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The Rise and Decline of Mormon San Bernardino

Edward Leo Lyman

From the beginning of what was to be the Latter-day Saint settlement at San Bernardino, the spirit of cooperation and harmony was strikingly prevalent, outstanding even among Mormon pioneers noted for success in planting new colonies through the mutual efforts of their members. Yet while the first three years of the community were notable examples of success and cooperation, the last three years the Mormons dominated there present a contrary picture of growing disenchantment and rising antagonisms. The purpose of this essay is to suggest an explanation of why the successful Mormon community of San Bernardino so rapidly disintegrated.

In 1849, Apostles Amasa M. Lyman and Charles C. Rich were sent to California with a specific charge to determine "the expediency or not of holding an influence in the country." Since Brigham Young and his associates had vivid recollections of Mormon inability to live harmoniously among non-Mormon neighbors, this was probably aimed at retaining or regaining influence with Church members in California. After associating with Mormon brethren in the mining camps and elsewhere for much of a year, Elder Lyman wrote to Brigham Young that "to strike hands with a man having the Spirit of God is a rare treat in California," meaning that there were but few, in his judgment, who had maintained their full commitment to the faith after coming into contact with what he termed "the poison of gold."

Nevertheless, Elder Lyman advised that after careful consideration it was his conclusion "that the interests of the church required a resting place in the region." He specified Southern California, which his associate, Elder Rich, had recently described in detail as the only place available with the advantages they were seeking. One of these advantages may well have been distance from

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the corrupting influence of the gold fields. The Apostle reported that California Mormons generally, including those “cut off” (excommunicated) or otherwise disaffected, were anxious for a settlement comprised of Church members. He declared that he had not “urged such to hasten to the lower country,” and frankly hoped that “the foundation of society may be laid with better material than those who are so light that they have floated over the Sierra Nevada to the gold mines.” Lyman understood that Brigham Young had fervently urged Latter-day Saints to remain in their assigned intermountain settlements and only those who had specifically disregarded such counsel were likely to be found residing in California.  

In early 1851, President Brigham Young reluctantly authorized the planting of a Southern California Mormon colony. He recognized the need for a snow-free wagon route to the coast and control of its southern terminus both for freighting goods from the outside world and a friendly way station, or “resting place,” for converts arriving from abroad by sea. On 23 February, Elders Lyman and Rich were officially commissioned to lead a company of prospective settlers and preside over them as Church leaders, aiming to establish a colony as a coastal stronghold for the gathering of the Latter-day Saints. Several weeks later, just before they departed for their mission, President Young and his counselors wrote to Lyman and Rich to specify other aspects of their assignment. They were to search for other “way station” locations between Iron County, Utah, and Southern California, and the new colony was to become a source of such semitropical products as olive oil, wine, cotton, and sugar. The tone of this letter was cordial and supportive, certainly displaying more interest in the venture than has often been attributed to Brigham Young. Yet it is true that in fact he soon became less than supportive of the Southern California enterprise.

There are several possible reasons for the apparent alienation of President Young from the colony. The most obvious of these has to do with the number of people seemingly anxious to leave the Utah center of Zion to participate in the venture. Other factors, more difficult to document, relate to Brigham Young’s growing perception that the California Saints, and perhaps some of their leaders, were failing to follow his direction carefully.

It is now established that during the early Mormon settlement of the Great Basin, which Brigham Young is given so much acclaim for directing, there was actually much less consistency of method than was previously assumed. Still, the typical pattern was for a bishop to be selected and a dozen or so families “called” to
accompany him to settle the place designated by Church leaders. In
the case of San Bernardino, Amasa Lyman and Charles C. Rich
personally selected families they wished to take to California.
Sometimes, as in the case of William D. Kartchner, extra incentive
was asserted. Kartchner claimed that when he initially declined to
be a part of the California colony, Apostle Lyman “Said that if I
Refused to go he would cause me to have a worse mission.”4
Kartchner and a considerable number of “Mississippi Saints,”
whom Lyman would have met several years before at Pueblo,
Colorado, participated with varying degrees of faithfulness in
establishing San Bernardino.

