

The Mountain Meadows Massacre

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This month marks the 150th anniversary of a terrible episode in the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. On September 11, 1857, some 50 to 60 local militiamen in southern Utah, aided by American Indian allies, massacred about 120 emigrants who were traveling by wagon to California. The horrific crime, which spared only 17 children age six and under, occurred in a highland valley called the Mountain Meadows, roughly 35 miles southwest of Cedar City. The victims, most of them from Arkansas, were on their way to California with dreams of a bright future.

For a century and a half the Mountain Meadows Massacre has shocked and distressed those who have learned of it. The tragedy has deeply grieved the victims' relatives, burdened the perpetrators' descendants and Church members generally with sorrow and feelings of collective guilt, unleashed criticism on the Church, and raised painful, difficult questions. How could this have happened? How could members of the Church have participated in such a crime?

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.

As is true with any historical episode, comprehending the events of September 11, 1857, requires understanding the conditions of the time, only a brief summary of which can be shared in the few pages of this magazine article. For a more complete, documented account of the event, readers are referred to the forthcoming book *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*.¹

Historical Background

In 1857 an army of roughly 1,500 United States troops was marching toward Utah Territory, with more expected to follow. Over the preceding years, disagreements, miscommunication, prejudices, and political wrangling on both sides had created a growing divide between the territory and the federal government. In retrospect it is easy to see that both groups overreacted—the government sent an army to put down perceived treason in Utah, and the Saints believed the army was coming to oppress, drive, or even destroy them.

In 1858 this conflict—later called the Utah War—was resolved through a peace conference and negotiation. Because Utah’s militiamen and the U.S. troops never engaged each other in pitched battle, the Utah War has been characterized as “bloodless.” But the atrocity at Mountain Meadows made it far from bloodless.

As the troops were making their way west in the summer of 1857, so were thousands of overland emigrants. Some of these emigrants were Latter-day Saint converts en route to Utah, but most westbound emigrants were headed for California, many with large herds of cattle. The emigration season brought many wagon companies to Utah just as Latter-day Saints were preparing for what they believed would be a hostile military invasion. The Saints had been violently driven from Missouri and Illinois in the prior two decades, and they feared history might repeat itself.

Church President and territorial governor Brigham Young and his advisers formed policies based on that perception. They instructed the people to save their grain and prepare to cache it in the mountains in case they needed to flee there when the troops arrived. Not a kernel of grain was to be wasted or sold to merchants or passing emigrants. The people were also to save their ammunition and get their firearms in working order, and the territory’s militiamen were put on alert to defend the territory against the approaching troops if necessary.

These orders and instructions were shared with leaders throughout the territory. Elder George A. Smith of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles carried them to southern Utah. He, Brigham Young, and other leaders preached with fiery rhetoric against the enemy they perceived in the approaching army and sought the alliance of Indians in resisting the troops.

These wartime policies exacerbated tensions and conflict between California-bound emigrants and Latter-day Saint settlers as wagon trains passed through Utah’s settlements. Emigrants became frustrated when they were unable to resupply in the territory as they had expected to do. They had a difficult time purchasing grain and ammunition, and their herds, some of which included hundreds of cattle, had to compete with local settlers’ cattle for limited feed and water along the trail.

Some traditional Utah histories of what occurred at Mountain Meadows have accepted the claim that poisoning also contributed to conflict—that the Arkansas emigrants deliberately poisoned a spring and an ox carcass near the central Utah town of Fillmore, causing illness and death among local Indians. According to this

story, the Indians became enraged and followed the emigrants to the Mountain Meadows, where they either committed the atrocities on their own or forced fearful Latter-day Saint settlers to join them in the attack. Historical research shows that these stories are not accurate.

While it is true that some of the emigrants' cattle were dying along the trail, including near Fillmore, the deaths appear to be the result of a disease that affected cattle herds on the 1850s overland trails. Humans contracted the disease from infected animals through cuts or sores or through eating the contaminated meat. Without this modern understanding, people suspected the problem was caused by poisoning.

Escalating Tensions

The plan to attack the emigrant company originated with local Church leaders in Cedar City, who had recently been alerted that U.S. troops might enter at any time through southern Utah's passes. Cedar City was the last place on the route to California for grinding grain and buying supplies, but here again the emigrants were stymied. Badly needed goods weren't available in the town store, and the miller charged a whole cow—an exorbitant price—to grind a few dozen bushels of grain. Weeks of frustration boiled over, and in the rising tension one emigrant man reportedly claimed he had a gun that killed Joseph Smith. Others threatened to join the incoming federal troops against the Saints. Alexander Fancher, captain of the emigrant train, rebuked these men on the spot.

