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Remembering the Pioneer Legacy

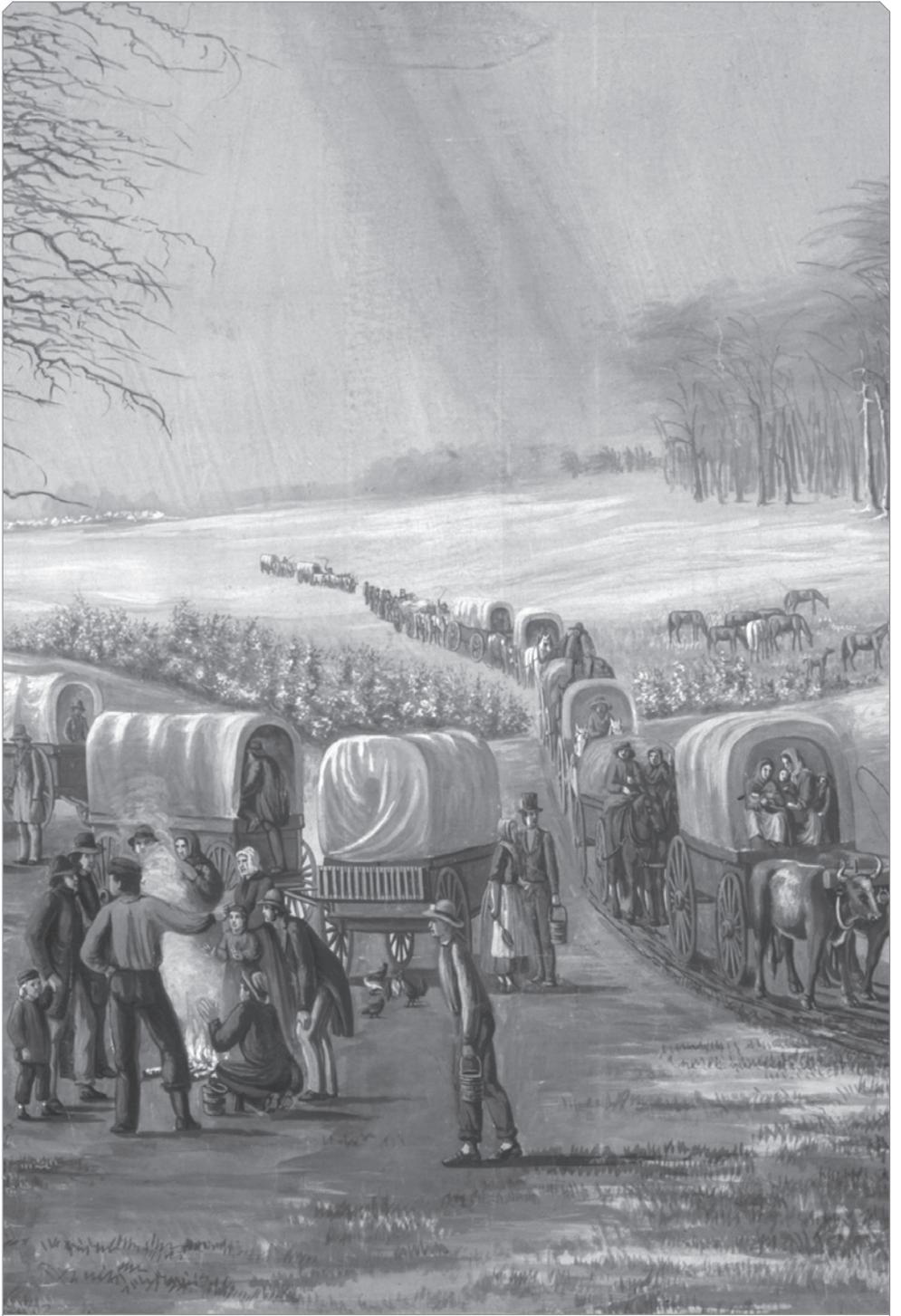
Timothy G. Merrill tim_merrill@byu.edu

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C. C. A. Christensen, *Leaving Missouri*, ca. 1865, tempera on muslin, 78 1/8 x 114 1/8 inches, Brigham Young University Museum of Art, gift of the Christensen grandchildren.

