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Personal Essay

On Being Mormon in Canada and Canadian in Utah

Maureen Ursenbach Beecher

Peter Gzowski, a name unpronounceable to Americans, is a byword to Canadians. Weekday mornings, CBC radio listeners hear his wry comments and sage interviews reflecting Canadian life on *Morningside*. In the mid-seventies, when *Morningside* was still *This Country in the Morning*, Gzowski ran a contest asking listeners to finish this sentence: “As Canadian as . . .” Entries poured in: “As Canadian as a toboggan” or “As Canadian as Diefenbaker.” But the grand-slam winner was unforgettable: “As Canadian as possible, under the circumstances.”¹

What is there Canadian in us—Elaine, Ardeth, and me? We were all born north of the forty-ninth parallel, admittedly, but our parents or at least grandparents were emigrants from Utah. I’m not sure about Elaine and Ardeth, but I have spent as much of my life in the United States as I did in Canada, and those years were my most productive. It was Canada, however, that nurtured me, taught me, endured my adolescent peccadilloes, and spewed me forth to do whatever it was I would do with what she created in me. Canada is my motherland—meaningful on many levels.

The other term in my title, “Mormon,” while it is unlike “Canadian” in that it is first and essentially a matter of faith and conversion, still shares with “Canadian” some characteristics of heritage, identity, and ethnicity. “As Mormon as possible, despite the circumstances?” What is it to be Mormon? And for the purposes of today’s consideration, What was it to grow up Mormon in Canada? What is it to be Canadian in Mormon Utah? To approach that question, I need to look beyond myself, to my foremothers.

My Grandmother Harvey, Millie Cluff—a schoolmarm in Utah’s Wasatch County from the time she was sixteen—married

Richard Coope Harvey in 1886. With his own hands, he farmed his own land and that of his widowed mother. He built the little house in Center Creek, just east of Heber, where he and Millie set to housekeeping. Three children were born to them, the oldest not yet four when Richard was called on a mission. Millie returned to teaching to support them all. On Richard's return, farming for a living became increasingly difficult in the increasingly populated valley with its limited arable space. And what would be left for his sons when they became adults?

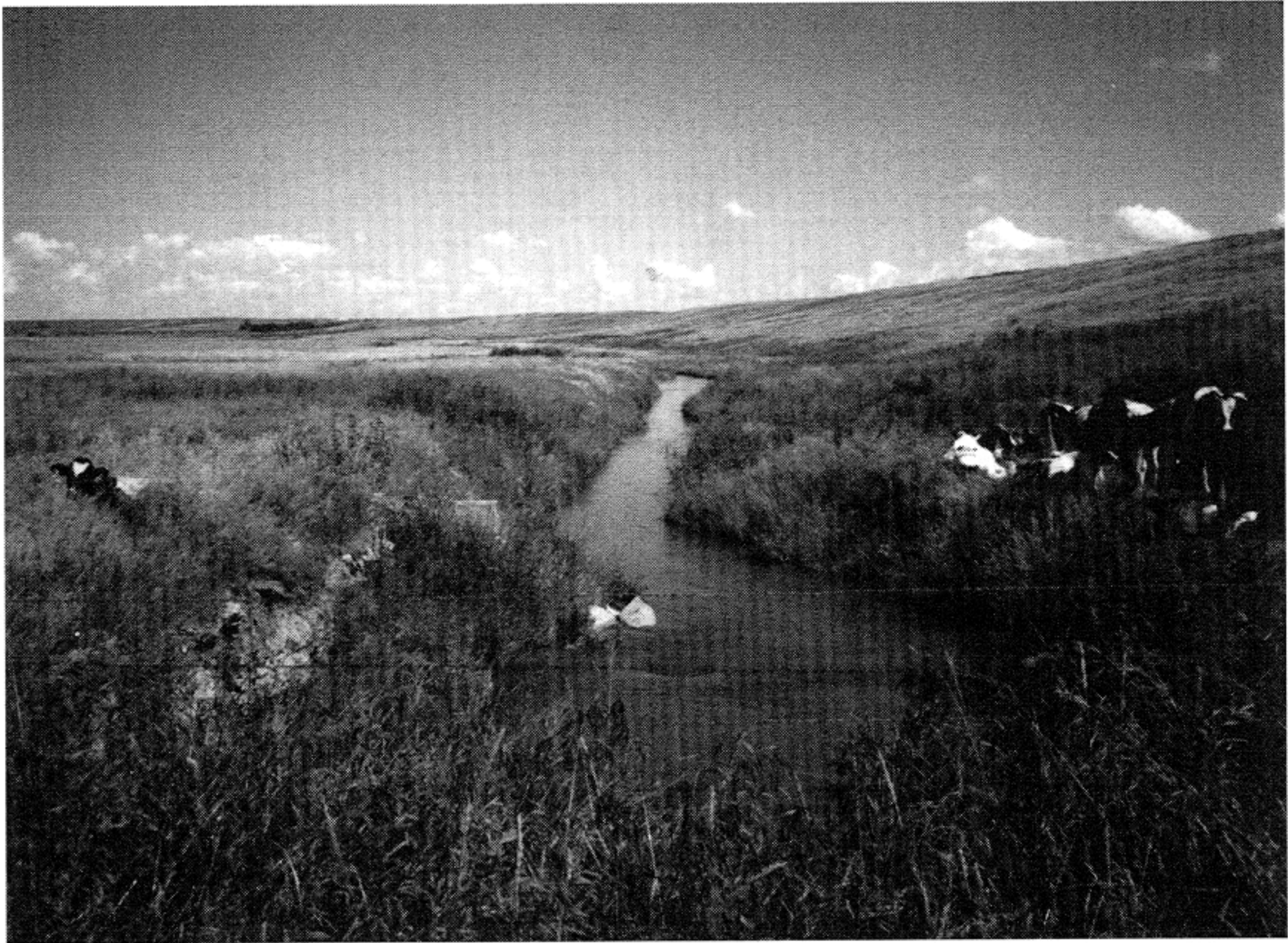
"Homesteads available in Canada," read a tract which fell into Richard's hand one day. All the way home, the idea reverberated insistently in his mind. "Millie," he announced as he scraped his boots at the kitchen door, "we're going to Canada!"

