2006 Third Place Informative Research Paper

Conflict in Utah Valley

On March 30, 1857 the former chief Justice of the territory of Utah, W.W. Drummond, wrote an inflammatory letter accusing the Mormons of Utah of various crimes, including wrongful imprisonment, murder, and destruction of public records. (Hance 4-5). In haste and under political pressure to improve his image as a result of the Bleeding Kansas crisis, Buchanan made the decision to order a military expedition to Utah to quell the supposed uprising and install a new territorial government. The Mormons, still paranoid after the tragedies of Missouri and Illinois, assumed the worst and began preparations for war. A bloody conflict was expected. Yet in the spring of 1858 after a long and tense winter, the Utah War came to a close peacefully. The federal government pardoned the Mormons for their supposed treasonous acts and the Mormons allowed the army to enter Utah. Alfred Cumming of Georgia was sworn in as territorial governor and the army traveled west to found a base, Camp Floyd, near the village of Fairfield. For three years the army resided there, forming an uneasy, often tumultuous, relationship with its Mormon neighbors.

Relations started out soured from the start. The army still carried a grudge from the miserable time they had spent at Fort Bridger the previous winter. After the long and drawn out build up to the Utah War, many soldiers were unsatisfied with its rather anticlimactic ending. They saw the whole Utah expedition as a waste of their time. They wanted to see some sort of action come out of it, especially to avenge themselves on the Mormons for the long cold winter they had spent at the ruins of Fort Bridger (Moorman 49). Even Albert Sidney Johnston, leader of the Utah Expedition, commented “that ‘he would give his plantation for a chance to bombard [Salt Lake City] for five minutes’” (ibid.). As well, most of the soldiers in the army came west with many preconceived notions about the Mormons. For one example, most soldiers were very much against the idea of a theocracy (Hunter).
A common belief amongst the soldiers was that “the Executive, the courts, and all officials [in the territorial government] were under the Mormon Church” (Farmer 26). This belief echoed the claims of such persons as W.W. Drummond, which started the whole Utah War in the first place, that “the Mormons look to him [Brigham Young] and him alone, for the law by which they are to be governed; therefore no law of Congress is by them considered binding in any matter” (Hance and Warr 4). In some ways their fears were valid. The vast majority of Utah residents were Mormon. As such, most of the members of the government were Mormon, thus most legislation in the territory followed and/or favored LDS principles and ideals. This was combined with legislation in 1859 which limited “voting rights to those living in the territory at least six months prior to the election” (Moorman 80), thus outlawing all the soldiers in Camp Floyd from voting in the 1859 elections. The soldiers of course highly resented this state of things, thus further souring their relationship with the Mormons.

Aggravating the feelings of the soldiers even more was the Valley Tan, a newspaper published by Stephen DeWolfe, one of the soldiers in the army. This newspaper was the primary source of news for the soldiers (Hunter). Unfortunately for Mormon-army relations, it was an extremely anti-Mormon newspaper. It regularly featured such articles as “Origin of the Mormon Imposture,” a piece which cast the Book of Mormon as a “bungling attempt to counterfeit the style of the scriptures,” described Joseph Smith as “lounging, idle (not to say vicious,) and possessed of a less than superior intellect,” and declared that Mormonism “deserves none of the charity extended to ordinary religious fanaticism, for knavery and fraud have been with it incipiently and progressively” (“Origin of the Mormon Imposture”). Needless to say, the Mormon residents of Utah weren’t too happy with its contents. Yet it was a strong influence on the soldiers, becoming one of the main reasons that “the opinion which the soldiers had of the Mormon people was extremely low” (Alexander and Arrington 15).

