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The Chimerical Desert

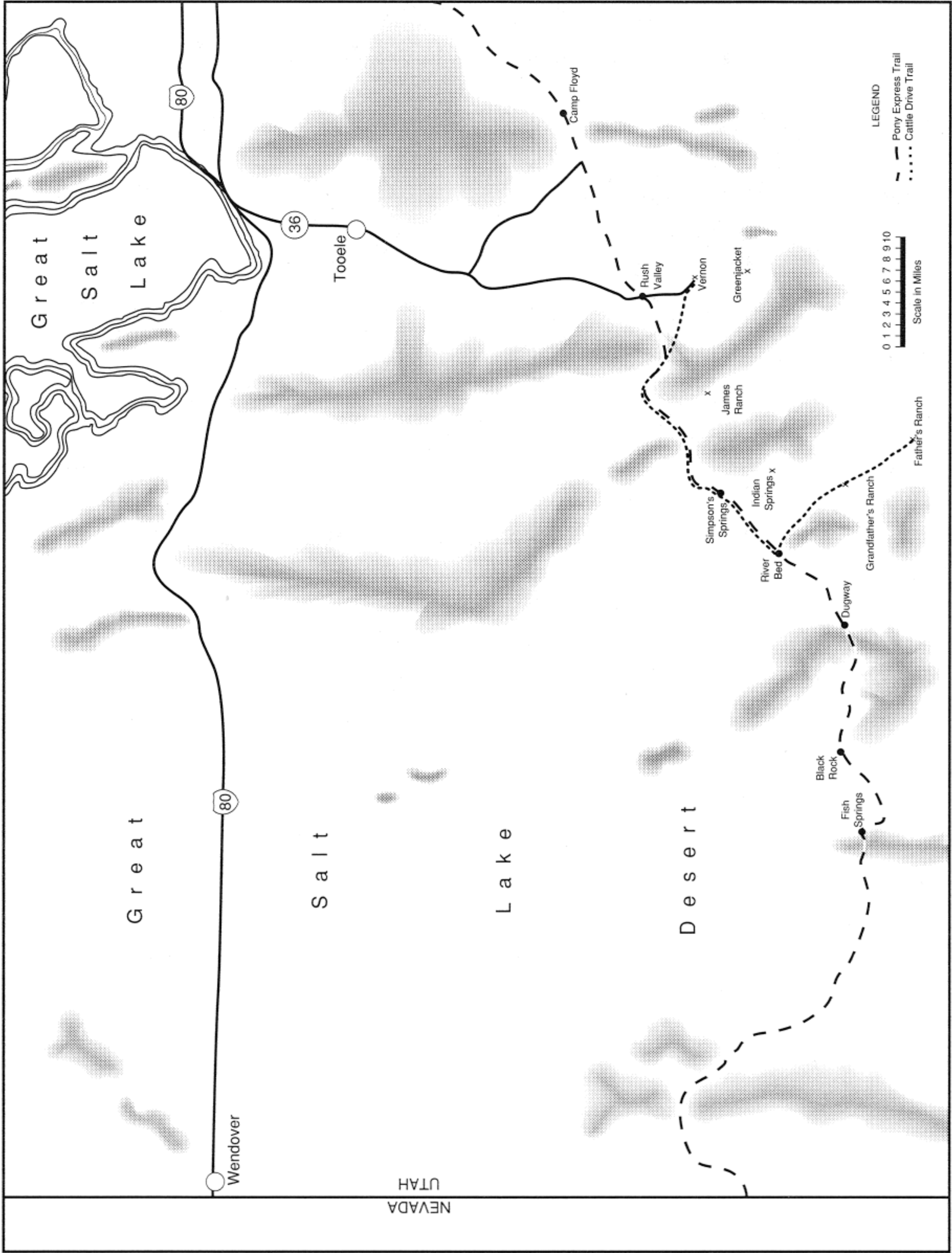
John Bennion

The Sheeprock Mountains curve in the shape of a knife across the south end of Rush Valley, settled by my people and others in the 1860s. Blackrock Mountain is the butt of the handle; the Tintic Peaks, the top of the hilt; Main Canyon, the blade point. Inside the curve is Vernon, a Mormon community with willows, cottonwoods, and Lombardy poplars growing along ditches; a brick and adobe schoolhouse; and in my youth, a white wooden church with hardwood floors and folding benches. Beyond the mountains and westward along the Pony Express trail lies deep desert, known in pioneer times as Paiute Hell. Frank C. Robertson describes this country in "Through Paiute Hell": "From Lookout Pass you look out over forbidding deserts of mountains and flats. . . . It is hot as the hinges of hell in summer, cold as the polar regions in winter. In winter, blizzards block the roads; in summer, cloudbursts wash them out."¹ Since the beginning of this century the male Bennions have left hearth and wife to conduct an affair with that desolate country. As they followed their sheep, cattle, and horses into the desert, spending more and more time away from churches and town gatherings, they seem to have also drifted from conventional religion and culture. They carried their faith into the wilderness and their doubt back to town; their wandering is my heritage.

Twice a year since before I was born my father drove his cow herd westward to winter range at Thanksgiving time, back again at Easter—a four-day trip each way. As a child, I walked or rode behind the cattle, which each fall scattered through the cedars on Lookout Pass if they were hungry for dry grass or lined out on the gravel road across the prairie when the lead cows remembered the alfalfa fields on my father's Riverbed ranch, forty miles by road west of our home in Vernon. On our way out, the flat was covered with yellow and

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Western Utah Desert, showing the route of the Bennion family cattle drive and the locations of some of the Bennion family ranches

red barbed cheat grass, squat shadscale brush, pear cactus, dried tumbleweed, thorny greasewood, and the thick green fingers of halogetan. Seven-foot sunflowers crowded the barrow pits. Once when we turned the herd south toward Simpson Springs, we found the Army Reserve on maneuvers with their big guns established on the foot hills, shooting over our heads into Dugway Proving Grounds. From Simpson—a former cavalry, Pony Express, and Wells Fargo station—we could see the white line of road which led down to the dried river bed. Below us lay white alkali flats and ancient mountains, looking like dinosaurs half sunk in mire. Farther out stood the blue-gray bulk of Table Mountain, marked with levels by Lake Bonneville's unsteady retreat. At the marker for the Riverbed Pony Express Station, we'd turn south for ten miles. Finally the herd would flood into my father's fields, which stretched across the dry river bottom, at one time the last link between northern and southern sections of the ancient lake.