Over the years teaching Church history, Brother Merrill has tried to make the pioneer figures painted by artist Carl C. A. Christensen come alive for his students.

Remembering the Pioneer Legacy

TIMOTHY G. MERRILL

Timothy G. Merrill (merrill.timothy@gmail.com) is an instructor at the BYU Salt Lake Center.

Elder Joseph Anderson, in April 1968, announced the death, at age 108, of “Hilda Anderson Erickson, sole survivor of the 80,000 Mormon pioneers who came to Utah before the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869.”¹ Hilda Erickson’s life bridged two dramatically different ages, from the Civil War to the Cold War. She alone of those pioneers lived to see Richard Nixon campaign to be the thirty-seventh president of the United States (although as a staunch Democrat, it is unlikely she would have voted for him). As a seven-year-old girl emigrating from Sweden in 1866, could she have dreamed that man would walk on the moon the year following her death? With her passing, the pioneer era passed from living memory. Forty years later, how does the pioneer legacy remain relevant to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? In what way do the pioneers continue to shape the Church’s identity in the twenty-first century?

The pioneer tradition anchors the Church’s identity to another age in order to inform our own. Richard L. Bushman said that history “must constantly be recast to be relevant, the past forever reinterpreted for the present.”² The inherent tension between memory and history put the pioneers

in danger of being forgotten—or, more likely, reduced to ineffectual stereotypes. History is “a bridge connecting the past with the present, and pointing the road to the future.”³ During Utah’s sesquicentennial anniversary in 1997, Eric Eliason warned that the pioneer tradition had already begun “to slip into popular historical unconsciousness.”⁴ President Gordon B. Hinckley wondered, “Can a generation that lives with central heating and air conditioning, with automobile and the airplane, . . . understand, appreciate, and learn from the lives and motives of [the pioneers]?”⁵ The answer lies in fellowshipping the past with more than just a casual handshake. “We need new histories that appeal to our views of causation, our sense of significance, and our moral concerns,” Bushman argued.⁶ We embrace the legacy of our forebears in the context of our day, not theirs; the pioneer story must be reinterpreted for each generation.

Recent studies have emphasized the primacy of doctrine in shaping the Church’s identity in the nineteenth century. Charles Cohen argued in 2005 that the “strong force binding Mormon nuclei was not fundamentally cultural, linguistic, economic, or even ecclesiastical but theological.”⁷ According to Cohen, the “religious construction” of the Saints emerged from “the certainty that [they] were restoring the House of Israel.”⁸ Kathleen Flake also highlighted the dominance of doctrine in her book *The Politics of American Religious Identity*, placing the doctrinal focus on Joseph Smith’s First Vision. The story of the Sacred Grove, Flake believed, “contained the elements necessary to fill the historical, scriptural, and theological void left by the abandonment of plural marriage” and became the cornerstone of “Latter-day Saint belief and identity.”⁹ While Flake does mention the significance of the 1847 migration in the epilogue of her book, the influence of the pioneer heritage upon our institutional identity has taken a back seat to other important unifying forces.

The Mediated Past

It has been suggested that history most closely resembles cartography.¹⁰ A blue shape on a map, for instance, represents the Great Salt Lake, but does that shape capture the smell of salt or the sound of seagulls? Like maps, history is a *representation*, not a *re-creation* of the original. The verb *to represent* means “to stand for; to symbolize.” Because we cannot recreate the past itself, we recast it in modern molds. “Aspects of the past that fail to match up with our present dispositions,” a scholar noted, “will necessarily seem irrelevant.

When it comes to analogy, . . . the lines of authority run from the present to past and not the other way around.”¹¹ Our “emotional and moral engagement with the past” is what makes the past matter.¹² Thus the past itself cannot be touched; instead a “mediated past” is born from our search for history’s significance and relevance. Our orientation to the past is not backwards but *inwards*.