Inevitably conflicts between the soldiers and the Mormons erupted. A common source of contention was the use of grazing land in the Rush Valley. Mormon settlers had claimed the grazing land there first; however, the army claimed the area as a military reserve (Alexander and Arrington 15). The issue came to a head when an army sergeant, Ralph Pike, injured a Mormon man, Howard Spencer, with his rifle during an argument about grazing land. In retaliation, a few months later as Pike was standing on trial in Salt Lake City for assaulting
Howard, Howard shot and killed Pike. Upon hearing the news, Pike’s regiment struck back. They rode into Cedar City and “then ‘shot up the town’ indiscriminately. In all about sixty shots were fired, the haystack with stock sheds and corrals adjacent were burned to the ground” (Roberts).

The army constantly attempted to indict Brigham Young as an accomplice to various crimes. One example involved a counterfeiting case. Because the supply trains containing the pay rolls were usually extremely delayed, due to the immense distance between Washington and Utah, the army began issuing drafts on the army bank account in lieu of pay. This provided a golden opportunity. Two young Mormon men, David McKenzie and Myron Brewer, joined up with John Wallace, a non-Mormon gambler from California, in a scheme to counterfeit these paper drafts. The plan was successful until Wallace was informed that the army was onto them. To avoid punishment, Wallace betrayed his companions to the soldiers (Moorman 249-251). Because the trio had used church assets to do their work, “it was hoped at Camp Floyd that [Brigham Young] could be implicated in it” (Roberts 506). As a result, McKenzie and Brewer were promised leniency if they would turn state’s evidence vs. Brigham Young. Brewer accepted the offer and escaped prosecution; McKenzie refused and was given two years hard time in the territorial penitentiary (Moorman 250-251). Still the army believed it had enough of a case against Brigham Young that it began surveying the hills above the Lion House for cannon emplacements to facilitate a forcible arrest of Brigham Young. Governor Cummings was forced to intervene, refusing to allow the army to arrest Brigham Young and ordering “General D. H. Wells of the Utah militia, to be ready with a force to repulse the federal troops” in case the army ignored his prohibition (Roberts 506-508). Needless to say, the entire incident caused many strains in Mormon-soldier relations.

The most volatile wedge between Mormon and Gentile was driven in by Judge John Cradlebaugh, a federal Judge in Utah territory. Cradlebaugh, on a trip to Provo in order to investigate murders in the area, brought a troop escort with him. With this escort he in effect seized the Provo courthouse and proceeded to arrest almost every major civil and church leader in Provo. The citizens protested vocally, complaining directly to the Judge and to the Governor. The Governor protested and demanded that the troops remove themselves. However, the troops were not under Cummings authority. Citizens began arming themselves, preparing to fight to protect their leaders from arrest. A standoff ensued between the soldiers and the armed civilians. It was the
closest the territory came to war since the Utah War. For a few days letters flew back and forth between Cummings, Johnston, and Washington. (Moorman Finally word came from Washington that the army must have the approval of the governor to perform guard duty work. The army was ordered off, the arrested officials released, and the crisis was over (Moorman 119). This marked an extremely low point in relations between the Mormons and the soldiers. The Mormons openly showed their contempt for the soldiers occupying their lands, and their willingness to fight if the soldiers went too far.

Nothing affected Gentile-Mormon interaction more than the Mountain Meadows Massacre. This ruthless slaying of over 100 unarmed travelers by a force of Indians assisted by Mormons horrified the troops at Camp Floyd. When soldiers were sent to investigate the site they found the bones of the slaughtered emigrants lying in the valley floor (Moorman 147). The site of these horrors did not enjoin the soldiers well to the Mormons, who they saw as responsible for the killings.

