JOHN STILLMAN WOODBURY AND THE BATTLE AGAINST IGNORANCE, SUPERSTITION AND PREJUDICE IN HAWAII, 1851-1878

By Lance D. Chase

In the tiny town of Curtis in the "Bible Belt" of southeast Texas two LDS missionaries labored in the summer of 1868. The total number of Mormons in the town was zero, in Jasper County, one family the number of LDS meeting houses, none. The two young elders had been the first ever stationed in the county. They were restricted to the white population of their area, around half the total of 6,000. Word of their presence spread, so did opposition and they became discouraged as the number of doors opened to them grew increasingly fewer. It was at this time that a crisis occurred, probably not a crisis anyone except the senior companion would have noticed but one which he would always remember with some shrinking.

As the new senior and his junior partner trudged through the tiny settlement one of the residents explained that only a few houses beyond his was one in which a real tragedy had occurred. A young man had been badly injured in a car wreck, never regaining consciousness and for many months had lain helplessly in bed, now at home, with little hope that he would ever awaken again. Certainly, the neighbor suggested, men of God, even these Mormon boys, would wish to pay a visit to such a home where God's miracles were so sorely needed. The senior, a member of the Church for barely eighteen months, was immediately troubled. Some of the questions arising in his mind were:

These people may have never before seen Mormons. It is therefore imperative we make a favorable impression. What if we knock on the door and are admitted? Will I be equal to the situation which might develop then? What if we are asked if we might call on the family? What if the family said they were very suspicious? What if we do not choose to heal him? What will the residents of Curtis say as the word circulates that while these young men were only was their theology strange, but their methods ineffective as well? Why, they aren't even as effective as the Baptists and Methodists before them?

The discussion which must have occurred between the two elders had been forgotten but the decision to bypass the house of the com-stricken man even to this day bothers the senior companion whose responsibility the decision was.

When one reads the journals of John Stillman Woodbury he is struck by the parallel between missionary life a hundred years ago in Hawaii, and Texas, or anywhere, in our own time. Woodbury's journal accounts frequently mention the missionaries administering to the sick, undoubtedly those elders recognizing that although the administration may not constitute a personal crisis, observers of these administrations might measure the credibility of this new faith by the presence or absence of miraculous results. The LDS Church was a fledgling religion in Hawaii and the absence of a visible and permanent Mormon clergy, its own media, churches or temples, a religious tradition, plus the unfavorable publicity the Saints always attracted, each of these facts is common to both southeast Texas in 1858 and Hawaii during the time of Woodbury's three missions there. In each instance the elders were involved in a battle against ignorance, prejudices, and superstition. Both their own and the following pages describe some of that conflict as found in Woodbury's over 750 page journal.

For many "gentiles" the most visible evidence that these relative newcomers to the religious scene in Hawaii had any real power was in their ministering to the sick. The absence of many of the "trappings" of Christianity put the Mormons at a disadvantage. Even the numerous converts the Mormons garnered were less impressive than the sick made whole since many of these newly baptized were easily reconverted to their old faith, or a new one! As Woodbury noted:

If the children can be taken away from the superstitions of the people which run very high I think they will be a people of faith, indeed; many of the Saints here have faith now and many have been healed by faith under the administration of the elders. (Epistles)

Woodbury himself had been first attracted to the Church by the healing of his mother in 1841 in New Salem, Franklin County, Massachusetts when he was only sixteen. His journal states that his mother suffered from ulcerated lungs and had been given up to die by the most skillful physicians in the country. In July of 1841 a Mormon elder healed her and she was baptized a short while later. By September, John and five other Woodbury family members had been converted. Some time after the family had sold their land and by spring the remaining three children were LDS. In May the family set out for Nauvoo to join the Saints, arriving in July. All this had occurred in part because when John's mother was healed she had been ill for seven years, unable even to turn herself in bed. Following her blessing, she dressed herself, did the chores the following day, and the next day made cheese. The impact of such a miracle on the family was certain to be profound. Journals of the last century are filled with accounts of sickness in the most settled of communities; these were pre-eminently made. Woodbury's journal is different and he appears to have struggled all his life with poor health. On his trip across the desert to his first Hawaiian mission in spring of 1851 he received a blessing for health at the time he was twenty-six and weighed 181 pounds. Despite the blessing he was physically unable to take his turns standing guard at night. He may have inherited his mother's propensity to lung problems for he was throughout his missions continually plagued by colds, coughs, dental problems, and even palpitations, flutterings of the heart, and sinking sensations. He wore glasses and dentures and on his third mission to Hawaii may have suffered a slight stroke. Moreover, and this is a further measure of his
commitment, he was invariably seasick as he made the frequent trips between islands, to say nothing of the weeks of illness and discomfort he suffered during the trips to and from the mainland. He is administered to with regularity. By his third mission in the winter of 1877, his second wife Alice Parratt Woodbury was nearly blind and the mother of five. It may have been wishful thinking on her part when she told John he would not be called, though he had dreamed he would. Alice was frightened since she had had a serious headache earlier in the year and wished to pray him to death. In the first place engage a Kahuna who understands the operation (if he does not understand it himself) and acts as a witness. A promise to obtain a piece of his enemy's clothing and spittle, etc. The Kahuna takes them and goes through certain ordinances and prayers and if the person hears him he will pray him to death. For the other save his life. (220)