They waited until Margaret Lucile was born, the baby who would become my mother. She was not yet two months old when, in early April 1900, Millie packed her children, two suitcases, and a huge food hamper and boarded the train for the unknown north. Richard, with the farm machinery, household goods, Millie's pump organ, the cattle, and Mormon Hort to help out, had left two days earlier.

For Richard, Canada was not so mysterious and fearful as it was for Millie. Not only had his father been born and reared in Ontario, but also while returning from his mission, Richard had visited his relatives there. But for Millie, with one babe in arms and four more children, the prospects not only of the journey, but of the arrival must have been terrifying. If indeed she had permitted herself to admit fear.

They arrived at the remote Stirling station in a blizzard (another account says a heavy rainstorm, but either is possible in Alberta in April), and while Millie and the children bedded down in the station house, Richard and Mormon herded cattle all night lest the animals stray in the storm.

Morning light revealed the Alberta prairie in its fearful glory—a full circle of unbroken horizon. Three hundred and sixty degrees of flat grassland. For Richard these were elysian fields—all that grass and nothing to do but feed his cattle. Even without cattle to feed or fields to plow, I share my grandfather's love of the prairies; they expand the vision, stretch the mind, make real the possibility of eternity.

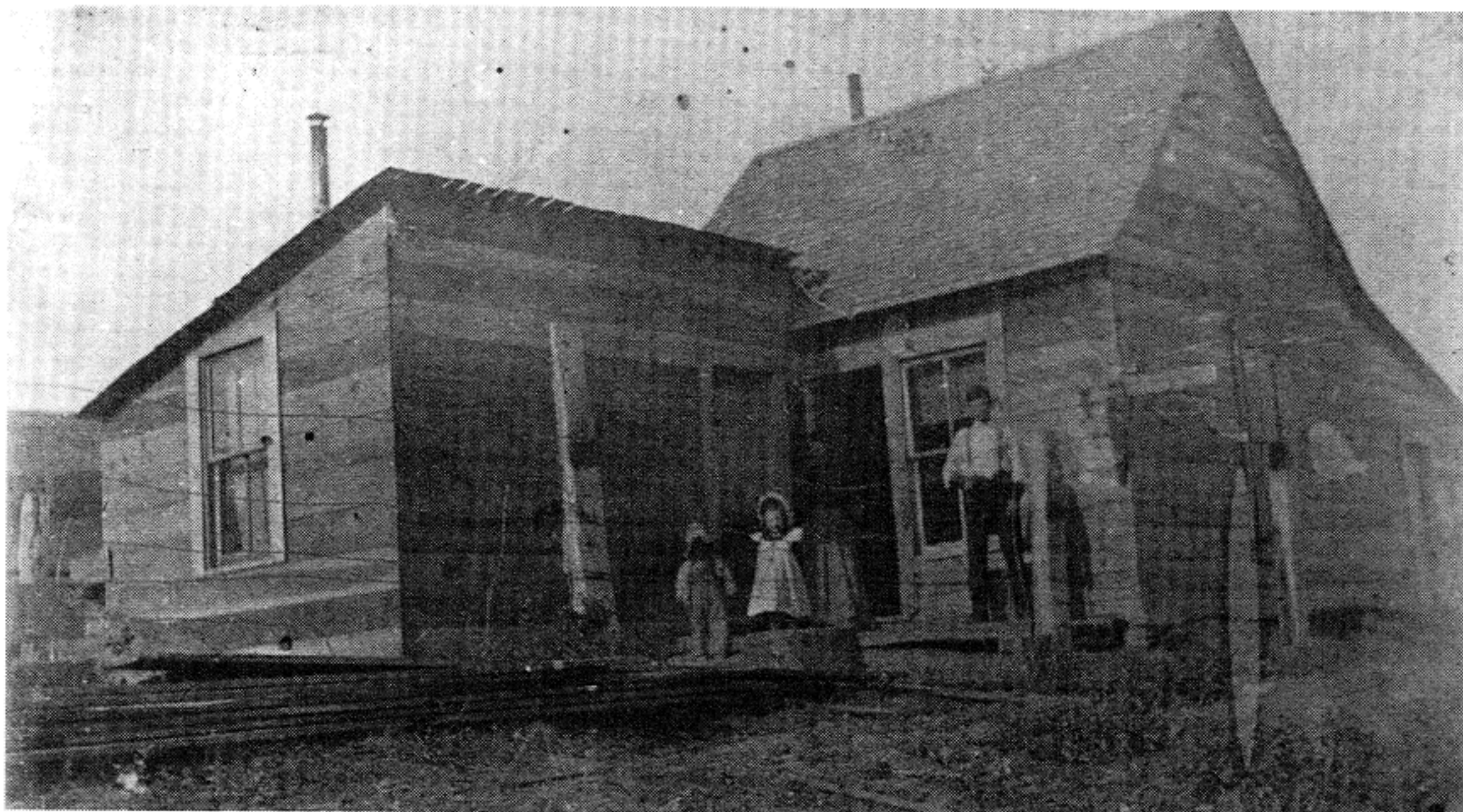


Etzicom Coulee, Alberta. Facing east, July 1995. The rise to the right was the site of the first Harvey home in Canada. Photo by Theron R. Nalder.

