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Missouri Thoughts

(April 15, 1972)

DAVIS BITTON*

We had an unforgettable experience rolling down the highways of Missouri, getting to places whose names are familiar to us from our history books. We felt the twinge of disappointment that is inevitable when we descend from the historic imagination to the present reality, when we return to sites that had meaning in the past only to find them changed, lost perhaps in the grey smog of our own century. Thomas Wolfe was right: "You can't go home again" to the scenes of your childhood, much less to the sites of significance a hundred years ago.

During the day our attention was properly focused on the sites of our Missouri past, on what it has meant in our history. We were guided in our considerations by the historians whose short presentations are reproduced here. These historians are a new breed. They have had advanced training in several of the great universities of our country. Some of them have published books or articles and have achieved a reputation in the world of scholarship. Not that Latter-day Saints of the past century were devoid of ability; that age saw some competent writing in Church periodicals and some books of merit, and the record improved during the first half of the present century. But never have there been so many Mormon historians as now, so well trained, engaged in such fruitful research. The organization of the Mormon History Association in 1966 marked a new era of profession-

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alism among historians of Mormonism. And our reconsideration of the Missouri period this year was one of the finest fruits of the Association's activities.

What anguish the name of Missouri must have provoked in the souls of our people in the 1830s and 1840s—and for several decades afterwards, and for some of us still! On the one hand, it was Zion, the gathering place of God's elect, destined to be another city of Enoch, a place where the faithful could gather, singing songs of everlasting joy. On the other hand, it was a place of contention, of taunts and jeers, of threats and violence, of repeated flights and constant fear.

Perhaps it is appropriate to remind ourselves of the sterling human qualities that helped the Saints, or at least most of them, to come through their time of troubles with their faith still strong. For one thing, they were buoyed up by a loyalty to Joseph the Prophet that we will misunderstand unless we think of it in intensely personal terms. The Church was still small. The people knew each other. They knew the Prophet, heard him speak, and shared many small experiences that bound their souls together with bonds of steel. In a day when we have become large and bureaucratized, when (as Alvin Toffler has reminded us) personal friendships can be maintained only against enormous practical obstacles, it is encouraging to recall a time when the Saints, a few hundred and then a few thousand in number, could still easily think of themselves as a community of believers, or a little flock, or a family.

If such personal ties provided strength, it is also refreshing to discover that persecution and exile did not extinguish a sense of humor. One brief glimpse is provided in the reminiscences of Orange Wight (son of Lyman), who heard his father describe the escape of the Prophet and others from the Missouri jails and their successful flight to the safety of Illinois.

They all changed their names and started out as land seekers, men from the East hunting homes. They left the main road and traveled through the sparsely settled country on by-roads and at times without a road. . . .

Now with all their trouble they at times had some amusements. . . . They came to a ranch in an out-of-the-way place and stopped for the night. [They] told their names (fictitious ones). The next morning they were look-

ing about and walking around, all but Bro McRay,¹ who was in the house. The proprietor came in and was talking with Bro McRay and asked his name, said he had forgotten it. And Bro McRay had also forgotten it—and it had the effect to cause Bro McRay to take a terrible cramp in his stomach; it came near throwing him into spasms.

The man ran out where some of the other brethren were and told them that their friend was sick. They went in and said, "Mr. Brown, what is the matter with you? What have you been eating?" That relieved Mr. Brown to such an extent that he began to get better right away. In the meantime the proprietor had brought in a jug of whisky from somewhere and recommended Mr Brown to take a glass of whisky . . . He done so. And the others, those that were disposed that way (which were nearly all), took some for fear the disease was contagious.

After they got to our house in Quincy and we had beer or any stimulant of any kind to drink, they would recommend to "Give Bro McRay some first. He has the cramp and can't tell his name."

Such comic relief undoubtedly helped to make bearable what otherwise would have been a series of crushing trials and disappointments.

As for the deeper causes of our unhappy experience in Missouri, it is no defense of the outrageous behavior of many of the old settlers to say that some of the Mormons were insufferable in their smug certainty that the land would be theirs. But in the interest of balance we do need to remind ourselves that the phenomenon of "block busting," as we call it now—the incursion of new elements into old settled areas—almost inevitably provokes opposition, especially if there is any indication of group action and bloc voting.

Recently I came across a version of General Samuel Lucas's speech to the assembled Saints. As recorded in the journal of Jesse W. Johnstun, the General's words went something like this:

Gentlemen, you have the appearance of being smart and intelligent men. You see the trouble and difficulty you have brought upon you[rself] by gathering together in large bodies. You had better disperse through the country and live as other denominations do, and [then] you can live in this country as well as any other citizens.

What he was urging, of course, was not consistent with the

¹Alexander McRae (1807-1891).

Mormons' self-image and, more important, their conception of space and time. In short, he was expecting people living in an eschatological frame of reference to live like ordinary people—meaning those of the great majority who assume that life will go on pretty much as it has always done. He was expecting the citizens of the New Jerusalem to settle down comfortably in Babylon.

Perhaps such a compromise can never be achieved; perhaps it should not be sought. But I am reminded of some words the Prophet Joseph Smith delivered in 1843, words that betray no haughty sense of exclusiveness:

Sectarian priests cry out concerning me, and ask, "Why is it this babbler gains so many followers, and retains them?" I answer, It is because I possess the principle of love. . . .

The inquiry is frequently made of me, "Wherein do you differ from others in your religious views?" In reality and essence we do not differ so far in our religious views, but that we could all drink into one principle of love. One of the grand fundamental truths of "Mormonism" is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may.

. . . Christians should cease wrangling and contending with each other, and cultivate the principles of union and friendship in their midst; and they will do it before the millennium can be ushered in and Christ takes possession of his kingdom.

These words push my mind in two directions. First, I think of the conflict that seemed always to arise between the Saints and their neighbors—in Kirtland, in Missouri, and in Nauvoo. Somehow the Saints did not succeed in conveying the love and good will that the Prophet expounded. Was it a failure of communication? Did they allow their zeal for the restored gospel to carry them away, expressing its message without tempering love and compassion, hitting their gentile neighbors with a verbal club that aroused many from their dogmatic slumber, to be sure, but at the same time creating resentful enemies who nursed a grudge and looked for the first opportunity to get even? Perhaps the Saints were not given the chance to do otherwise, but we cannot help but wonder what might have been.

Then, too, my mind is pushed by the Prophet's words into 1972. We live in a fascinating period of Christian history, a

period largely informed, at least until recently, by the ecumenical spirit. Christians have been trying to emphasize their agreements and deemphasize their differences. In different ways they have been inspired by the old irenic ideal, "Unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials, charity in all." And in a modest way, it seems to me, this has been one of the finest by-products of the activities of the Mormon History Association. I refer to the spirit of friendship and cooperation between some of us in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and some fine people in the Reorganized Church. We are discovering the relevance of the Prophet's words not only to our troubled history but also to our challenging present: "Christians should cease wrangling and contending with each other, and cultivate the principles of union and friendship in their midst." And again: "In reality and essence we do not differ so far in our religious views, but that we could all drink into one principle of love."