



7-1-2009

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Miller, Mark E. "An Outsider's Experience Teaching Mormon History in Utah." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 10, no. 2 (2009). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol10/iss2/11>

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Mark Edwin Miller

An Outsider's Experience Teaching Mormon History in Utah

Mark Edwin Miller

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Adapted from an address given at the Mormon History Association Conference in Sacramento, California, in May 2008.

I am going to discuss some of the ways I have approached the teaching of Mormon-related topics at a secular state school (Southern Utah University) that has, however, a predominantly Latter-day Saint student body. In essence, I bring an outsider's perspective, being both a non-Mormon and a non-native Utahn. In methodology, I will detail issues that caused me trepidation, how I dealt with these anxiety-causing topics, how I presented the fear-inspiring lecture, and how these presentations were received by students in my Utah history course.

My interest in Utah and Mormonism grew out of my graduate training. I received my PhD in history from the University of Arizona, where I conducted research and published an article on Latter-day Saint colonization and antipolygamy prosecution in territorial Arizona in the *Journal of Mormon History*. Although this experience helped me land my current job, I must admit, teaching the subject of Utah history caused me much anxiety before coming to Utah in fall of 2006. In particular, there were several topics that generated some loss of sleep. In this paper I will focus on six events that caused concern my first year teaching Utah history to a predominantly Latter-day Saint student body: Native Americans, Mormon theology, and relations; early Church history and conflict with non-Mormons in the eastern states; tensions between Mormons and Gentiles in Utah over the

creation of the theodemocratic state of Deseret; the Utah War and Mountain Meadows Massacre; the issue of polygamy during the nineteenth century and enduring conflicts over plural marriage today; and anti-Mormonism as it related to delayed statehood. In preparing this presentation, I conducted a small student survey to help gain their perspectives. I was also able, in teaching my course, to draw upon training and experience I had in teaching culturally sensitive matters to teaching assistants at the University of Arizona.

When thinking about the chronology of Utah history, I immediately encountered a potential pitfall on the issue of Native American origins. I could also envision a tricky journey discussing the first contacts between the indigenous peoples of Utah and Europeans—in this case the Latter-day Saint pioneers. In particular, a potential issue concerned the prominent place of native peoples (or Lamanites in Mormon theology) in the Book of Mormon. I surmised that most of my students would be aware that Mormon theology holds the first inhabitants of the Americas in an exalted place as descendants of the house of Israel whom Jesus Christ visited—a major component of the Book of Mormon.

The origin of Indian peoples is thus an important historical and theological issue that had to be treated gingerly and in a culturally sensitive manner. I decided to present the topic in a way that positions the origins of Native Americans as a theoretical proposition. In this regard, I was aided by the fact that traditional native religions generally teach that the Creator placed their people within sacred homelands; many native peoples thus take offense to the widely accepted scholarly and scientific theory that ancestral Native Americans crossed the Bering Land Bridge during the last Ice Age and are thus of Asiatic origin. In outlining Indian origins, I therefore note that Latter-day Saint theology is one among several theories that include not only the scientific Bering theory but also native origins, stories, or beliefs. With no value judgments, I simply outlined competing beliefs and let students see the issue within a complex, contentious historical and theological debate that is multidimensional and multicultural.

Also related to Native American history was the topic of Mormon-Indian relations. According to the folk history of the state, Latter-day Saints enjoyed better Native American relations than found elsewhere in the American West. More harmonious encounters stemmed from the unique theology of the Mormon people. In a short lecture, I detail how there is some evidence to support this contention: local Utes made a distinction between friendly “Mormonee” and their enemies, the so-

called “Americats.” While he led the Church, Brigham Young tried to enforce his dictum: “It’s cheaper to feed Indians than to fight them.” He even tried to ally with the “Lamanites” against non-Mormons at various points in time. Overall, in this segment, I point to the sincere efforts of early Latter-day Saint missionaries like Jacob Hamblin who did endeavor to aid their native brethren with humanitarian gestures stemming from deeply held religious conviction. As I do with other historical topics, however, I show how early Mormon–Indian relations are a good example of the common clash between theory and practice—good intentions versus real-world competition. With several quotes I show how leaders like Heber C. Kimball came to see the Indians in Utah as Gadianton robbers, hellions of the Book of Mormon who were an obstacle and threat. Again, by laying out quotes of the leaders themselves, I let the students see that good intentions often come to naught on the ground, especially as the two groups vied for the limited natural resources of Utah.

