He lived in Franklin but spent several years working in a lumberyard in Dillon, Montana. He spent substantial periods of time away from his family to provide for them and wrote many letters home to them. He traveled by train often, which was certainly his preferred mode of transportation. I learned that he had a lot of respect for his adopted country and always mentioned the celebrations that occurred on July 4. He also was happy to report each March 3 that he had a birthday, as did his son, Levi, who shared that birthday. He reported briefly on events that happened in the town: the weather, work he performed, business transactions he made, trips to visit family, letters he sent and received. I came to know what topics would cause him to become agitated. He certainly was an independent, liberal-minded man. He valued the ability to be free in his new country, enjoyed the opportunities available to him, and liked making something of himself and his property. He defended his right to make his own decisions and did not appreciate anyone trying to take that privilege away from him. He was detail-oriented and kept track of both money he owed and money owed to him.

While diaries are valuable historical sources, they often have limitations. They are great sources to learn of events that occurred and what the diarist thought of those events. Consequently, however, diaries cannot fully help us contextualize and completely understand history. Through them we learn how one person perceived the world around him, but they often do not provide enough context for that perception. Diaries cannot help us completely understand events because they only offer one point of view. However, the great benefit of diaries as historical documents is their contemporary nature, and that they mention events that we can investigate further. As Pimlott puts it:

Diaries tell the truth, the partial truth, and a lot more beside the truth….In them, you seek—and often find—an atmosphere, a sense of mood of the moment, which could not be acquired in any other way. They should never, ever, be taken as the last word. But as raw material for reconstruction of the past they are as invaluable as they are savagely entertaining. (2002, 2–3)

Let us consider the strengths and limitations of using diaries as a historical resource by considering entries from Oliverson’s *Diary*. In transcribing the *Diary* entries below, I have retained spelling and punctuation as found. When I felt it necessary to add missing letters, words, or phrases that would help the reader better understand what was written, I have added those in square
Discovering Oneself through Ancestors’ Diaries

brackets. However, for this article, I am changing the font to illustrate the common occurrence in Oliverson’s Diary entries to record an event, recorded in italics, and a response in bold, which is usually an emotional one. There are two entries that I want to use to demonstrate this point, regarding Oliverson’s involvement with: 1) the Mormon Tribune and 2) a free school administered by the Presbyterians. I think both will prove interesting for librarians because one relates to a publication while the other relates to education. We will consider one at a time.

Entry 1: Oliverson’s Involvement with the Mormon Tribune

May 30th Monday [1870] Been at work on cub river water Ditch to day been cold and cloudy All day the river is rising fast Storming in the mountains grasshoppers very bad in Utah Valley Bishop Hatch and the Teachers cut off 3 men yesterday For takeing and reading the Mormon Tribune free Utah Bah!!!

From this entry, we learn of an event that had taken place on the previous day, Sunday, May 29, 1870: “Bishop Hatch and the Teachers cut off 3 men yesterday For takeing and reading the Mormon Tribune.” We also learn Oliverson’s response to the event: “free Utah Bah!!!” However, we don’t have any context with which to understand the event or adequately evaluate the appropriateness of his response. Let us try putting the May 30, 1870 entry in context with others that address the same topic. That should help us better understand both the event recorded in Entry 1, and Oliverson’s response to it. A previous entry is:

May 29th Sunday [1870] At home all day reading I whent On the acre Lots to see how the Wheat Looked very Cloudy all day And cold 15 chickens Hatchd Out today Blowing hard from They South this afternoon

Subsequent entries are:

Sunday Saturday June 5th [1870] Whent to meeting this morning They cut the 3 men off From the church that was up Before the Teachers Last Sunday For contemped of priesthood Last Sunday the aledge fault was Subscribing for the mormon Tribune and reading of the same But in reality for being free to think for themselves and not Leting some other man think For them

Wednesday June 15th [1870] I sold to Joseph Stone this morning 1 Acre Lot for 3 Bushells of wheat 1 old plough for 2 bits I receved on subscribing for the Mormon Tribune No. 24 this morning very strong wind from south West to day

Friday June 17th [1870] made 2 pair of posts this morning and Put 2 pannels of fence up in front of Lot Threatened for subscribing for the Mormon Tribune with dire purcutions in from the people of franklin Some of them very warm to day some of the teams who whent from hear to montania with fr[e]ight Has got back this morning
Munday June 20th [1870] grate preparation Being made to receve Brigham young all out dress up The company is Expected between 4 and 5 o'clock the[y] arrived a Little Before 4 o.clock and held meeting in the meeting house

These additional entries help us understand the event and Oliverson’s response. We learn immediately from the entry for Sunday, May 29, 1870, that he did not attend the church meeting where the event took place. So, he recorded the event the next day, after the fact. Did he learn about it from his family members or friends who had attended the meeting? We do not know. We also learn that Oliverson had an interest in going to the church meeting the next Sunday, June 5, because he attended and then reported on it that day instead of doing other work or reading as he had the week before. In fact, the meeting attended was the only thing he mentions for the June 5 entry. Perhaps he was interested to learn more about the event and become better informed on what occurred. In the entry, Oliverson shared what he learned. We learn that three men were cut off from the church for the charge of contempt of priesthood. They allegedly demonstrated that contempt by subscribing to the Mormon Tribune. We also learn more about how Oliverson responded to the event of May 29. He stated that, in his opinion, the real fault was that these three men were willing to think for themselves and not allow some other man to think for them.