On our way, the herd passed through or near eight of my grandfather Glynn's former ranches—Greenjacket, Hill Springs, the Sharp place, the dry farm near Black Rock, the Faust Ranch, the James Ranch on the far side of Lookout Pass, Indian Springs, and finally Riverbed—each of which he took up in turn and then lost because of disastrous weather or unfounded trust in bankers and partners. After each loss he moved on, motivated by the mirage of a blossoming desert.

This obsession in my family with exploring westward into the desert for unsettled but fertile land began with the first Bennions in Utah. The Salt Lake City land owned by John and Samuel, brothers who emigrated from Wales, was absorbed by Brigham Young when he discovered that grazing land wouldn't regenerate itself as it had in the East and in England. He sent the brothers west across the Jordan River to ranch, an act which violated his treaty with the Utes. After the Bennion sheep and cattle quickly used up the grazing there, my great-great-grandfather, my namesake, explored and claimed land at the north and south ends of Rush Valley, which was relative wilderness. In a letter to his first wife's parents in Wales he writes:

About one year ago I with a few others took a few days journey in a South West direction beyond the settlements in search of better grasing [*sic*] country soon after I moved my sheep cattle & horses out there, I am now well satisfied that it was a move in the right direction, our

live stock wintered well, by getting their own living, I now have a flock of 1150 sheep about 70 of cattle and about 20 head of horses.²

While his first wife remained at the Jordan ranch, managing the livestock and home weaving business there, his second and third wives helped establish operations at Mountain Home, located at the mouth of an aspen-filled canyon at the extreme southern end of Rush Valley. The foundation of their old place is now choked with sagebrush and cedars, but my ancestor John, thinking that the water there would help make his fortune, regularly walked a hundred-mile circuit between his wives and homesteads. His herds grew until the heavy grass around Vernon was depleted, and then he moved his herds near Castle Dale. He drove himself and his family, using wives and children as a colonizing and laboring force, all in the service of his desire to build a spiritual and economic empire.