It is not certain just how many persons were recruited for the
Southern California colony, but it is clear there was surprise
mingled with the oft-noted disappointment at the number who
appeared at Payson, Utah, prepared to depart with Lyman and Rich
for the new settlement. Kartchner’s diary is again revealing on this
point. He noted, “it was seen a Grate many more than was called
was moving with us & Prest. B. Young and H. C. Kimball called a
meeting at this Place & Heber Preached and Discouraged many
from going.” Since 437 individuals departed in the company
anyway, the number who previously intended to go must have been
even larger.5 Brigham Young’s Manuscript History, written by
clerks close to him, states that his original plan intended for some
twenty families to accompany his designated agents. When he
arrived at Payson, President Young declared he was “sick at the
sight of so many of the Saints running off to California.” In his
mind, they were abandoning the kingdom he was striving to build
and were succumbing to the enticements of the corrupt outside
world. He was so angered by this that he chose not even to address
the company of pioneers as they departed. From then on, the San
Bernardino colony seems to have held a place distant from the
affections of the highest Church leader.6

En route south, Elders Lyman and Rich took every occasion
to communicate to President Young on their progress and possibly
persuade him his unfavorable assessment of the company was
unfounded. Before leaving the southernmost Utah settlement, they
reported that 111 men (which must have been most of the men in
the company) “reported themselves as willing to obey counsel,”
meaning willing to follow the direction of their ecclesiastical
superiors. This was repeated while the emigrants were encamped
in Cajon Pass just prior to the purchase of the San Bernardino
ranch.7

During the first two years in Southern California, the commu-
nity spirit in San Bernardino could hardly have been stronger. Even
on the initial journey, undoubtedly one of the most arduous pioneer treks in American history, they had to occasionally pool their efforts in a high level of teamwork. At least one steep mountain incline necessitated hitching the draft animals together to pull each of the wagons to the top, a process so exhausting that even the most faithful diarists made no entries during the days thus engaged. After the San Bernardino ranch was finally secured, which allowed the entire company to remain intact, the normal process of settlement was interrupted by reports of Indian uprisings. This compelled construction of a stockade fortress accomplished through the almost ceaseless labor of all available hands. Although the Indian menace rapidly dissipated, almost all of the colonists lived in houses within the fort for more than two years, in a confined space that would test even the most neighborly, with no evidence recorded of anything but continuous harmony.8

One reason for the prolonged stay in the stockade was the community effort at clearing, planting, and fencing a two thousand acre grainfield. While much of the work was accomplished in unison, the land was clearly apportioned among the participants. On several occasions, when Elders Lyman and Rich’s crops needed attention and they were engaged on colony business, the entire labor force of San Bernardino turned out to lend a hand. Thus was spent the first Independence Day in the new settlement. Similar efforts accomplished construction of the storage facilities for the harvested grain and digging the millrace essential to the operation of a flour mill. An even more demanding community undertaking was the thousand man-days required to build a road into the mountains to the immediate north, enabling some enterprising citizens to tap the timber resources and engage in a lumbering industry. And again, when the sawmill of Lyman and Rich burned, a voluntary requisition of labor was furnished to make rebuilding possible. Most impressive of all community undertakings were the financial commitments and sacrifices many made to assist the colony leaders in the purchase of the ranch.9

When the Mormon agents first negotiated with the Lugo brothers for the San Bernardino ranch, they hoped to accomplish the purchase of between eighty and one hundred thousand acres of good land for between fifty and sixty thousand dollars. But the proprietors drove a hard bargain, and Elders Lyman and Rich eventually agreed to a price of $77,500. They were compelled to journey to northern California and through prosperous Mormons there secure loans for the seven thousand dollar down payment at gold rush interest rates of 3 percent per month. The two Apostles purchased the ranch in their own names, without Church aid, with
the understanding that their fellow colonists would support them financially by purchasing individual plots after the property was surveyed and in the meantime exert every effort to help meet the difficult first year's payments. Early in 1852, prior to any harvest in the new land, the San Bernardino Saints agreed to sell livestock to buyers then in their midst to the extent necessary to meet the approaching second payment. By March, sixteen thousand dollars had been raised and the immediate obligation met. Much of the remaining balance of over fifty thousand dollars was also apparently refinanced at that time by the firm of Burgoyne and Ness of San Francisco, payable in two years with the mortgage of the entire ranch given as security.