We do not learn the identity of these three men, nor do we learn of the “Teachers” who decided to excommunicate them. We are left to assume, however, that it was the “Teachers” who did it, and maybe not Bishop Hatch, as he was mentioned in the May 30 entry but not in the second rendering of the event as recorded on June 5. We would need to further investigate official Church records to know these facts. However, we do learn from subsequent June 15 and June 17 entries, that Oliverson stated his feelings about this event, because he received the Mormon Tribune No. 24 and then was threatened by townspeople for subscribing to and receiving the next issue of the weekly newspaper. Was this an attempt by Oliverson to demonstrate that he also thought for himself? And what of the Mormon Tribune? What was it? Why did subscribing to such a paper cause such a reaction by Church officials?

In order to provide more contextualization for Oliverson’s Entry 1, I provide a brief history of that newspaper. The Mormon Tribune was first published on January 1, 1870. Its predecessor, The Utah Magazine, was a new periodical that made its debut in Salt Lake City in January 1868. It attempted to promote the ideas of its editors and publishers, E. L. T. Harrison, Edward W. Tullidge and William S. Godbe, and served as the official voice of their New Movement. The New Movement wanted to break open the closed economic and political systems of the region and loosen or eliminate what was perceived as the exclusive control of Brigham Young in both these areas of concern. The Mormon Church, upon its arrival in the Salt Lake Valley two decades earlier, had pursued an economy based on agriculture and home industry. With the
impending transcontinental railroad, which was completed in May 1869 at Promontory Summit in Utah, the Church established a network of cooperative stores. They were known as Zion’s Cooperative Mercantile Institution (ZCMI) and were set up in order to safeguard the interests of the Zion community and its economy. Members of the Church were expected to conduct all buying and selling of merchandise at the cooperative stores. One result of their continual antagonism toward the Church through their newspaper was the eventual excommunication of Godbe, Harrison, and Tullidge.

In January 1870, The Utah Magazine became a weekly called Mormon Tribune. The new weekly openly challenged what its editors and publishers believed was Brigham Young’s reliance upon the previously mentioned, antiquated economic system based on agriculture and home industry. They called to open up the economic policies of the region, in order to take advantage of mining interests and align its economy with that of the United States. By June 1870, Godbe, Harrison, and Tullidge agreed that retaining “Mormon” in the title might stifle the interest of other residents in their newspaper. So, they changed it to The Salt Lake Daily Tribune and Utah Mining Gazette which, by 1871, was again changed simply to The Salt Lake Tribune. It became an anti-Mormon newspaper and directly challenged the Church and its societal, political, and economic controls, which were often communicated in the Church-sponsored Deseret News. The Salt Lake Tribune, which is still published today, no longer is considered an anti-Mormon newspaper.

When the intentions of The Utah Magazine first became apparent, the Deseret News, which was at first very supportive of the new periodical, published a statement in its October 26, 1869 issue:

The Utah Magazine is a periodical that in its spirit and teachings is directly opposed to the work of God. Instead of building up Zion and uniting the people, its teachings, if carried out, would destroy Zion, divide the people asunder, and drive the Holy Priesthood from the earth. Therefore, we say to our Brethren and Sisters in every place, The Utah Magazine is not a periodical suitable for circulation among or perusal by them and should not be sustained by Latter-day Saints. We hope this will be sufficient without ever having to refer to it again. (Malmquist 1971, 11)

No similar statement has been found with regards to the Mormon Tribune, but the 1869 statement above regarding the The Utah Magazine must have been the sentiment in 1870 with its successor. The leaders of the Church in Franklin, Idaho, believed that the ideas and principles touted by the Mormon Tribune were detrimental to maintaining their Mormon community, so they consequently excommunicated the three men. It is clear from what is recorded in his Diary that Oliverson wanted to state that he supported the Franklin free-thinkers, who read the Mormon Tribune and made their own decisions. He was willing to go on record as one of their supporters, even if the threats by local residents were quite heated.
There is no *Diary* entry which documents the event or Oliverson’s response to it, because the time frame falls during one of the gaps mentioned earlier in this paper. However, Oliverson himself was excommunicated from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on March 8, 1878. The family story is that he purchased yardage material or a shawl to give to his wife, from a traveling salesman instead of the ZCMI in Franklin, even though the cooperative had the same or a similar item in stock. As a member of the Church, Oliverson was expected to make purchases at the cooperative store but chose to buy the item from the traveling salesman because he got a better price. He soon found himself called before the local Church leaders on a Sunday and was excommunicated. Oliverson still continued to live in the town of Franklin, became its postmaster in 1888, and apparently was well respected. However, having felt that he was treated unjustly, he never reconciled with the Church, which explains why, after 1878, Oliverson wrote in his *Diary* as if he were an outside observer thereof. Let us consider one more entry to illustrate the important role his *Diary* plays as a historic document.

