

# **Mountain Meadows Massacre**

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By

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Selecting a topic for an Athenaeum Paper is often the most difficult part of the presentation process. However, this time around I felt blessed to have a topic literally fall into my lap in the form of a newspaper article from "*The Paris Post-Intelligencer*" of Paris, Tennessee dated March 23, 1984. The article, by Charles D. Robbins, relates the story of the Mountain Meadow Massacre which occurred in Utah in 1857. Feeling an obligation to read the story, since it was presented to me by a relative, my curiosity was piqued when I saw the name William R. Aden mentioned. In order to save the members of the society the pain of yet another genealogy paper I will simply inform you that William was child of my Great-Great Uncle, Dr. Sidney Bennett Aden of Henry County, Tennessee. Having never heard of the Mountain Meadow Massacre or William, I set about to educate myself concerning the matter.

The Basic Story goes something like this:

In September of 1857, a large wagon train making its way through Utah Territory camped at the Mountain Meadows, near Cedar City, Utah to graze the livestock they had brought and prepare for the difficult desert trip that lay before them. The emigrants, whose origins are disputed but generally accepted and having originated in Arkansas, chose a campsite that was near a spring. They could not arrange their wagons around the water source because it was marshy.

Just before sunrise, a few days after the company's arrival, the trouble began. A large group of Indians, according to many accounts led by some Mormons, attacked the emigrants. They hastily drew their wagons into a defensive ring, dug ditches, built embankments, and began shooting back at the natives. The emigrants, killing at least a couple of Indians, managed to stave off the attack. During the next few days, the Indians maintained their siege from the ridge tops, effectively cutting the travelers off from their water source.

At the end of the week, about 120 emigrant men, women and children lay dead along the road to Cedar City, having somehow been compelled to leave their makeshift fort. Only seventeen children age seven and younger were spared. Local Mormon families assumed the care of those surviving children.

The Mormons publicly blamed the Indians for the massacre and denied taking any part in it. Gradually, though, evidence of Mormon involvement emerged. On March 23, 1877, twenty years

after the killings, Mormon Bishop John Doyle Lee was executed by a firing squad at the Mountain Meadows for his part in the massacre. (Lee's father was a member of the "First Families of Virginia," and had not the son become tainted with Mormon superstition, and the victim of unquestioning obedience to the agents of the church, he would doubtless have lived and died an honored member of society.)

It is very difficult to obtain reliable information concerning the Mountain Meadow Massacre. The only survivors were Mormons, Indians and small children. The Mormons have always been reluctant to talk on the subject and in fact have been accused of suppressing information on the deed.

Since it is such a touchy subject among the Mormons, I will emphasize from the beginning that the massacre was not sanctioned by the Mormon Church. In fact, it was carried out in direct opposition to orders that had been issued by Brigham Young, the leader of the church at the time. There is evidence that his orders arrived either a matter of hours or days after the massacre itself.

I am not attempting to justify the viciousness of the massacre but the violent history of the church undoubtedly had much to do with the attitude of the Mormons who were living in Utah in 1857. So perhaps we should look at the social climate of the times.

The history of the persecution of the Mormon Church is lengthy. Their religion had been started by Joseph Smith in New York in 1830. Two years later, Smith was tarred and feathered for the first time. During the next 14 years, Smith established Mormon colonies at various places in the United States. No matter where he went, he seemed to rouse the anger of the local populace. There were rumors that polygamy was being practiced among the Mormons. Smith denied it for 10 years, and then he had a revelation that authorized it.

Joseph Smith seemed to be purposely fanning the fires of hatred with his arrogant attitude. He even had himself declared King of the Kingdom of God. Then in May 1844, he announced himself as a candidate for the presidency of the country for the November elections. About six weeks later, Smith and his brother Hyrum were killed by a mob in Carthage, Illinois.

Smith's announcement of his candidacy for president caused considerable concern on the national political scene. While there was no danger of him actually being elected, he did have sizable vote in his pocket. The election of 1844 figured to be close, with Whig candidate Henry Clay opposing Democrat James K. Polk. It was reasoned that Smith could name the president by dropping out and "throwing" his votes one way or the other, perhaps to the highest bidder.

