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Making Space on the Western Frontier: Mormons, Miners, and Southern Paiutes

W. Paul Reeve

Jay H. Buckley

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W. Paul Reeve. *Making Space on the Western Frontier: Mormons, Miners, and Southern Paiutes.*

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006

Reviewed by Jay H. Buckley

University of Utah historian W. Paul Reeve has written an intriguing and engaging monograph examining the dynamic interchange between Mormons, miners, and Southern Paiutes along the Great Basin's southern rim. Broadly covering the last four decades of the nineteenth century, Reeves focuses his lens most closely on southwestern Utah and southeastern Nevada during the turbulent 1860s and 1870s, when the clash of cultures reached its zenith.

Paiutes, Mormons, and miners possessed quite different worldviews relating to their notions about identity. The "complicated and messy" story that unfolds tackles the economic, cultural, political, and religious clashes that intertwine (and entangle) these three groups' perspectives (3). A cursory list of the historical actors includes a carpetbag governor, anti-Mormon military officers, corrupt Indian agents, jury members passing contested decisions, murderous scoundrels, and even lynch mobs. Notable Mormons and Southern Paiutes include Brigham Young, Erastus Snow, Bush-head, Tut-se-gav-its, Taú-gu (Coal Creek John), and Moroni. James Ashley, Patrick Conner, Thomas Sale, and George Hearst round out the cast of politicians, military personnel, Indian agents, and mining investors.

The first act opens with the murder of George Rogers, a Kentucky miner killed in 1866. Fifteen armed miners suspect Mormon treachery and set off to exact vengeance. As the drama unfolds, a Paiute named Okus admits committing the murder and implicates three of his friends. By night's end, all four have paid the price for Okus's actions. Reeve uses the event to demonstrate that as their worlds collided, Mormons, Paiutes, and miners sought to shape their "own world in meaningful ways" while defining and defending their power, place, and space (4).

Reeve develops this theme by seeking to understand each group's physical and spiritual struggle over land and resources. While the three groups were contending against one another on location, the matter was

being decided thousands of miles away by eastern politicians, who entitled mining interests over Mormon concerns or Indian rights. During the Radical Reconstruction period of the post-Civil War era, politicians busy reconstructing the South also focused considerable attention on reshaping the West. They championed legislative measures to eradicate polygamy and bring the “Mormon Question” to an end. Concurrently, they sought to annihilate or assimilate tribal peoples in order to remedy the “Indian Problem.” To make matters worse, crooked governors, Indian agents, lawyers, and local officials allowed personal greed and corruption to triumph over civic service and the public good. As a result, the 1860s represented the expansion of Nevada at the expense of Paiute and Mormon lands, resources, and influence.

Reeve uses Pioche, Nevada, as an illustrative case study of the complexity. In 1864, a silver mine opened, but Southern Paiutes defended their ancestral lands and mineral resources and drove the miners away. Five years later, San Francisco financier François Louis Alfred Pioche purchased the site and poured in investments, such that the town rose in influence to rival the Comstock Lode in silver mining importance. The town attracted all kinds of people—good and bad—and had more than its fair share of saloons and brothels. It was a violent place, and many staked their final claim in Boot Hill.

Many Americans during the Gilded Age felt mining represented American industry, individualism, risk taking, and progress. Certainly the acquisition of wealth was more palpable to them than Mormon communal farming, the practice of polygamy, or Paiute subsistence. Preference turned to prejudice as men like Patrick Conner, who disliked Mormons and Indians, used mining to attract outsiders to the region in order to diminish the power and influence of both groups. Federal Indian agents such as Reuben Fenton and Thomas Sale commingled civic and personal interests in favor of pursuing personal profit.

Congress, too, supported increasing Nevada Territory in 1861 and 1862 at the expense of the Mormon Zion and Paiute homelands. After Nevada joined the Union in 1864, Governor Henry Goode Blasdel encouraged politicians like James Ashley, chairman of the U.S. House Committee on Territories and a member of the Mining Committee, to expand Nevada’s borders further eastward in order to make sure all the silver mining operations and towns such as Pioche fell within Nevada’s borders. Reeve does a masterful job showing how Nevadans exaggerated the mineral wealth of the region and Congress acted without the consent of the residents living in the contested space. Politicians categorically chose to dismiss Mormon complaints and ignore Paiute claims in order to expand Nevada’s border

in 1866 and 1867. By 1869, Ashley even tried to draw Utah out of existence, a measure that ultimately failed. His motives for doing so likely resulted from his quest for wealth and power after he lost his reelection campaign, although some claimed it was his disappointment with Mormons for failing to provide him with appropriate “female companionship” while he was visiting Utah Territory (59).

Arizona Territory, too, lost its northwest corner in order for Nevada miners to gain access to the Colorado River. These boundary shifts favored Nevada’s state interest over those of the two territories, and mining enterprises over subsistence and communal farming. Miners tended to be racist toward Paiutes and prejudiced toward Mormons but remained somewhat dependent upon Paiute labor and Mormon foodstuffs for survival. Paiutes resented the Mormon presence but, for various reasons, some were baptized. Mormons found the mining towns a bit uncouth, yet they went there anyway to trade food for currency. Reeve paints a vivid scene of three disparate groups chasing their own American dreams in a seemingly barren corner of the West.

Paiutes adapted to the changes by repeatedly refusing to remove from their lands to join their traditional enemies—the Utes—on their reservation in the Uintah Basin. The Southern Paiutes defended their lands and stayed upon them. Some joined with the Utes in raiding towns, stealing stock, and killing during the Black Hawk War. Others found ways to survive as wage laborers for miners and Mormons. Paiute leaders played Mormons and miners off one another when they could. Leaders like Bushhead favored antagonism while Moroni chose the path of friendship and conciliation. The author asserts that the Paiutes successfully withstood the overwhelming forces surrounding them by retaining portions of their traditional lands in reservations like Shivwits, Moapa, and later ones created between 1891 and 1929. Nevertheless, just as the territories of Utah and Arizona lost ground to Nevada, the Moapa River Indian Reservation also faced significant reductions that were added to the Silver State (56–57).

Mormons, too, accommodated the changes. Unable or unwilling to pay Nevada’s taxes in hard currency, Mormons abandoned many of their Nevada settlements at Clover Valley, Eagle Valley, and Spring Valley and retreated to build up strength in other locales. Mormon leaders preached maintaining independence from the gentile world by avoiding individualistic mining and attempting to keep contact between the communities to a minimum. After Brigham Young’s death in 1877, Mormon-miner interactions increased and became relatively commonplace. Over time, resolving conflicts allowed all three groups to form temporally symbiotic relationships while maintaining spiritual separateness.

Reeve has mined the manuscripts, newspapers, government documents, and secondary literature well, sorting through a lot of overburden to pursue the vein of richest color. While the maps are adequate, several of them lack sufficient detail to really see the communities that were founded or abandoned because of the realignments. Moreover, the three group identities often come across as monolithic constructs between “spiritual” and “worldly” without adequate exploration of their ethnic makeup or their regional and nationalistic diversity. Nevertheless, Reeve has provided a thoughtful approach to examining how several frontier communities and peoples in the southern Great Basin responded to internal and external pressures during the Gilded Age.

Jay H. Buckley (jay_buckley@byu.edu) is Associate Professor of History at Brigham Young University. He received his PhD from Nebraska University. His interests include nineteenth-century western and American Indian history, and his publications include *William Clark: Indian Diplomat* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008).