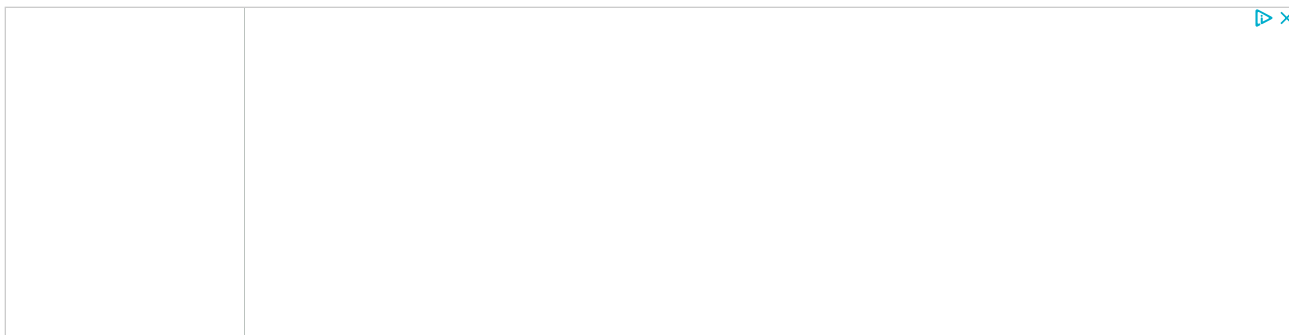




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Monument instills healing at Mountain Meadows site Pres. Hinckley dedicates massacre-site memorial

By Deseret News | Sept 12, 1999, 12:00am MST

Carma Wadley senior writer



CENTRAL, Washington County -- A hundred and forty-two years have passed since the Mountain Meadows Massacre. For a long time, it was something people tried to forget. But now, it has become something to remember -- not with bitterness but with a spirit of compassion and understanding.

"All who knew firsthand about what occurred here are long since gone. Let the book of the past be closed. Let peace come into our hearts," said President Gordon B. Hinckley, president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as he dedicated a grave-site memorial at the site of the massacre, about 35 miles north of St. George. In the audience at the dedication Saturday morning were about a hundred descendants of children who survived the massacre, people who had come from Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. Also in the audience were descendants of members of the Iron County militia, which had participated in the massacre.

For both sides, the new memorial has been a focus of healing and reconciliation. "This is one of the final chapters in the Mountain Meadows Association's endeavor," said Verne Lee, a descendant of John D. Lee, the man executed in 1877 for his part in the affair. "From the standpoint of the Lee family, this event has a lot of significance," Lee said.



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People are recognizing that his ancestor, while involved, was not the only one and didn't instigate the massacre. "I'm not the guy that he is sometimes portrayed."

For Ron Loving, president of the Mountain Meadows Association and a descendant of the brother of John D. Lee, the day also held a lot of joy and significance. "Never in my wildest dreams did I



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think we'd get to this point. It is as if a dam of pent-up emotion and interest has been released. The truth of the massacre is being talked about freely, and there has been such an outpouring of feeling."

The tragedy occurred in 1857 as the wagon train of immigrants, mostly from Arkansas, were moving through Mountain Meadows along the old Spanish Trail. Some 120 men, women and children were killed by a group of Paiute Indians and local militiamen for inexplicable reasons.

"This is a solemn and significant occasion," said President Hinckley. "This is an emotional experience for me. I come as a peacemaker. This is not a time for recrimination or the assigning of blame. No one can explain what happened in these meadows 142 years ago. We may speculate, but we do not know. We do not understand it. We cannot comprehend it. We can only say that the past is long since gone. It cannot be recalled."

President Hinckley told of his first visit to Mountain Meadows, nearly 50 years ago. "When my father turned 85, I brought him down to southern Utah. We visited this place. There was no one else around. My father said nothing. I said nothing. We simply stood here and thought of what occurred here in 1857. The rock cairn was here. Weeds rustled in the breeze.

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"We walked back to our car without speaking. We knew this ground was hallowed, and we were reverent and respectful."

He came to the site again last year. "I was shocked by what I found. I must confess it. The wall of the cairn was beginning to slip in the direction of the small stream in the gully. The weeds were tall. There was an ugly barbed-wire fence around this site.