This reasoning turned out to be correct. Polk defeated Clay by a popular majority of less than one percent of the vote, thanks to the intervention of a third party candidate under John Birney. Joseph Smith could have easily swung the election.

Brigham Young, who now led the Mormons, sought a safe haven for his people. He chose the valley of the Great Salt Lake, because only Indians lived there at the time and it seemed unlikely that the non-Mormons or Gentiles would settle the area. Young and his followers began the journey to Utah in 1846. The trip, in wagons and handcarts, left many dead and all impoverished, but the Mormons believed they had found their Zion, their haven from persecution. Mormon leaders believed their emigration to be “the Lord” gathering Israel home to the “chambers of the mountains’ preparatory to “the great day of wrath that was to come to the Gentile world.” It would seem that not only safety but also revenge occupied their minds.

When the Mormons arrived at the Great Salt Lake in July 1847, the area still belonged to Mexico. The Mormons believed that the Mexican government would allow them to establish a theocracy in their New Zion. However, the Mormons’ optimism faded in 1848, when, after the Mexican War, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo awarded the lands of the southwest to the United States. The Mormons found themselves once again under the jurisdiction of the government they so despised.

Many Americans felt that the treaty with Mexico justified Manifest Destiny, the idea that the United States was destined to control all of North America. That concept, along with the discovery of gold in California, sent Americans streaming westward, through Mormon territory. The influx of emigrants from the east seemed to promise more persecution for the Mormons. However, the Gold Rush did prove to be economically profitable for the Mormons. The emigrants, in their frenzy to reach the gold, often made trades that favored the Mormons. "Stories are related of the frantic haste with which many of the emigrants would part with wagons, cattle, and goods, for a horse or mule outfit to carry them to California." The Mormons enjoyed a sudden prosperity; emigrants constantly brought much-needed supplies and traded them for little value, and the land of Utah proved exceedingly fertile. The Mormons should have finally been able to wallow in their good fortune, but clashes with the emigrants grew increasingly frequent.

Each group complained of the other's behavior. The Mormons said the "gentiles were rowdy, dishonest, vicious, and worse; that they tried to corrupt Mormon women, created disturbances, accepted hospitality and later bit the hand that fed them," while the emigrants claimed the "Mormons discriminated against strangers, threatened them, impounded their stock and charged them a fee to get

it out again, even sometimes murdered them for their wagons and goods." There were many rumors that the Mormons committed "holy murders" and reports of the "mysterious disappearances of apostates and offensive Gentiles." These clashes were probably the result of the well-established animosity between Mormons and non-Mormons, especially the United States government.

Young believed that God would strike down the United States government for its treatment of the Mormons. "I am prophet enough to prophesy the downfall of the government that has driven us out," Young declared. "Woe to the United States! I see them greedy after death and destruction." Despite this sentiment, the Mormons organized the State of Deseret, an enormous tract of western land, elected Young as Governor in 1849, and sent delegates to Washington to petition Congress for statehood. Wary of the Mormon theocracy, Congress reduced Deseret to one third its original size, renamed it Utah, and made it a territory. President Fillmore named Brigham Young the "Territorial Governor and Superintendent of Indian Affairs."

Soon clashes arose between the Mormons and non-Mormon officials who arrived in Utah in July of 1851. That September, as an honored guest at a large Church meeting, Associate Justice Perry S. Brocchus made a speech in which he attacked many Mormon practices and beliefs, especially polygamy. The assembly arose in outrage at Brocchus's clear anti-Mormonism. Young prevented violence, but he and his councilors made clear their faith in all Mormon practices and their willingness to defend their sect. Frightened by the indignant Mormons, Brocchus and the other non-Mormon officials left for Washington. A volley of venomous letters and publications ensued as Young condemned the officials' behavior and the officials spread fear about Mormon polygamy.

