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Where Were the Moroni Visits?

RUSSELL R. RICH*

Dating early events in Church history is occasionally especially difficult because early "eye witness" accounts are often found to disagree. Take for example the birth date of Alvin Smith, the Prophet Joseph's oldest brother. The *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, which is taken from Joseph Smith's journal, lists the date in question as February 11, 1798;¹ but Lucy Mack Smith lists the date as February 11, 1799, in her first edition of her history of the Prophet.²

There has been much more controversy over Alvin's death than over his birth. A footnote in the *DHC* 1:16 includes a genealogy of the Prophet's family, giving the date of Alvin's death as November 19, 1825. On the same page (and also on page 2) in the body of the text the Prophet is quoted as specifying the date as 1824. In Mother Smith's original edition she also gave 1824 as the year of Alvin's death. In Joseph Smith 2:4-6, in the Pearl of Great Price, the present edition also gives 1824 as the year of Alvin's death. Ascertaining the correct date of Alvin's death will assist our dating and placing the first Moroni visit.

Two sources enable us to establish the death date of Alvin as November 19, 1823. First is the inscription on Alvin's grave in the community cemetery located adjacent to the old Western Presbyterian Church in Palmyra. His tombstone gives his

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¹Joseph Smith, *The History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, 1946), Vol. 1, p. 16 [commonly known as *Documentary History of the Church*: hereafter referred to as *DHC*].

²Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors For Many Generations* (Liverpool, 1853), p. 40. This first edition was said to have "contained errors, occasioned by its not being carefully compared with historical data," and was reissued in a "Utah" edition, *History of Joseph Smith*, 1901 (from page 1 of the Introduction).

death as November 19, 1823. This evidence alone is insufficient to authenticate this date, because a tombstone placed years after a death might also be in error. However, there is another bit of evidence that does establish the 1823 date as the correct year beyond doubt.

It appears that someone was spreading rumors around Palmyra that Alvin's body had been exhumed from its grave and mutilated. These rumors naturally brought deep concern to the Smith family. Joseph Smith, Sr. became so concerned that he purchased the following advertisement in the *Wayne Sentinel*, printed at Palmyra. This ad appeared on successive Wednesdays (September 30, October 6, 13, 20, 27, and November 3, 1824):

To the Public. ✓

WHEREAS reports have been industriously put in circulation, that my son *Alvin* had been removed from the place of his interment and dissected, which reports, every person possessed of human sensibility must know, are peculiarly calculated to harrow up the mind of a parent and deeply wound the feelings of relations—therefore, for the purpose of ascertaining the truth of such reports, I, with some of my neighbors, this morning repaired to the grave, and removing the earth, found the body which had not been disturbed.

This method is taken for the purpose of satisfying the minds of those who may have heard the report, and of informing those who have put it in circulation, that it is earnestly requested they would desist therefrom; and that it is believed by some, that they have been stimulated more by a desire to injure the reputation of certain persons than a philanthropy for the peace and welfare of myself and friends.

JOSEPH SMITH.

Palmyra, Sept. 25th, 1824.

53

A microfilm photograph by courtesy of the Church Hist

It is obvious that neither 1824 nor 1825 could be the correct date for Alvin's death, since a request not to circulate grave-molestering rumors was printed as early as September 30, 1824.

Some historians have used the death date of Alvin as a means of determining the house in which the Smiths were living when Moroni made his first appearance to Joseph. While living in Palmyra the Smiths pooled their funds, and eventually negotiated for the purchase of 100 acres of land about two miles south of Palmyra in the township of Manchester and the county of Ontario. They soon constructed a comfortable log house there on the west side of the road, possibly 100, possibly less than 100 yards south of the Palmyra township and Wayne County line. After a time they began to plan another home, one that would be more comfortable for older people. This house was begun under the "management and control" of Alvin. Mother Smith states:

And when November, 1822, arrived, the frame was raised, and all the materials necessary for its speedy completion were procured.

The Utah edition of Mother Smith's biography gives this date as 1824. Obviously the Utah date is incorrect since Alvin died in 1823 when this house was still only partially completed; in fact from the description given, this seems to have been about the stage of construction the house was in when Alvin died. Thus it appears a possibility that Mother Smith should have given the date as 1823 instead of 1822, but never as late as 1824.

Since it has been definitely established that it was not later than 1823 when Alvin died, and that the new house was not yet finished, for Mother Smith stated that shortly after Alvin's death they took steps to get the house finished "as speedily as possible" and hired workmen to complete the job, there is only one possibility that it was in the new house that Moroni appeared to Joseph the night of September 21, 1823. This would be that, perhaps because of the large number of children in the family, the Smiths were using the unfinished house as sleeping rooms for some of the boys. This writer is of the opinion, however, that the appearances of Moroni were in the "snug" log house referred to above which the Smiths built shortly after purchasing the farm.

One other interesting conclusion might also be noted in relation to Alvin's death. Shortly before he died, Alvin in speaking individually to each member of his family said to Joseph: "I want you to be a good boy, and do everything that lies in your power to obtain the Record. Be faithful in receiving instruction, and in keeping every commandment that is given you. . . ."³ Mother Smith states that

Alvin manifested, if such could be the case, greater zeal and anxiety in regard to the record that had been shown to Joseph, than any of the rest of the family; in consequence of which we could not bear to hear anything on the subject. Whenever Joseph spoke of the Record, it would immediately bring Alvin to our minds with all his zeal, and with all his kindness; and, when we looked to his place, and realized that he was gone from it, to return no more in this life, we all with one accord wept over our irretrievable loss, and we could 'not be comforted because he was not.'⁴

With the date of Alvin's death definitely established as November 19, 1823, and with record of his great interest shown in the "Record," it is obvious that recent criticism that the First Vision and the first Moroni visit could not have preceded 1825 is unhistorical.

³Lucy Smith, *History of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, 1958), p. 87.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 89.