"I knew that the church owned this ground. I said to myself, 'You must do something to make this a more beautiful and attractive and lasting memorial.' "

That visit set in motion events that culminated in the creation of a new memorial.

"Unless you saw how it looked a year ago, it's hard to imagine," said Leland Gray, who designed the new monument for the church. "It seemed so forlorn, so uncomfortable. This feels so much more appropriate," he said.

As work began on footings and foundations for the new monument, remains of some of the victims were accidentally uncovered. Those remains were laid to rest once again in a private ceremony for descendants on Friday. "The ceremony was one the victims would have been familiar with," said Loving. And as part of the re-burial, dirt that had been brought from Arkansas was placed under the four coffins containing remains of 28 men and women and one infant. "They will rest now forever on Arkansas soil," he said.

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A time span of 142 years seems like a long time, Loving said, but the events that happened here are still fresh in the minds of descendants.

That sentiment was echoed by Shirley H. Pyron, president of the Carroll County Arkansas Historical and Genealogical Society, who is related to the Miller and Tackitt families of the wagon train.

She told of the immigrant families, who had eagerly loaded their wagons to set off for California; how their parting with friends and relatives at home would have been bittersweet, both sides knowing that prospects of seeing each other again were dim.

She told of how letters from the wagon trail suddenly stopped arriving; how rumors circulated of an Indian massacre; how they learned the wagon train never arrived in California.

Those friends and relatives in Arkansas were "grief-stricken. And when they learned that Mormons were involved, that grief was mixed with outrage.

"And then they learned that some children had survived. But it was nearly two years before those children were located and returned."

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Then those families began to wonder what had happened to the possessions: to the fine stallion, to the gold coin, to the keepsakes that were taken to California. But no recourse or relief was ever given the children.

"The story was spoken of less, but the passage of time failed to heal the wounds," said Pyron. "Only now, in the third and fourth generations has that begun, and we can attribute that to Ron Loving and Verne Lee, to the dialogue between both sides. It has transformed the tide of ill feelings into new friendships."

The events of 1857 touched everyone, said Elder Dennis B. Neuenschwander, a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy and president of the Utah South Area, who also spoke at the dedication. "Deep feelings have surrounded the events. The feelings have been of separation. But that which is broken can be mended; that which is wounded can be healed." Up Next - The Best Thanksgiving Gravy You... X Ad 1 of 1 (0:09)

After 142 years, the events of this day were both an ending and a beginning, said Elder Neuenschwander.

"We intend to maintain this memorial and keep it attractive. I am an old man now, in my 90th year. I am grateful that I have had the opportunity to further this effort.



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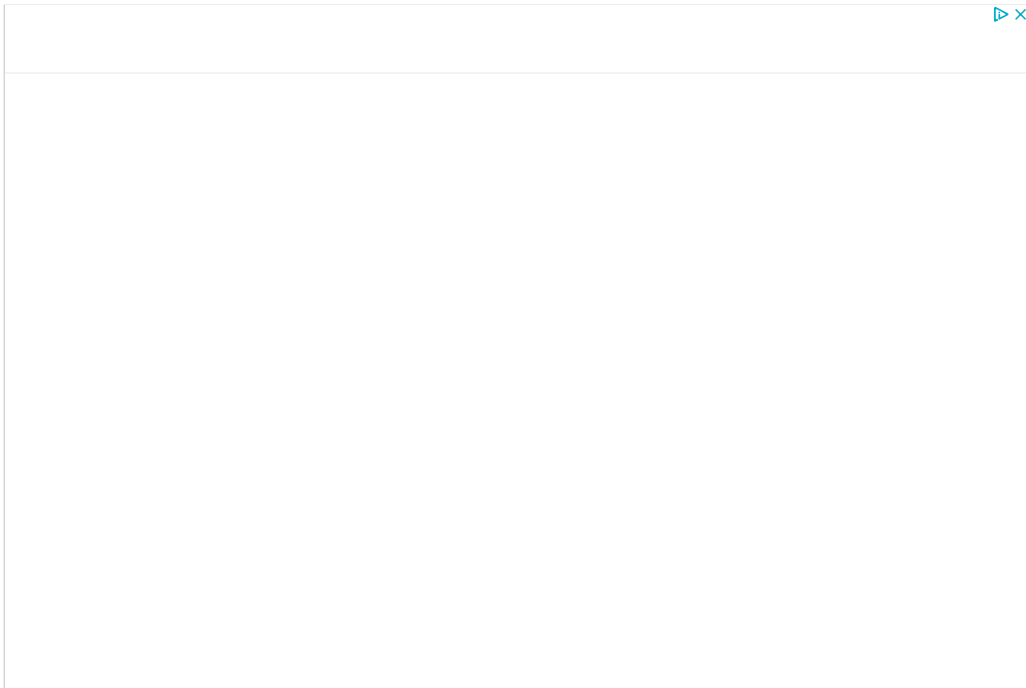
"I sit in the chair that Brigham Young occupied as president of the church at the time of the tragedy. I have read very much of the history of what occurred here. There is no question in my mind that he was opposed to what happened. Had there been a faster means of communication, it never would have happened and history would have been different. That which we have done here must never be construed as an acknowledgment of the part of the church of any complicity in the occurrences of that fateful day.