Anti-Mormonism in the government increased with reports of a speech by Brigham Young entitled "Old Zachary is in hell, and I am glad of it," a condemnation of Whig President Zachary Taylor, who died in office in July of 1850 and was replaced by Vice President Fillmore. Young denied having made the speech, but animosity towards the U.S. government flourished. The Mormons felt unjustly accused; while the government grew convinced that the Mormons were plotting against the United States.

The government's concern over the "Mormon problem" increased in 1852, when Young publicly declared polygamy an essential Mormon tenet. In fact, only about one out of five Mormon men claimed more than one wife, but Young's announcement sent reformers into a new offensive. They linked polygamy with slavery, declaring that both practices should be immediately abolished. The

Republican platform in the election of 1856 called polygamy and slavery "the twin relics of barbarism." Thus, anti-Mormonism took on an active role in politics.

Meanwhile, conflicts grew steadily worse. In 1855, surveyors in Utah met with resistance from the Mormons, who feared losing their land, which they held "only by right of occupation." The same year, federally appointed Utah judge W. W. Drummond made the claim, later proven false, that the Mormons had destroyed court records. Drummond's anti-Mormon agitation proved influential in stirring up the nation against the Mormons

Shortly after President James Buchanan's inauguration in 1857, Drummond and other angry government officials from Utah came to Washington and convinced Buchanan that the Mormons were in open rebellion. Newspapers and pamphlets told of numerous boycotts, threats, and murders by Mormons. When Mormon Apostle Parley Parker Pratt was shot to death in May of 1857 by Arkansas native Hector H. McLean, who boasted widely of the murder, the killer never even faced charges, and newspapers reported the incident almost with joy. Anti-immigrationists protested the thousands of European Mormons heading into Utah. Southern leader John Tyler, the former president's son, encouraged Buchanan to attack the Mormons in hopes of diverting the nation's attention from the divisive issue of slavery:

*"The popular idea is rapidly maturing that Mormonism should be put down. I believe that we can supercede the Negro-Mania with the almost universal excitement of an Anti-Mormon Crusade. Should you seize this question with a strong, fearless and resolute hand, the Country I am sure will rally to you with an earnest enthusiasm and the pipings of Abolitionism will hardly be heard amidst the thunders of the storm we shall raise."* John Tyler, 1857.

Faced with pressure from all sides, Buchanan decided to replace Young with a new governor and send to Utah an army of 2,500 soldiers, under Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston, to "put down insurrection." The Mormons first learned of this expedition on June 24, 1857, during the ten-year anniversary party of the day the Mormons settled in Utah--the day when Brigham Young had proclaimed "Give me ten years and I shall ask no odds of the United States."

As with any crime, one must look for a motive. Many possibilities have been proposed as to what drove the Mormons to carry out the massacre, if they were in fact the perpetrators.

News of the approaching U.S. army made the Mormons fearful. They resolved to defend themselves at all costs. Elder Charles W. Penrose said, "a plan had been prepared, if [the army] should come into

the Territory, to burn down our houses, to destroy our property and leave the Territory a desert, a barren waste; for the people to flee to the mountains and leave nothing as a prey to their enemies." One source, most likely a Mormon, but cryptically identified in several accounts as A.M.P.O., says, "the United States was considered as an enemy, and its subjects were treated as foes."

Soon after hearing of Johnston's army, Young declared martial law. In that declaration, he forbade "all armed forces of every description" from entering Utah Territory, commanded the Mormon forces to make ready "to repel any and all such invasion," and issued a pass policy which said "no person shall be allowed to pass or repass into, or through, or from this territory without a permit from the proper officer."

Though Young himself denied it in an 1875 affidavit, the overwhelming majority of sources agree that Young forbade the Mormon people to sell food and supplies to emigrants. In his affidavit, Young says he counseled the Mormons not to sell grain for emigrants' livestock, because crops had been poor for several years. However, A.M.P.O. contests the claim that grain was scarce at that time, saying the harvest that year had been particularly plentiful, and says that George A. Smith rode through the south of Utah ahead of the emigrant train, giving "strict orders to sell no food or grain to emigrants, under pain of excommunication." John D. Lee confirms the reason for Smith's mission, saying Smith told him that Young had given orders forbidding "the brethren of the different settlements to sell any of their grain to our enemies."