The brethren tell Kaluaikai to throw off his old ways and beliefs. Two days later they call on him again and find the native doctor present. Once more they counsel and once more Kaluaikai refused to be administered to by the priesthood. The following day Brother Kaluaikai is moved some two miles to the Kahunas, to spare him. The journal entry for Monday, April 29, 1894 reads:

\[ \text{Just as night the body of Brother Kaluaikai was brought home from the Kahunas a corpse amidst the wailing of the people and the regretting of his family and friends, that they had not called upon the elders to assist and administer to him, according to the order of the Church instead of calling upon their old fashioned Kahunas out of the Church to temper with him.} \]

On Tuesday Elder Woodbury preached Brother Kaluaikai's funeral sermon.

During Woodbury's third mission while on Hawaii during August of 1877, he stopped at Nicole where, he says, "a sister had lately been quite singular." About an hour or more after her death she had borne a daughter and appeared to be doing well. Suddenly, a strange influence came over her, she called her friends who were going to die, kissed them, and went to death. The same evening the child's husband was seized with a power that drew up his hands in a stiff posture so he could not move for a time. Woodbury told the woman who had been living with a native who had been dispossessed at her leaving him and had performed some ancient custom of witchcraft, saying if he could not have the woman the Chinsaian should not. The day's journal entry concludes by noting he traveled on the following day and heard of the birth of a nine pound son, mother and son doing well. He prayed to his Heavenly Father in Jesus' name that His blessings might continue with them. (227)

The Latter-day Saints were not the only victims of superstition and ignorance. In 1854 near Kaimanu on Oahu, Woodbury recorded a frightening local superstition. Brother and Sister Daniel had been quarreling when the elder visited and counseled them. They reconciled their differences and Sister
Danilo told Woodbury that as she was sleeping alone the other night some one tried to strangle her. She sprang up, raised the alarm, and the man fled. She and the natives asserted that the man wanted, after killing her, to bury her under the pulpit of the new meeting house being constructed. Woodbury wrote:

It is a fixed tradition among many of this people that whenever the Calvinists build a meeting house they always secretly kill a person and bury him in the place where they build the pulpit and they are afraid to be out nights or to go into the meeting house alone in the night.

The day's entry concludes: "the night was beautiful and clear moonlight."[271]

Last the foregoing appear too critical in a parochial sense, it is well to compare such accounts with one nine months previous included in a letter from Elder Tanner in California. He stated "spirit rappings are still increasing and gaining influence among the people in California and throughout the world. Some who used to be Saints were getting carried away with it."[192]

One other bit of what reads like superstition though it may be fact, pertains to an area of Dahu four miles from Waianae called Haliu keo or bloody holes. The story told in the Woodbury journal is that the area was used to be inhabited by robbers who murdered passersby and took their property. What is more, these bloodthirsty but practical robbers also took the arm and thigh bones of their victims, preserving these for fishhooks. The main cavern's mouth was about 150 yards from the sea and ran underground so that after the robbers had plundered the bodies they cast the remains into the foaming sea.[249] No indication is given when in Hawaii's history such murders may have occurred.

The attitude of the Calvinists toward the hula is well documented and thus it is interesting to compare the view of the Mormons. In August of 1854, Elders Green, Allred, Killeheu and Keeler attended a hula about three miles from Honolulu, toward Ewa. Brother Reddin Allred proposed they go since it was "remarked as a grand exhibition." Killeheu said the hula "was a wicked practice, that it led to illicit intercourse with the opposite sex." The Hawaiian added:

It might properly be said it was reduced to a science and was extensively taught a few years ago but it partook so much of the vulgar that it was finally prohibited by law and is only allowed to be practiced at this one place for the benefit of the king and nobles.[220]

Woodbury's journal continues:

We went in and must say that my expectations were fully realized. I had seen the dance once on the island of Hawaii but it was a little different from this. They used no drums this time. At this place, two men sat on one of the houses each having a drum made of the trunk of a coconut (sic) tree. One end was hollowed out and a piece of rawhide drawn over it. They strapped with the left hand. Each had a small drum made of the shell of a coconut and they used a piece of rope instead of a stick. They would beat their drums and sing their song, a kind of hum song suited to the occasion. In front of them was three girls about the age of fifteen; their dresses extended a little below the knees. Their legs and feet were bare, and in the calf of each leg was a wreath of banana leaves, and a 'lapa bound loosely around their waist and extending down to the knees. Their steps were very regular and gentle, their hands were continually in motion, and each made the same gestures with the greatest exactness; every muscle and part of the whole body was in motion and nothing unbecoming or immodest could be detected except the motion of the hips which I will not attempt to describe in my book. The whole affair was managed with the greatest civility possible.[289]

Nine months later, in May of 1855, at Kaliki, Woodbury recorded he saw a girl dance the king's private and favorite dance. "It was a noble thing and somber on the ridiculous for all the motions and twists that you ever saw."[135] The novelty attracted other elders and four days after this entry, Elders Woodbury and Johnson, the latter for the first time, saw a hula again in Kaliki. The May 31, 1855 entry reads, in part:

We found it quite a novel performance and every motion was made with that exactness with the time of the drum and singing which made it quite interesting and their motion (although not always modest) are very graceful by their pliableness and limberness in bending and twisting themselves it would almost seem they have not a joint or bone in their whole body or otherwise that they were all joints.[136]

Considering the enormous relaxation in social customs since 1854, the extreme emphasis on social decorum of the last century and the impact of a culture so foreign to that of the American Mormons, Elder Woodbury's questions about the hula's modesty are understandable.

Relative to the origins of the "superstition" reintroduced by a recent change in the Book of Mormon (found in 2 Nephi 13:19, from "white" to "pure") on March 26 of 1854 at a conference in Waialua, Elder George G. Cannon told local officers in the Church that "as sure as the Lord lived their fathers brought the red skin upon them in consequence of the very same priesthood which they now had in their midst, that if they paid attention to it, it will entail them and their curse will be rolled off." Woodbury himself, some days before leaving Hawaii on his last mission, prayed in his journal that the Hawaiians or their seed might become a white and delightful people.[140] If whiteness is the main ingredient of their idea of happiness, someone ought to send them an old BYU-HC record who trap past sacrament service each Sunday on their way to the beach in an attempt to become less fair and more delightful.

While there is sometimes question about the level of commitment of those converted by healing, for the missionaries in Hawaii this was the route taken by many of their converts.
Woodbury's journal for August 3, 1854 told of the elders administering to a sick man. Discovering the people had gathered to see the elders perform the administration, the missionaries asked the group if they wished to hear the elders preach. The answer was affirmative, the sermons delivered, and the meeting concluded by administering to the sick man.(29)

Sometimes the mere request for the elders to come administer appeared to have been a demonstration of sufficient faith that the administration itself was almost superfluous. In September of 1854 Kalaautina, a non-member, summoned Woodbury and his companion. After over a year the afflicted man had been unable to walk and "had pined all away." A woman was also present who had nearly lost the use of her legs and requested baptism. After she was baptized and confirmed near Waialua, apparently, the man stood and walked to the house leaning upon another man. He was then appointed and administered to.(31)

An illustration of the depth of Elder Woodbury's faith in the power of the priesthood to heal is just one of the many spiritual experiences that occurred near Waimanalo on Oahu. On the last day of November, 1854, Woodbury called at the house of an old standby in the Calvinist church who was huddled by sickness. Asked if he was heeding James' counsel to call for the elders when ill, Mau said his church did not teach such things. Woodbury preached to Mau who concluded he, his wife, and daughter should be baptized. A sacrament service followed the baptism about which Woodbury concluded he had never been in a scene where the spirit seemed to fill man and move with joy.(32) Such conversion experiences are common in Woodbury's journal.