For causes of his ambition I look not only to Brigham Young's fervor, which made the colonizing instinct into a religion, but also to the class system in Wales. In John's youth, he was accused of poaching on manor lands; he escaped shame and perhaps worse by running away to Liverpool, where he joined the LDS Church. A few decades later in Deseret he was a successful and propertied patriarch, and his lust for land was passed from parent to child down to the fifth generation, my own.

Although my great-great-grandmother Esther Ann colonized with John in Rush Valley and in the Muddy Mission near Panaca, Nevada, her ambition was directed more toward writing and reading well than toward acquiring more land. As an indentured servant in England, she practiced reading the newspapers plastered to the walls of the outhouse. When her master discovered why she was taking so long, he turned the papers upside down, but that only made her reading more challenging. Even in the harsh poverty of the Muddy Mission, she tried to improve her writing and reading. In a letter to George Calder, who married into the Bennion clan, she writes,

It is gratifying to me to have the privilege of corresponding with you, George. Your style or mode of writing is so superior that I hope to be able to learn something from it. I do not expect to ever make a good writer but I wish you would keep one of my letters and if we are not all changed from mortal to immortal compare them five years from now and see if I have profited by corresponding with you.³

She taught herself well enough that in 1893 she was chosen as one of Utah's three outstanding poets whose work was sent to the Chicago World's Fair. More important to me is that by reading to her children and encouraging them, she instilled a love of writing and literature that has lasted to my generation.

Because of her influence, when her son Israel wandered in the mountains around Vernon or in the western desert with the cattle and sheep herds, he carried a Bible in one saddlebag and a volume of Shakespeare in the other. Perhaps this turning toward the cultivation of self tempered his ambition for wealth. Whatever the cause, instead of breeding vast herds, Israel strove to create Zion—a utopian Mormon village named Benmore. He developed land south of Vernon and invited new immigrants to join him, predicting that if they shared according to the righteous principles of the United Order that God would bless them by increasing yearly precipitation, which would consequently affect the flow of the streams. A severe drought drove them from their hovels and destroyed their faith in his prophecy, and they complained that Israel had misled them with his foolish visions. Their complaints caused the authorities in Tooele to remove Israel as the Vernon Ward's representative on the high council. "I have been released from the councils of the mighty," he told his wife Jeannette, a native of Vernon, a gentle, genteel, and devout woman. After the collapse of his dream, she remained with him six miles from Vernon in the relative isolation of their Greenjacket ranch near Benmore, which is now a town of crumbling foundations and skeletal orchards. Like John Bennion's success, Israel's failure was not simply economic; he felt it as a loss of religious and social status.

Although my grandfather Glynn was even more a wanderer, his visions were similar to those of his father, his grandfather, and every other American pioneer who has looked westward for wealth. His specific dream was that he would prove that alfalfa and beef could grow in the most arid country in Utah. His herds of cattle would be larger than his grandfather's, his property holdings more extensive. As a consequence, he believed, he would grow in the eyes of his Salt Lake relatives who were important in the Church.

One of his pioneering experiments in making the desert blossom was homesteading the cedared foothills and dry valleys below Indian Springs, which he claimed with three of his sons. My father, Colin, who had the same dream of the west desert,

describes the move in his autobiography, penned sometime in the late 1980s:

June 21st, 1934—my father, my brothers Owen and George, and I set out on an adventure. We rented a truck and loaded it with \$12 worth of groceries, lumber and fixtures for a cabin, seeds and fruit tree starts, and bedding.

We left Salt Lake City in the morning. We traveled over Lookout Pass, Government Wash, Simpson Springs, and finally arrived at our destination—a hollow six miles south of Simpson. We got there at 12:00 midnight, having gone 110 miles. . . .

We planted a garden before we did anything else. . . . Then we built our cabin. My dad wasn't anything special as a builder, but I thought he was great. The thing I remember best was that he made a latch-string. He said—When you are away, you leave the latch-string out—which means, "Everybody is welcome to this house."