**Entry 2: Oliverson’s Involvement with a Free School Administered by the Presbyterians**

*Jan 17th Monday [1881]* Another very fine morning The Mormans in church yesterday told the people that let their children go to the free school in this place taught by the Preptairns would be cut off from the Morman church if the parents failed to take there children out right away O Lord keep me from such dogmatic teachings and away with such ignorance Such men that preach such doctrines and believes in the same ought to be away from children. Has their faith and doctrine going back to the dark ages as fast as time will take them

From this entry, we learn of an event that took place on the previous day, Sunday, January 17, 1881 and Oliverson’s response to the event. However, once again we lack any context for understanding the event or adequately evaluating the appropriateness of Oliverson’s response. Let us try putting the January 17, 1881, entry in context with others that address the free school specifically, and education in general. These should help us better understand both the event recorded in Entry 2 and Oliverson’s response to it. Because of the number of *Diary* entries to consider in this example, instead of quoting them entirely, I will include only their dates, those statements about the school, and Oliverson’s responses.

Previous entries are:

*Munday [January] 6th [1879]*…Janett James and Levi commenced going to School today

*March 3rd munday [1879]*…Mr Meachams school Discontinued for the present time on cause sickness
Oct. 15th Wednesday [1879]...I paid Jas. Packer Sen my School bill for 3 Sch [illegible]

Dec 12th Friday [1879]...had a visit From the School teacher

Dec 13th Saterday [1879]...Hauld a big Load of fire wood too the School to day

Dec 28th Sunday [1879]...The Children all went To Sunday School to Day after wich some Of them went to meeting

Jan 22nd Thursday [1880]...Left 2.00 dollors On School Bill

Feb 8th Sunday [1880]...Children all going to school

April 8th Thursday [1880]...Till and John Each had A pair of Shoes given Them By there School Teacher Mrs. Martian [Martin] 5

May 20th Thursday [1880]...I sent home By Thos. Holden Last Sunday 40.dollors 20 for T. Smart 10 for School Teacher and 10 For my wife

June 30th Wednesday [1880]...the people subscribed For a School house

Dec. 26th Sunday [1880] Christmas went off very quite I went to the [illegible] in the evening They had a very nice tree loaded with presents for the children who attented their school

Jan 5th Wednesday [1881]...The children commenced going to school today

Jan 9th Sunday [1881]...some of the children went to Sunday School

Jan 12th Wednesday [1881]...Had a note from Miss Nobles the school teacher about James staying out of school She wished me to see James about it she seems very anxious about her scholars and I believe she has a great interest in learning them I corrected James about his conduct and wished him to apologized to Miss Nobles and ask her forgiveness and that he would not do it any more I hope he will do it 6

Jan 16th Sunday [1881] Very fi ne morning Sun shining bright and clear Looks fi ne this morning changed for the better The prospect for fi ne weather is good I fi xed up the fence the same stock was in again last night

Subsequent entries are:

Jan 19th Wednesday [1881]...Had a note from the school teacher about the boys bad conduct at school it greaves me very much if they do not do better I hope they will observe the rules of the school

Feb 6th Sunday [1881]...The children have gone to Sunday School

Feb 9th Wednesday [1881]...John broke a window light at the school this afternoon

Feb 12th Saterday [1881]...James Levi and Tilly are doing very well trying to write
Feb 17th Thursday [1881]...Had a letter from Bear Lake to day and one from the school mistress about James bad conduct

Mar 1st Tuesday [1881]...James got the horses and we loaded a load of wood for the school house and took it down

Jan 6th Thursday [1887]...Our School commenced yesterday

March 8th Tuesday [1887]...our Boys all Turnd out of School the Teacher has become very much against them has I have opposed her teaching So She is takeing it out Of the Boys

March 9th Wednesday [1887]...I had to take Our Boys out of School in consequence of brutal Treatment of the teacher A Marian Kelly

April 25th Wednesday[1888]...some boys Broke in the Public School Houes and committed Other Damage in Different parts Of town Brakeing fences Down

Feb 18th 1890 Tuesday...the Little boys Christopher and Will been Home from School The teacher told them to Stay home whilst we Had Sickness at Home

Jan 25th Munday [1892]...Chris began Going to School this Morning

Feb 1st Munday [1892]...chris Started to go to School to day he has been Sick this Last week