Buchanan may have underestimated the Mormons' determination to defend themselves. A movement called the Mormon Reformation was sweeping through Utah and increasing the Mormons' loyalty to their church and its leaders. Initiated by Young in the fall of 1856, the Reformation was a time of renewed religious fervor--"a vigorous call to repentance among the people." Missionaries questioned each Mormon individually on morality and loyalty to the church, and after confessing his sins or answering satisfactorily, each person was re-baptized for a "renewal of covenants." Mormon historian Juanita Brooks believes that the Reformation fostered fanaticism among those who hoped to avenge the Mormon blood shed in earlier persecutions and that "in awakening the Saints to their duties, the Reformation also seemed to set them more directly against the government officials who, they felt, were ruling without consent of the governed." Described by the anti-Mormon historian Josiah F. Gibbs as "the intensification of indescribable fanaticism, frenzy, and violence," the Reformation increased animosity between the Mormons and the rest of American society.

Amidst this religious renewal emerged the Blood Atonement Doctrine, "saving the souls of sinners by shedding their blood." Young began preaching the doctrine in 1856. On September 21 of that year, he preached, "There are sins that men commit for which they cannot receive forgiveness in this world, or in that which is to come," unless the sinners "have their blood spilt upon the ground, that the smoke thereof might ascent to heaven as an offering for their sins; and the smoking incense would atone for their sins, whereas, if such is not the case, they will stick to them and remain upon them in the spirit world." Young assured his people that anyone who knew this truth would be glad to have his blood spilled to save his soul; the killing of sinners "is to save them, not to destroy them."

Sins worthy of blood atonement included 'covenant breaking,' profaning 'the name of the lord,' murder, adultery, interracial sex or marriage, stealing, counterfeiting, and telling lies. Sinners were decapitated or slashed across the throat. In their 1997 article, "*Mormon Blood Atonement; Fact or Fantasy?*" historians Jerald and Sandra Tanner offer numerous stories of blood atonement killings by church authorities. In his confession, John Doyle Lee reports many blood atonement murders. In one instance, Bishop William H. Dame of Parowan ordered a group called the Destroying Angels to kill Mormon William Laney for the grievous sin of feeding and housing a young William Aden, who traveled with the train that met its end at the Mountain Meadows. Knowing that Young had forbidden the selling of supplies to travelers, Laney had assisted Aden by selling him a few onions. William's father had earlier saved Laney's life. Dr. Aden had given Laney refuge after he was threatened and fired upon by a group in Paris, Tennessee several years earlier.

Some Mormons deny that blood atonement was ever practiced. Some assert that actions resulting from the preaching of that doctrine affected only Mormons--nobody outside the church. However, Jerald and Sandra Tanner and John Doyle Lee believe that non-Mormons also suffered from the practice. In fact, Lee says, the ideas behind blood atonement had existed in Joseph Smith's regime. In Nauvoo, "it was then the rule that all enemies of Joseph Smith should be killed, and I know of many a man who was quietly put out of the way by the orders of Joseph and his Apostles."

Young's preachings on the subject, then, simply exposed to the public a doctrine that had long been practiced by the church leaders. Encouraging the practice among all Mormons undoubtedly increased the incidence of Blood Atonement murders. Young taught his people that the practice was not a necessary evil, but rather an act of benevolence. On February 8, 1857, in a sermon on the necessity of blood atonement, Young declared that the slaughtering of sinners "is the way to love mankind."



Blood Atonement, combined with other qualities attributed to the massacred emigrant company, could have prompted Mormon aggression. Special correspondent A.M.P.O. asserts that "certain disaffected Mormons joined the train to go to California," and under blood atonement, sheltering apostates is a grievous crime indeed. A.M.P.O. also acknowledges other possible motives, noting that the decimated train was the richest company ever to cross Utah by the Southern route. "Their wagons, teams, and loose stock, alone, amounted to over \$300,000, and they had the costliest apparel and jewelry." Others believe the train was wealthy and suggests that the Mormons' greed contributed to their complex motive for attacking.