But I know, too, the terrifying aloneness of walking a prairie road on a midwinter night under a full moon. I never sing the old song “The Hills of Home” without a twinge of sympathy for Millie, who, however beautiful she might have thought her prairie home, always longed to return to her mountain-bordered valley. Millie would never complain, of course, other than to admit wistfully that “if Richard were to choose to return to Utah, I should be happy to accompany him.”

Richard took up land seven miles south of Stirling. A section on the Etzicom Coulee was perfect—a depression in the prairie that filled each spring with runoff water and, up the hill south, flat fields as far as the eye could see.

Lucile grew up knowing only the prairie. In her sunbonnets—always bright red ones so her mother could track her in the tall grass—she waded in the coulee stream, slid squealing down the hay stacked in the barn, played hide-and-seek in the ruts of the Fort Benton Trail that ran behind the house. At night she and the other children leaned over the open stairwell from the loft to listen to



First Harvey home. On the rise above the Etzicom Coulee, about 1905. *Left to right:* Robert, Lucile, Elma, and John Harvey, children of Richard and Millie Harvey. The room on the right was constructed from railroad ties initially filled with bugs. The built-on room to the left, made from good lumber, was for the first schoolteacher, Mr. Fitch.



Feeding motherless lambs. On the Harvey homestead, about 1908. *Left to right:* Elma, Robert, and Lucile Harvey. Because of Millie's poor health, Elma cared for the household in her stead. Once when Lucile tired of feeding lambs, this circumstance led to her proposal "Let their Elma's feed them."