The men's statements were most likely idle threats made in the heat of the moment, but in the charged environment of 1857, Cedar City's leaders took the men at their word. The town marshal tried to arrest some of the emigrants on charges of public intoxication and blasphemy but was forced to back down. The wagon company made its way out of town after only about an hour, but the agitated Cedar City leaders were not willing to let the matter go. Instead they planned to call out the local militia to pursue and arrest the offending men and probably fine them some cattle. Beef and grain were foods the Saints planned to survive on if they had to flee into the mountains when the troops arrived.

Cedar City mayor, militia major, and stake president Isaac Haight described the grievances against the emigrant men and requested permission to call out the militia in an express dispatch to the district militia commander, William Dame, who lived in nearby Parowan. Dame was also the stake president of Parowan. After convening a council to discuss the matter, Dame denied the request. "Do not notice their threats," his dispatch back to Cedar City said. "Words are but wind—they injure no one; but if they (the emigrants) commit acts of violence against citizens inform me by express, and such measures will be adopted as will insure tranquility."²

Still intent on chastening the emigrants, Cedar City leaders then formulated a new plan. If they could not use the militia to arrest the offenders, they would persuade local Paiute Indians to give the Arkansas company “a brush,” killing some or all of the men and stealing their cattle.³

They planned the attack for a portion of the California trail that ran through a narrow stretch of the Santa Clara River canyon several miles south of the Mountain Meadows. These areas fell under the jurisdiction of Fort Harmony militia major John D. Lee, who was pulled into the planning. Lee was also a federally funded “Indian farmer” to local Paiutes. Lee and Haight had a long, late-night discussion about the emigrants in which Lee told Haight he believed the Paiutes would “kill all the party, women and children, as well as the men” if incited to attack.⁴ Haight agreed, and the two planned to lay blame for the killing at the feet of the Indians.

The generally peaceful Paiutes were reluctant when first told of the plan. Although Paiutes occasionally picked off emigrants’ stock for food, they did not have a tradition of large-scale attacks. But Cedar City’s leaders promised them plunder and convinced them that the emigrants were aligned with “enemy” troops who would kill Indians along with Mormon settlers.

On Sunday, September 6, Haight presented the plan to a council of local leaders who held Church, civic, and military positions. The plan was met with stunned resistance by those hearing it for the first time, sparking heated debate. Finally, council members asked Haight if he had consulted with President Young about the matter. Saying he hadn’t, Haight agreed to send an express rider to Salt Lake City with a letter explaining the situation and asking what should be done.

A Five-Day Siege

But the next day, shortly before Haight sent the letter to Brigham Young, Lee and the Indians made a premature attack on the emigrant camp at the Mountain Meadows, rather than at the planned location in the Santa Clara canyon. Several of the emigrants were killed, but the remainder fought off their attackers, forcing a retreat. The emigrants quickly pulled their wagons into a tight circle, holing up inside the defensive corral. Two other attacks followed over the next two days of a five-day siege.

After the initial attack, two Cedar City militiamen, thinking it necessary to contain the volatile situation, fired on two emigrant horsemen discovered a few miles outside the corral. They killed one of the riders, but the other escaped to the emigrant camp, bringing with him the news that his companion’s killers were white men, not Indians.

The conspirators were now caught in their web of deception. Their attack on the emigrants had faltered. Their military commander would soon know they had

blatantly disobeyed his orders. A less-than-forthcoming dispatch to Brigham Young was on its way to Salt Lake City. A witness of white involvement had now shared the news within the emigrant corral. If the surviving emigrants were freed and continued on to California, word would quickly spread that Mormons had been involved in the attack. An army was already approaching the territory, and if news of their role in the attack got out, the conspirators believed, it would result in retaliatory military action that would threaten their lives and the lives of their people. In addition, other California-bound emigrant trains were expected to arrive at Cedar City and then the Mountain Meadows any day.

Ignoring the Council's Decision

On September 9 Haight traveled to Parowan with Elias Morris, who was one of Haight's two militia captains as well as his counselor in the stake presidency. Again they sought Dame's permission to call out the militia, and again Dame held a Parowan council, which decided that men should be sent to help the beleaguered emigrants continue on their way in peace. Haight later lamented, "I would give a world if I had it, if we had abided by the deci[s]ion of the council."⁵

Instead, when the meeting ended, Haight and his counselor got Dame alone, sharing with him information they had not shared with the council: the corralled emigrants probably knew that white men had been involved in the initial attacks. They also told Dame that most of the emigrants had already been killed in these attacks. This information caused Dame, now isolated from the tempering consensus of his council, to rethink his earlier decision. Tragically, he gave in, and when the conversation ended, Haight left feeling he had permission to use the militia.