At the time, this venture appeared to be financially sound, but several developments soon occurred with rather disastrous consequences. First of all, the economic boom accompanying the gold rush was rapidly subsiding, and the San Bernardino Saints consequently had more difficulty selling their expected cash products of flour and lumber in quantity and at the price expected. Vastly more devastating to the community's future was the discovery that the original San Bernardino land grant had specified that the owners were to actually possess only eight square leagues of land, less than half of what the Lugos had used as rangeland. Lyman and Rich had undoubtedly been negligent in not having the fine print of the documents examined by someone more competent in Spanish than William Stout, one of their brethren. Although they appealed to the United States Land Commission then substantiating old claims, when that body made its final ruling the Mormon leaders were informed that eight square leagues or thirty-five thousand acres was the extent of the legal grant.

Elders Lyman and Rich were given the right to select from any of the lands they assumed they had purchased. But in a very real sense this was a blow from which the financial agents of the community never recovered. Not only was there less land to sell to recoup the debt, but there was also suddenly a very large amount of government land available at what would likely be a substantially lower price than Lyman and Rich could offer. It would be more temptation than some could withstand to disregard promises to purchase lands through the Church leaders and attempt preemption of the adjoining public domain.

In the first local Church conference after the bad news from the land commission, in October 1853, the proceedings were highlighted, according to Lyman and Rich, by the participants reaffirming that they would "use their utmost exertions with all the means they might be able to influence to meet promptly the next and
last payments for the rancho of San Bernardino.” Those present also displayed marked generosity in payment and pledges to the regular Church financial obligations of tithing and contributions to the Perpetual Emigration Fund. By this time division of San Bernardino into individual lots available for approximately one hundred dollars each was under way, but the Church leaders observed that since the community intended to “bind all our energies to the payment” of what became known as the ranch debt, few individual improvements were expected to commence that year.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the population of the colony was being enhanced by Latter-day Saints arriving from northern California, Utah, and missionary fields of the South Pacific. By the October conference of 1853, the official Church membership in the area was just over one thousand, with new additions coming regularly. Possibly Elders Lyman and Rich had received some hints of official dissatisfaction at the rapid growth—at the expense of other Mormon communities. At any rate, as the year began they wrote a letter to the editor of the official Church newspaper, the Deseret News, denying reports that they had encouraged Utah Church members to emigrate to California. They reaffirmed the principles of colonization strongly held by Brigham Young that “the place for the saints is wherever the counsel of the Lord through the presidency of the church may place them.” They stressed it was “the privilege and duty of all saints, without thinking for a moment,” to go to whatever locality Church authorities sent them and to remain there until released. All of this, it was stressed, would be in the interest of service to Jesus Christ in the upbuilding of his kingdom on the earth. They further stated they had been sent to California to build the same kingdom. But, they stressed, they were not to accomplish this “by pulling down one part” elsewhere. They concluded pointedly, “if any think to leave [Utah] without counsel, and think to be fellowshipped by us, they are mistaken.” They concluded by frankly stating “those who love not God sufficiently to serve him in one place, will not do it in another” and expressed hope that such persons, if interested in going to California, would take the northern route, which, they said, would “sooner bring them to the palace of the Golden God” and spare San Bernardino “the curse of their faithlessness.”¹¹

Later that summer, after the disappointments concerning the land grant were fully understood, Lyman and Rich admitted their first apprehensions of potential internal dissension. After offering condolences over a recent conflict with Indians in Utah, the San Bernardino proprietors ominously stated that the “foes against
whom we have to contend are not shut out by adobe walls.” They went on to explain that such foes arise in the form of the “spirits [or attitudes] that those who came here bring with them.” This, it was said, was the same spirit of discontent “as caused them to come [to San Bernardino] in opposition to the counsel they should have respected elsewhere.” Though conceding the results of these “principle troubles” were not yet apparent, they expressed hope that the cause they were striving to uphold would prevail. Certainly the fears thus expressed were well founded. If such an element, unwilling to follow counsel of ecclesiastical leaders, became dominant in the San Bernardino community, the self-sacrifice necessary to complete the land purchase would not continue.12