One of the Mormon customs which had nothing to do with superstition has been continued down to our own day. Woodbury's arduous for holding meetings was nothing compared to this lesson in practicality. To his credit, he described it with a chuckle. Locals and Utahns alike were excited about the launching of their own vessel, the thirty-six foot sloop Lanai at Puuhea, near Kailua on Oahu Wednesday, August 8, 1853. This home-made boat constructed by Brother Charles Baumann, a German convert, was described as laying better in the water than on shore but in truth, experience showed she laid rather poorly in both elements. Not having yet discovered this fact, but possibly suspecting it, a crowd had gathered to see the launching after which a dinner and then a church meeting were to follow. Woodbury might have been describing the activity after a Mormon dinner in any age when he wrote:

As soon as it was over each one looked out for his piece of meat to take home which when he had secured he lost no time in bending his way towards home, leaving the meeting to take care of itself.(470)

It has been thought that during the turbulent anti-polygamy decades, the 1870s and 1880s in Honolulu, many journals of the first four decades of LDS missionary work in Hawaii have little to say about this subject. It thus might appear plural marriage was seldom if ever openly taught in Hawaii as an LDS Church doctrine. Woodbury's journal illuminates these heretofore shadowy areas demonstrating that the Saints in Hawaii were also subject to condemnation from critics on this matter though as was so often the case on the mainland, the criticism was veiled by either an enlightened or objective study of the practice.

In Utah plural marriage as an LDS Church practice and doctrine was first announced publicly on August 2, 1852 by Orson Pratt, he who had been nearly destroyed by his first association with its secret practice in Nauvoo. Attuned as always to the bizarre, the press soon picked up on the issue. In Hawaii, Church leaders including George Q. Cannon quickly realized the harm which might be done in Hawaii where the LDS Church had a different kind of protective geographic isolation than the Utahns. So by Conference time, April of 1853 in Waialua, Maui Elder Cannon was at work translating the revelation into Hawaiian for immediate explanation to the Saints. Woodbury recorded on April 7, 1853:

We thought it better to explain it to them to prevent the influence of lies and etc., which we knew would be made use of and also newspaper stories, and we felt the best way to counteract the influence of false doctrine, was to declare the truth and explain it fully to them, that there might be no room for mistake or wickedness.(56)

Then follows a significant announcement. George Q. Cannon "... impressed very forcibly upon us the necessity of not meddling with those things that are present were not for these. He then read the revelation and explained it to them."(56) The antecedents of this announcement are not mentioned. Still, even considering the polygamous nature of the Hawaiians until the Protestants came, the decision to keep plural marriage out of Hawaii is not surprising. Clearly, the history of the Mormon Church here would have been much different had the Hawaiian Mormons attempted to follow Utah's example in this regard.

Six weeks after the Waialua Conference in April of 1853 Woodbury wrote from Kalaaua on Molokai that the natives had on that island found the first time put the subject of plurality of wives to him.(72) On Saturday, May 21, 1853 Brother Kealoha returned from Honolulu to Kailua, Molokai and the next day preached on polygamy. Woodbury said Brother Kealoha heard it preached in Honolulu and since plural marriage had already been introduced at the meeting, Elder Woodbury picked up on the subject and preached upon it himself. Once again he explained it was for those commanded by the Lord and the Saints were to have nothing to do with it here.(73)

Not surprisingly the opponents of the Church were quick to use this occasion, evidence of the peculiarity and to these even depravity of the Mormons, in their attacks on the Church in Hawaii. In March of 1854 word reached Woodbury from Maui that Kauai might have been in jail charged with polygamy. Though Woodbury noted the local elder had a divorce from his first wife long before marrying his second, he was required to post bond of $1,000 or spend eight months before his trial in jail. The high
had to polygamy again by marriage taken with Catholic and Protestants. A grant of divorce is essential for the end of the marriage. The Mormons could not and the gentiles would not let the issue die. On May 26, 1854 two Lahainaluna School boys, Kahawai and Kulou visited Woodbury on Molokai to ask about the doctrine of a plurality of wives. He apparently convinced them from the scriptures it was a just and good principle. Of course, other Protestants remained unconvinced and some published their views in a native paper.(241) Woodbury's report of the article said the Calvinists would send "even old father Adam to an endless hell because he partook of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden."(242) The traditional "gentile" discrimination to call a fruit a fruit is apparent. They admit, according to Woodbury, that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and others practiced plural marriage but had proof Abraham and Jacob were liars and therefore not approved of God.(242) Woodbury summarized his thoughts on the matter:

When I look upon the so called Christianized and enlightened world my heart sinks and I am led to exclaim that light and knowledge, whether thou fled well did one of the ancients say when looking down through the darkness of time, that darkness should cover the earth and gross darkness should cover the earth and gross darkness the people.(242)

At least one of the Molokai members, a priest named Pialapa, was taken with the doctrine. After Woodbury preached repentance and baptism at a meeting of Church officers on May 28, 1854, he invited Pialapa to preach. While the Utah elder concluded the Hawaiian spoke well, the local brother's subject was plural marriage approved in ancient times. Woodbury then spoke again warning against embracing upon the priests or prophets message. In June of 1854 Kahawai and Kulou of Lahainaluna had been influenced by their associates once more for they again sought conference with Woodbury at Lahainaluna. By June 4, the two boys had read the revelation on plural marriage, concluding it was a righteous principle.(252) The young priests did not tell whether hot and cold boys ever stayed hot and joined the Church.