August 7th Sunday [1892]...the boys gone to Sunday school

Nov 20th Sunday [1892] the boys gone to Sunday School

Nov 28th Munday [1892]...Chris and Richard commenced going to school this morning

As in the already examined Entry 1, Oliverson was not in church to witness the event described in Entry 2. We learn that on Sunday, January 16, 1881, he was out repairing a fence that had allowed animals to reenter his field. The weather that day was sunny and very promising. This stands in contrast to what happened in church on January 17, 1881. We witness once again that Church leaders used the threat of excommunication to rein in their members who seemed, from their perspective, to be a little out of control. We obtain names of teachers: Mr. Meachum and Miss Nobles. We discover that Oliverson mentioned his children in connection with the entries related to the school and/or education. We determine that he had some responsibility to pay fees and/or provide supplies for the school; e.g., the ten dollars he sent to the teacher and the load of firewood he hauled to the school. The other entries also tell us of the existence of a Sunday school. We have more information but not enough to help us contextualize the event recorded on January 17, 1881, nor determine the appropriateness of Oliverson’s response to the event. In order to understand more about the school situation in Franklin, Idaho, we need to look elsewhere.
In *The History of a Valley: Cache Valley, Utah-Idaho*, J. Duncan Brite (1956) writes two chapters entitled “Non-Mormon Schools and Churches” and “The Public Schools,” which give a brief history of education and schools in the Cache Valley area. The chapters also help us understand the plight of public education in the area and how non-Mormon schools and churches helped to fill that void. He describes in some detail the history of education and the roles played by the Episcopalians, Methodists, and Presbyterians in establishing schools and providing education for the children of Cache Valley. Education in the area was elementary. Many people, including adults, could not write, read, spell, or work with large numbers. The first school in Franklin and all of Idaho was taught by Hannah Comish in her home on the east side of the fort in the 1860s. (Brite 1956b, 343). “The early schools in Cache Valley were private schools conducted in homes or church, or were community schools conducted in log buildings built by the citizens. Tuition, if paid at all, was paid in money or in produce” (Brite 1956b, 321–22). By 1880, of the 4,022 children under the age of eighteen, only 2,389 were actually enrolled and only 41 percent of those attended. The budget was $9,000 and teachers averaged less than $250 a year in salary (Brite 1956b, 325). The early district schools were not free. Students paid anywhere from $0.60 to $1.50 per term and churches and schools worked hand in hand in the same buildings. It was often a challenge to educate all children as many were needed to work the fields and do other tasks (Brite 1956b, 321). While there were several non-Mormon churches involved in providing education for the area, I will focus on the role played by the Presbyterian Church as it sponsored the free school mentioned in Oliverson’s diaries. In Brite’s chapters we read that:

Presbyterian mission schools were established in Utah before Presbyterian churches. By action of the general assembly of the Presbyterian Church, schools were largely supported through the Women’s Board of Home Missions, and the teachers in them were women. Schools were to be established only where the people could not be reached by churches and where public schools were not likely soon to be set up […]

Between 1875 and 1879 eleven schools with eight hundred day pupils were established in Utah. Duncan J. McMillan, district missionary for the whole Mormon territory, had in mind an academy in the major town in each valley, surrounded with primary schools in the surrounding villages. Schools would be located around Logan: at Millville, Hyrum, Wellsville, Mendon, Smithfield, and Richmond in Utah, and in the Idaho area at Franklin, Malad, Samaria, Montpelier, and Paris. Over thirty six schools and six academies were contemplated. (1956a, 308–9)

Funds that covered about a fourth of the cost of these efforts were raised in the area served by the mission school. The largest donor was the Women’s Board of Home Missions. It is estimated that the Presbyterians spent well over $1.5 million on education between 1875 and 1915. Presbyterian mission
schools reached their height of activity in the early 1890s and began to decline as public schools took over (Brite 1956a, 311–14).

George K. Davies’s *A History of the Presbyterian Church in Utah* states that “while other Protestant denominations were likewise at work in Utah, the Presbyterian Church characteristically and specifically worked its missionary program in the Mormon villages, towns, and cities.” He also reports that in Utah “the school with the school teacher was first to be established, for the early workers were convinced that the vantage point of attack on Mormonism was through education. […] After the school, there came the chapel and the church” (Davies 1945–1947).

Davies also includes descriptions of encounters between Presbyterian teachers, missionaries, preachers, and Mormons in various towns throughout the area, from southern Idaho to St. George in southern Utah. Some accounts are exaggerated while others are downplayed. It was common for Mormon Church leaders to strongly discourage their members from allowing their children to attend these schools. Some, like Oliverson and other folks in Franklin, Idaho, were even threatened with excommunication if they did allow it. Some Presbyterians felt, and undoubtedly were, threatened, intimidated, and snubbed while living in Mormon communities.