On arriving at Cedar City, Haight immediately called out some two dozen militiamen, most of them officers, to join others already waiting near the emigrant corral at the Mountain Meadows. Those who had deplored vigilante violence against their own people in Missouri and Illinois were now about to follow virtually the same pattern of violence against others, but on a deadlier scale.

The Massacre

On Friday, September 11, Lee entered the emigrant wagon fort under a white flag and somehow convinced the besieged emigrants to accept desperate terms. He said the militia would safely escort them past the Indians and back to Cedar City, but they must leave their possessions behind and give up their weapons, signaling their peaceful intentions to the Indians. The suspicious emigrants debated what to do but in the end accepted the terms, seeing no better alternative. They had been pinned down for days with little water, the wounded in their midst were dying, and

they did not have enough ammunition to fend off even one more attack.

As directed, the youngest children and wounded left the wagon corral first, driven in two wagons, followed by women and children on foot. The men and older boys filed out last, each escorted by an armed militiaman. The procession marched for a mile or so until, at a prearranged signal, each militiaman turned and shot the emigrant next to him, while Indians rushed from their hiding place to attack the terrified women and children. Militiamen with the two front-running wagons murdered the wounded. Despite plans to pin the massacre on the Paiutes—and persistent subsequent efforts to do so—Nephi Johnson later maintained that his fellow militiamen did most of the killing.

Communication—Too Late

President Young's express message of reply to Haight, dated September 10, arrived in Cedar City two days after the massacre. His letter reported recent news that no U.S. troops would be able to reach the territory before winter. "So you see that the Lord has answered our prayers and again averted the blow designed for our heads," he wrote.

"In regard to emigration trains passing through our settlements," Young continued, "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. There are no other trains going south that I know of[.] [I]f those who are there will leave let them go in peace. While we should be on the alert, on hand and always ready we should also possess ourselves in patience, preserving ourselves and property ever remembering that God rules."⁶

When Haight read Young's words, he sobbed like a child and could manage only the words, "Too late, too late."⁷

Aftermath

The 17 spared children, considered "too young to tell tales," were adopted by local families.⁸ Government officials retrieved the children in 1859 and returned them to family members in Arkansas. The massacre snuffed out some 120 lives and immeasurably affected the lives of the surviving children and other relatives of the victims. A century and a half later, the massacre remains a deeply painful subject for their descendants and other relatives.

Although Brigham Young and other Church leaders in Salt Lake City learned of the massacre soon after it happened, their understanding of the extent of the settlers' involvement and the terrible details of the crime came incrementally over

time. In 1859 they released from their callings stake president Isaac Haight and other prominent Church leaders in Cedar City who had a role in the massacre. In 1870 they excommunicated Isaac Haight and John D. Lee from the Church.

In 1874 a territorial grand jury indicted nine men for their role in the massacre. Most of them were eventually arrested, though only Lee was tried, convicted, and executed for the crime. Another indicted man turned state's evidence, and others spent many years running from the law. Other militiamen who carried out the massacre labored the rest of their lives under a horrible sense of guilt and recurring nightmares of what they had done and seen.

Families of the men who masterminded the crime suffered as neighbors ostracized them or claimed curses had fallen upon them. For decades, the Paiutes also suffered unjustly as others blamed them for the crime, calling them and their descendants "wagon burners," "savages," and "hostiles." The massacre became an indelible blot on the history of the region.

Today, some massacre victims' descendants and collateral relatives are Latter-day Saints. These individuals are in an uncommon position because they know how it feels to be both a Church member and a relative of a victim.

James Sanders is a great-grandson of Nancy Saphrona Huff, one of the children who survived the massacre. "I still feel pain; I still feel anger and sadness that the massacre happened," said Brother Sanders. "But I know that the people who did this will be accountable before the Lord, and that brings me peace." Brother Sanders, who serves as a family history consultant in his Arizona ward, said that learning his ancestor had been killed in the massacre "didn't affect my faith because it's based on Jesus Christ, not on any person in the Church."

Sharon Chambers of Salt Lake City is a great-granddaughter of child survivor Rebecca Dunlap. "The people who did this had lost their way. I don't know what was in their minds or in their hearts," she said. "I feel sorrow that this happened to my ancestors. I also feel sorrow that people have blamed the acts of some on an entire group, or on an entire religion."

The Mountain Meadows Massacre has continued to cause pain and controversy for 150 years. During the past two decades, descendants and other relatives of the emigrants and the perpetrators have at times worked together to memorialize the victims. These efforts have had the support of President Gordon B. Hinckley, officials of the state of Utah, and other institutions and individuals. Among the products of this cooperation have been the construction of two memorials at the massacre site and the placing of plaques commemorating the Arkansas emigrants. Descendant groups, Church leaders and members, and civic officials continue to