Then we started to work on our ditch. Shovels and rakes, work that bent backs and gave us aches. When we got the water down, we dragged a harrow, meant for a horse, by 3 boy and one manpower, after we had planted the 10-acre field in alfalfa. Four days later the little cotyledon came up—then the true leaves. We knew we could grow it. Clean the ditch—fix it where the wild horses came off the hill and trampled rocks into the water—find better places where the water could run—bring down the Coyote water and clean the spring—and above all—spread the life-giving water on the orchard, garden, and field.

1934 was the driest year in Utah history. I just remember one rain all summer. I hated the place. I hated the dry earth. At one time we started getting what we called the stomy-gurgles—we'd wake up with a rotten taste in our mouths, then barf for one hour. Dad finally figured it was the water from the ditch, which was running over old sheep bedding grounds.

He started carrying two buckets of water every morning from Coyote junction—a mile away. I never really appreciated his efforts for many years.

He had planned for this ranch for two years. The year before we came out, he had surveyed the ditch and spring at Indian, and had brought out two bronco work horses and, in April, plowed the ten acres we planted. Then in June we all came out. . . .

In August my father walked across the mountain, bringing back the same bronco team, a wagon, and a plow and a few staples to eat. He introduced me to the one-man plow. An acre a day. Thirty acres were put under cultivation and planted. More irrigation, more ditch work, more concern for the growing alfalfa. Many people search for the wonder crop of the west. Search no more. It is alfalfa.⁴

This discovery, that a water-intensive crop like alfalfa would grow in the desert, opened land for cultivation which previously supported

only antelope and jack rabbits. My father and grandfather felt like Columbus did when he sighted what he thought was the Orient. After their first harvest, instead of arid wilderness, my father and his father saw a green alfalfa Eden; in their minds romance and economy mingled, strong as testimony.

Once at Riverbed my father and I labored to shore up a low ditch. We dug clay that stuck to our shovels and boots but not to the ditch bank. With the venom only an adolescent can produce, I asked my father what possessed him to waste his life on that barren land. He dropped his hands to his sides and wept, partly from disappointment that I would ask such a thick-headed question, partly from the emotion he felt toward the farm. He told me that the soil had the right composition for protein-rich alfalfa and that the underground water was wealth. Agriculture was the foundation for prosperity in any country. We were engaged in an essential endeavor, one ordained by God. Love of the desert, for my people, has been economics, social status, religion, and romance intermingled.

In addition to the Indian Springs homestead, my grandfather worked the James Ranch, fifteen or twenty miles closer to Vernon. He lost that place after the harsh winter of 1948–49. As the snow deepened the cattle climbed onto the carcasses of the first dead; in spring he found pyramids of frozen beef. Soon afterward he discovered that water lay just below the surface of the dry river valley west of Indian Springs, and he believed that even better alfalfa crops could be grown there. In 1951, because the number of homesteads he could claim was limited by law, he had each of his children and most of their spouses file for him; together they took three and a half sections of desert land.

In a 1962 article in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, my grandfather Glynn praises the Homestead Act, which provided the way for people with average income to realize the dream of getting and holding land. “No rich investor could secure great tracts of land and operate with tenants or hirelings like European lords,”⁵ he said to the reporter. Ironically, becoming powerful through gaining property was probably his primary motive. As John Bennion’s grandson, he imbibed his thirst for land and animals with the air he breathed and the water he drank, and in the article, he translates the vision into modern terms:

Pioneer spirit for homesteading, adventure, hard work and realizing one’s dreams, regardless of age, was once an important part

of our American life. People of today just cannot be convinced that there are thousands of acres of unappropriated land in the great valleys of the West Desert, potentially rich and productive with ample underground water for irrigation.

These lands are going to waste because homesteading is generally considered to be for poor people and then only of necessity. . . . [To] make a success of a homestead nowadays requires money, credit, courage, a quality of imagination that can make a mirage actually become a garden of Eden.⁶

Riverbed was his last farm, the pinnacle of his efforts to make the desert blossom. After talking to my grandfather, the reporter was converted to the vision and returned to Salt Lake to describe Riverbed as Utopia. The article reads,

Rounding the last mountain point, the valley before me was unbelievable—a rich green spectacle, with rows of bailed [*sic*] hay stretching into the distance, green fields of alfalfa, corrals of fine fat livestock, a yard of modern well-kept farm machinery, and ditches flowing with clear water.⁷