R. Douglas Brackenridge recounts some of these same stories, that Church leaders exhorted members to not permit or withdraw their children from attending the Presbyterian schools, sometimes accompanied by the threat of excommunication. He also retells the feelings of harassment experienced by Presbyterian preachers, teachers, and missionaries as they settled into Mormon villages; the reports of rocks being thrown at their doors in the night, and windows breaking at their homes, churches, and schools. After repeating the exaggerated stories on both sides, Brackenridge dismisses such accounts, and instead champions those that illustrate the good people in each group, and those who reinforced the truth that, as they came to understand each other they got along very well. Brackenridge documents the changing accounts of the same stories over time, as both sides had to admit they had exaggerated some of them to win support from their various constituencies. He also clarifies that the threat of excommunication on the part of the Mormons was a haphazard tool used by some bishops, but certainly not all, to curb bad behavior of members. There is also evidence that some statements of excommunication were only hollow and unwarranted intimidations, as admitted by some bishops (Brakenridge 2011, 162–228).

In close proximity to Entry 2 discussed above, Oliverson specifically mentioned the name of the school teacher in Franklin: “Miss Nobles.” She was, according to the Presbyterian Church’s (1881) *Reports of the Board*, a young woman named Miss Anna Noble. The *Hand-book on Mormonism* (1882, 81–82) describes her further: “The next group of stations consists of Franklin—where Miss Anna Noble teaches the school of 46 scholars and
conducts a Sabbath school of 52 boys and girls” (Hand-book 1882, 81–82). Another resource, Home Mission Monthly (1887, 27), explained that a free school in Franklin, Idaho, was established because “a number of liberal families in Franklin...were very anxious for a school.” It also explains that during the second year of that school’s existence, “Miss Anna Noble took charge of the Franklin work, and accomplished a great deal of good in the years that she was stationed there” (Home 1887, 27). I also learned in earlier pages of this resource that “[conspicuous] among the teachers...was Miss Anna Noble, who for twenty-six years has given her life to mission work” (Home 1887, 29–30). Reading through these resources allows us to better understand the motivations of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, of its committed teachers, and of its enthusiastic evangelists in the Women’s Board of Home Missions to secure teachers and Christian education for the children of that area. This has been very helpful to add context to events surrounding Entry 2 of Oliverson’s Diary on January 17, 1881.11

Entry 2 was the result of some very strong desires of multiple groups: Group 1: Parents in Franklin, Idaho, where quality education for their children was inconsistent or nonexistent, wanted organized, consistent, good quality mission schools and well-trained teachers. As indicated above, some of these parents appealed to Reverend C. W. Parks in Logan, Utah, to establish a school in their community. Group 2: The Presbyterians, motivated by their wish to Christianize and Americanize the Mormons of Franklin, Idaho, established missions on the frontier. The best way they found to fulfill that wish was through education. As a consequence, they mobilized their collective funds and “teachers” and established schools for children, believing it was a means to separate them from their faith. Group 3: The Mormon Church wanted to protect its members, especially their children, from being unduly evangelized by Presbyterian teachers.

Better understanding of the historical events surrounding the Presbyterian schools established in Franklin, Idaho, gives context to the event recorded by Oliverson and his response to it. He chose to respond the way he did because he was part of Group 1. He wanted an education for his children. For him, the threat of excommunication was not a real one as he had been excommunicated three years earlier. On the other hand, the marginalization of his children and spouse for his failure to remove the children from the school was a possible reality. Also, the potential consequence of his children being Christianized and losing their faith in Mormonism because of their teachers was a real possibility. However, Oliverson’s response indicated that the education of his children was more important than either of those potentially negative outcomes. With an education of some kind, his children would have the ability to choose appropriately for themselves. This was positive. Having decisions made for him by those who coercively threatened to cut him off with fear tactics was negative. As in his reaction to the Mormon Tribune issue, considered above
in Entry 1, Oliverson testified to the individual’s right to make his or her own choice or decision. He encouraged good behavior, but felt that the decision to choose and produce good behavior lay within the free individual who could think and act for him- or herself.

Oliverson’s responses in both Entry 1 and Entry 2 demonstrate a characteristic that defined him throughout his life: a fierce sense of independence. Oliverson decided what he wanted to do and refused any other man or group the right to determine his course of action. Transcribing the diaries caused me to ask questions about what he recorded. My research helped me better understand Oliverson’s *Diary* entries because I now could read them in the context of the events that were happening around him. Consequently, I now have a better sense of him as a person. In short, I consider him more than just a name on a page or a picture in a frame. I no longer consider him mean, nor am I scared by his picture. In fact, spending months in his *Diary*, transcribing each word, and taking yet more months to research and understand the events recorded, I have learned not to be afraid of James Oliverson. Along with these newly found pictures on the Internet, I have had the opportunity to view him differently.
Figure 3. James and Caroline Oliverson

Figure 4. James and Caroline Oliverson
I connected with this man as I read of his lengthy vigils, sitting by the bedside of his sick son James night after night, trying to comfort the uncomfortable, while fervently pleading with the Lord to spare his oldest. I also learned that he possessed a spirit of gratitude as I read his acknowledgement of the Lord’s hand in the eventual healing of his son. Transcribing the Diary gratefully led me to expand my perception of Oliverson. I learned that behind his hard, somewhat cold exterior beat the heart—the warm heart—of a caring and compassionate man.