Baptizing in Etzicom Coulee. Looking southwest toward the second Harvey home, about 1910. By then, Richard Harvey had built a head gate to control and retain the coulee water. There had been no head gate when Lucile was baptized in “just a puddle of water left from the winter.”



Harvey family. *Seated left to right:* Mildred “Millie” Cluff Harvey, Ralph, Richard Coope Harvey, Robert, and Lucile. *Standing:* Foster, Mildred, John, and Elma. 1910.

the grown-ups talking and singing. Growing older, she roamed the rolling prairie on her pony, Buie Anajohn, or went with Foster and Mildred and handsome Ersal Smith to the dances in Stirling.

Unlike the Mormon settlements further west, the coulee was home to so few Latter-day Saints that Sunday School was held in my grandparents' or the Keslers' home until the little schoolhouse was built the year Lucile turned six. The schoolmaster, Mr. Fitch, a Gentile from Ontario, boarded with the Harveys in a lean-to room of the first house and often on snowy mornings carried Lucile, his favorite, the half mile to school.

A diary Lucile kept from her tenth birthday on reveals no distinction in the young girl's mind between LDS and gentile settlers on the coulee—the parties celebrating Christmas or Valentine's Day included everyone, even the four bachelor farmers further along the coulee. The Mormon families were just a part of the mix of coulee society.

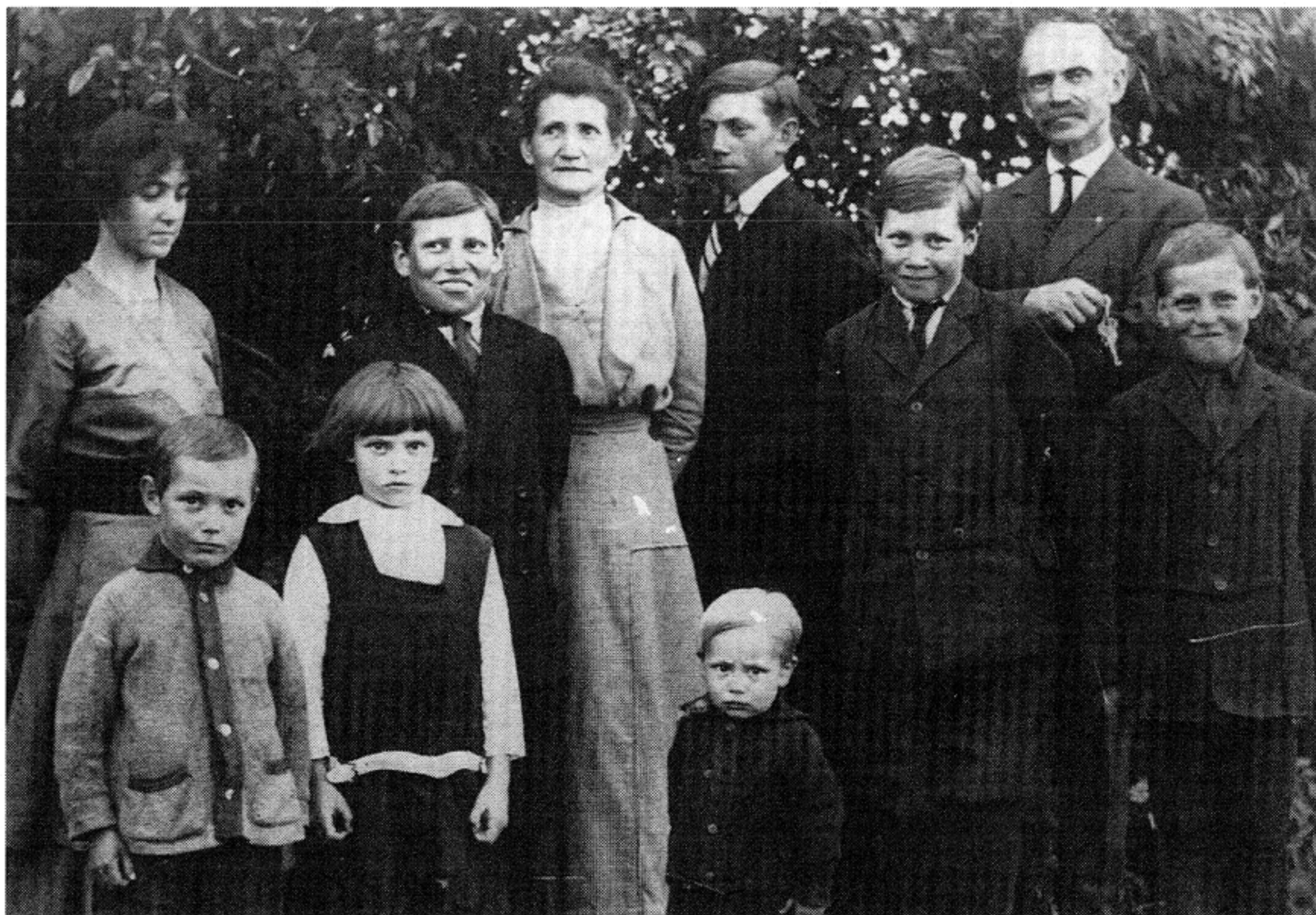
When in her thirteenth year Lucile was sent into Lethbridge to attend high school, therefore, she was unprepared for the harshness of the anti-Mormon bias of that gentile city. Bright and literate