In a very real sense, San Bernardino was coming to serve as a means of escape from the physiographical harshness of Utah and, to some, the theocratic despotism of Brigham Young’s Mormon empire. There is also some evidence that the California settlement became a haven for those becoming disillusioned with the faith because of the practice of plural marriage, finally announced publicly in 1852. One contemporary observer, H. C. Rolfe, describing the relative attractiveness of residence in California compared to Utah for some Latter-day Saints, suggested that the presence of the San Bernardino “branch of their people gave them a plausible excuse” for relocating there.13 Apparently a significant number of Utah Church members were convinced they had had enough of their present situation but may not yet have concluded to completely sever their ties with the Church. San Bernardino could serve as a means of transition, where they could escape much of what they recognized as unpalatable while maintaining at least nominal ties to the religious movement to which they had previously held strong commitments.14

Members of the Church hierarchy also regarded California as a haven for less faithful Latter-day Saints. Brigham Young publicly exhorted those who could not abide the notably strict rules of his regime to emigrate to California. In the semiannual Church conference of April 1854, President Young discussed the stream of Mormons leaving Utah for California in terms of the biblical separation of the sheep from the goats. In an accompanying discourse on the same occasion, Apostle Orson Hyde mentioned the same subject in terms of the New Testament parables of the sower and separation of the wheat from the tares. The tares were clearly those abandoning the Mormon Zion.15 That same year, Brigham Young wrote to Apostle Parley P. Pratt, then engaged in missionary labors in Latin America and the Pacific Islands, advising him to carefully interview the Latter-day Saints he came
into contact with and ascertain the extent of their commitment and obedience to authority. President Young frankly instructed Elder Pratt that "those who were faithful and determined to remain so" should be encouraged to come to Utah; "all others to remain in California which would be a strainer to the streams from that direction leading into the reservoir" of Utah Mormondom.

Early in 1854, Brigham Young inquired as to the identities of individuals suspected of being uncommitted to the cause of the California mission. In answer, Elders Lyman and Rich mentioned the "good men" who had come with their original company, along with four of the "Brooklyn Saints" who had joined the colony from the north. In a subsequent letter on the same subject they also listed a dozen brethren added to the community from the missions of the South Pacific. But that was the extent of the number of San Bernardino men the California Apostles judged to be fully faithful. They then clarified further the potential problem they perceived by saying their "present prospective troubles with the people arise from a clap of hangers-on who have no interest but to seek whatever advantage may arise from the labors of others in building up the common cause." In their exasperation, they singled out a man prominent in early Mormon history, Henry G. Sherwood, for special criticism. The offense they indicted him for sheds further light on the type of behavior the Church leaders perceived as offensive. They reported Sherwood "has totally failed to do what he promised us when on the way here which was to operate in connection with us in the accomplishment of our labors here." This undoubtedly alluded to his not participating in land payments and acquisitions through Lyman and Rich. They also complained that he considered himself "too old to be managed" by the relatively younger designated leaders.

Elders Lyman and Rich made this complaint near the time when another payment was due on the ranch mortgage. They had been optimistic they could raise the amount needed, but when the time came only eight thousand dollars had been raised locally and but little obtained elsewhere. This was nowhere close to the amount required, and after further schemes aimed at raising funds failed they were compelled to sign a new note for thirty-five thousand dollars secured by a new mortgage.

Clearly many of the San Bernardino Saints were tiring of the tremendous burden of the ranch debt and were growing increasingly more inclined to get on with developing their individual property obtained in 1854 mostly on credit. One of the most detailed contemporary descriptions of the city, by visiting Judge Benjamin Hayes, described construction of a hundred new
buildings, along with other notable improvements, during that summer alone. Such developments certainly drained considerable financial resources away from the mortgage assessments the Church leaders were ardently seeking.¹⁸