On July 16, 1854 in Lahaina, Elder Hammond preached on polygamy to the Haleo congregation. In August The Polynesian had again printed an article against polygamy.(253) Elder Hammond demonstrated their interest in the matter. Elder Woodbury was then near Hakipuu [Iolani palace] on Oahu when a local Catholic priest Hakipuu told him he thought the Mormons had it all left since they were denied the right of marrying. Incidentally, this was a right they were to be denied for more than twenty years. In the ensuing argument, conducted on horseback as they traveled along, the priest jumped to the plural marriage question, concluding his argument only when summed to the side of a dying parishioner.(300)

The story of Kaumai, mentioned earlier, is not totally concluded by the end of Woodbury's journal. Despite the Mormons' feeling that Judge Lee was guilty of mean and selfish designs against them in the case, Kaumai was not only out of jail but had received the privilege from the governor of the first adverse decision. He remained in Lahaina, waiting for a decision on the appeal in March of 1855. Woodbury does not indicate the final disposition of the matter but Hawaii continued to play a significant role in the plural marriage drama. After Abraham Lincoln signed the Anti-Bigamy legislation in 1862 which was really an attack on plural marriages but was not enforced, over the next twenty-eight years the pressure on the Church to forsake the practice increased dramatically if not steadily. A stream of anti-polygamy legislation came before the Congress and in 1874 the Poland Law was passed. In that same year the Church arranged for a test case encouraging George Reynolds, Brigham Young's secretary, to be arrested for polygamy. Unfortunately, the results were a blow to the Church for in January of 1879 the Anti-Bigamy Law was judged valid. Within three years the Edmunds Law was passed and a variable fear of anti-Mormonism resulted, driving many of the polygamist Saints underground, some of them fleeing to the Sandwich Islands to avoid arrest.

It seems that one could sometimes practice the principle without persecution if he lived away from Utah and Idaho, and maintained a low profile. Woodbury's journal records the statement of a Brother Vanderburgh in 1877, a wealthy Mormon living in San Francisco. He told the brethren he had acquired a second wife three or four years earlier and no one had molested him.(267)

But while the Catholics and Protestants were outspoken against polygamy in Hawaii, it appears to have been somewhat of a haven for those on the underground from federal marshals. There are no records I am aware of plural marriage being performed here and the Joseph F. Smith who hid out in Lacle beginning in February of 1855, none of these here on the underground seem to have brought more than one wife along. The evident lack of government effort here to locate or prosecute polygamists is notable. Actually, the Hawaiian government's attempt to prohibit Mormons from performing marriages anticipated the same move by the federal government. By the time Washington was involved in passing legislation on this matter, Hawaii had relented and selected Latter-day Saints were performing marriages. This all suggest that B.H. Roberts may have been correct in observing that anti-polygamists were motivated primarily by political than moral considerations.(290)

The favorable attitude of King Kalakaua toward the Mormons and his success in obtaining for them the right to perform marriages, in 1877, symbolized the success of Woodbury and his companions in winning the fight against ignorance, superstition, and prejudice. Today in Hawaii the Mormons occupy what is for us an unprecedented position as a respected religious group. But while Mormons attempt to battle ignorance,
superstition, ignorance and prejudice have continued since John Stillman Woodbury left Hawaii for the last time in 1877, his final recorded act, on Kauai, was a harbinger of the ongoing success his successors have enjoyed. Elder Woodbury is last seen in a cane field on Kauai conversing with King Kalakaua. He preached the gospel to the king, probably becoming so engrossed in the urgency of his message that he did not consider the fact that far more glorious kings would be his consorts in the future. Also, he was likely unaware that while his kingdom would likely be immeasurably greater than that of the king with whom he conversed, it might well be in a setting much like the one in which he had "fought the good fight" during his three missions in Hawaii.

ENDNOTES

1 Since this paper was completed the 751 page Woodbury typescript has been bound into two volumes. It can be found in the BYU-HC archives, call number BX8670.1/W4476 Volumes 1 & 2. Subsequent references will refer to specific pages of the Woodbury journal. Volume one concludes with page 367.
PURPOSE OF MPHS

1. To encourage research and publication on topics relative to the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the Pacific Basin area.

2. To maintain bibliographic and reference information relative to the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the Pacific Basin area.

3. To gather in conferences and workshops to teach and to learn from each other about Latter-day Saint history in the Pacific.

4. To teach those skills helpful in the gathering and recording of historical information.