My next topic led to some humorous results from which I learned and subsequently adapted my course materials. The origins of Mormonism and the conflicts the new faith engendered was a topic of great interest to students while I was teaching at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkansas. Students there had little, if any, knowledge of the topic and were generally fascinated by early Church history. Of course, I was aware that early Mormonism would be common knowledge to students at Southern Utah University. Even so, my first semester I went into some detail about Joseph Smith, his revelations, the origins of the Book of Mormon, and other related topics. Along the way I mispronounced Moroni, a name I had only seen in print. I was able to use the snickering as a humorous break, but of course I was privately mortified. Adapting, I developed a confidant to go over Latter-day Saint and Utah names such as Nephi, Gadianton, and Deseret. Also humorously, I went into great detail about the difficulty of pulling a handcart across the plains, not knowing most of the students had attended camps doing just this! They laughed at that.

After informal discussions with several students, I realized that the predominantly Latter-day Saint student body had much knowledge of pre-Utah Mormon history. I also realized that I did not have time to cover certain topics in Utah history if I spent too much time on these issues. Because of this, the next year I evolved the lecture. I now focus class discussion around the old settler–Mormon conflict and detail four or five main points of controversy that engendered virulent anti-Mormon sentiments in the mid-nineteenth century. Conflicts over the

birth of the Book of Mormon, communalism, bloc voting, polygamy, and land competition together proved central to the reason why the Latter-day Saints clashed with non-Mormons, ultimately forcing them to immigrate to Utah.

Conflict is a major theme of my lectures on nineteenth-century Utah history. I note that problems followed the Saints west and erupted between U.S. officials and Brigham Young over his plan to create what Thomas Alexander calls the “Theodemocracy” of Deseret: a quasi-independent nation in the desert wastes of the Great Basin. This controversy was of long duration and multifaceted. In teaching the topic, I simply set out the goals of the Latter-day Saint hierarchy in creating Deseret. Using quotes from Young himself, I show that he and others wanted a form of independence from the United States but were ultimately swept into the nation with the Mexican War, making the new Utah Territory subject to the power of non-Mormon officials. Key to this topic was Mormon leaders’ beliefs that the Millennium was imminent and that they were God’s true representatives on earth as they would be after the Second Coming. Of course, U.S. laws clashed with these deeply held notions. Previous background on conflict and even massacres against the Saints at the infamous Haun’s Mill helps set the stage and makes it comprehensible why Young and the others would want to isolate and separate themselves from the United States. The context is well known to most Latter-day Saint students but becomes clear to non-Mormon students in the class as well.

To get to the basic arguments of non-Mormon officials against the Saints, I show a quote from one appointee reciting a slew of anti-Mormon rhetoric he sent back east. I note that communications were poor, which contributed to misinformation that the Mormons were practicing blood atonement or sacrifice, but I also acknowledge that some allegations were true. I note that the Latter-day Saints did vote in blocs, that General Authorities were the source of nominations for 100 percent of territorial officials elected in Utah; the flock simply rubber-stamped their choices. To charges that Brigham Young was dictator, I remark that many Utah historians conclude that Young did have more power than any other official in U.S. history. A common charge was that Mormons were lawless. I argue that they were very law-abiding people except when it came to polygamy and other religious tenets that clashed with Anglo-American law. In this case, I go into detail regarding the operation of territorial probate courts, noting that the local bishop served as judge and that locals bypassed the federal courts. The Saints were so successful in using their own law system that during the

Civil War one territorial justice heard exactly zero cases. I ultimately allow the students to see both sides: that there were baseless charges but that outside officials had reason to believe the local Saints in Utah were not operating in ways that nineteenth-century Americans viewed as 100 percent American, voting in all-Mormon blocs and boycotting non-Latter-day Saint businesses.

Another controversial topic I engaged was polygamy or plural marriage. The issue of polygamy is both a historical fact that affected Utah's statehood and a modern phenomenon that impacts the image of Utah outside the state. I knew this was a hot-button issue before coming to Utah—and this was before the recent Warren Jeffs trial and Eldorado, Texas, child custody case. I decided to deal with the subject in a discussion format. As preparation, I had the students read sections of our textbook detailing federal efforts to quash polygamy in Utah Territory. I also had them read an online description of polygamy written by Jessie Embry for the *Utah History Encyclopedia*, a concise work that takes the issue to the present, especially as practiced by the Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints. Feeling a bit like Oprah working a crowd, I moderated a heated debate that lasted the entire hour-and-twenty-minute period.

