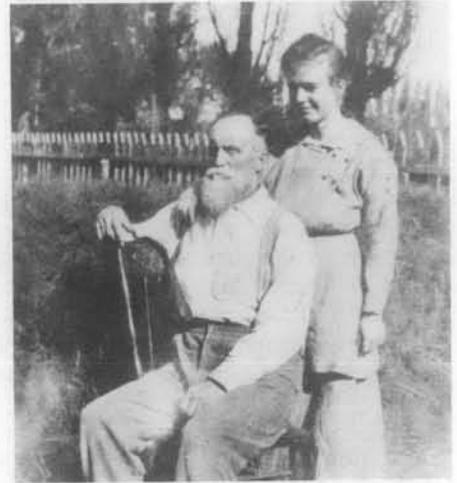


A Mormon and Wilderness: The Saga of the SAVAGES



Levi Peterson

My mother has just published a book about her ancestors, the Savages. With this book my mother, now in her mid-eighties, culminates twenty years of research. The book has the usual content of amateur genealogy: long columns of names and dates, traditions gathered from family lore, anecdotes conveyed in the letters of aging uncles and aunts, minor biographical essays written by this cousin or that. For most readers, it will not be vital or dramatic or beyond the ordinary. But for me, raised on the saga of the Savages, having seen it daily in the face of my mother when I was a child and seeing it yet among the living Savages, this book is tense with emotion and conflict. I am drawn to the Savages by the fact that they suffered and survived the American wilderness. They were a part of that historical phenomenon called the frontier experience. From 1759 until well into the present century, the Savages were at the periphery of American settlement. It is no accident that my love for wilderness and my love for my ancestors are inextricable. In the image I carry of the American wilderness, I find a color, a trace, a scent of the Savages.

The first Savage was named John. He was a private soldier in the army of James Wolfe. Family tradition says that he stood near Wolfe when the general was mortally wounded at the battle of Quebec in 1759. After the battle, John Savage deserted from the British army and went into western Massachusetts. He married a red-haired Irish woman, fathered four children, quarreled with his wife, and escaped by the skin of his teeth when his wife betrayed him to British officers. He fought in the war of the American Revolution on the side of the patriots. He made his living as a common farmer, and he signed his documents with an X. He was born an Englishman; every other fact about his origin has been swallowed by the Atlantic Ocean. I do not mind that he was illiterate, common, and obscure. I like the sharp, clean beginning he gives our family: we spring to life in the New World and know nothing of the Old. I also like the fact that John Savage always lived in backwoods places. When I travel in the East



and drive among farms bordered by brush and woodlots and when I pass through the residual forests of the Appalachian mountains, I think of John Savage. While he lived, America was still a continental wilderness.

The migration of the Savages went on. John's son, Daniel Savage, went into western New York around 1790 and settled down to raise a family. One of the sons of Daniel Savage, Levi Savage, Sr., moved to Ohio where he married Polly Haynes in 1817. Shortly afterward, Levi and Polly migrated to Michigan. They

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had eleven children, of whom five died in childhood. In 1840, Levi and his family heard the Restored Gospel and believed in it. When the exodus from Nauvoo began, he took his family from Michigan and joined the Saints on the Iowa plains. Polly Haynes died in camp during the winter of 1846. Levi made the crossing of the plains in the summer of 1847, bringing with him a young woman named Jane Mathers, who helped care for his motherless children. She would later marry his son. In the Salt Lake valley, Levi married plural wives, built up several farms, and participated respectably in the community of Zion. He died in old age at the home of a son in Willard. My home in Ogden is twenty miles from Willard. I take comfort in knowing that the bones and dust of Levi Savage, Sr., lie near me.

The second Levi was a Mormon Odysseus. Levi Savage, Jr., joined the Mormon Battalion on the Iowa plains in 1846, and participated in the Mexican War by marching with the Battalion to Santa Fe, Tucson, and San Diego. He arrived in Utah in October, 1847. In 1848 he married Jane Mathers. Jane bore a son in early 1851 and died before the year was out. Brigham Young called Levi on a mission to Siam. He began at this time to keep the journal in which he wrote intermittently for the rest of his life. He left his infant son with a sister and departed on a journey that led him to a complete circumnavigation of the earth. He embarked from San Francisco and sailed to Calcutta. From there he found passage to Rangoon, but he never reached Siam. He spent depressed months living as a dependent upon kind English colonials. He converted no one. In fact, he rarely preached the Gospel and at last considered himself fortunate merely to receive passage on a vessel bound for America. From New York he made his way to Florence, Nebraska, the marshalling point of the Saints for the crossing of the plains. It was August of 1856. He had been gone from the Saints for four years. He found them moved by a new enthusiasm. It was the Lord's will that the handcart be used to transport immigrants to Zion. Levi warned the members of the Willie company that the season was too far advanced, but when he was shouted down, he joined their fated trek, earning himself a place in Bancroft's *History of Utah*. Bancroft quotes him as saying, "Brethren and sisters, what I have said I know to be true; but seeing you are to go forward, I will go with you. May God in his mercy preserve us." There is nothing of such eloquence in his journal, but his entries nonetheless record the worsening circumstances of the company stranded by early storms on the high Wyoming plains:

