

A Tragic Tale of Southern Utah: The Mountain Meadows Massacre

By Roland P. Michaelis

In September 1857, 120 men, women and children in a wagon train of emigrants from Arkansas, were massacred at Mountain Meadows, Utah. This tragic event has been investigated and studied by historians for 150 years and continues to be the subject of study to this day because it was a major act of religious terrorism in the United States.

The migration of people westward was fraught with many difficulties and hazards. Most people were inexperienced in the daily travel over rough ground and where water and supplies were often unavailable. Progress was slow, averaging about ten miles per day. Often the hired guides were not familiar with the territory. Maps might be inaccurate or not even available. Indians were often a great source of trouble or danger.

Many of the old trails generally followed routes established earlier by the Indians. Gradually an important trail was established over time, eventually to be called "The Old Spanish Trail." The trail covered 1200 arduous miles between Santa Fe and El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora La Reina de Los Angeles—or Los Angeles as it is called today. A portion of the trail passed through southwestern Utah.

Discharged members of the Mormon Battalion drove the first wheeled wagons over a branch of the trail from San Diego to Salt Lake in 1848. This opened a new emigrant trail known as the California Road.

Travel on these early trails or

roads was difficult, often dangerous, and hostility by Indians was always a concern. In 1853 Capt. John W. Gunnison led an expedition to survey a route for the Pacific Railroad between the 38th and 39th parallels. Upon reaching Lake Sevier, Utah, he and eleven of his men were attacked by Paiutes. Gunnison and seven of his men were killed. When the bodies were recovered it was found that they had been mutilated. There were some who believed that the Mormons had encouraged the Paiutes to attack the expedition to prevent the railroad bringing in outsiders. The Mormons however, denied any involvement in the massacre.



The Fancher-Baker Party

In 1857 Alexander Fancher formed a wagon train of solid citizens and families wanting to develop the West and California. Although it was known that Indians had attacked other emigrant parties or expeditions, he had previously made two safe trips to California. This new party of emigrants consisted of about 120 to 150 men, women and children. Second in authority was John T. Baker. The Fancher-Baker party left Arkansas from Crooked Creek or Carrollton, as it was later called. The train was well equipped with 40 some wagons and several carriages, just under a thousand head of cattle and several hundred horses. Total wealth of the train was estimated at about \$70,000. Today the value is estimated at 1.4 million dollars.

The party followed the Cherokee Trail to where it joined the Oregon Trail, traveling northward through Kansas Territory and at South Pass turned toward Fort Bridger and into Utah territory and to Salt Lake City.

As the Fancher party entered Utah, Eli B. Kelsey who was returning from a Mormon mission joined them. He recalled "they were people from the country districts, sober, hardworking, plain folks, but well-to-do and, taken all-in-all, about as respectable a band of emigrants as ever passed through Salt Lake City."¹

The party reached Salt Lake in August 1857. However, upon their arrival they met much hostility. This had been the case for wagon trains reaching Salt Lake since mid July. For reasons to be explained later, federal troops were on their way to Utah to take over the government and the Mormons were determined to fight the U.S. Army. Hostility increased with the news that a dearly beloved Mormon named Parley Pratt had been killed in Arkansas shortly before the arrival of the Fancher party.

Upon leaving Salt Lake, the party followed the southern road as marked today by Interstate 15, and then joined the Old Spanish Trail. Along the way they were becoming more and more desperate for grain because Brigham Young, President of the Church of Latter-day Saints and Governor of Utah Territory, had ordered the Mormons not to sell grain to the emigrants. Historian Bagley states that emigrant P.M. Warn believed the party's obvious wealth excited the greed of the poverty-stricken people of southern Utah. "An element of gain," Warn observed, "enters largely into all Mormon calculations."²

At Corn Creek, a few miles south of Fillmore, the Fancher party met Jacob Hamblin, President of the Southern Indian Mission who was returning from a meeting with Brigham Young in Salt Lake. Hamblin recommended that the party should rest the animals before entering the desert at a spring at Mountain Meadows four miles south of his ranch. As the party continued southward rumors began to spread about the emigrants poisoning the meat of a dead ox at Corn Creek in order to kill Indians. As word of this act reached the Mormons they became outraged. This story and others contributed to the events that were to follow at Mountain Meadows.

