
Report of Fourteenth Annual Meeting of the Mormon History Association

by Lavina Fielding Anderson

Why don't you come down with us?" invited one of the determined tourists trampling through a Missouri meadow's waist high grass and thistles. He was one of the nearly three hundred persons attending the Mormon History Association annual meeting in Lamoni, Iowa, May 25-28. His destination was a bluff overlooking Crooked River, the place where a clash between Mormon and militia-mob resulted in the death of three Mormons including an apostle, David Patton. The invitation was addressed to the Missouri landholder who, with pipe in teeth and baby-cradling wife at his side, leaned on his fence and watched the procession. "No thanks," he drawled back. "I'm afraid of snakes."

The whoop of laughter that greeted his sally may have been tinged with uneasiness. D. Michael Quinn, commenting on one of the papers, had quoted British historian Arnold Toynbee: "Historians generally illustrate rather than correct the ideas of the communities within which they live and work." He added: "Consciously or unconsciously, communities and institutions use history to justify their existence and current identity. Whether the community and institution are looking inward for self-justification or outward for approval and expansion, the 'impartial' judge of the past (the Historian) is expected to illustrate and reinforce the assumptions of the institution and community."

Going in search of historical truth may, in some respects, be going out on a bluff to see—for the first time—this perspective on the Battle of Crooked River. (It wasn't quite a first time; President and Sister Kimball had been there first last year.) The possibility exists of disturbing other creatures who feel that the territory is theirs and should remain undisturbed.

As it turned out, there were no visible snakes on the bluff. The papers, many of which did provide new perspectives on historical landmarks, provoked at best lively discussions and at worst nodding heads from those who had indulged in stimulating conversations too long the night before. But unanimously a deeper commitment to the historic community of Mormonism emerged.

Graceland College, the Reorganized Church's four-year college, was hosting the conference and passing out wooden nickels in honor of Lamoni's centennial to be celebrated the weekend after the conference. It was spacious, green, and very quiet, its buildings dotted around gentle swells and dips in the landscape and its sidewalk luring members out into exploratory walks.

The intellectual fare was heavy and steady. Thirty-six presentations were crammed mainly into Saturday. Also presentations and lectures were given on the bus tours that took visitors to the sweeping panorama of Adam-ondi-Ahman/vast enough that two hundred people could have a

private experience at this "once and future" site, to the courthouse lawn at Gallatin, the overlooks at Crooked River and the Clay County border, Liberty Jail, the RLDS Auditorium, the site of the Baptist church that sheltered Joseph Smith and others from the storm at Fishing River, and the courthouse steps and cemetery of Richmond-Whitmer country.

The papers themselves were presented at five plenary sessions. At the first, President Wallace B. Smith of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints welcomed the historians to the campus, described the records management program being set up for the official RLDS records, and confessed his own ambiguities about the idea of taking himself seriously enough to consider his doings and sayings "historic." That evening Richard L. Bushman challenged the idea that Joseph Smith may have written the Book of Mormon out of 1830s current events by showing that two extremely popular subjects—anti-Masonry and the Indians as remnants of the ten tribes—were not primary reasons why converts accepted the Book of Mormon. The next morning Alma Blair of Graceland College described Lamoni's special feeling that it was "the center place," even after Joseph Smith III moved himself and Church administration to Independence. Reviewing its history, he identified the sense of nostalgia, of living history, that pervades the town, and the sense in which it is still an experimental Christian community. Nancy Hiles Ishikawa, an honors graduate at Graceland, presented a paper on Alice Smith Edwards, daughter of Joseph Smith III's oldest son, Frederick Madson Smith, and hence his heir had she been a boy. Also wife to F. Henry Edwards, an apostle and member of the First Presidency, Alice was both grounded in her RLDS heritage and restricted by it. Alice's husband and children were in the audience. After lunch editors of a half dozen Mormon publications described their history, their goals, their audiences, and what they were trying to do. Mary Bradford of *Dialogue*, Charles Tate of *BYU Studies*, Judith Dushku of *Exponent II*, and Allen Roberts of *Sunstone*—all LDS publications—were joined by Roger Hershey, associated with the RLDS' defunct quarterly *Courage* and by Richard Sadler of the *Journal of Mormon History*. After the evening business meeting and awards presentation Milton V. Backman, Jr., outgoing president, delivered the traditional president's address, reporting on his intensive research to establish population statistics for Kirtland during the Church's crucial Ohio period.

The rest of the sessions, frustratingly but temptingly, were concurrent, running four and five at a time. Participants discussed such diverse topics as millennialism, philosophy, Emma Smith, the Walker War, the Ghost Dance religion, pioneer lawyers, the territorial probate courts, the Mormons in England, Tonga, Hawaii, Tahiti, Iowa, such dissidents as Benjamin Winchester, John C. Bennett, John Noah, and James J. Strang, Mormon attitudes towards the Blacks in both churches, a report on the restoration of Nauvoo, twentieth century attitudes toward social conditions, and economic efforts in California and Utah. Even a sampling of topics was intriguing.

Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, coauthoring a biography of Emma Smith, suggested that James Arlington Bennet, a charismatic convert, may have been the real author of the *New York Sun* letter. Printed over Emma Smith's signature eighteen months after Joseph's death, the letter called Church leaders "petty tyrants,"

stated her intention to stay in Nauvoo, and described Joseph as "laboring under a diseased mind." The second paper on Emma probed her second marriage and found a happy and loving relationship with Lewis C. Bidamon. He admittedly drank but was neither lazy nor a poor provider. On the contrary he was energetic, ambitious, and well-respected in the community. Emma was his third wife and Val pointed out the "vast irony" of Emma living the practice of polygamy by raising one of Lewis' illegitimate children, born after his marriage to Emma. The fact that this infidelity did not disrupt the marriage tells us much about the strength of their relationship.

Thomas B. Alexander of BYU's History Department and Redd Center described the history of the Social Advisory Committee, an inter-auxiliary board operating in the 1920s that encouraged action on social issues. In addition to the all-too-familiar emphasis on dress and dance styles, it also recommended such services—still not available—as a Church-wide program on sex education.

James Hilmer Backman of BYU's J. Reuben Clark Law School traced the rise of law as a "respectable" profession in the Church. Ironically it dates to the time when law was primarily the Church's enemy—during the polygamy trials.

Kenneth L. Cannon of BYU's Child Development and Family Relations Dept. reported some research on Mormon students' attitudes toward such practices as Word of Wisdom and morality. Questionnaires first administered in 1935 and again in 1972 show that, in marked contrast to the increasing secularization of society, Mormonism is not only holding the line with its young people but actually increasing the strength of their beliefs.

Howard A. Christy of BYU Press analyzed the bloody 1853 Walker War between Indians and Mormons and concluded that Brigham Young consistently worked for "a humanitarian strategy" against the opposition of the settlers and the military. Despite his determination, however, local militia units disregarded his orders and caused most of the deaths of that war.

J. Kenneth Davies of BYU's Economics Department took another look at the Church's open opposition to participation in the Gold Rush and discovered that between fifteen and twenty-five percent of the pioneers of 1847 ended up in California, mostly in the gold fields. This represented as many as a thousand Saints. Not only were they present at Sutter's mill when gold was discovered there, but they were involved in discovering gold in many places, from Carson Valley to Sacramento. Between 1848 and 1851 as much as \$100,000 in gold entered Salt Lake from men that Brigham Young had authorized to go—not for themselves but for the Kingdom. Had it not been for this Mormon gold, such vital ventures as trade, missionary support, and investments would have been seriously jeopardized.

Don Enders of the LDS Church Arts and Sites Division compared the proposed plat of Nauvoo with its broad streets, landscaped yards, and carefully maintained sidewalks to the reality as revealed by archaeological digs. The results show that Nauvoo "was too busy growing to adhere to the ideal." The large one acre lots were subdivided. Buildings trespassed on property lines. Some areas of the city never had their streets aligned with the original plat. And sidewalks and roadways were considerably more haphazard than the plan.

Elizabeth Dutson Gee, a graduate student in BYU's History Department, examined the frequent complaint that Utah County's Probate Court—like other territorial courts—picked Mormon judges and juries that discriminated against non-Mormons. The results? Court records show that decisions, punishments, and money awarded in civil suits simply do not show favoritism to Mormons.

Stanley B. Kimball of Southern Illinois University's Historical Department gave a map tour of the Mormon trails in Iowa. In addition to the famous trail of 1846 he detailed the "virtually unknown" trail followed by the Mormon Battalion south to Missouri and Kansas until it picked up the Santa Fe Trail and a second "unknown" trail—the handcart trail from Iowa City to present-day Lewis in Cass County.

Robert L. Lively, Jr., of the University of Maine, compared Mormonism with Irvingism (the Catholic Apostolic Church), both competing for English converts in the nineteenth century. Both were established in the early 1820s, had charismatic leaders, believed in the gifts of the spirit, claimed revelations and prophecy, preached that it was restoration of the original church, featured twelve apostles, and looked forward to the millennium. But the Irvingite Church is, for all practical purposes, extinct. Lively claims that Irvingites "sought to restore the past," while the Mormons "were a forward-looking, expansionist, populist movement on the frontier of the New World."

J. Keith Melville of BYU's Political Science Department took a look at Mormon-Gentile relations in Iowa, a stopping-off place on the way west, and discovered signs that the same ominous bad-neighbor pattern was repeating itself. Mormons voted as a bloc in the 1848 election, resulting in a violent exchange among all the partisan newspapers in the state. In-fighting existed between two Church leaders, Orson Hyde and Almon W. Babbit. There was polarization on the "Mormon problem" in the state legislature, and a Congressional investigation into which candidate should be seated.