"But we have an obligation. We have a moral responsibility. We have a Christian duty to honor, to respect and to do all feasible to remember and recognize those who died here. May this cairn stand as a sacred monument to honor all of those who fell, wherever they might have been buried in these Mountain Meadows."

It is nice to know, said Loving, that the people who died here, "so far away from any friends and family will now be cared for with the same reverence and love that any family members could give."

The Fanchers and the Bakers and the other immigrant families will be forever linked to the Mormons, he noted. And Mountain Meadows has now become a place of remembrance.

"It is hallowed ground. Is is neutral ground. It is a place where only love and tolerance and understanding should be brought. Leave everything else behind. And no one should leave here without love in their hearts."



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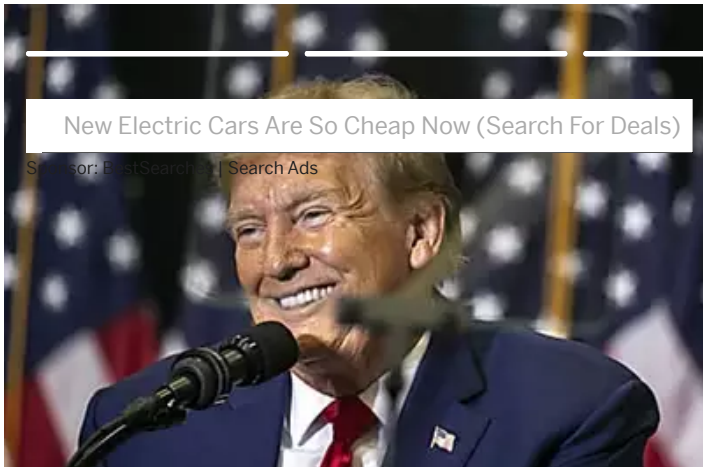


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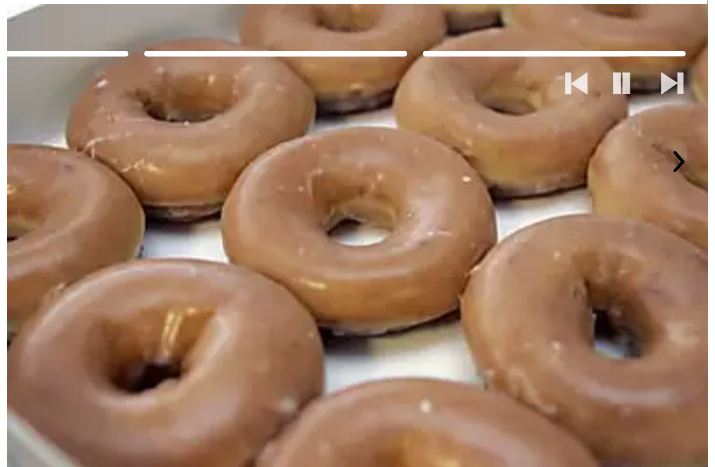
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