Other than these big singular events, the soldiers and Mormons had the simple differences in morals come between them as well. The most extreme example of this was Fairfield itself. Fairfield was about as far from the moral standards of the rest of Utah as is possible. Front Street in Fairfield “was lined with a dense network of connected gambling dens, dance halls, brothels, and other second-rate establishments which reflected the lawless character of the village” (Moorman 63). The Mormons deplored the place, and resented the soldiers for bringing such things into their previously peaceful and idyllic lives. But the moral decay brought by the soldiers didn’t just remain in Fairfield,

Some officers tried to induce women to go to Camp Floyd to engage in prostitution, and one officer actually sought to proposition the mistress of a household in which he was guest. Camp followers and troops often made nuisances of themselves in Salt Lake City and other settlements, and some murders resulted from the activities of these men. The influence of the church in the moral lives of its members was undermined as some members, under the new temptations offered by Gentiles, threw off the restraints of their religious upbringing. (Alexander and Arrington 16)

Other irritants existed of course. The Valley Tan was a nuisance, constantly spreading around anti-Mormon stories to its readers (Hunter). The Military Dramatic Association formed by the soldiers would have
been a great benefit in normal circumstances to relations, as the Mormon’s appreciated the theater as well. Unfortunately, the Association had a liking for “caustic anti-Mormon satires that victimized Church leaders [which] proved immensely popular” (Moorman 88). The Saints were not so amused.

Despite all these conflicts, good relations between some members of the army and Mormons did exist. Many officers had friends among the Mormon people and would often be invited over to dinner (Hunter). “Relations with some army officers … were quite agreeable.” (Alexander and Arrington 16) Some soldiers were even converted to Mormonism during their stay at Camp Floyd (Hunter). There were many cases of soldiers and local girls falling in love and getting married. For one example, Sgt. John Rosza met Patience Loader, a Mormon girl, while he was on a two month furlough in Lehi. Unknowingly conforming to a future Utah Valley tradition, the two were married before his furlough was up. (Godfrey 51-52).

The soldiers did have one immense positive effect on the Mormons of Utah territory. They were “undoubtedly a boom (sic) to Utah’s economy. President Buchanan’s million dollar blunder really helped save the West” (Peterson 9-6). It provided an influx of supplies and money that the saints desperately needed at the time. Construction of Camp Floyd alone cost around $200,000, almost all of which went into the local economy. Mormons were paid to construct barracks and other structures in the camp, using adobe bricks sold to the army by Mormons (Moorman 56-57). While the Army was encamped at Camp Floyd, their basic provisions were provided by the Mormons who often “claimed never to have seen United States coin” (Alexander and Arrington 8). All this injected badly needed money into the Utah economy. The mormon residents were especially benefited by the end of Camp Floyd. The government gave “orders to evacuate Fort Crittenden [a.k.a. Camp Floyd] whenever public properties could be sold, but not later than August 1 [1860]” (Moorman 275). The result was a massive rushed auction of excess camp supplies which created a windfall for the Saints.

Some $4 million in food, clothing, and equipment were sold for $100,000. Flour that was selling on the open market for $10 a hundred pounds was sold for 52 cents. Bacon which had originally cost $5 per hundred weight sold at $1.34. Sugar 12 ½ cents a pound. Harnesses that had cost the army contracted prices of $49 sold for as low as 50 cents a set. Wagons sold for $14 each, and mule and horseshoes were unloaded at 1/4 cent each. (Peterson 9-8)
In the end, the army ended up practically giving away an amount of supplies equal to $400 per family in Utah, double the annual average income (Alexander and Arrington 18). The saints definitely profited from the soldiers at Camp Floyd, even if they didn’t always get along with them.

Throughout Camp Floyd’s stormy three year existence, the soldiers and Mormons were forced to coexist. Mostly this coexistence was mutually distrustful, with soldiers despising Mormons, and Mormons resenting the soldiers. There were some bright spots amidst the conflict, though. Overall, it is likely that Camp Floyd was a positive part of Utah’s history, in that it brought much needed money and supplies into the territory, leaving long lasting positive effects on the territory, which counteracted the short term negative effects of the Camp. One thing is certain, Camp Floyd was a major effect on Utah’s history, whether for good or for ill.
works cited


Interview with Michael J. Hunter: LDS History Librarian. 6 December 2006.