The stories grew and varied and became more elaborate and multiplied over the years. One version referred to a wild bunch of ruffians in the party who called themselves "The Missouri Wildcats." Careful examination of these stories shows that they don't hold up. Bagley states "Something was killing the cattle at Corn Creek, and Indian Agent Jacob Forney gave a likely explanation in 1859: "The ox died unquestionably from eating a poisonous weed that grows in most valleys in this Territory."³

Forney believed that one or two Indians died from eating the dead ox. It is known that a young boy, Proctor Robison died, supposedly

because of handling the dead ox. However, the boy actually died at Fillmore almost a month after the Fancher party had camped at Corn Creek. Historian Juanita Brooks concluded that the boy died of an infection, probably anthrax.⁴

The Fancher party reached the Old Spanish Trail near Pinto and traveled to Hamblin's ranch at the Northern edge of Mountain Meadows and continued about four miles farther to a large spring. The weary party arrived at the Meadows at dusk on Sunday, September 6, 1857.

The Initial Attack

They had by now traveled approximately 1200 miles in just over four months. Here at last was a luxuriant alpine valley with tall green grass for the cattle and horses and water from a large spring. It was a place for the emigrants to recuperate and gather their strength before crossing the deserts of the Great Basin. That night the weary travelers rested. Then, just before dawn as breakfast was being prepared, there was firing of guns.

Several of the men were wounded. Returning fire, the emigrants defended themselves successfully enough that the initial attack was over in about a half hour. In the intervening time the emigrants were able to make a fort by circling the wagons and shoveling dirt underneath. One Indian had been killed and two Paiute chiefs were badly wounded despite assurances the Mormons had given the Indians "that they could kill the emigrants without danger to themselves."⁵

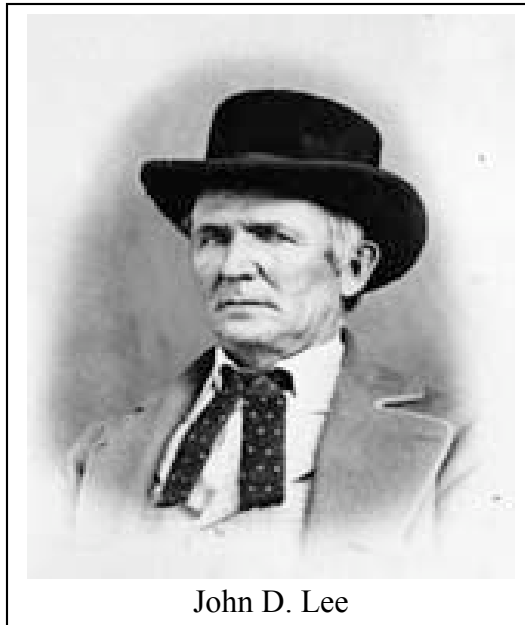
Over the next few days the Indians became more and more upset due to the superior weapons and gunfire of the emigrants. As a consequence many of the Indians left. Mormon leader Major John D. Lee, the adopted son of Brigham young and presiding elder of the new community of Harmony, led the battalion of the Iron Militia in the attack. Lee had hoped that the Paiutes would carry out the

major part of the attack, but found that they could not in the face of the emigrant's strong retaliation. Lee now realized that the situation had become a siege. His men rounded up the cattle and kept the emigrants from getting to them or from obtaining much needed water from the spring. Thirst had by now become a very serious problem for the emigrants.

By Monday afternoon Lee sought reinforcements from officials at Cedar City.

However even with reinforcements the attacks were not successful. More of the Indians left. On Wednesday night the emigrants sent young William Aden out through enemy lines to seek help from wagon trains that they knew were following behind them. Aden however, was killed when he unknowingly approached a Mormon campfire. Mormon officials now became concerned that word of the attack would get out.