October 24, 1856. Friday. This morning found us with thirteen corpses for burial. These were all put into one grave. Some had actually frozen to death. We were obliged to remain in camp, move the tents and people behind the willows to shelter them from the severe wind which blew enough to

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pierce us through. Several of our cattle died here.

Levi Savage, Jr., married a widow whom he met during the plains crossing. She had two teenaged daughters. When they reached maturity, he also married them. He migrated southward from Salt Lake City and at one moment pioneered in Kanab. Fearful of Indians, he retreated to the barren soil of Toquerville where he lived out his days. In late 1887 and early 1888, he served six months in the Utah penitentiary for illegal cohabitation with his plural wives. He was not a prominent man nor, if I believe his sparse and ungrammatical journal, was he educated. But he was a representative Saint. He went through it all: the march of the Battalion, a circumnavigation of the globe for the purpose of preaching the Gospel, the handcart passage, pioneering in southern Utah, imprisonment for the peculiar institution of Mormonism. I am proud of his endurance. I am also proud that he lived close to wilderness during most of his life. He gave no indication in his journal that this fact was important to him, but it explains a great deal about me.

The infant son whom Levi Savage, Jr., left behind when he went to Asia was named Levi Mathers Savage. He grew up to be an intelligent man, and he took life very seriously. In an early journal, he recorded that a little girl at play in Toquerville shouted at him, "Cousin Levi, come help us dingburst these boys." Levi considered such language a mark of degeneracy. Having gone with his father to Kanab and Toquerville, Levi returned to Salt Lake City as a young man and got a little education at a business college. He taught school at Coalville and married a temperamental wife there. He yearned for a mission, and when a call came to go to Arizona, he was ready. He went first to Sunset, a United Order village under the direction of Lot Smith. One day Wilford Woodruff sat with Levi on the banks of the Little Colorado and persuaded him to obey the principle of plural marriage. Levi took my grandmother, Lydia Lenora Hatch, to St. George by wagon and married her. His first wife, pregnant with her third child, rampaged. Lot Smith had her bound to a chair, and when a wagon going to Utah came by, he put her and her children into it. That was the end of my grandfather's first family. He grieved all his life for the three children he never raised. Later he married Hannah Adeline Hatch, sister to my grandmother. He moved his two wives to Mexico for a while, came back to Snowflake to teach briefly in the stake academy, and went finally as bishop to the new colony of Woodruff at the confluence of the Little Colorado and Silver Creek. He remained as bishop of Woodruff for twenty-seven years. He was released only after his son informed the general authorities of the Church that his father was kept a prisoner to duty by a stake president who could not dispense with his leadership in Woodruff. Woodruff was a bleak, windblown, impoverished hamlet. Levi Mathers Savage superintended the building of thirteen dams on the Little Colorado. All of them washed out. He spent his last days doing temple work in Salt Lake City. He daily walked seven miles each way to and from the temple until he died of pneumonia at eighty-three. He said that he never wanted to see Woodruff again.

Levi Mathers Savage lies by the side of Lydia Lenora Hatch in the cemetery on the avenues in Salt Lake City. But his return in old age to the city is deceptive. Most of his life he was a groundbreaker. He too was either in wilderness or at its edge.