Lucile Harvey Ursenbach. Holding daughter Maureen, 1935, Calgary, Alberta.

though she was, she found herself ill equipped to compete with the city students; worse, she was the only Mormon in her school, and her religion branded her pariah there. Only later in the year, when a Mennonite girl from Grassy Lake moved in, did she have a friend. Lucile never completed high school but went instead to Garbutt Business College and then to work.

But you would never have sensed in her a lack of formal education. From her schoolteacher mother, Lucile had learned early the value of lifelong education, the importance



Ursenbach family. About 1915, a few years after they moved to Raymond, Alberta. *Left to right:* Winona, Grant, Ruth, Dean, Hannah Turner Harvey, Mark, Octave Willis, Charles, Octave Frederick Harvey, and Roy. Missing are Joseph, who remained in Utah, and Grace and Jocile, who are not yet born (Grace will later die in childhood).

of music, the necessity of beauty. I'm not sure her brothers ever got that message, but she and her sister Mildred will always represent to me the highest ideals of never-ending learning, of gracious living.

Ten years after Richard and Millie moved to Canada, my paternal grandparents came as well. Hannah and Octave Ursenbach were part of a third wave of Mormon immigrants to southern Alberta, arriving in a quite-settled Raymond in 1910. Octave had been sent as teacher in the Church-sponsored Knight Academy. My father, sixth of their eleven children, learned the lessons of self-reliance as a youth. After typhoid fever ended his attempt to earn a degree at the University of Utah (in contrast, two of my mother's siblings attended the agricultural college in Guelph, Ontario), my father returned to Alberta, courted my mother, and won her hand.

Sensing widening opportunity, the young Ursenbachs (after Dad had left his young wife while he served a mission, as had my Grandfather Harvey) moved to the Big City. Calgary had then only a

hundred-odd Latter-day Saints but all the more warmth of camaraderie for the paucity of membership. An amalgam of British and northern European immigrants, Canadian converts, and southern Alberta Mormons, the ward grew, built its chapel on Crescent Road. Its growth kept pace with the city's expansion: then, as now, a sparse 1 percent of Calgary's population was LDS. The difference is that now Calgary has half a million inhabitants and six LDS stakes.

The fourth and last of Charles and Lucile's children, I grew up with the Church in Calgary. Like my mother, I was often the only Mormon in my school; unlike her, I don't recall its being an educational disadvantage. Like my daughter, born into white-middle-class Mormon Salt Lake City, I seemed to thrive on being different. Being among Gentiles amplified my Mormonness; being surrounded by Mormons sent my daughter off the Wasatch Front to discover her religious roots.

I grew up not only aware of my Mormon identity, but also having a strong affinity for things American. I sang "God Bless America" while my parents waited impatiently for the United States to enter World War II; I prided myself on the faddish bobby sox my aunt Mildred sent from Utah; and for some unaccountable reason, I never spoke with a "Canajan" accent. ("Eh?" is such a useful shibboleth—I envy those who use it with just the right inflection—it can't be faked!)