On Thursday evening Lee received orders that everyone must be killed except those under six years old as they were too young to tell. This was a matter of "Blood Atonement." Bagley quotes Mormon Major John M. Higbee, who gave the order that everyone except very young children should be killed, "Have not these people threatened to murder our leaders and Prophet, and have they not



John D. Lee

boasted of murdering our Patriarchs and Prophets, Joseph and Hyrum? ... Why there is not a drop of innocent blood in that entire camp of Gentile outlaws; they are a set of cutthroats, robbers, and assassins...”⁶

The fateful day of Friday, September 11, arrived. Then, apparently, a miracle! A man with a white flag appeared. It was Lee. He stated that if the emigrants would surrender their arms they would be safely escorted out and the Indians would leave them alone. After much debate they decided to surrender their arms. They had not much choice because they were running low on ammunition and in dire thirst. Some women and children were put into wagons, while others walked. Some distance behind the group of men followed—each man marching along side an armed Mormon soldier. After about an hour had passed, an order was given and each guard turned and shot the man next to him while women and children were overtaken and slain by Paiutes and painted Mormons.

Years later Nancy Huff recalled that as a four-year-old “[Capt. Jack Baker] had me in his arms when he was shot down, and fell dead. I saw my mother shot in the forehead and fall dead. The women and children screamed and clung together. Some of the young women begged the assassins after they had run out on us not to kill them, but they had no mercy on them, clubbing their guns and beating out their brains.”⁷

Altogether 120 men, women, and children were murdered that day.

Carleton’s Report

In 1859 Brevet Major James Henry Carleton, Captain in the First Dragoons, United States Army, received orders to leave Fort Tejon, California and travel to Southern Utah to investigate the circumstances of the massacre. His investigation and findings are detailed in a report dated May 23, 1859. Carleton was

shocked at what he observed: “Nearly every skull I saw had been shot through with rifle or revolver bullets. I did not see one that had been broken in with stones . . . The scene of the massacre, even at this late day, was horrible to look upon . . . Around and above this grave, I caused to be built of loose granite stones, hauled from the neighboring hills, a rude monument, conical in form and 50 feet in circumference at the base and 12 feet in height. A cross, hewn from red cedar wood, surmounts this; from the ground to the top of the cross is twenty-four feet. On the transverse part of the cross, facing towards the North, is an inscription carved deeply in the wood: “VENGEANCE IS MINE: I WILL REPAY SAITH THE LORD.”⁸

Upon visiting the site in 1861, Brigham Young read the biblical quotation on the cross and was provoked to destroy the monument.⁹ Over the next few years it was raised again and then torn down again, except the cross was never included. The monument was last raised in 1932 and has remained. A replica of Carleton’s rock cairn with cross exists in Carrollton, Arkansas.

Among those interviewed by Carleton was Jacob Hamblin who he described as “a man of considerable importance, and noted among the Mormons in this southern part of the Territory. He is about 50 years of age, and although with but little education, is a shrewd, intelligent, thinking man...[He] is, and has for a long time been Indian subagent for the Pah-Utes [sic]. He speaks their language well and has great influence with them.”¹⁰

Carleton accepted Hamblin’s statement that he had been on a trip to Salt Lake during the time of the massacre and on his return home he found three unhappy young survivors under the care of his wife. This was the first knowledge he had of the massacre.

Only seventeen children, all under the age of

six had survived and had been taken to Cedar City and distributed among homes of Mormons. These children were gathered and taken to Salt Lake and placed under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Army. They then were returned to Carrollton, Arkansas.

When out of the hands of the Mormons, some of the children began to tell of the horrors inflicted on members of the wagon train. The children told of how a group of white men disguised themselves as Indians and washed the war paint off their faces in the creek. The children were witnesses and would not forget how their mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters were slain.¹¹

In his report, Carleton records various inconsistencies in the Mormon accounts of events to protect themselves. In his final comments he spares no words to vent his outrage at the Mormons for their cruel acts perpetrated on the emigrants.

Factors Contributing to the Massacre

Several factors contributed to the tragic event at Mountain Meadows and its aftermath.