At year’s end, Charles C. Rich was in Salt Lake City, where on 10 December 1854 he spoke at the Tabernacle on the subject of unity and obedience. He was clearly referring to individuals of the San Bernardino community when he said that “some persons get an idea they cannot work so well here for the building up of the Kingdom [of God],” so they go to California or some other place according to their personal wishes. This, he declared, was not the correct procedure; he reiterated, “where the authorities put us is the proper place for us to be.”¹⁹

Such exhortations were too late to have any effect on just that type of emigrant who arrived at San Bernardino at about the same time Elder Rich was delivering his address. Amasa Lyman reported that they had come from Cedar City and other settlements and but few of them had in the first several months “manifested a disposition to renew their connection with the church” through the method then in use of rebaptism. Later in the year, Lyman learned that some of these new arrivals had written to friends in Utah stating that San Bernardino Church leaders had allowed them rights and privileges in the Church even beyond those they had enjoyed when in full fellowship in their former congregations. Elder Lyman denied this, saying that on the contrary he treated those who did not bring vouchers of good standing from their former bishop as if they had been “cut off from the church.” Only those who subsequently signified desire to rejoin the Church and were judged to be worthy were allowed to resume fellowship and be admitted into the San Bernardino congregation. And even this, Lyman assured, some had attempted but failed to accomplish.²⁰

After his denials of leniency, Lyman philosophically described his situation in presiding over such people as were being added to his ecclesiastical charge by saying, “men come here from other settlements in the mountain country to escape those hardships their love of the truth would not strengthen them to endure.” And, he continued, “unfortunately for them, their already overtaxed capacity for practical righteousness does not undergo any improvement” by their taking up residence in San Bernardino.²¹

Elder Lyman’s personal diary sheds further light on his feelings toward incoming Saints such as those from Cedar City. He reported that some of them were contemplating settling in the Yucaipa area. This was a valley so distant from the center of the San Bernardino community and the current activities of the ranch
propriators that those anticipating which lands Lyman and Rich would finally select as their allotted holdings considered Yucaipa a safe place to locate, in hopes of a subsequent land purchase at a reduced price from the federal government. Lyman had recently referred disdainfully to those similarly engaged in the area as nothing more than trespassers.22 In the later period of marked antagonism between Church leaders and dissidents inside and outside the Church, opposition was clearly centered in the Yucaipa area.

This opposition has generally been said to have begun with political developments during the San Bernardino County supervisorial elections of 1855. While this was certainly a catalyst that brought the conflict into the open, Mormon leaders had been worried about the lack of internal unity and commitment for more than a year previous and were particularly sensitive to signs of disunity because of implications for disposition of the lands with which they were so heavily burdened.

As the 21 April 1855 county elections approached, Amasa Lyman followed the common Mormon practice of the highest ranking Church leaders in the vicinity nominating the candidates they deemed most desirable for office. In this case, Daniel Starks and William Crosby were chosen as supervisor candidates. However, several other Church members, including Benjamin F. Grouard and Frederick M. Van Leuven, acting independently, also decided to contest for those offices. In the election, these unapproved candidates were soundly defeated, with Van Leuven gaining only nineteen votes and Grouard only thirteen, while Crosby garnered one hundred votes and Starks ninety-nine.23

Elder Lyman simply noted at the time, “there was some opposition from a faction headed by V. J. Herring, F. M. Van Leuven and B. F. Grouard.” Henry G. Boyle’s more detailed diary account further states, “these men came out in opposition to Amasa’s nominations, contrary to counsel” and exhibited a “regular mob spirit.”24 There are no contemporary accounts of the local election campaign, but reference to a “regular mob spirit” probably meant simply defiance of vested authority. This was, however, a serious offense at the time in Mormondom, and thus Grouard, Van Leuven, and Herring were summoned before the Church leaders “to make satisfaction or be disfellowshipped.” At the appointed time, they arrived with a group of supporters, who, it was noted, “were not in the habit of meeting” at the Church headquarters. Elder Lyman proceeded to explain the nature of their offense and the serious consequences he anticipated might accrue from a course of independent political conduct. The defendants replied that the
Latter-day Saints were “slaves and not men” because they followed the counsel of ecclesiastical leaders in political affairs. They further argued that under such circumstances individual citizens were denied “the privilege of thinking for [themselves].” Since the accused had no intention of confessing wrongdoing or retracting previous statements, they were disfellowshipped. When they subsequently accelerated their opposition to Church authority, they were excommunicated.25

