MOUNTAIN MEADOWS MASSACRE

In September 1857, some two thousand persons gathered in Cedar City, Utah, to effect a reconciliation among those whose ancestors died or participated in what may be considered the most unfortunate incident in the history of the LDS Church, the Mountain Meadows massacre. The massacre occurred between September 7 and 11, 1857, when a group of Mormon settlers in southern Utah joined with nearby Indians in killing all but some of the youngest members of a group of non-Mormon emigrants on route to California.

After years of painstaking research, Juanita Brooks, author of an oft-cited book on the tragedy, concluded, "The complete—-the absolute—-truth of the affair can probably never be evaluated by any human being; attempts to understand the forces which culminated in it and those which were set into motion by it are all very inadequate at best" (Brooks, p. 223). Yet, as Brooks makes clear, a few elements that helped contribute to the tragedy are evident.

Among these is the fact that a large contingent of United States troops was marching westward toward Utah Territory in the summer of 1857 (see Utah Expedition). Despite having been the federally appointed territorial governor, Brigham Young was not informed by Washington of the army's purpose and interpreted the move as a renewal of the persecution the Latter-day Saints had experienced before their westward hegira. "We are invaded by a hostile force who are evidently assailing us to accomplish our overthrow and destruction," he proclaimed on August 5, 1857. Anticipating an attack, he declared the territory to be under martial law and ordered "[t]hat all the forces in said Territory hold themselves in readiness to march, at a moment's notice, to repel any and all such threatened invasion" (Arrington, p. 254).

Part of Brigham Young's strategy in repelling the approaching army was to enlist local Indian tribes as allies. In an August 4 letter to southern Utah, for example, he urged one Latter-day Saint to "[c]ontrive the conciliatory policy towards the Indians, which I have ever recommended, and seek by works of righteousness to obtain their love and confidence, for they must learn that they have either got to help us or the United States will kill us both" (Brooks, p. 34).

Meanwhile, owing to the lateness of the season, a party of emigrants bound for California elected to take the southern route that passed through Cedar City and thirty-five miles beyond to the Mountain Meadows, which was then an area of springs, bogs, and plentiful grass where travelers frequently stopped to rejuvenate themselves and their stock before braving the harsh desert landscape to the west. Led by John T. Baker and Alexander Fancher, the diverse party consisted of perhaps 120 persons, most of whom left from Arkansas but others of whom joined the company along their journey.

As the Baker-Fancher party traveled from Salt Lake City to the Mountain Meadows, tensions developed between some of the emigrants, on the one hand, and Mormon settlers and their Native American allies, on the other. Spurred by rumors, their own observations, and memories of atrocities some of them had endured in Missouri and Illinois, Mormon residents in and around Cedar City felt compelled to take some action against the emigrant train but ultimately decided to dispatch a rider to Brigham Young seeking his counsel. Leaving September 7, 1857, the messenger made the nearly 300-mile journey in just a little more than three days.

Approximately one hour after his arrival, the messenger was on his way back with a letter from Brigham Young, who said he did not expect the federal soldiers to arrive that fall because of their poor stock. "They cannot get here this season with-
out we help them,” he explained. “So you see that the Lord has answered our prayers and again averted the blow designed for our heads.” Responding to the plea for counsel, he added, “In regard to the emigration trains passing through our settlements, we must not interfere with them until they are first notified to keep away. You must not meddle with them. The Indians we expect will do as they please but you should try and preserve good feelings with them” (Brooks, p. 63). The messenger arrived back in Cedar City on September 13.

By that time, however, it was too late, and nearly all the men, women, and children of the Baker-Fancher party lay dead. Besides a few persons who left the party before the attack, only about eighteen small children were spared. Two years later, seventeen of the children were returned to family members in northwestern Arkansas. Two decades after the tragedy, one of the Mormon settlers who were present at the massacre, John D. Lee, was executed by a firing squad at the Mountain Meadows, symbolically carrying to the grave the responsibility for those who “were led to do what none singly would have done under normal conditions, and for which none singly can be held responsible” (Brooks, p. 218).

Yet for more than another century after Lee’s death, the community guilt of those who participated in the massacre continued to fester alongside the collective pain of those children who survived it and the relatives of those who did not. Then in the late 1980s, the descendants of those affected by the tragedy began meeting to bind the wounds and achieve a reconciliation. On September 15, 1990, many of them gathered to dedicate a memorial marker to those who died at the Mountain Meadows.