Of the first semester, this discussion of plural marriage was my most enjoyable moment, as it appeared to be for the class. I let historical data speak for itself while allowing the largely Latter-day Saint students to delve into this emblematic Mormon issue intellectually and honestly. We discussed arguments for and against it (with many students saying there were no plausible arguments *for* it). Analyzing the landmark Supreme Court case *Reynolds v. U.S.* was very illustrative: students seemed to see the dilemma court officials faced in drawing lines between religious beliefs and practices that may be harmful to people. Most came to see the practical dilemma Church President Wilford Woodruff faced before issuing the famous Manifesto of 1890 banning the practice. We had engaging debates over whether plural marriage could be OK among consenting adults, though most felt the issue of child welfare and abuse overrode religious beliefs among the modern Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints.

Another Utah conflict I detailed was the late-nineteenth-century battle over statehood, a struggle largely involving Gentiles and the Church establishment. I end the controversy period of Utah at the turn of the century by revealing how changing demographics, economic commonalities between Mormons and non-Latter-day Saints,

and mainstreaming ideologies of Mormon leaders served to make Utah increasingly similar to surrounding Mountain West states.

I begin the Americanization era with Colonel Patrick Connor, a Civil War officer who ushered in the mining industry in the state, an economic activity that opened the territory to non-Mormon immigration and influences. Connor provides several inflammatory quotes that prove useful to show modern students the tensions surrounding statehood. I also display census records detailing how mining did, in fact, open up the state to non-Latter-day Saint immigrants, including many from Eastern Europe. Along with the railroad and defense-related communities, I try to shift more focus to non-Mormon Utah by detailing mining enclaves scattered around the state. In terms of economics, I concluded the series by trying to show how financial matters could, and did, draw diverse peoples together into modern groups like the Chamber of Commerce in pursuit of common goals, namely helping Utah expand economically. Here, I try to show how these forces ultimately brought a form of accommodation to Utah politics. This fact can be seen with the dropping of the unique Peoples' Party and Liberal Party—in favor of the dominant Republican and Democratic Parties by 1892. We conclude by showing how Church President Joseph F. Smith and Senator Reed Smoot proved central to mainstreaming the Saints into American society.

I saved the most controversial topic for last: the Utah War of 1857 and the related Mountain Meadows Massacre. Of all the issues I tackled my first semester, the Mountain Meadows Massacre was the most contentious yet most important to local history. The event happened about fifty miles southwest of Cedar City and was carried out by local militiamen. Added to my trepidation was the fact that I had a student in the course whose last name was Dame and, as I correctly surmised, was related to one of the key instigators of the massacre, William Dame. Being familiar with the emotionally loaded nature of this event, I approached teaching the subject in a lawyerlike manner. I also saw the event as a good tool for introducing budding graduate students to historiographic debates.

I began the day's lecture by taking on a somber, serious tone (which is sometimes hard for me). I started by noting that context is central to understanding this event. It was apparent that the difficult part would be explaining why it occurred or perhaps that episodic mass murder can never be explained. I also believed it was important not to appear to lay collective blame on modern Mormons, either at the state or local level, while also not excusing the murderers' actions. I

pointed out that in order to understand the massacre, you must know the context in which it occurred. Of course, students were already well versed in the anti-Mormonism of the nineteenth century by this point. We discussed the fact that in the summer of 1857 the U.S. Army was marching toward Utah with 2,500 troops to quell a supposed rebellion. I used slides to show the rhetorical buildup on both sides, with eastern papers fanning the flames of anti-Mormonism, while in Utah Elder George A. Smith traveled south issuing fiery sermons, dredging up the past history of anti-Mormon atrocities.

With this background established, I informed the class that certain facts are well accepted, namely that a wagon train of Arkansan emigrants made its way through Utah during the height of the so-called Utah War of 1857. There were tense encounters because the Saints refused to sell them provisions in the wartime atmosphere. At Mountain Meadows a group of Paiutes, led by Indian agent John D. Lee and local Latter-day Saint militiamen, attacked the camp. They were under orders from Parowan militia commander William Dame and stake president Isaac Haight. After several days of standoff, Lee rode into camp under a flag of truce and convinced the wagon train to give up, promising protection from the Paiutes. At a prearranged moment, on September 11, the militiamen executed the members of the wagon train, sparing only children too young to testify. It was not until twenty years later that officials convicted and executed Lee for the crime. He was the only one brought to justice.