As with his father and grandfather, the motivation for Glynn's drive westward was more than simple economics. His wife had grown up in Salt Lake, a Cannon, and earlier in his life my grandfather had tried city life. When he first began work as a journalist and historian, writing for the *Salt Lake Tribune*, the *Improvement Era*, and the Church Historian's Office, the growth he evidenced pleased my grandmother. In a letter to my father on his mission, she writes:

Your father has just completed a very excellent article on Brigham Young and Jim Bridger. . . . It really is very, very fine. He is all the time gaining in ability to see, to analyse and to express with conviction the wonderful things he finds in the files of the Historian's Office. I feel too that he has gained this winter a new view of Brigham Young's work which will be helpful to him, to us and to others who read his findings.⁸

Perhaps her desire was that he grow to be an important man in the Church, such as his grandfather John, his father Israel, and his brothers were. But she was sensitive enough to see that there was a quality in him which allowed him to escape both the good and evil of such ambition. She writes, "Your father is not like many men who like to exercise their authority. But he has all the qualities of a leader of the first rank and, if each of us follows his quiet, unassuming leadership we will have much happiness together."⁹ Unfortunately for her, he finally became unable to bear living in the city, primarily

because the money paid for writing was not enough to support his family. The men who married the other Cannon sisters—his brother Howard and his brothers-in-law Dave Howell and Ira Sharp—were all becoming millionaires. My uncle, Robert Bennion, has described to me his father's discouragement: "Dad wanted to make it big and being a writer and a flunky to the [Church] Historian was not buying groceries for his family."¹⁰

My grandfather wanted to build a desert empire and return to Salt Lake City a man of status, but he also left because he had trouble writing the kind of history his superiors demanded. Church Historian Joseph Fielding Smith believed our history is solely for the purpose of building faith, of necessity positive—my grandfather disagreed. When he uncovered uncomfortable information, he was asked to ignore it. He was disturbed mostly by the accounts of Church leaders who used their power to take advantage of impoverished immigrants. Once he found that some especially compromising pages had been cut from a diary; he held the Church Historian responsible. With authority pushing in this manner and with the desert pulling, my grandfather soon returned to the country of his childhood.

As Glynn's dreams took him farther and farther west, to Indian Springs and Riverbed, away from the moist air, the trees, people, and conveniences my grandmother knew, she didn't follow him. In another letter to my father, she writes that Grandpa (Israel) Bennion had his eightieth birthday: "Your father was of course at the ranch, where he has been for nearly 5 weeks. The children too had all gone out Saturday afternoon. I stayed in because of the extreme heat and dust. No rain for nearly a month."¹¹

When I was a child, my grandmother lived at Greenjacket near Vernon, but my grandfather's trips away became lengthier and finally she moved back to Salt Lake, where dust didn't aggravate her hay fever and where she could more easily further her career as a painter of pictorial maps. According to her son Robert, she hoped that her work would help her husband: "The maps were to make a pile of money for Dad so he could get his pipeline built, or get whatever he wanted so he could be a cattle baron, so that he could be comfortable in the courts of the genteels (or should I say, gentiles?)"¹² But as has happened with other sons of pioneers who spend their days riding outside the boundaries of town and home, the longer he lived in the desert, the rougher his habits became. He

washed himself and his dishes less and swore more, becoming less and less accommodating to polite conditions and communal religion. For much of their marriage, my grandparents were separate, she a daughter of the city, one of the faithful, he a son of the desert, a doubter after learning history that disturbed his belief.

Following her death, he recorded his anguish of soul concerning the conditions that separated them:

The dreadful agony is over. For her there is now the rest and peace and joyous reunions of Beulah Land. For me there is self-recrimination and regret—and an overpowering aloneness I've never before experienced.

I should have tried harder to make a living in her natural environment, the city. But I wasn't trained for it, hated it, couldn't cope with it. I wanted to be hauling wheat to the railroad with a four-horse outfit, or working cows in the aspens and chokecherries. There just isn't anything like the thrill of seeing a stretch of barren land become a beautiful green field.

And all the while I was far away pursuing one chimerical venture after another, she was always near. At Indian Springs or some other outlandish place if I got to worrying about things at night and couldn't sleep I'd get up and walk over to Six Mile and back, occasionally scaring myself wide awake by hearing myself talking to her.