Members of the ill-fated wagon train may have behaved so aggressively that many Mormons would have felt justified in killing them under the blood atonement doctrine. The identity and condition of the massacred train are disputed, but most sources agree that the train was known as the Fancher party, a group traveling from Arkansas to California, and included a **rude and rowdy** group called the Missouri Wildcats, who had probably joined the Fancher Train for that leg of the journey.

Regardless of whether they were right or wrong, the Mormons in the spring were bitter. Many of them had been uprooted four or five times and forced to move onward. Each time they were forced to sell their property at a low price or to give it away. Now, after moving all the way to Utah, they were still being badgered and were now on the verge of attack by the U.S. Army. The Indians in the area were also jumpy. They knew that the Army was on its way but did not know what to expect from them.

Mountain Meadows is a small expanse of meadow. lying about six miles southwest of Cedar City. It is a narrow valley about one mile long and six miles wide. The Fancher party was resting there preparing for the 90 mile trip across the desert that lay ahead.

Acting on the orders of Isaac C. Haight, John D. Lee and several others provoked the local Indians to attack the emigrants. The Mormons assured the Indians of Divine Protection--that they could make the attack in absolute safety. At dawn the Indians made the first attack, killing seven emigrants and wounding sixteen. The rest of the Fancher party hastily arranged their wagons in a defensive position and dug rifle pits. Their return fire killed or wounded several Indians. With the realization that they could neither make the attack in safety nor defeat the emigrants with one volley, "the redskins promptly lost interest." They withdrew and sent a message to Lee notifying him of their failure and requesting help.

That night, William Aden and two other of the emigrant men approached a Mormon camp. The Mormons killed young Bill Aden and wounded another, who returned with the unharmed man to the circle of wagons. In a special meeting that night the Mormons decided to kill the entire party except for small children so that there would be no witnesses to Mormon participation in what was already becoming a massacre

The next day, as more Mormons gathered at the meadows, the Indians made another ineffective, long-range attack. Some of the Indians then left, and the rest refused to make a charge. Through Major John M. Higbee, Captain Lee received orders from Colonel Haight to "kill all old enough to tell tales." Following the plan that had been formulated the night before, Lee entered the circle of wagons under a flag of truce. Soon afterward, other Mormons joined Lee. They told the emigrants that the Indians, though still furious, had agreed to spare the emigrants if they left their arms and ammunition and followed the Mormons back to their settlement. The emigrants complied, probably because they had exhausted their supply of ammunition.

Into the first wagon were loaded the seventeen young children who were spared, into the second, some of the women and the wounded. A group of women and men, walking single file, brought up the rear, accompanied by the Mormon militia. Major John M. Higbee, facing the rows of militia, issued the fatal order, "Do your duty to God!" The killing of those one hundred and twenty emigrants was completed in less than three minutes. Some Indians who had laid in hiding behind the ridge joined the militia "in completing the gory task, in killing the wounded, in stripping the bodies, in looting the wagons, and in rounding up the several hundred head of cattle and horses."

The brutality of the massacre and the complex passions that surrounded it caused the lack of agreement in the sources that describe it. All of the events and circumstances are disputed. Though it occurred over one hundred and forty-five years ago, the crime continues to inspire strong attacks and counter-attacks and has prompted an ongoing, heated debate on the Internet. The one man punished for the deed has been deemed a scapegoat, so people still cast about for someone else to blame.

The answer will always evade its pursuers. The problem is too complicated to solve, the unknowns too numerous to count. Patriotism, religious fervor and righteousness clashed in a storm that has yet to totally subside, obscuring the truth of this bloodbath. Historians' viewpoints on the subject cannot be neatly categorized as "traditional" or "revisionist" but rather follow the haphazard rules of personal bias. Times change, but passions thrive, and people still manipulate the evidence.