History becomes relevant when we understand the present through the past. In Pierre Nora’s study of memory and history, he described “sites of memories” (*lieux de mémoire*) that “originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, [and] organize celebrations . . . because such activities no longer occur naturally.”¹³ Collective memory plays an important role in shaping a community’s sense of identity. Through memory “human societies can impose order on what appears to them to be a universe whose principle of ordering lies outside their control.”¹⁴

The difference between history and memory is important. On the one hand, there were stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments (a historical artifact), and on the other there were the effects those commandments had upon a people (effects preserved by their collective memory). *History* will not forget the pioneers, whose record is traced by wagon trails and secured within the subterranean vaults of libraries, but whether the pioneers live on in our *collective memory* is a different matter.

Memory is never static but “remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation.”¹⁵ It seems that memory follows the laws of entropy like everything else. We do not want the pioneers remembered by history alone—not in museums full of relics without warmth, not in history books filled with facts shorn of meaning. We need to keep the pioneers alive in our collective and individual memories because (to paraphrase Joseph Smith), “If men do not comprehend [their past], they do not comprehend themselves.”¹⁶

Constructing Identity

The termites of time are constantly eating away at the pillars of the past. Ask a member of the Church at random to name a handcart company, and the answer will usually be, “Willie or Martin.” Why these two companies instead of the others? Eric Eliason explained: “Simplification . . . is a process with

political implications and ramifications. The construction of the pioneer myth is no exception. Simplification raises questions such as Whose experience qualifies them for being revered as pioneers? Which parts of the pioneer past have been forgotten, and which events become draped in sacred significance for later remembrance and why?¹⁷ One reason the Willie and Martin companies seem to be singled out is that their tragic story makes them “ripe for romantic remembrance.”¹⁸

Since we cannot reclaim the past out of whole cloth, we must take it one patch at a time. Richard Terdiman observed that “*the most constant element of recollection is forgetting* [so] remembrance can occur at all. . . . Reduction is the essential precondition to representation. Loss is what makes our memory of the past possible at all.”¹⁹ What we forget is as revealing (if not more so) about who we are as what we choose to remember. One way to revitalize the pioneer tradition is to widen Mnemosyne’s net to include forgotten narratives. But which narratives deserve remembering? Nora argued that “it is the difference [between then and now, them and us] that we are seeking, and in the image of this difference, the ephemeral spectacle of an unrecoverable identity. It is no longer genesis that we seek but instead *the decipherment of what we are in the light of what we are no longer.*”²⁰

Identity can be defined as the set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group. An important part of identity is formed in opposition to the noncommunity. If someone is a Jew, for example, we know he or she is neither Gentile nor Muslim. One important difference between the pioneers and modern society is the notion of “community.” A social commentator recently noted that a rift is forming in America between religion and spirituality. Religion “is too much work. Religion is potluck suppers, . . . disciplines and dogmas, and most trying of all, pews full of *other people.*”²¹ Spirituality, on the other hand “is lighter on its feet” because it is less concerned with horizontal obligations.²² The pioneers were, above all, *religious* in their social structures which emphasized community and consecration. The word “pioneer” appears only once in scripture, in what is now section 136 of the Doctrine and Covenants. While that revelation to Brigham Young demonstrated the Saints’ inspired ingenuity in mobilizing the Camp of Israel, what is most remarkable about the Mormon exodus was that it put the pioneers under priesthood covenant to help each other (see D&C 136:2, 4). This covenant commanded the Saints, “Let every man use all his influence and property to remove this people” to Zion (v. 10) and forbade

anyone from “build[ing] up himself” (v. 19). These cooperative covenants stood dramatically opposed to the notion of “dominant individualism” in the American West. In a day of privatized devotion, the pioneers remind us that Zion is a *society* built only by common effort.

Often the pioneers are invoked today to remind us not to stray from the path they forged. Elder J. Golden Kimball said in 1902, “I declare to you that we, the sons and daughters of those old pioneers, are becoming effeminate, and we no longer believe that we can do the things our fathers did.”²³ The pioneers hereby provide a foil for modern Saints. For instance, Elder Erastus Snow (who was the first to enter the Salt Lake Valley with Elder Orson Pratt) gave an address in 1880 in which he criticized some of the Saints for departing from the old pioneer ways. “There is one feature,” he said, “which contrasts unfavorably today; it is this: that among the rising generation, and even among some of the former generation still remaining, . . . [some] seem befogged [by] the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches and the pride of life.”²⁴ For the succeeding generations, the pioneers have always served as an anchored reference point to measure our progress or regression, a sextant to chart our course, and a compass to navigate the currents of time.