I was especially touched to read his entries describing the years when his wife Caroline was bedridden. In these instances, like so many others, I was most impressed by the things I did not read. Oliverson did not wallow in self-pity. There are few things more difficult than coping with the emotional and physical stress of taking care of a bedridden wife for over two years. Yet Oliverson did this without complaining.

It is true that he expressed concern at being overburdened with taking care of too much, but he never criticized nor blamed his sick wife. This held true with all the setbacks and frustrations he experienced. He rarely talked about people behind their backs in his Diary. I found this quite remarkable. I am very certain that Oliverson had several run-ins with people, simply because he possessed such a strong, independent spirit. I am sure that on several occasions he became very upset with others, and it is probably equally true that
they became very upset with him. However, he never blamed his frustration on anyone else. In several of his accounts, even in the cases when he enjoyed success, he was true to his sense of who he was and maintained his integrity. His sense of freedom, demonstrated by his strongly guarded independence, called for individuals to take responsibility for both the good and the bad. As I learned how he chose to overcome his challenges, how he dealt with the events he encountered in his life, I am better prepared to deal with the events that will occur in mine. For me, that is exactly the value of researching diaries. That is the value of discovering oneself.

**NOTES**

1. In addition to the two volumes of James Oliverson’s diaries held by my grandmother (1884–1886 and 1886–1888), I found transcriptions or microfilmed copies of the following volumes of the diaries, which resulted in 12 volumes: 1852, 1870, 1873–1879, 1879–1880, 1880–1882, 1882–1884, 1888–1889, 1889–1891, 1891–1892, and 1892–1893. I found these at the Utah Historical Society, Utah State University’s Merrill-Cazier Library, and in the photocopy collection of Ray Oliverson, a distant relative whom I met as a result of transcribing these diaries. In 1995, I finished transcribing and editing them and they were printed and bound in a single volume, *The Diaries of James Oliverson: A Quiet Voice in the Town of Franklin*. In 1997, a second edition of this work was revised and enlarged by my father, Allan C. Wright, including more footnotes to give historical context to many events described. Several of these second edition copies were given as gifts to local libraries and historical associations. The references made to Oliverson’s diaries in this paper are pulled from this second edition and are simply identified in the paper by the date of diary entry.

2. The situation of the *Mormon Tribune*, and the dissent of its editors and publishers, William S. Godbe, Elias Lacy, Thomas Harrison, Edward W. Tullidge, and others, is indeed complex. As I have investigated further, I have learned more about these periodicals, the people behind them, and the New Movement which developed in the mid- to late-nineteenth-century Utah Territory. It represents a clash between Brigham Young’s perception of the Mormon Zion and the perception of largely British converts to Mormonism who immigrated to the Utah Territory, became disenchanted with Young’s perception, and challenged it. They became quite confrontational and were labeled as apostates. In his book, *Wayward Saints: The Godbeites and Brigham Young*, Ronald W. Walker (1998, xv) indicates that “The Godbeites opposed Young and his ideal community partly because they represented another strain of Mormonism, which I call ‘British Mormonism.’ Many of the New Movement men and women were products of the Saints’ successful evangelizing of early Victorian Great Britain, and when these members traveled to Utah, they brought with them the values and practices of their earlier days. They prized the city life of their British nativity; they were drawn to ideas and the arts; and they relished public debate. They also remembered British Mormonism’s simple biblical doctrines and its abundant display of spiritual gifts. Finally, these men and women were used to challenging the status quo in Great Britain. All these tendencies were hard to set aside once they arrived in Utah. Indeed, this British heritage helps to explain the Godbeites’ reservations about Brigham Young’s agrarian, practical kingdom, with its stress on conformity, obedience, and unity.” This is the culture that James Oliverson came from as a British convert to Mormonism himself. He displayed some of the same characteristics as the members of the New Movement. Another great resource that sheds lights on this event is Walker’s (1997) chapter, “William S. Godbe (1833–1902) and Elias Lacy Thomas Harrison (1830–1900),” found in *Dictionary of Heresy Trials in American Christianity*. This details the ecclesiastical trial of these two men which would determine their continued membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. These two sources help give the researcher a good
understanding of the details underlying the basic positions of Young and the established Church, and how they contrast with those held by Godbe, Harrison, and others of the New Movement. In order to help the researcher also understand the periodicals created by the New Movement, and how they influenced the economic, political, social, and religious environments of the time, please see O. N. Malmquist (1971), *The First 100 Years: A History of The Salt Lake Tribune, 1871–1971*.