One speaker at the marker dedication was Judge Roger V. Logan, Jr., of Harrison, Arkansas, a man related to twenty-one of the massacre victims listed on the marker, as well as to five of the children who survived. “I am happy to say that thanks to the work, cooperation and gifts of many of you,” he said, “there is now an appropriate monument standing in the place of the emigrants’ demise; a monument containing the names of eighty-two persons who died and seventeen who survived and [that] also contains reference to many others who may have been a part of the caravan.” As he read the victims’ names, he asked all related to them to stand in their honor.

Brigham Young University President Rex E. Lee, a descendant of John D. Lee, also spoke at
the memorial service, saying he found little solace in recognizing that similar tragedies had occurred across time and space. "Any attempt to recreate the human dynamics that were at work in southern Utah in the fall of 1857 can only leave us bewildered as to how rational human beings at any time, in any place, under any circumstances could have permitted such a tragedy to occur."

"Fortunately," he added, "full comprehension of the reasons is as unnecessary as it would be impossible. Our task for today is not to look backward, nor to rationalize, nor to engage in any kind of retroactive analysis nor apology. Our focus is not on 1857. It is on 1990. It is on our generation, and on those that are yet to come. And whatever drove the actions of those who came before, ours must be driven by something higher and more noble."

Gordon B. Hinckley, First Counselor in the LDS Church First Presidency, offered the prayer dedicating the new monument. In a talk delivered before the prayer, President Hinckley said he came "not as a descendant of any of the parties involved at Mountain Meadows" but "as a representative of an entire people who have suffered much over what occurred there."

"In our time," he said, "we can read such history as is available, but we really cannot understand nor comprehend that which occurred those tragic and terrible September days in 1857. Rather, we are grateful for the ameliorating influence that has brought us together in a spirit of reconciliation as new generations gather with respect and appreciation one for another. A bridge has been built across a chasm of cankering bitterness. We walk across that bridge and greet one another with a spirit of love, forgiveness, and with hope that there will never be a repetition of anything of the kind."

(Excerpts from the talks are all taken from unpublished manuscripts found in the Mountain Meadows Memorial collection, LDS Church Historical Department, Salt Lake City, Utah.)

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MOUNT OF TRANSFIGURATION

The Mount of Transfiguration was the scene of a transcendent New Testament event. It has been set in perspective by REVELATIONS to the Prophet Joseph Smith and portrayed with several related components. First, Jesus conversed with Moses and Elijah, who were then translated beings (Matt. 17:3-4). Second, a transfiguration of Jesus Christ himself occurred there, confirming his divine nature and calling to his three chief apostles: Peter, James, and John (Matt. 17:1-2). Third, those apostles were also temporarily transfigured during that experience (TPJS, p. 158). Fourth, in vision those apostles saw the earth in its future transfigured state as the inheritance of the faithful (D&C 63:20-21). Fifth, those same apostles received certain priesthood keys of the kingdom of God, which they utilized during their mortal ministries (HC 3:387). Sixth, Moses and Elijah, who were also on the Mount of Transfiguration, also conferred priesthood keys to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in the Kirtland Temple on April 3, 1836 (D&C 110:11-16).

The experience on the mount no doubt strengthened the Savior as he approached the last months before his atoning sacrifice. Moses and Elijah visited him as he prepared for the infinite sufferings in Gethsemane and the agonies of Golgotha (Luke 9:30-31; JC, p. 373).

Jesus’ transfiguration before Peter, James, and John made them “eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Pet. 1:16). During their visit, the voice of the Father bore record of the Savior’s mission, giving assurance to Peter, James, and John of the Father’s love and his approval of Jesus (Matt. 17:5-8). Because these apostles would soon constitute the FIRST PRESIDENCY of the early church (MD, pp. 571-572), the event was an unforgettable personal witness of the Father’s acknowledgment of Jesus’ redemptive mission. John later testified, “We beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father” (John 1:14).

The temporary transfiguration of Peter, James, and John allowed them to hear the voice of the Father and see the transfigured Son (cf. Moses 1:9-11). This extraordinary experience helped prepare them for the coming burden of Church leadership following Jesus’ departure from his earthly ministry. Well did Peter declare, “Lord, it is good for us to be here” (Matt. 17:4).