Mormons at the Missouri, 1846-1852: “And Should We Die” Richard E. Bennett

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Richard E. Bennett, archivist at Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba, has done what archivists do best. He has marshalled an enormous collection of facts, quotations, and references on Mormons at the Missouri River between 1846 and 1852. In so doing, Bennett has served notice on LDS historians that they can no longer ignore that nebulous place between Nauvoo and Salt Lake City.
Bennett’s approach is novel and refreshing. Traditionally, when historians have given any attention to this period they have focused on the hardships of the pioneer group, the call of the Mormon Battalion, and the April 1847 departure from Winter Quarters to the Great Basin. Bennett has not slighted these but has given equal attention to ecclesiastical organization, social and political life, and the development of LDS doctrine.

The sheer magnitude of assembling and analyzing this vast array of material, however, seems to have pushed Bennett into a number of mistakes. For example, he refers to the Middle Missouri Valley as a wilderness and suggests that Lewis and Clark in 1804 were the first white men to reach Council Bluffs. Actually, French, Spanish, and American explorers, traders, and others had used this Platte-Missouri crossroads since early in the eighteenth century, almost a hundred and fifty years before the Latter-day Saints arrived here. By 1846, there were dozens of acres of land under cultivation, a mill, a ferryboat, a steamboat landing, traders, four stores, government agents, and missionaries. Dozens of Indian-white families were living in the villages of Point aux Poules and Bellevue. In view of the extent of development, it is misleading to refer to the area as a wilderness.

It is true, however, that Mormons gave a fresh impetus to the development of the region. While Bennett gives important information on Kanesville, Council Point, and other communities, he does not delve into the basic role and enduring success of Mormon industry in the Missouri Valley. Viewed from the perspective of 1700 to 1987, the 1846-53 Mormon period in southwest Iowa and eastern Nebraska was a watershed. Before this time, the economy was based on the fur trade. The Mormons moved in and began sod busting, log building, and organizing communities. Their accomplishments were remarkable and enduring. Some basic agricultural patterns and town and county governments established by the Mormons still exist there today.

Understandably but unfortunately, Bennett puts a good deal of emphasis on the experience at Winter Quarters at the expense of the Mormon experience in southwest Iowa. He evidently overlooked the community census reports recorded on Family History Library films 001922 and 001923 and also Silas Richards’s 1848 crop reports for twenty-one southwest Iowa communities, with additional notes about nonreporting communities. One gets the impression from Bennett’s book that there were only small clusters of Mormon families along the “east bank” of the Missouri River. Orson Hyde, writing in the 27 June 1849 edition of the Frontier Guardian, gives a different impression:
The roads in Pottawatamie county are so completely blockaded by fences that there is hardly room enough left for a passage to Heaven. It is proposed that a committee of three persons be appointed, one from Carterville [southeast of Kanesville], one from Kanesville, and one from Big Pigeon [eight miles northeast of Kanesville], to examine and determine the most feasible route for a public road leading from the prairie south of Carterville through the latter place, passing through or near Kanesville and extending up the Tabernacle [Pigeon Creek Tabernacle] hollow to Little and Big Pigeon.

These, presumably, were some of the “little groups” Bennett found clustered along the east bank of the Missouri River. In addition, there were dozens of other communities scattered far to the east, north, and south of those named by Hyde. These communities pulsed with vitality and life. What Bennett calls a two-story schoolhouse was, in fact, a music hall paid for by Orson Hyde. It was used as a music studio, concert hall, and center for other cultural and social activities. Bennett also ignores the mercantile houses in Kanesville, the hotels, lawyers, doctors, and dentists, band and choral concerts, cotillion dances, public debates, and performances of Macbeth. In short, the cultivated people who had built Nauvoo were engaged in a repeat performance in the Missouri Valley, though they used logs instead of bricks for their temporary towns. The steady influx of non-Mormon speculators, investors, preachers, settlers, and opportunists indicates their success.

Statistics have always been at the heart of any discussion of the Mormon experience in Iowa and Nebraska. When we try to come to terms with the statistics of 1846-53 (and it is important to remember that the final exodus took place in 1853, not 1852), three questions arise: How many Latter-day Saints started west? How many died en route? How many apostatized or at least dropped out of the exodus? The answers to these questions will aid in answering another fundamental question: How successful were Brigham Young and the Quorum of the Twelve in shepherding the exodus?