David Whittaker of BYU's Religious Instruction Department examined the life of Benjamin Winchester, a Philadelphia missionary who helped convert about eight hundred and published early Mormon periodicals. He was excommunicated in September 1844 over issues involving "the increasing powers of the Quorum of the Twelve and the rumors of plural marriage." He spent some time with Rigdon's movement as an apostle, operated a cigar shop in Pittsburgh, and lived in Iowa from 1854 until his death in 1901.

James B. Allen of BYU's History Department looked at economic life in Utah through William Clayton's "quest for economic well being." He had many projects going but despite investments and paper profits never became wealthy. Nine wives and forty-two children "could drain it all, and in Clayton's case apparently did." Nearly everything he owned was sold to pay his debts when he died.

The indisputable high point of the annual meeting was the Sunday morning devotional which began with Paul Edwards, vice-president of Graceland, greeting the group: "We meet in the name of Restoration, and surely one of the things being restored is our fellowship after a very real exile." He lingered over "the beliefs held common and the unbelievable willingness to accept and understand each other despite the very real incompatibility of other beliefs."

In an understated, direct, and personal way, Dr. Edwards, Linda Newell, Val Avery, and Lyman Edwards, Paul's brother and an RLDS minister, shared what it had meant to them personally and professionally to come to Graceland. They recalled, with gentle affection, moments of personal meaning: F. Henry Edwards leading family prayer "with naturalness" in Leonard and Grace Arrington's Salt Lake home, Val standing "with foreboding and terror" before the Auditorium and entering it to find welcome and acceptance, Paul Edwards meeting for the first time with other Mormon historians and hearing someone blandly tell the waitress, "No one at this table will have coffee." "I think I learned more about me and outside-ness at that moment than I thought possible." Paul commented. He termed the Association a "larger and more dignifying experience than a single mind and heart looking for a single explanation."

The program had begun with a solo saxophone playing "Lead, Kindly Light," providing its own meditation for Mormons of all descriptions by the author, an Anglican just baptized Catholic. It ended with "The Spirit of God Like a Fire Is Burning," a totally Mormon experience for both groups, and Lyman's thought that led into the closing prayer: "One of the things that really brings us together is knowing that God is so real that when we come into his presence, the past and the future feel different. Our past can be absolved, it can be okay. And our future can be possible; it can be victory." The tears and embraces that followed were a seal on the service.

Next year's annual meeting will be held May 1-4 at Canadaigua's Sheraton Inn in New York, near Palmyra. Jan Shippo, the new president, reported on arrangements to hold Sunday devotional in the Sacred Grove and drew uproarious laughter by adding, "And we think we can promise you a couple of really special things there."

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Newly Elected Officers of MHA

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Jan Shippo, History/Religious Studies, Indiana-Purdue at Indianapolis

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Jill Mulvay Derr, LDS Historical Department

Richard P. Howard, RLDS Church Historian

William B. Smart, Editor, *Deseret News*

1979 MHA AWARDS

BEST BOOK

Richard H. Jackson, ed., *The Mormon Role in the Settlement of the West*, published in 1978 by Brigham Young University Press

BEST DOCUMENTARY OR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL BOOK

Chad J. Flake, *Mormon Bibliography, 1830-1930*, Published in 1978 by the University of Utah Press

BEST ARTICLE BY A SENIOR SCHOLAR

Lester E. Bush, "Brigham Young in Life and Death: A Medical Overview," *Journal of Mormon History* 5(1978): 79-104

Eugene E. Campbell & Bruce L. Campbell, "Divorce among Mormon Polygamists: Extent and Explanations," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 46 (Winter 1978): 4-23

BEST ARTICLE BY A JUNIOR SCHOLAR

Danel W. Bachman, "New Light on an Old Hypothesis: The Ohio Origins of the Revelation on Eternal Marriage," *Journal of Mormon History* 5(1978): 19-32

OUTSTANDING GRADUATE STUDENT

Steven L. Olsen, candidate for the Ph.D at the University of Chicago

The following special citations were also given:

To the late GUSTAVE O. LARSON for his service to the cause of Mormon history, his scholarly publications in that field, and for his years of service as a teacher and a friend to students.

To the late DR. T. EDGAR LYON for his service to the Mormon History Association, for his scholarly contributions to the field of Mormon history, and for his years of service as a teacher and a friend to students.

To the late DR. DAVID E. MILLER for his service to the Mormon History Association, for his scholarly contributions to the field of Mormon history, and for his years of service as a teacher and a friend to students.

To BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY PRESS for its encouragement of the art of history through publishing four fine works of Mormon history during 1978—*Utah's History*, *The Mormon Role in the Settlement of the West*, *Anti-Mormonism in Idaho, 1872-1892*, and *Sister Saints*—as well as for its continuing involvement in the publication of *BYU Studies*.

To GRACELAND COLLEGE and its administration and staff for their generous and gracious offer to host the Fourteenth Annual Mormon History Association meeting and for their outstanding attention to our needs and comfort.

Gordon Irving
Chairman, Awards Committee