Hannah Adeline Hatch lies in the red, wind-stirred soil of the Woodruff cemetery. In one respect, Adeline was more fortunate than my grandmother: four of Lenora's seven children died in childhood; none of Adeline's five children died. Otherwise Adeline had a difficult and handicapped life. She was seven years younger than my grandmother, and she married my grandfather four years after my grandmother's marriage to him. Adeline was passionate, intense, and intelligent. I conclude this from observing the lives of her children and from reading her unusual journal. She badly needed a settled, structured society. She would have done well, perhaps even brilliantly, in Salt Lake City. Instead she had Woodruff. She was bedridden during most of her married life. She suffered from a bad back, from dizzy spells, from vague internal pains. Her compensation lay in spiritual gifts. Her journal alludes to her illnesses and briefly records births, missions, marriages, and deaths. But principally it is an account of her touches with divinity. She knelt in prayer-circles with Sisters, she anointed and administered, she prophesied, she spoke in tongues and interpreted them, she received miraculous healings, she received portentous promises for herself and her children. Nothing elevated her so much as the visit of these favors from God. She tabulated them, remembered them, recorded them in vivid detail. This passage from her journal radiates her hope and ecstasy:

January 16, 1898 I also received a blessing...at the hands of my much beloved Sister M. J. West wherein she made these promises that my children would grow up without sin and that when my hairs were white that my eyes would beam with brightness even the Spirit of God would beam through them and those who knew me would be surprised and also myself at the great labor I had performed and the children that I had brought forth with my weak body, that I should accomplish a greater work than thousands because their minds would not be so enlightened and that I would receive a most glorious crown whose brightness would be dazzling, and that the promise made to me by my sister May would be so that the fruit of my womb would come forth perfect in form and feature.

Adeline's journal has inspired her descendants. Some of them characterize it as informal scripture, as a family revelation. It is also tragic. There is a disparity between her fervent belief in "a glorious crown whose brightness would be dazzling" and the actualities of her life in Woodruff. Within a day or two of the beautiful blessing quoted above I know her life subsided to its drab, impoverished, bedridden routine. I see in Adeline's journal how compulsively a person to whom health, status, and an amplitude of things are denied turns inward and beyond, seeking in the spirit the fulfillment that she cannot find in the world. The wilderness was not a fit habitation for Hannah Adeline

Hatch. I am desolated by her lonely, barren grave in the Woodruff cemetery.

Observing Adeline and observing my grandmother who also was often ill, my mother made a decision that she would not be an invalid. Lydia Jane Savage still lives at Snowflake, twenty miles south of her birthplace in Woodruff. She keeps her own house and makes her own bread. Her house is not elegant. Colors and laces, draperies and fixtures, appliances and furniture have not been within the range of things her conscience could easily allow. But within her possibilities her will has been direct and determined. Growing up, I knew unquestioningly the behavior she expected of me. Sometimes I have judged her to be too stern and unrelenting toward duty. Yet now I am moved to an enlarged admiration for humanity itself because of the ripening of spirit I have seen in my mother. No other person I know feels such compassion for errant and sinful people, nor so insistently overrides her impulsive indignation. She converses daily with God. She is strongly dependent on Him and strictly heeds His commandments. She doubts her salvation yet hopes for ultimate forgiveness. She is passionately familial. Her love spreads out to include every new generation of grandchildren and great-grandchildren without retracting in the slightest from those she loved first. Beyond this, her great trait is work. Work is the center of her life, an end in itself. As I grew up, it was a usual thing for my mother to go to bed at one or two o'clock in the morning and to arise at four or five. My father was aging; my brothers and I were small; neither house or income allowed for conveniences. After my father died, my mother added to her other duties those of teaching school for a living.

With so many other things she might do, why has my mother been a genealogist? Surely because of duty. My mother belongs to the era in which it was seen as the direct, personal duty of all Church members to discover their ancestors who had died without the ordinances of the true Gospel and to provide their name to the authorities of the temples, where rituals of salvation are performed for the dead. For twenty years, Mother kept doggedly at her work, although at best genealogical research is a tedious, sterile business. Observing my mother, I saw that she departed on hunches and arrived by luck. Most of the time during her twenty years of research, she was looking for a needle in a haystack. She perused books of genealogy, local histories, wills, deeds, census reports, church registries. She was plagued by unpredictable variables. If she could not find facts and verifications for a given ancestor, it might be because he had never lived where she was searching, or because he had never got into the records, or because the right records were not accessible. When she found what she was looking for, it always seemed pitifully little to me: places and names and scanty dates for birth, baptism, marriage and death—abstract, bonehard facts from the dusty past.

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Perhaps my mother's sense of duty alone would not have kept her at this unrewarding business. She had another motive to quicken her search for the Savages. She has always had a need to reunite the family, to find lost loved ones. It is an actual, passionate need: mythological and irrational perhaps, but strong, pulsing, moving. One of the archetypal impulses in humanity is the search for lost generations—for the dead parent, for the dead child. It is an impulse arising from that part of the human spirit that disowns time and disregards space. However mature we become, we cannot entirely forego our need for the nurture and comfort those dead parents gave us; we cannot accept our adult children as an adequate replacement for those little boys and those little girls we once had.