Fortunately, there is enough data—eyewitness accounts, census reports, and reports by Church officers—to make at least some preliminary assessments. Bennett used some of these but overlooked or dismissed others. Perhaps the most obvious error in Bennett’s statistics appears in his table of 1846 Mormon population (90). Bennett underestimates the numbers. For example, he lists 500 as the number of people in the Mormon Battalion. But if we assume only 489 men volunteered for the Battalion, 12 boys went along as aides to officers, and some 20 women served as laundresses, we have a total of about 520. To this figure we need to add 33 wives and “many” children who followed the battalion. It
appears the gross count should be somewhere between 550 and 600.

The same kind of oversight plagues Bennett’s table entitled “1848-1852 Emigration West from Kanesville” (228), based on an average of three people per wagon. If we assume Pratt and Taylor successfully led all 1,490 emigrants to the Great Basin without any loss of life in 1847, and if we assume that 540 of the Mormon Battalion population reached the Great Basin, we have a total of 2,030 in the Salt Lake Valley in 1847—that is, if all the pioneer company returned to Winter Quarters, as Bennett implies. Add to this Bennett’s figures of 2,400 migrants in 1848, 1,850 in 1849, and 2,100 in 1850, and we get a net population of 8,380 in the Salt Lake Valley by 1850. Yet the U.S. census counted 11,380 people in Utah in 1850. Thus we have a discrepancy of 3,000 people—and perhaps more, depending on when the census was taken and when the last of the 2,100 migrants arrived in Utah in 1850.

How many Mormons participated in the westward migration? Bennett seems to have overlooked the possibility that other Latter-day Saints in western Illinois, southeast Iowa, St. Louis, and other parts of the United States and Canada joined the exodus. He does allow for some to have come “from the east,” but overall his figures seem too conservative.

How many died en route? There are few original documents available to answer that question. Most promising is the data-rich sexton’s record from Cutler’s Park and Winter Quarters, September 1846 to May 1848. Though it deserves a thorough reading and analysis, Bennett largely dismisses this document. For example, he says, “An heroic monument at the Winter Quarters cemetery in Florence, Nebraska lists the names of over six hundred people who supposedly died there in 1846-47. Present-day promotional literature still relies on this original estimate” (136). However, the bronze tablet on the Winter Quarters monument is based on the sexton’s record and lists 369, not 600 plus, who died at Cutler’s Park and Winter Quarters between September 1846 and May 1848. Thus Bennett both discounts and distorts the primary document available to historians concerning how many people died both at Cutler’s park and at Winter Quarters. That unbroken record of deaths commenced in September 1846 and ended in May 1848, not in 1847. In short, he has overestimated the number of deaths and underestimated the number of migrants.

Bennett, attempting to explain away the shortfall in death count by the sexton, notes that some pioneer saints could not afford the $1.50 burial charge and the cost of coffins, which could be as high as $3.50. What he fails to note is that some were buried without
coffins, with less formal covering such as brush, split logs, or blankets. With no real evidence to the contrary, it seems unlikely that Saints were buried other than in the cemetery for lack of a burial fee. If the Saints freely shared their desperately inadequate food supplies, it is likely they arranged for proper burial of their own or their friends’ dead, with or without cash.

How many apostatized or merely dropped out of the exodus? Bennett claims at least 2,000 Mormons “left the church at the Missouri” (314). That is about one-third the number once claimed by some local Reorganized Latter Day Saints in the Middle Missouri Valley, but it is still inflated. My evidence would suggest that between 400 and 700 dropped out of the exodus at the Missouri River. Here again, census figures are necessary parameters.

Thus the problem of numbers is very real. It is unfortunate that while Bennett’s book shatters some myths and false perceptions, it creates some of its own. Still, it must be regarded as an important contribution. Bennett demonstrates that Mormons did indeed have a life between Nauvoo and the Great Basin, a life filled with both significant and poignant events. There is no longer any excuse for us to be ignorant of the Mormon sojourn in the Missouri Valley.