These actions on the part of Amasa Lyman and his associates appear to be an overreaction to political activities American citizens were clearly entitled to. The harshness of the punishments further exacerbated the internal dissension in the community. Yet Elder Lyman was acting in the accustomed manner practiced and expected by Brigham Young and other high Church officials in Utah. The Church hierarchy in the Intermountain region, in their isolated circumstances, could demand and receive political submissiveness until 1891, although frequently criticized by outsiders for such actions. But in San Bernardino, as elsewhere in the nation, there was no toleration for such ecclesiastical interference in political matters, and thus the Mormon actions only provoked further alienation.26

By August 1855, the community clerk-historian, Richard Hopkins, could write, “the spirit of disention is becoming more evident; some men who have occupied prominent positions in the church here are very violent against [the local Church] authorities.” He noted that this spirit was becoming both more open and more widespread. He then observed that this situation fulfilled a prediction by Lyman early in the colony’s existence that if there were trouble at San Bernardino “it would be started by those in our midst.”27 Later that fall, Hopkins reported “the spirit of apostasy is daily becoming more evident,” with former Church members verbally abusing the presiding authorities and “swearing vengeance on all Saints.” Later, he described conditions in San Bernardino as the antithesis of those that had prevailed in the early days of the settlement, saying, “it is almost impossible to insure a concert of action upon any object of public interest”; instead, “the grand object appears to be the aggrandizement of private interests.” He concluded that by that time in a city still comprised mainly of individuals who at some time had espoused Mormonism, “to be a Latter-day Saint is becoming quite unpopular.”28

Early in 1855, Brigham Young wrote a letter to Amasa Lyman which is most significant in revealing his attitude toward San Bernardino and many of the Church members located there. He observed that “it often times occurs that men and women are
tolerable good saints anywhere else except with the saints.” President Young confessed to thinking that such “half-hearted” Latter-day Saints were the “only ones which this generation [of the world] are worthy to meet” since they preferred “to be with the world where they can see, hear and feel the continued profanity and abomination of the wicked,” while “the pure-minded and strictly virtuous . . . so abhor the wickedness of this generation that if they could have their desires granted would never again behold a devil in any form.”

Clearly, Brigham Young had categorized Church members into two basic classes, and only the less faithful type should live in contact with the corrupt outside world. It is impossible to ascertain whether his conclusions were based primarily on the reports of Lyman and Rich or whether his attitude influenced them. Certainly all agreed to some extent, and such assumptions would figure markedly in the future of the San Bernardino colony.

By mid-1855, Elders Lyman and Rich were candidly expressing doubts about the future of San Bernardino to President Brigham Young. Lyman asserted that if the colony could not be made useful “as a home and resting place for the Saints,” it was “hardly worth the toil and anxiety it was costing.” Rich confided that he would be glad if he could report that “righteousness was on the increase” in the area, but he went on to complain that a few more immigrations such as had recently arrived from Utah “would place the balance on the wrong side.” He once again concluded that “men who will not be governed in one place will not be governed in another.” At this time, Rich confessed he looked forward to once again living in the relatively harmonious environs of Utah.

In answer to one of these letters, Brigham Young revealed a lack of confidence in the colony’s future, stating, “we cannot afford to spare good men enough to sustain such a place as that is soon likely to be.” In another letter addressed to Rich at the end of 1855, President Young cited a Brother Lewis as comparing current troubles in their midst to the bitter anti-Mormon conflict in Illinois at the time of Joseph Smith’s assassination, saying San Bernardino was “just half way between Carthage and Warsaw.” The highest Church leader predicted that either the San Bernardino Church members would incline to the ways of their neighbors and the “spirit of the world” or else the past history of cupidity, hate, and violence would repeat itself.

By the beginning of 1856, the growing number of Mormon dissenters, labeled by Elder Lyman “factionalists,” was fully united with the considerable number of non-Mormons who had settled in the vicinity and had become increasingly disenchanted with LDS church domination. While the political opposition became
full-blown and continued, the most bitter confrontations of 1856 stemmed from disagreements over land ownership.