3. I was interested to learn what was said at this meeting, believing that Brigham Young certainly would chastise the Mormons in the area for subscribing to the *Mormon Tribune*. I found recorded in the *Deseret News*: “Monday, 20th June 1870. We drove over the mountain to Franklyn and held a meeting, the people being addressed by L. Snow, John Taylor, D.H. Wells, W. Woodruff, F.D. Richards, and President Young. President Young said the Saints should labor to obtain the Spirit of God, and, in all their labors, temporal and spiritual, they should follow the dictations of that Spirit. All persons are liable to be tempted, but there is no need to yield. If a man yield to evil and lose the spirit of God, after having received it, and turns traitor and denies his God and betrays his brethren, neither the Lord nor his people can ever have the same confidence in him again. Blessed is that man who keeps the commandments of God in all things. All have to be governed by law; all exalted beings have to abide a law, and so must we if we ever enjoy the glory possessed by them. The Lord is pleased with good order and refinement, and we should seek to imitate Him.” (*Deseret News*, 298). This was a summary of Young’s talk, and we don’t have a summary of those given by the other speakers. I include it here because I was somewhat surprised that Brigham Young’s counsel was not more hellfire and damnation. That was the portrait painted of Brigham Young by the dissenters, and I assumed he would live up to their caricature. However, I don’t find evidence of that in this published summary of his remarks.

4. Levi was the son of Oliverson: Levi Roberts Oliverson (3 March, 1868–4 October, 1942).

5. Till and John are the children of James Oliverson: Matilda Oliverson (31 March, 1870–27 January, 1947) and John Besley Oliverson (22 February, 1872–26 October, 1941). They apparently received shoes from their schoolteacher Mrs. Martin, the wife of Mr. J. W. Martin, one of the Presbyterian teachers at Franklin and the brother of George Martin, the Presbyterian reverend located in Manti, Utah. The other teacher was Miss Anna Noble.

6. James was the son of James Oliverson: James Henry Oliverson (11 May, 1866–19 February, 1932). The teacher is Miss Anna Noble. A little bit more about the teaching career of Anna Noble can be found in “Teachers of Presbyterian Schools in Utah and Idaho” assembled by Fred Burton (2006). Miss Anna C. Noble came to Utah with teaching experience in Iowa. She began teaching in Springville, Utah, in 1877. She was assigned to Franklin, Idaho, in 1880 and taught there through 1886. She then moved to Wellsville, Utah, in 1886 and taught through 1893; moved to Samaria, Idaho, and taught from 1894 to 1899; and finally, moved to Kaysville, Utah, from 1899 to 1903, when she retired after twenty-six years of teaching in the Utah and Idaho Presbyterian schools. During retirement she collected relief grants. In 1908 she suffered from cataracts in both eyes and bronchial asthma. She died in 1914. Also teachers in the Franklin school were Miss Tillie (Lillie E.) Kelley (Kelly) from 1882 to 1884, a former student of Miss Noble’s; Miss Ella M. (M. E.) Campbell from 1884 to 1885; Miss Jennie Simons (Simmons), an assistant teacher from 1885 to 1886; Miss Blenda (Balinda) Christine Johnson from 1898 to 1901; and Miss Harriet Elliott, another former student of Miss Noble’s, from 1901 to 1905.

7. I found a teacher named Miriam Kelly in Burton’s (2006) list but there was no mention of her working in Franklin.

8. Christopher and Will were sons of James Oliverson: Christopher Oliverson (29 December, 1876–12 September, 1934) and William Oliverson (2 August, 1879–9 June, 1932).

9. Richard was also a son of James Oliverson: Richard Thomas Oliverson (31 March, 1875–5 September, 1938).
10. Some attribute the *Hand-book* to J. M. Coyner, a Presbyterian leader in Utah, but it appears that he simply applied for the copyright with the Library of Congress.