At this point I introduced the historiographic debate over the central question: who was to blame for the massacre? Here, I noted that this is a common conundrum in any genocide or mass killing, from Nazi Germany to Rwanda to Bosnia. Howard Bancroft was the first major historian to look at the massacre in 1889, ultimately agreeing with the courts that Lee, as Indian agent, was squarely to blame. I then gave some detail on famous local historian Juanita Brooks, who in her 1950 book concluded that Lee was scapegoated for the crime. She surmised that the Arkansans were the victims of bad timing and war hysteria. I then outlined Will Bagley's controversial recent book on the topic, *Blood of the Prophets*. Bagley claims that Young tacitly ordered the attack. He bases this conclusion on circumstantial evidence from Dimick Huntington's journal that Brigham Young met with Paiute chiefs prior to the event and "gave" the herds of the wagon train to the Indians, asked for their alliance in the coming war, and claimed he could not control the Indians as they would "do what they will." I finished our excursion into historiography by detailing the conclusions

of prominent BYU professor Thomas Alexander. He concludes that there is no evidence that Young or other high Church leaders ordered the event. To the contrary, the only evidence we have is a letter from Young to the Cedar City group telling them to leave the wagon train alone. According to Alexander, the militia simply panicked over what the train would do once they escaped to California: would they come back with an army for revenge? With a brief examination of historical interpretations, we then had a discussion concerning the contested events. The next semester I showed a documentary by Brian Patrick called *Burying the Past* that discussed the dual issues of laying blame for the event and the ownership of the site—a clash between the Latter-day Saint Church and descendants. This really encouraged a spirited and emotional debate among the students.

While a graduate student at the University of Arizona, I attended seminars in order to lead sessions on culturally responsive teaching at teaching assistant orientations. We came to advocate maintaining some form of objective distance from both the subject matter and individual student opinions. By maintaining respect for both diverse student opinions and for the actions of actors in the past, in theory, students should feel more engaged and comfortable and learn from both sides in any debate.

To test these theories, I conducted a small survey of students in my Utah history course. The dominant comment on the survey was that I brought a balanced and fair perspective to teaching Mormon-related topics in Utah history. One said I provided an outsider and non-Mormon perspective to many topics Utah students think they know, but actually know, only from a religious perspective. Noting that many students were non-Latter-day Saints, one respondent remarked that I provided a respectful environment where students of all faiths felt comfortable discussing ideas. One said I had a “nonpreachy” style detailing controversial topics—a fact that aided non-Mormon students, especially those from outside the state. One said she gained a valuable perspective on Mormon history from an outsider that showed how non-Utahns must see their history. Others compared my class to courses they had at other institutions, noting that I did not make fun of Mormonism or belittle aspects of it, experiences they had had at other universities. These respondents said I did not appear patently on one side of debates like polygamy as other professors have. Another liked my academic and purely historical approach, keeping lectures and discussions on a purely secular plane and not veering into doctrine or divine explanations for many actions in the past. One student liked the

way I fused specific Utah and Mormon history with larger topics of western America.

Some students offered mild but constructive critiques. Several noted that my newness to Utah and its local history led me to feel self-conscious that the students may have known more about certain issues than I did. One recalled my mispronunciation of names like Nephi but thought that I likely learned and did not make the mistake again (which was true!). A student noted that my non-Latter-day Saint background may have led me to a cursory explanation why some Church leaders acted the way they did. Despite these critiques, all the students said I always showed respect for the Latter-day Saint faith and for *all* faiths, for that matter—the greatest compliment I could receive in a culturally sensitive course.

To conclude, my first several years at Southern Utah University have certainly been an adventure in teaching Mormon history. Despite some early trepidation, I have come to find teaching Latter-day Saint-related topics in my Utah history course to be one of the several most rewarding aspects of all my teaching responsibilities today. The very tensions inherent in certain topics and from the fact that I am not from Utah leads to an often electric atmosphere in class—something we all know is a wonderful thing in college teaching. I have found that the predominantly Latter-day Saint student body have more than met me halfway in the learning and teaching process; it has truly been a joy to teach them. **RE**