Here again, the Mormon leaders appear in an unreasonable light. They delayed several years before finally designating which lands would ultimately be claimed from within the larger domain they originally thought they had purchased. They were entirely within the law in this delay, but it certainly did nothing to promote harmony and understanding among those already inclined in the opposite direction. Part of the problem was entirely beyond control of the Church proprietors. Since the first days of the settlement, most agricultural activity had been at the big field situated on high ground adjacent to the mountains and foothills. These fields had been notably productive during the first two years, largely, as it turned out, because these were years of unusually heavy precipitation. When more normal weather patterns resumed, production at the big field dropped drastically. After several poor harvests there, the San Bernardino leaders realized they needed to look to the irrigable lands closer to the Santa Ana River bottom to the south and the more naturally moist soil of the Yucaipa Valley to the east for a productive future. Since these were areas where those least inclined to cooperate with Lyman and Rich in their land disposition schemes had gravitated, conflict was bound to ensue.

A few individual examples sufficiently illustrate the details of the lands dispute. The most oft-cited case involved Jerome Benson, a former Mormon who arrived from Provo well after the colony was established and after estrangement from the Church because of disagreements with some of its leaders in Utah. Being a man described in even the most favorable account as “of rather aggressive disposition,” often at odds with his neighbors, Benson was not regarded by the Church proprietors as the type of citizen they wished to welcome into their community. Therefore, they quoted him a significantly higher price for land than most of the more desirable purchasers were accustomed to paying. Upon learning of this slight, the newly embittered Benson left the Mormon city and took up land several miles south, across the Santa Ana River, in an area commonly expected to be designated as public domain as soon as Lyman and Rich made their final land selections. But after he had made considerable improvements on the property, the ranch owners notified him he was trespassing on their lands. With encouragement from other opponents of the landowners, Benson refused to leave, fortified his home lot with breastworks and a cannon, and defied the Mormon leaders to remove him. Although the initial court proceedings for eviction favored Lyman and Rich, the stubborn Benson remained on the land until bargain prices for
unencumbered property enticed him to relocate on land some of the Latter-day Saints would abandon within less than two years of the dispute.34

Frederick M. Van Leuven was another Mormon who arrived in San Bernardino after its initial settlement. He immediately located on land east of Benson’s near present Loma Linda, also believing it was beyond the holdings of Lyman and Rich. Eventually, sometime after coming into conflict with the Church authorities through his political independence, he was notified that the land he was occupying would be included in the eight leagues of property the Church proprietors were designating as their final holdings. Van Leuven submitted rather quietly and withdrew to Yucaipa, where he arranged with John Brown for a portion of the land he was using there. Subsequently, he and Brown would be evicted from this area also.35

John Brown had moved to Yucaipa sometime after Diego Sepulveda, a relative of the Lugo family, vacated that portion of the ranch upon its sale to Lyman and Rich. Previously associated with the Mormons in Colorado, Utah, and northern California, Brown was baptized into the Church soon after arriving in San Bernardino in 1852. He cooperated fully with his Latter-day Saint neighbors during his first years in the area, playing a prominent role in separating San Bernardino County off from Los Angeles County and in attempts to curb Indian raids on livestock in the valley. Yet for some reason whatever ardor he had possessed for Mormonism faded, and he gravitated into the faction most opposed to the Church leaders and ranch proprietors. He was undoubtedly one of the individuals Amasa Lyman referred to as trespassing at Yucaipa.

Elder Lyman’s feelings probably stemmed from the fact that Brown had neither paid rent nor purchased any of the land he had occupied for several years. And sometime thereafter, when a paying tenant, Vincente Lugo, offered to reoccupy the Yucaipa ranch, Rich informed Brown he would have to either pay the back rent, purchase the ranch, or promptly vacate the premises. After several conferences on the matter, Brown promised to move his livestock and family as requested if all outstanding debts were canceled. Brown later alleged that as he returned home that evening in April 1856, someone he believed to be a Mormon fired shots at him from ambush. Thereafter he changed his stance on the ranch occupancy and summoned his friends for consultation. A dozen men, including some of the most prominent non-Mormon neighbors and the most vocal apostate Mormons, signed a remonstrance supporting Brown’s refusal to leave. Charging he was being forced out under duress, they stated, “we believe the land upon which he
lives to be public domain . . . and firmly insist that he, John Brown, shall remain where he is without further molestation until the general government shall determine” the outcome of the case. Although their legal position was weak, these men were fully determined to stand against the Mormon leaders’ seeming arbitrariness. Brown subsequently vacated the disputed land, but the antagonisms between the clearly divided factions on occasion during the ensuing year reached the verge of armed confrontation.36