During the twentieth century, the pioneers became the model Saints. They provided one of the primary didactic tools used to instruct the Saints



Lynn Fausett, *To Them of the Last Wagon*

During the twentieth century, Mormon pioneers became a powerful example for Latter-day Saints as to how they should live lives of devotion, courage, and faith.

in the ways of godliness. During the centennial year in 1947, visiting teachers shared messages dealing with “Our Pioneer Heritage” that included the following topics: love of God, love of fellow man, faith, courage, industry, self-reliance, dependability, and thirst for knowledge.²⁵ The pioneers speak from the pulpit of the past to urge us to live up to their finest ideals. “Are these pioneer celebrations academic, merely increasing our fund of experiences and knowledge?” Elder Dallin H. Oaks asked during the sesquicentennial, “or will they have a profound impact on how we live our lives?”²⁶ He indicated that the way we honor the pioneers is “to identify the great, eternal principles they applied to achieve all they achieved for our benefit and then apply those principles to the challenges of our day.”²⁷ Pioneers have thus become metaphors. Metaphors powerfully influence our lives by creating “realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. . . . This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make the experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies.”²⁸

How, then, are the pioneers being deployed today to meet the needs of the current generation? The challenge in the twentieth century was to make the pioneer heritage meaningful (and therefore relevant) to the youth of the Church, to new members, and to those who live outside of the Mormon cultural corridor. The pioneers were invoked to decry, for example, the “new” morality, the government dole during the Great Depression, and godless communism. Revitalizing the pioneer tradition for the twenty-first century is a priority because, in the words of George Allan, the “resourcefulness of our traditions lies in their ideality, in the schemata for truth and commitment they provide. We cannot return to the old ways, but through returning to the kind of way the old ways were we may be able to recover the ancient meanings they embodied, meanings from which convincing new beliefs and enabling practices can be fashioned.”²⁹

The Mormon Frontier

Frederick Jackson Turner did not mention the Mormons in his 1893 address, but he very well could have. While Western historians have been chipping away at Turner’s frontier thesis over the past fifty years, the idea of Mormon (and not just American) exceptionalism has endured. After all, who was better than the Mormons—to cite from Turner—at “breaking the bond of custom, offering new experiences, calling out new institutions and activities”?³⁰ The pioneers wrested water from the desert to make it blossom as the rose, but how many

of us irrigate today? This leads to one of the paradoxes of Turner's thesis (and one we face today) noted by Alan Trachtenberg: "If the frontier had provided the defining experience for Americans, how would the values learned in that experience now fare in the new world of cities?"³¹ To paraphrase that question, if the pioneer era was a defining process in shaping the Church's identity, what happens to that identity if we are no longer pioneers?

Turner saw the frontier as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization." Where does the frontier exist today? A Latter-day Saint historian observed, "We have usually thought of the 'frontier' as an empty place . . . to be cultivated or civilized. But in recent years, scholars . . . have suggested another definition. A frontier is not a geographical space but a social space, an environment in which two different cultures meet and interact. In this sense, Latter-day Saints are at the pushing edge of a new frontier."³² On an institutional level, the pioneer spirit is best preserved in creating communities. The young interact in Primary and Mutual activities. Scouting teaches cooperation among patrol members and is, according to President Heber J. Grant, "the pioneer spirit . . . applied in practical, yet romantic fashion to the youth of this later age."³³ In 1947 President Marion G. Romney highlighted the social aspect of pioneering when he said, "I am persuaded that the Church today is meeting its pioneering responsibility through its welfare program."³⁴ A pioneer in modern times is one dressed in the garb of the good Samaritan.