Then my north-south axis shifted. Looking eastward, I learned more about Canada beyond the prairie horizon. Living and working in Montreal, I became ever more fond of Canada's polyglot diversity. I understood with greater compassion the complaints of the Québécois: that I could live four years in a city predominantly French-speaking and never have need to speak French makes clear the linguistic tyranny which gave rise to Quebec's overcompensation against English. My Canada is *all* of Canada—had I been there last October, I'd have marched in Montreal in favor of the referendum's² "Non!" side.

Like my daughter, I had to move away for my roots to assert their draw on me, for my grafted-on branches to attain full flower. I have attended universities in both western and eastern Canada and in the United States; I have lived and worked in North America and Europe; I filled a mission in my paternal Switzerland and

visited my maternal origins in Scotland. But always with a maple leaf pin in my coat lapel.

So what does this say about being Mormon in Canada or Canadian in Mormon country? That it's a mixed bag. That the experience is as varied as are we border crossers. That one can harbor more than one intra-national or inter-national loyalty in the same breast, usually without conflict. That like the original Mormon settlers at Lee's Creek,³ one can observe one huge celebration lasting from Canada's July First through the Glorious Fourth.

Heir both to my British Canadian heritage of peace, order, and good government and to my American cause of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, I sense a widened vocabulary of life expressions. I find justification for both evolution and revolution; I am tolerant of some imperialism, knowing it to be a passing phase, and of some violent uprising, realizing that sometimes tyranny demands rebellion. I am equally proud of America's economic largess to evolving countries and of Canada's peace-keeper roles in embattled regions.

The dual national loyalty with which I grew up has created in me a still developing expansiveness. I am sister not only to the inhabitants of one country with two official languages and a dozen ethnic groups and to a continent of three national entities in perpetual détente, but also sibling to people of a world of countless countries. Knowing that I feel connectedness on both sides of one border makes all borders meaningless. The world is my native land; its people of all colors, background, and origin, my brothers and sisters. As my mother used to remind us, I am by descent English, Irish, Scots, Welsh, French, Norman, Saxon, Norse—whatever. When I am in Switzerland, I am Swiss; in London, I am British. I wonder what I will become when I fulfill my dream of living in India.

National and ethnic identity fades in the global awareness born of dual citizenship. Into the space created by a lessening chauvinism comes the other aspect of my identity. I am a Latter-day Saint. I am a daughter of eternal parents, sister to all humankind. I have been taught, have learned, that we are not "one nation under God" or two or twenty. We are a global family. My sisters in Bosnia Herzegovina are experiencing war's aftermath; my brothers in Zaire have overcome the Ebola virus, only to see it spring up in another

village; until last month my feuding siblings in the Middle East were coming closer to sharing their heritage from Father Abraham; and my English-Irish cousins, recently so close to peace, have broken faith again. And I alternately rejoice and weep with them all.

My faith transcends national boundaries, forbids my making of some nations friend, of others enemy. “For there is neither East nor West,” my mother used to recite, “nor border, breed, nor birth.” NAFTA⁴ makes sense to me only as a first step toward global free trade; voting for president or prime minister only makes me wish to have my small say in a world government, a really united United Nations. I can stand and sing “God Save the Queen,” or I can sit and sing “My Country, ’Tis of Thee.” But the lines that catch my breath and resonate through my being remain “Our fathers’ God, to thee, / Author of liberty, / To thee we sing.” Only when the love of God is felt in truth and freedom by “every nation, kindred, tongue, and people” will I feel our work is done.

Knowing all this, I can still joke—I am “as Canadian as possible, under the circumstances”; but my heart beats in a much wider world, and I claim as my nation the whole of humankind, under God, father of us all.

Maureen Ursenbach Beecher is Professor of English and associate at the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History at Brigham Young University. All the photographs are from the collection of Charles and Lucile Ursenbach, now in possession of the author.

NOTES

¹The winning entry was by E. Heather Scott, according to Shelly Ambrose of the *Morningside* staff, telephone interview with the author, October 9, 1996. In 1994 controversy over credit for the quip became so insistent that the *Toronto Globe and Mail* carried letters to the editor on the subject.

²The 1995 referendum gave Quebecers the opportunity to decide whether their province should separate from the rest of Canada. The “No” side won by a margin of less than 1 percent.

³Lee’s Creek, founded in 1887, was the original name of present-day Cardston and was the first Mormon settlement in Alberta.

⁴North American Free Trade Agreement, passed by both the American Congress and Canadian Parliament in 1993.