1. When the Mormons arrived at Salt Lake in July 1847 they were outside jurisdiction of the United States. Shortly thereafter the Mexican War resulted in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in February 1848, ceding a half million square miles to the United States including Utah. Suddenly the Mormons found themselves again to be subjects of the United States and its laws. The Mormons, however, declared they would decide which Federal laws to obey.

2. At this time two federal judges from Utah territory returned to Washington and reported "The Mormons look up to him (Brigham Young) and to him alone, for the laws by which they are to be governed; therefore no

law of Congress is by them considered binding in any manner."¹²

3. In May 1857, when the slavery issue was beginning to divide the country, President James Buchanan took this as an opportunity to divert public attention by sending the U.S. Army to Utah to remove Brigham Young from office and impose Federal law. This became known as The Utah War.

4. On July 23 word reached Brigham Young that the U.S. government had cancelled the mail contract, and a new Governor, judges, and 2500 troops would come to Utah.

5. By August 5 Young issued a proclamation declaring, in part: "We are invaded by a hostile force who are evidently assailing our overthrow and destruction. . . . Martial law is hereby declared to exist in this territory, from and after this Proclamation; and no person shall be allowed to pass or repass into or through or from this territory, without a permit from the proper officer..."¹³

6. Throughout the country there was great animosity against the Mormons over the practice of polygamy as evidenced by political cartoons of the times.

7. The *Deseret News* reported the assassination of Parley Pratt in Arkansas on July 1. Pratt was an original Apostle of the LDS Church, Prophet, Seer, and Revelator, who was shot and stabbed by Hector McLean. Eleanor Pratt McLean had left her abusive husband and gone off with Pratt. In the eyes of the Mormons, this was one more black deed that needed retribution.

8. Conditions in Southern Utah were severe. Floods, drought, crop failures and sickness due to malnutrition were all present. These were in contrast to glowing reports of conditions in California and Nevada. As a consequence Brigham Young was concerned as

many of the saints were starting to fall away.

The Aftermath

The Utah War was settled peaceably. No shots had been fired. Neither Brigham Young nor the Federal government desired a shooting war. The Federal Commissioners however, made it clear they had come to Utah to report the president's policy not to negotiate. Young had to accept the terms of the government and was replaced as governor. He did, however, remain as head of the church.

In 1870, after Federal Judge John Cradlebaugh's investigation brought to light facts of John D. Lee's involvement in the massacre, Young excommunicated Lee, his adopted son. A year later, Young sent Lee to establish a ferry crossing near the confluence of the Paria and Colorado River.

John and Emma Lee, one of his nineteen wives, established the ferry crossing in this lonely, remote place, a place she would call "Lonely Dell" (now known as Lee's Ferry). In 1873, Lee went into hiding after being informed that federal officers were looking for him. Emma was left to manage the ferry. U.S. Marshall William Stokes finally captured Lee at his home in Panguitch in 1874. This was where another of his wives, Rachel Lee and his children lived.

Lee was taken to the town of Beaver for his trial that ultimately resulted in a hung jury. There was a national uproar over this result when Lee was let out of jail on bail. In September of 1876 a second trial of Lee was held.

In Lee's second trial the prosecutors were careful to ask only questions concerning Lee therefore not incriminating anyone else. Jacob Hamblin was one of several who testified against Lee. The all-Mormon jury was unanimous for conviction. Following his conviction, Lee was promised life and freedom if only he would tell all he knew or death

if he did not. Lee refused. Eight hundred citizens of Beaver and Panguitch petitioned the court on behalf of Lee but to no avail.

While in jail in Beaver, Lee began his autobiography "Mormonism Unveiled." Bagley comments that Lee "denounced the men who had testified against him . . . [but] exonerated Brigham Young from ordering the Massacre."¹⁴

Bagley also quotes Lee's family recalling his last prophecy: "If I am guilty of the crime for which I am convicted, I will go down and out and never be heard of again. If I am not guilty, Brigham Young will die within one year! Yes, within six months." (It can be noted here that Brigham Young died within the six months of Lee's prophecy almost to the day.)