The idea of pioneering on the sociocultural frontier was expanded upon by Elder Oaks, who said that "many modern Saints do their pioneering on the frontiers of their own attitudes and emotions. . . . Modern Saints know that one who subdues his own spirit is just as much a pioneer as one who conquers a continent."³⁵ Thus one solution has been to encourage us to all be modern pioneers. President Gordon B. Hinckley said the example of the pioneers "can be a compelling motivation for us all, *for each of us is a pioneer in his own life*, often in his own family, and many of us pioneer daily in trying to establish a gospel foothold in distant parts of the world."³⁶ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich reasoned along the same lines, stating that a "pioneer is not a woman who makes her own soap. She is one who takes up her burdens and walks to the future."³⁷ In 2006 members celebrated Black Heritage Month with the theme "Contemporary Black LDS Pioneers."³⁸ Such efforts to establish modern pioneers, according to Eliason, are "a way of keeping the Mormon present in sacred time—a situation where Mormons are really the most comfortable—by redeploying a symbol from a previous sacred time. This strategy

helps give the Mormon present a sense of being 'sacred history in the making.'"³⁹ However, recasting ourselves in the pioneer mold means little if we do not understand who the pioneers really were, what motivated them, and what they accomplished.

The global expansion of the Church poses a unique challenge to the pioneer story. Eliason argued that the way "Mormons come to conceptualize the relationship between a pioneer heritage and a new world religion potentially tells us much about who we are now and has profound implications for the shape of Mormon culture to come."⁴⁰ It would be difficult to imagine a Mormon identity shorn from its pioneer roots. We may as well attempt to understand the nature of the United States while ignoring the impact of the Civil War.

One way the Church has tried to keep the pioneer story alive has been through celebrations on Pioneer Day. One cannot really celebrate Pioneer Day alone because it is intended to bind the community together. Dorothy Noyes and Roger Abraham noted, "The characteristic element of calendar observances—noise and crowding, music and dancing, masking, eating and drinking, physical risk-taking, and the demarcation of community space—work powerfully on the bodies of participants and, furthermore, impose participation on all present. Unified in practice, the community creates a unity of feeling."⁴¹ Steven Olsen pointed out that Pioneer Day is used to symbolize "central aspects of Mormon identity and solidarity," which help "create and preserve a strong consciousness of the Mormon past" and reinforce the Church's "social organization and cohesion."⁴²

Pioneer Day continues to serve a present need by binding the community together through a shared or adopted past. These activities act as a modern-day circling-the-wagons. The most significant function of such celebrations is to amplify collective memory because "the consensual account of the community past becomes the interpretive authority for present actions and events. . . . They respond to strong contemporary problems and pressures: they are strategically engaged in the defense of the local community."⁴³ However, institutional observances like Pioneer Day cannot communicate through bake sales and parades the depth of our heritage. Rather, the act of remembering requires bridging generations through metaphor and shared meaning.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Few voices speak from the ossuary of history as loudly as those of the pioneers. One girl, Lucy Hannah Flake, was eight years old when she crossed the plains in 1850. When one looks at the faded black-and-white photographs of Lucy taken when she was a grandmother (wrinkled by age with her hair pulled back tightly and lips pursed), it is difficult to relate with the young girl who said: “It had always been easy for me to laugh. In fact that was one of my worse faults. I laughed in season and out of season. Not the giggley kind, but a rippling one that came from the toes up.”⁴⁵ In order for the pioneers to remain relevant, they must first become *real* people.

As I have taught Church history, I have tried to make the pioneer figures painted by artist Carl C. A. Christensen come alive for my students. Some students have difficulty finding compelling enough reasons to investigate what is beneath the bonnets and straw hats. So long as the pioneers remain abstract they remain inaccessible. When we realize that our identity is welded to theirs on the same family tree, we may understand what Joseph Smith meant when he said, “They without us could not be made perfect. These men are in heaven, but there [*sic*] children are on Earth their bowels yearn over us. God sends men down for this reason . . . [to] join hand in hand, in bringing about this work.”⁴⁶ The pioneers can remain relevant in the twenty-first century as members find new reasons to remember. And we *must* remember, for without our pioneer forefathers, we are orphans. **RE**

Notes

1. Joseph Anderson, in Conference Report, April 1968, 69; for a brief sketch of Erickson’s life, see Becky Bartholomew, *History Blazer*, October 1995.
2. Richard L. Bushman, “Faithful History,” in *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 1.
3. Allan Nevins, “A Proud Word for History,” in *The Vital Past: Writings on the Uses of History*, ed. Stephen Vaughn (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 237.
4. Eric A. Eliason, “Pioneers and Recapitulation in Mormon Popular Historical Expression,” in *Usable Pasts: Traditions and Group Expressions in North America*, ed. Tad Tuleja (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1997), 201.
5. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Faith of the Pioneers,” *Ensign*, July 1984, 3.
6. Bushman, “Faithful History,” 5.
7. Charles L. Cohen, “The Construction of the Mormon People,” *Journal of Mormon History* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 61.
8. Cohen, “Construction of the Mormon People,” 60–61.
9. Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 118.