11. To give the reader a feel for the sentiment of those involved in the Home Mission activities of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, we read the following from the *Reports of the Boards* (1881, 3–4): “It is not a new thing for this Board to call for more men for frontier work; but in view of such facts as have been named we desire to call the attention of the Assembly to the growing demand for much more laborers. The last year we obtained all the good men we could from the graduating classes in all our theological seminaries, but the supply was not equal to the demand, and we were constrained to send out, at heavy cost, many men with families, who on that account cannot as easily adapt themselves to frontier work. But obtaining men from all available sources, we have been unable to acquire the requisite number. This year the difficulty is not diminished. The railways are extending the people are still flocking into the newest portions of the west. The missionaries on the ground are constantly appealing for helpers and yet it is impossible to find the men we need. Our financial condition seems to intimate what is The Divine will and the will of the Church on that subject. The Treasurer’s report shows that nearly $15,000 more has been raised the past year than any previous year in our history. Is not such a result proof conclusive that the Lord and his people are urging us to press forward and occupy all the waste places of the Land? We therefore call on the Assembly to consider carefully the necessity for our increased supply of missionaries for the new States and territories—not as an exigency or a temporary but as a permanent necessity—for if this country is to be won for Christ, if we as a Church are to keep pace with the increase of population and its rapid flow in the vast and unoccupied spaces of our country, we must plan not for a single year but for decades—we must plan for an increasing demand for men till the population is equalized from sea to sea. We desire to call the special attention of the assembly to the ‘Present Outlook’ of the work presented, being largely in the language of missionaries of experience who know whereof they affirm. It shows what wonderful opportunities are now furnished us for home missionary work.” From the “Present Outlook” just referred to, we read: “We desire to set before you as far as our space will allow in the language of missionaries of experience, who know whereof they affirm, the wonderful opportunities that are thus presented for home missionary work. Now is the time to make the desert blossom as the rose, to redeem wide wastes for the kingdom of the Redeemer. By what is said below you will see that more men are called for in Dakota and Montana, Nebraska and Kansas, Texas and New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, California and Oregon. Shall such glorious opportunities be thrown away? Shall not the past suffice for the day of small things? The people in the new sections, in the sparse settlements, in the wilderness, among the mountains, in the mining towns, need to be looked after now. Their children need Sabbath schools now. The church has money enough and men enough to fill the broad land with the institutions of the Gospel if she will only awake. The writers show what has been accomplished in the past as an encouragement to undertake the larger work of the future” (5–6).

From the section of the report entitled “Woman’s Work. The Department of Schools” we read the following: “In the progress of our work, when our missionaries found themselves face to face with the Indians on their reservation, the Mormons of Utah, the Mexican in South Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona, the necessity for Christian Schools as a means of evangelization became conspicuously apparent. The matter was brought before the General Assembly, which virtually said: ‘This work among the Mormons, the Mexicans and Indians is exceptional. The women, as a whole, have never taken any marked share in Home Missions, except in the preparation of ‘Boxes’ to add to the comfort of Home Missionary families. Let our women then assume the work; to them so strikingly appropriate, and support the mission schools called for. Let the Board of Home Missions go on to establish these schools so far as the women supply the means.’ The Board of Home Missions accepted the trust. The Women already at work were inspirited to fresh effort. By recommendation of the General Assembly, twenty-seven of the Synods have appointed Synodical Committees of women to stimulate and superintend the work for Home Missions, of the women,
each within its limits. These Synodical Committees as a whole are organically conjoined in the Woman’s Executive Committee of Home Missions, which was organized in answer to a general demand for woman’s work exclusively for Home Missions. Since the women of the Church began this work, it has gained in interest beyond all precedent. The Government, the people at large, and especially the churches are turning their attention to Schools of the Indians, and churches are regarded as necessary to fit them for citizenship. So of the Mormons. All the people are growing indignant at the monstrous thing that sets itself up as the Church of God in Utah. The railroads penetrating and crossing New Mexico open all its towns to new forms of business, and its valleys to the occupation of Northern men. A new era is dawning. The people must fall into line, and keep step with the advancing civilization of the country. Schools are essential to their enlightenment and evangelization. All this work everywhere may be greatly enlarged. A rising interest is felt in the church regarding it. By the blessing of God this training of the young will make itself felt in the early future to the sapping of the foundations of superstition, ignorance and fake religion, and to the up-building of the cause and kingdom of our Redeemer. These mission schools, although committed as above stated to hands so new to the work, have been manifestly owned of the Master, whose guidance and blessing in it should be acknowledged to the glory of His Holy Name. They are nearly all so grouped that each school house is also a preaching station, and connected with them is also a Sabbath School. The teachers in the government boarding schools are paid by the government, but we put in their names to show the entire civilizing and evangelizing force among all the tribes in which we are expending any labor” (26–27). In the appendix of this published report we read the following: “In Utah.—So among the Mormons in Utah, twice as large as Ohio. In the past few years the work of our Board in that benighted territory has immensely advanced. There exists one of the most prosperous, promising missions in our land. Our schools unsettle the faith of the children in Mormonism—and many adults are found to confront the alienation of their property, as the price of the Christian confession. There schools develop into churches as a rule. They are an entering wedge to split parental opposition through children” (119). I have used bold face in the quotes above to highlight the zeal with which the Home Mission of the Presbyterian Church was approaching this evangelization opportunity. Some of their comments, especially the stated intention of the Home Mission of the Presbyterian Church to unsettle the faith of the Mormon children and drive a wedge between children and their parents in their efforts to Americanize and Christianize the people, are very disturbing.

REFERENCES