That all groups involved felt threatened--the Mormons by the United States government, the Indians by the encroachment of whites on their homeland, and America at large by this growing religious group that acted almost in rebellion of the government--contributed to the massacre itself, the cover-ups that followed, and the continued distortion of the facts. In a time of fear, all concerned acted out of a distorted sense of what was needed for self-preservation. Though it does not excuse the crime or the lies that followed, this aspect of human nature may help explain them.

In examining this deed, finding a culprit is less important than learning from the array of opposing accounts that one must always question historical records and one must always search for the best point of view. Perhaps nobody will ever know what truly happened, but the Mountain Meadows Massacre provides a valuable lesson in the flaws of humankind. “

G.S.L. City, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1859

Mr. S. B. Aden  
Paris, Tennessee

Dear Sir:--

Your note of enquiry, concerning your son William R. Aden arrived per last eastern mail, and I regret having to inform you that I have at no time known either your son or his whereabouts, nor have I as yet found any one who has seen him or knows where he is. 'The Deseret News,' printed in this city, circulates throughout this territory, and I caused an enquiry for your son to be inserted in the columns of it in this weeks issue, as the speediest and surest method for learning his location, if in Utah, with the request that the information be promptly furnished to me or yourself, at the option of the person giving it. Any information coming to my knowledge, as to your son or his whereabouts, will be cheerfully forwarded to you, at the earliest opportunity, by

Respectfully  
Brigham Young

G.S.L. City, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1859

Mr. S. B. Aden  
Paris, Tennessee

Dear Sir:--

Since my reply, of April 27, to your letter of enquiry concerning your son William A. also advertising in the current number of the Deseret New to learn his whereabouts, from all I can hear I am to believe that he joined the emigrant company that was massacred at the Mountain Meadows. As all the reports that I have heard, or seen published agree in the statement that none of the company were saved, except some sixteen very young children, it becomes my painful duty that, incase your son was in that company, I know of no reliably stated fact or even reports upon which to ground the lease hope that he is now alive.

With the kindest sympathies in your affliction and holding myself ready to furnish you any additional information concerning your son William A. that may come to my knowledge, I have the honor to remain, very respectfully,

Your Ob't Srvt  
Brigham Young

## Salt Lake Tribune

December 24, 1874, page 4, col.2

“Lingering Hope”

A Tennessee Father Makes Inquiry of the Tribune For His Son  
Supposed Victim of The Mountain Meadows Massacre  
One Thousand Dollars Offered For His Recovery

Paris, Tenn. Dec. 14, 1874

Eds: Tribune:-- Having lately seen accounts in your paper of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, I am induced to write you. The main object of which is this; In 1857 I lost a son in route for California, and having long since felt convinced that he is one of the victims of the Mountain Meadows, and seeing that the leaders of that butchery are being brought to account; thought, perhaps, you might learn something of my son, I enclosed one of the circulars I then (1857?) had published and scattered all over Utah and California, without receiving any information positive in return. It is true, I have letters from Governor Cumming and Brigham Young, which induced me to believe he was murdered, but I find there is a discrepancy in dates which causes me to hope he may still be living, and possibly held in captivity by the Indians, and recently having seen an account of the recapture of two young ladies from the Indians, Increases my hope. If he is living and held by the Indians, perhaps you might learn through the friendly Indians or Mormons; if so, and he can be rescued. I hold myself ready to pay the \$1000 reward, and more if necessary. If alive, he might be heard of, for he was a natural genius, particularly at painting pictures, signs, lettering, etc., and a good talent for music, particularly instrumental. My circular was copied in some California and Utah papers about the time mentioned.

Thinking you have correspondence with persons throughout most of the Territories, you might possibly learn something about him, or it might be you could learn from some of the Mormons whether he was murdered at the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Any information you might be able to give, would be most thankfully received by your humble servant and distressed family, as well as remuneration for your efforts should you learn anything of his whereabouts.

But I suppost I have said enough now. Shall be pleased to hear from you at any time.

Resectfully,

S. B. Aden