Lee's execution took place at Mountain Meadows on March 23rd, 1877, almost twenty years after the massacre. He was the only person ever tried, convicted and executed for the Massacre. Lee was buried in the cemetery in Panguitch. His membership and temple blessings were reinstated in the LDS church on April 20, 1961. Subsequently, the Lee descendants placed a marble "Blanket" over his grave and carved into it were the words: "YE SHALL KNOW THE TRUTH AND THE TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE."

In 1990 a granite memorial was erected by the Mormons on a hill overlooking the site of the massacre. Carved into the large granite slab, are the names of the 120 men, women, and children who died here in 1857. In 1998 after having visited the site, LDS President Gordon B. Hinckley pledged a quarter of a million dollars to restore the site of the battle and to restore the 1932 monument. Over time the monument had deteriorated due to the Magotsu Creek undercutting the foundation.

Mormon men, women, and children carefully removed and laid aside the stones from the monument during the reconstruction.

Ground penetrating radar was used to check the area for any residual bones. Despite finding none, a backhoe uncovered hundreds of fragments of bones and skulls from twenty-eight men, women and children. In 1999 during a solemn memorial ceremony, these bones were carefully placed in four wooden boxes, each covered with a folded American flag, which were in turn placed in a vault in the ground along side the base of the reconstructed monument.

An important part of the memorial ceremony was the reconciliation and healing efforts attempted by many of the emigrant and Mormon descendants. In some instances however, some resentment still lingers on. For a century and a half the descendants of the emigrants from Arkansas have mourned the tragic loss of their relatives. There has been resentment among some in that the LDS church has not accepted responsibility for this violent act. Historian Juanita Brooks summarized things as follows: "It [the massacre] was tragic for those who were killed and for the children left orphans, but it was also tragic for the men who became murderers, and for their children who for four generations now have lived under that shadow."¹⁵

"Many of them moved away. Not that they feared the law but that they could not face their neighbors. They wanted their children to grow up so far away that they would not hear of this or become connected with it. Within a year, the population of Cedar City had decreased almost half."¹⁶ Mormon historian Richard Turley has stated "Two facts make the case even more difficult to fathom. First, nothing that any of the emigrants purportedly did or said, even if all of it were true, came close to justifying their deaths. Second, the large majority of perpetrators led decent,

nonviolent lives before and after the massacre."¹⁷



ENDNOTES

¹ Will Bagley *Blood of the Prophets*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Page 96

² Bagley, Page 102

³ Bagley, Page 109

⁴ Miss Brooks was a Mormon English professor and historian who spent over fifty years studying the Mountain Meadows Massacre and wrote the first book on the subject. As a devout Mormon she felt it necessary to reveal the truth about the subject whatever that truth might be. Will Bagley paid tribute to Brooks describing her as "one of the West's best and bravest historians. No one could equal the insight, dedication, and courage Juanita Brooks brought to the story..."

⁵ Bagley, Page 125

⁶ Bagley, Page 141

⁷ Bagley, Page 147

⁸ James H. Carleton, USA, *Mountain Meadows Massacre, House of Representatives, 57th Congress, Document No. 605 Page 15*, (1971 Reprint, The Press of the Charterhouse of Parma)

⁹ Bagley, Page 372. According to Frank Kirkman this is attributable to the diary of church historian and later LDS President, Wilford Woodruff.
http://1857massacre.com/MMM/brigham_young_descerated.htm

¹⁰ Carleton Report, Page 4

¹¹ Bagley, Page 154, 160

¹² Edward W. Tullidge, *History of Salt Lake and its Founders, Resignation of Judge Drummond, March 30, 1857*.

¹³ <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?NCMP1847-1877,165>

¹⁴ Bagley, Page 318

¹⁵ Rea, Ralph R. *The Mountain Meadows Massacre and Its Completion as a Historic Episode*. (Boone County Historical & Railroad Society.)
<http://asms.k12.ar.us/armem/brondel/archive/rea.htm>

¹⁶ Bagley notes that in 1857 there were 857 families living in Cedar City but two years later only about 20 families remained.

¹⁷ Turley, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Newsroom Website,
<http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/news-releases-stories/the-mountain-meadows-massacre>