But now if I speak to her, she doesn't hear me anymore. So I've been re-reading her letters. She was a most faithful letter writer. To me they are the sweetest love letters a man ever got. Not just because they are tender and kind. She never gave up scolding, arguing, cajoling, pleading, trying her darndest to convince me that some of the worrisome items I encountered during the six years I spent in the Church Historians Office were not important.¹³

But she had been unable to restore him to a conventional faith, the respect of his city relatives, or her own companionship.

Like my grandfather, my father was influenced by opposing desires: he wanted the status and friendship offered by conventional community as well as the freedom and economic opportunity of the desert. He writes in his autobiography:

My boyhood was a mixed experience—Cannon city associations in Salt Lake; Bennion ranch days near Vernon. I worked for Grandfather Cannon doing lawn and shade tree work in Forest Dale. From him I gained a love of trees. I worked with the Bennions in the summers, learning the business of vegetable gardens, range cattle, horses, and haying. I also absorbed a love for the desert and mountain ranges that is so deep a part of me. Wild animals, insects, reptiles, and birds are so much a part of my being that I guess I can accept the words of Kipling's *Jungle Book*: "We be brothers, thee and I."¹⁴

Like his father he experimented unsuccessfully with living in the city. He tried school at the University of Utah, where he was unhappy and lonely. He served a mission in Texas and then returned to Fort Worth for Air Force navigation school. His assignment was with the 397th Bombardment Squadron, which was sent to Panama, quite a contrast to his own dry country. "We patrolled for German and Jap submarines and shipping,"¹⁵ he wrote. "I loved the swimming and fishing, and hunting in the bush."¹⁶ On his return, he tried the University of Utah again and law school in Chicago, neither of which satisfied him. Finally he found his place studying range management in the forestry school at Utah State, where he met my mother, a city woman like my grandmother. Summers he returned to Greenjacket and the west desert, building a cowherd of his own in the country of his youth. "Times change," he writes, "but not the desert":¹⁷

I enjoyed the farm work there [in Riverbed] and also I thought the setting of mountains and desert were beautiful. One of the sights I loved best was when summer thunderstorms came . . . as a grey curtain in a diagonal across the south end of Keg Mountain, across our land, and head for Bennion Canyon in the Vernon Mountains. Then the blessed rain would soak our Greenjacket ranch.¹⁸

He enjoyed the scenery, but again, as it was for his fathers, the core of his admiration was for the productive forces of the desert—moisture in the form of rain or well water, alfalfa roots and leaves, land made arable.

This back and forth movement between two worlds had a liberalizing and a confusing effect on my father, as it did on my grandfather. He had a fierce devotion to both city and country family; his motto was "*Viva la raza*," meaning his Sharp, Cannon, Morris, and especially his Bennion relations. He worked hard for the community in Vernon as mayor, as Boy Scout and Explorer leader for a decade or more, and as teacher of countless classes in the Church. He understood community and the necessity of hierarchy, but at the same time he had an extreme sensitivity to individual independence; he was one of the most tolerant people I have known.

In Panama, during the war, he made himself perfect his high school Spanish by moving back and forth between the soldiers and the natives. He told me that once he was on a bus where some soldiers sat behind an upper-class Panamanian man and woman. The soldiers were berating the couple but were so ignorant of Spanish that they couldn't imagine anyone else being fluent in two

languages. My father watched the faces of the Panamanians, feeling with them their anger and shame.

As I grew up, he was like a bridge between the Mexican-Americans and the Anglos, the actives and the apostates in Vernon; he tried to be friends with everyone. In addition, another kind of tolerance—desert feminism—was forced on him by biological fact. I was the first and only son, followed by five daughters, so my sisters had to learn to work on the ranch. They taught my father through their competence. In notes for his remarks at my sister Susan's missionary farewell, he writes:

My girls had to help me on the farm and the cattle range. They trailed cows twice a year out to Riverbed, slept on the ground, and ate dirt behind the herd.