My mother had a vocation to hunt for lost loved ones. She was conditioned by the longing of her mother for her four dead children, and she responded to her father's grief for the three living children he failed to raise. In her many years, she has seen families evaporate. Happy clusters of people around her have faded into insubstantial ideas and fervent memories. Brothers and sisters, father and mother, husband and son, cousins, uncles, aunts: by the dozens she saw them go, melted like snow in the spring wind. Genealogical research has been a ritual for my mother, a prayer and an incantation for the resuscitation of those dead. The biographical notes of her book show this. She cannot stay for long by simple facts. She elaborates her own personality into the narratives about her dead ancestors. She projects into their historical acts, their participation in the American Revolution, their epic pioneer marches, their losses and loneliness. The passage below shows how she feels. It comes at the end of her account about Sally Parish, the woman who married Daniel Savage and became the mother of Levi Savage, Sr. My mother halts her narrative and addresses her dead ancestor with an immediacy that is not mere rhetoric:

Do you know me and do you love me, Sally, as I love my great grandchildren? Already I am a great-grandmother, and before long I might be a great great grandmother. I am your great great granddaughter, Sally. Can you feel as tender as I do for these that are mine in this mortal world; or is your capacity far in advance of mine so that you can love me ever so much more? No matter, I shall always love you and bless your name...

I have come to the end of the stanza in the saga of the Savages. If I live long enough, time will give me another installment. While I wait, I ask what attraction the saga has had for me. I think that I too have the archetypal impulse to find my lost loved ones. I have an upwelling urge to go where I last saw my father, to go where my mother still sits at her sewing machine and bends down to me with tenderness on her face. When I think of the Savages, I want to go where they walked and worked. But perhaps I want more. Perhaps

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my mother, too, and all other human beings who search for their roots and branches want something more. I think we have, all of us, an unrecognized mysticism, an impulse to join ourselves to a great parent, to the universe, to nature, to life. I am a mystic of sorts. I have very little sympathy for rapturous mysticism, for the trances and hysterias of individuals who believe they have been inexplicably subsumed into God. But I do believe in a quiet mysticism arising from the recognition that humanity is part of a whole, that our being is part and parcel of total being. When I look for the Savages, I am seeking my place in nature.

Where will I find the Savages? Certainly in my mother's book and in the old journals. But I also find the Savages in wilderness. I cannot dissociate their image in my mind from the image wilderness has left there. I hear my ancestors in the surf breaking on the Plymouth shore. I walk with John Savage along the trail from Canada to Massachusetts. I pass over the mountains and enter the forests of western New York and Ohio. I winter at Council Bluffs. I choke on the dust of the Platte Trail. I see the valley of the Great Salt Lake from Little Mountain. I herd sheep on the red cliffs beyond Kanab. I weather the winds of spring on the Little Colorado.

Sometimes when I visit my mother at Snowflake, we drive to the farm she and my father bought, and we climb a small steep hill. Around us, the open Arizona land rolls away to meet the sky on a vast, circumferential horizon. We can see the winding strip of green fields, trees, and houses where Silver Creek flows. We can see the sage plains and the juniper-covered ridges and great outcroppings of gray sandstone and a multitude of distant knolls, buttes, and mesas. We stand and look for a while. My mother is at one with what she sees. She loves intensely, reverentially, the land she was born into. She has no words, no fine distinctions, no recognition of possible disparities between her heavenly faith and her love for this earth. I know how she feels. I recognize that at least in part I absorb my love for wilderness from her.

This is why I have to have wilderness. This is why wilderness is more important to me than paintings, sculptures, cathedrals, and museums. From that swirling mixture of facts, words, places, of ideas, image, and emotions that filled my childhood, the primitive reason of my child-mind assembled strange and paradoxical equations. Among the equations which continue to assert their validity is that which makes my ancestors and the wilderness one. To grow up in Snowflake meant that I saw myself and those who preceded me underneath a sky or on an open ridge or among the junipers. Even in a house I was never more than a step from wilderness. I cannot divest myself of wilderness because I cannot divest myself of my ancestors. That is one reason why I resent the great growing world city. There is nothing in a city to remind me of the Savages. None of them, my mother included, ever existed for long in a city. When the wilderness is gone, half my identity will be gone with it.

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