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The Trial of Don Pedro León Luján: The Attack against Indian Slavery and Mexican Traders in Utah Sondra Jones

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Sondra Jones. *The Trial of Don Pedro León Luján: The Attack against Indian Slavery and Mexican Traders in Utah.*

Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000.

Reviewed by Jacqueline S. Thursby

In *The Trial of Don Pedro León Luján: The Attack against Indian Slavery and Mexican Traders in Utah*, Sondra Jones has written an excellent and accessible discussion of a little-known episode in the history of nineteenth-century Utah. In the first chapter, Jones makes it clear that the arrest, trial, and expulsion from Utah of Don Pedro León Luján, a New Mexican trader, has often been distorted or even glossed over in Utah histories; she then describes the event using as evidence extant primary records.

Jones contextualizes the story of slave trading in early Utah and supports it with substantial references and informative notes. The Utah Territory into which the Saints settled after being forced to flee from the Midwest was seasoned with tribal customs and traditional trading practices between Native Americans and traders. In particular, the Utes often traded Indian children—children from other tribes and even their own children—for goods and firearms. These children, then, were essentially slaves. Despite moral conflicts, the Saints became part of this slave trade: “The Mormons’ initial reluctance to purchase Indian captives posed no real problem for the Indian slavers. To make a sale [the Utes] needed only to threaten to sell [the children] to Mexican slavers or Navajos (another active market for domestics and herders) or to kill [the children]” (49).¹

Still, as Jones explains, “the Mormons from the beginning regarded the slave trade as not only morally reprehensible but politically untenable as well”:

First, the Mormons found themselves in the center of the traditional Mexican/Indian slave route and saw only the uglier aspects of the operation: the cruelty of Indian slavers toward their merchandise. Almost as bad, the fate of these slaves was to be purchased by Mexicans, who, in the

eyes of the Mormons, with their nineteenth-century prejudice, were little better than the Indians themselves. (41)

In 1851, León Luján inadvertently wandered into this cultural milieu and into territory where he was not licensed to conduct business. He engaged in trading for Indian children and was arrested and brought to trial for being a slave trader. Upon his conviction, he was summarily stripped of all his properties (including his horse and supplies) and sent back to New Mexico, three hundred miles away, on foot (3–4, 89).

Jones suggests that the Mormon officials of the 1850s had an ulterior political motive concerning this case: to stop all Mexican traders from trading in Indian children. Apparently, there were also racist motives: “The prosecuting attorney also seems to have been personally prejudiced against the Mexicans” (87). It is clear that Church leaders abhorred slave trading of any kind, even though technically at that time slavery was still legal in Utah Territory. Other issues are less clear. For example, were the Utah leaders hypocritical in their charges against León Luján? Jones argues that León Luján and his traders were punished for doing the same things that the Mormons had been doing for some time without penalty.

However, the Latter-day Saints bought children for different reasons than the traders did. Mormons traded for Indian children to save them from a worse fate (enslavement by others or even death) and ostensibly to adopt them as family members and to socialize them as Latter-day Saints; New Mexican traders traded for Indian children, ostensibly to sell them as servants and ranch workers and to eventually socialize them as Roman Catholics. However, Jones demonstrates that in New Mexico the children were usually given their freedom when they became adults, at the time of their marriage (92).² And however noble the Mormons’ motives were, whether or not the Indian children raised in Mormon families were really better off than those sold as servants may be debatable. For example, one adopted Indian girl “stated on her deathbed that ‘it had been a mistake for her ever to suppose that she could be a white girl. Indian children, she said, should be left with their own people where they could be happy; when they were raised in white homes they did not belong anywhere’”³ (103).

Jones concludes that typical historical accounts of the trial of León Luján omit important cultural and contextual elements, such as the elements of racism and coercion. In the incident for which he was arrested, at least, León Luján refused to trade with the Utes for their captives. In retaliation, the Utes stole several of the traders’ horses, leaving the traders without the means to return home. Some have suggested that the traders then “were forced to take the children in lieu of the horses” (69).

Jones's discussion of the trial is well documented, and she closes her account by showing the historical significance of this trial: "The Indian slave trade ended with the influx of Americans into the Spanish borderlands. Its demise was heralded by the politically necessary trial of Pedro León Luján" (119).

The Trial of Don Pedro León Luján, presented attractively by the University of Utah Press, makes a lasting contribution by clarifying an important but little-explained event in Utah history. Further, it relates an insightful account of mid-1800s litigation regarding slave trade in Utah and New Mexico as well as of social conditions among both Native Americans and early Mormon settlers. León Luján may have been a victim of circumstance, but it is unlikely that his trial could have been resolved in any other way. The Mormon leadership was ready to put an end to the practice of coercive sales of children that had gone on for decades.

Jones has performed an admirable work of scholarship on this topic, and it is balanced as far as possible, given the resources Jones was able to access. The story is well told and should be included in any thorough historical scholarship of nineteenth-century Utah.

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1. For more information see L. R. Bailey, *Indian Slave Trade in the Southwest* (Los Angeles: Westernlore, 1966), xv-xvi.

2. Sondra Jones, telephone conversation with the author, June 25, 2003.

3. Juanita Brooks, "Indian Relations on the Mormon Frontier," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 12 (January-April): 37-38.