They drove tractors, did [castrated and earmarked] the calves at branding, walked miles in the snow—and still managed to look feminine.¹⁹

But as it did for my grandfather, the desert in my father's soul had its down side. When he was a child, he lay in the next room as his parents argued about the Church; he grew up with fragmented belief. He once quoted the Mormon author Paul Bailey, saying that his faith was like Joseph's coat, tattered and blood stained, but still his. "I know that at the last day," my father said, "my Savior will raise me up." For him and for me, faith and doubt are not opposites. My father swallowed whole the tension between my grandfather and the more respectable Salt Lake relations, whom my father also loved. His personality became a paradoxical mixture as he inherited my grandmother's desire for belief and my grandfather's impulse to criticize. In postmodern terms he was marginalized, inhabiting the region between community and desert. This confusion, when coupled with a biological propensity for depression and his inability to talk freely about his feelings, helped turn his experimental drinking as a teenager in Salt Lake into alcoholism. Until I was eleven or twelve, his drinking was invisible; I soon learned that when he was more gregarious, more sentimentally affectionate, cheerful, and open than usual, he had lubricated himself with the cooking sherry stashed under bales of hay or in the hollow roof of the chicken coop. Perhaps his confusion about his own emotions, his body, his people, and his religion was salved in some way by his habit. I now think of his alcoholism as a symptom of that deeper despair.

Once when my father, my grandfather, and I returned from Riverbed, my grandfather, quite senile, rambled on about Brigham Young serving alcoholic beverages to guests in the Lion House. We were on the east slope of Lookout Pass, traveling down toward the lights of Vernon, and my father slammed so hard on the brakes that the truck, loaded with hay, slid to a stop. He chastised Grandpa for talking to me, an unformed adolescent, about such matters. Then he took me behind the truck and told me that his father had lost his testimony because of research in the Church Historian's Office. I think my father's anger was due to a desire to protect me from the confusion he had felt most of his life. But if anything, my intelligent, hybrid ancestry had prepared me to ingest such facts without indigestion of the spirit.

Like my father, I am a product of both community and desert. Dozens of times a year we crossed Lookout Pass traveling to the desert, returning again. The desert is always white in my memory; either the sun shimmered off the alkali plain or bitter snow blew in drifts. We labored to start the ancient diesel engine that ran the water pump, counted the seconds between drips of oil that lubricated the spinning shaft, chopped ice, and fed cattle during the winter; cleaned ditches in the spring; irrigated and hauled hay during the summer. After a day or week in the desert, we drove the forty miles back over Lookout Pass to Vernon, toward the regular lines of Lombardy poplars and giant cottonwoods. The willows and Siberian elms seemed to breathe moisture as we dropped into town, unbelievably sweet after the drought of the desert. Sunday mornings we sat on wooden benches, with either the breath of the coal furnace on our faces or with the windows open to the heavy perfume of Russian olives, while speakers wove their words. In that white, wooden church house, I began to feel the lift and movement of the spirit.

In town my sisters and I were under another civilizing influence—that of my mother, who probably more than any other person has taught me the adaptability necessary for moving between worlds. Because of her, despite any confusion of doubt and faith, gregariousness and independence, I've been able to hold my skin together. Like my grandmother, my mother was a city woman, but she remained with my moody and driven father all of his life. Of their courtship, my father writes in his autobiography:

In my senior year I met and fell in love with Sergene Benson, daughter of Serge and Elizabeth Benson, who at that time were living in Silver Springs, Md. The summer before we were engaged I sent Sergene an Indian arrowhead and rattles from a snake. I'm sure her mother was outraged, upset, and mystified; but it must have meant more to her daughter, because the next summer we were married in the Logan Temple.²⁰

She lived with him at Greenjacket and in Vernon, overcoming isolation by turning to books, making friends with the Bennions and Vernonites, fiercely managing the limited resources that farming and teaching give a family, and urging us toward the finer things of the world. She has a practical respect for the benefits of property but hasn't been blinded by the romance of my male ancestors. While my grandmother returned to the city, my mother's resilience and flexibility have allowed her to remain in the relative desert of Vernon, even after my father's death.