10. See John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
11. Steven Knapp, "Collective Memory and the Actual Past," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 130.
12. Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 7.
13. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," trans. Marc Roudebush, *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 13.
14. Sarah Clift, "Impossible Testimony: Figures of Memory in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*," in *Inventing the Past: Memory Work in Culture and History*, ed. Otto Heim and Caroline Wiedmer (Schwabe Verlag Basel, 2005), 161.
15. Clift, "Impossible Testimony," 8.
16. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 343.
17. Eliason, "Pioneers in Mormon Experience," 192–93.
18. Eliason, "Pioneers in Mormon Experience," 194.
19. Richard Terdman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 22; emphasis in original.
20. Nora, "Between Memory and History," 18; emphasis added.
21. Garret Keizer, "Crap Shoot: Everyone Loses When Politics Is a Game," *Harper's Magazine* February 2006, 36; emphasis in original.
22. Keizer, "Crap Shoot," 36.
23. J. Golden Kimball, in Conference Report, April 1902, 9.
24. Erastus Snow, discourse delivered July 25, 1880, reproduced in *Improvement Era* 16 (May 1913), 761.
25. Ann P. Nibley, "Our Pioneer Heritage," *Relief Society Magazine*, January 1947, 33.
26. Dallin H. Oaks, "Following the Pioneers," *Ensign*, November 1997, 72.
27. Oaks, "Following the Pioneers."
28. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 156.
29. George Allan, "Traditions and Transitions," in *Philosophical Imagination and Cultural Memory: Appropriating Historical Traditions*, ed. Patricia Cook (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 37.
30. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1921), chapter 1.
31. Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 15.
32. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "A Pioneer Is Not a Woman Who Makes Her Own Soap," *Ensign*, June 1978, 55.
33. President Heber J. Grant, in Conference Report, April 1924, 156; quoting Oscar A. Kirkham.
34. Marion G. Romney, in Conference Report, April 1947, 126.
35. Dallin H. Oaks, "Modern Pioneers," *Ensign*, November 1989, 66.
36. Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Faith of the Pioneers," *Ensign*, July 1984, 3; emphasis added.
37. Ulrich, "A Pioneer Is Not a Woman Who Makes Her Own Soap," 55.
38. See "Today's Pioneers of African Heritage," *Church News*, January 28, 2006, 5.

39. Eliason, "Pioneers in Mormon Expression," 204.

40. Eric A. Eliason, "The Cultural Dynamics of Historical Self-Fashioning: Mormon Pioneer Nostalgia, American Culture, and the International Church," *Journal of Mormon History* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 140; emphasis in original.

41. Dorothy Noyes and Roger D. Abrahams, "From Calendar Custom to National Memory: European Commonplaces," in *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity*, ed. Dan Ben-Amos and Liliane Weissberg (Wayne State University Press, 1999), 80.

42. Steven L. Olsen, "Celebrating Cultural Identity: Pioneer Day in Nineteenth-Century Mormonism," *BYU Studies* 36, no. 1 (1996-97): 161.

43. Olsen, "Celebrating Cultural Identity," 85.

44. Alma asked the Saints long ago whether they had "sufficiently retained in remembrance the captivity of your fathers? Yea, and have you sufficiently retained in remembrance his mercy and long-suffering towards them? And moreover, have ye sufficiently retained in remembrance that he has delivered their souls from hell?" (Alma 5:6).

45. Lucy H. Flake, *To the Last Frontier: Autobiography of Lucy Hanna White Flake* (Arizona: privately printed, 1976), 13.

46. *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 74.