So what is my inheritance? I am also afflicted in my blood with the illusion of wealth in a blossoming desert. I long to regain the small herd of angus cattle I once had and to stand in my own alfalfa field as the mist of irrigation sprinklers surrounds me. I want to build a house at Greenjacket and live there, competent, self-sufficient, unperverted by my own wealth, the moral opposite of urban businessmen. But I also love weaving words with people, both writing for publication and talking with a class as we unravel some text, and there is no college at Greenjacket. So I live as a suburbanite, a teacher at what some call the Lord's university. I have inherited both my grandfather's distrust of ill-used power and my grandmother's love of matters of the spirit. Like my grandfather, I'm uncomfortable in a culture which holds both agency and authority as absolute values. I feel beset by ironies—such as the idea that there can be an apolitical and benevolent hierarchy of power, an honest history which accommodates its truth to the ends of public relations, equal but different roles for men and women, a universal Utah church—and by such notions as faith which grows without challenge or stretching, of sexless procreation, or of scholarship which never uncovers anything uncomfortable. But, because of my grandmother, I claim membership in the culture that I question, grasping this opportunity to serve God's children. Because of her, I know that my stillborn daughter is safe; because of my grandfather, I still curse God for taking her from me.

Viewed from the perspective of either desert rats or urban church members, my life is an inconstancy—a movement between desert and town, doubt and faith—a pluralism received from my people. And I want both John’s practical industry and Esther Ann’s hunger for the cultivation of the inner state through writing and reading, both Israel’s vision and Jeannette’s gentleness, my grandfather’s integrity and critical vision, my grandmother’s faith and imagination, my father’s sensitivity and tolerance, my mother’s adaptability and culture. The voice that speaks from this complexity will be inconsistent, fragmented, and will explode upward through the surface of conventionality, through the tendency of many to imagine that all good people are as singlemindedly pious as they are. It will be marked by what my father calls a “wry, dry, peculiarly *Bennion* sense of humor.” Bennions, he writes, “all tend to be a bit salty and earthy in our jokes and teasing; *shocking* to some more delicate souls.”²¹

Once my grandfather, senile and bewildered, sat among sophisticated city folk at a Bennion reunion. My aunt, his daughter-in-law, played something from Mozart or Beethoven on the piano. Afterward, when everyone clapped politely, he half stood on his ruined legs and shouted “Bravo, bravo.” Many looked at him, disapproving. I only hope I can add my raucous voice to his.

NOTES

¹ Frank C. Robertson, “Through Paiute Hell,” in *Hoofbeats of Destiny: The Story of the Pony Express*, ed. Robert West Howard (New York: New American Library, 1960), 99.

² Ruth Winder Rogers, *Bennion Family History*, vol. 4 (Bennion Family Association, 1990), 136.

³ Rogers, *Bennion Family History*, 47.

⁴ Colin Bennion, “The Family of Colin and Sergene Bennion of Vernon, Utah,” n.d., n.p. This unpublished collection of writings has page numbers in only certain sections of the manuscript. Further citations of this work may or may not include page numbers. This collection and all personal papers and letters are in possession of Barbara Wilson.

⁵ *Salt Lake Tribune*, September 23, 1962, 7.

⁶ *Salt Lake Tribune*, September 23, 1962, 6.

⁷ *Salt Lake Tribune*, September 23, 1962, 6.

⁸ Lucile Cannon Bennion to Glynn Colin Bennion, March 21, 1940.

⁹ Lucile Cannon Bennion to Glynn Colin Bennion, March 21, 1940.

¹⁰ Robert Bennion, personal conversation with author, January 1992.

- ¹¹ Lucile Cannon Bennion to Glynn Colin Bennion, June 5, 1940.
- ¹² Robert Bennion, personal conversation with author, January 1992.
- ¹³ Glynn Bennion to Bill Hunter, March 24, 1966.
- ¹⁴ Bennion, "The Family of Colin and Sergene Bennion," 2, 3.
- ¹⁵ Bennion, "The Family of Colin and Sergene Bennion," 3.
- ¹⁶ Bennion, "The Family of Colin and Sergene Bennion," 3.
- ¹⁷ Bennion, "The Family of Colin and Sergene Bennion," n.p.
- ¹⁸ Bennion, "The Family of Colin and Sergene Bennion," 5.
- ¹⁹ Personal notes of Colin Bennion in possession of Barbara Wilson, n.d., n.p.
- ²⁰ Bennion, "The Family of Colin and Sergene Bennion," 4.
- ²¹ Personal notes of Colin Bennion, n.d., n.p.