Elders Lyman and Rich had long understood they were expected to go to England to assume leadership of the European missions whenever they could make the necessary financial disengagements and arrangements in San Bernardino. Neither Apostle is known to have offered anything but encouragement of the assignment change. Yet there is in the subsequent developments a perceptible difference in attitude toward the California colony between Lyman and Rich. At the end of 1855, Brigham Young complied with a previous inquiry and instructed Rich to move his family back to Utah. Several unforeseen complications caused more than a year of delays, but there is every indication the junior Apostle remained anxious to make the Intermountain Area home for himself and all his families. On the other hand, Elder Lyman apparently intended to maintain his direct association with San Bernardino, planning for several of his wives and families to remain there while he was on his mission and doubtless expecting to return himself when his present assignment was completed.37

A crucial development in the attempt to resolve the ranch debt obligations still hanging over Lyman and Rich was enlisting Ebenezer Hanks, a faithful Latter-day Saint who had met with considerable financial success in the northern California gold fields, as an equal and eventually most active partner in the affairs of the San Bernardino ranch. Even with the pressure of high interest rates and the constant harassment by impatient creditors, the ranch proprietors could well contemplate substantial economic rewards for their pains once the debts were repaid. Outstanding land payments owed the company on approximately one quarter of the ranch land already sold would virtually cancel the remaining financial obligations. Whatever land was disposed of thereafter would be largely profit. Undoubtedly Hanks understood there were risks in the undertaking and joined the partnership partly as his own mission to relieve his Apostle-partners from such temporal cares. But the fact remains that there still existed much potential for rich economic rewards from the enterprise.38

In March 1857, prior to his departure from San Bernardino, Amasa Lyman addressed the Latter-day Saints assembled there at
a Church conference. He reminded his congregation that they had come to build the kingdom of God in the area, saying, "if that consists in planting vineyards, fruit trees, making farms, and building houses," they had accomplished their purpose. But the real task had been to improve the lives of individuals in their daily application of the principles of their religion. Some of the listeners were undoubtedly succeeding in this realm too, but compared to the number of potential Latter-day Saints in the area the success rate was far from outstanding. Another major thrust of this farewell address, and a similar one by Elder Rich, focused on the continuing obligations of the San Bernardino Saints to complete payments on the ranch. The Apostles requested the community members to pledge their support to Hanks and William J. Cox, who as stake president would be the presiding Church authority in the area.39

During the next several months, President Cox was hard-pressed to hold his brethren to their ranch commitments. Whether intentionally or not, Elder Rich had seriously undermined such effort by discouraging a Brother Durfee from purchasing additional San Bernardino land, counseling him to save his means so that he would be prepared to move his family away when the time came. When Cox heard reports of this, he counseled the brother to keep such stories to himself, but the word had already spread. The stake president soon addressed the Saints at the regular Sunday worship services and reminded them they had recently "covenanted to sustain Brother Hanks in his exertions to redeem the pledges that had been made to build up the cause in this land." He went on to advise his listeners that Latter-day Saints should "prepare to live here or go where called." But, he continued, for the present they were in their proper field of labor; they were "called to stay here," and when a different call came they would know it. By continuing such meetings and exhortations throughout the summer, Cox was successful in maintaining a good deal of cooperation in the community effort to lift the ranch mortgage.40 In fact, in early August, Ebenezer Hanks wrote his absent partners to report that their business was increasing so rapidly that it appeared to be more than he could handle. A large portion of this activity was land sales, including sales to Mormons. Although by this time a considerable number of San Bernardino Saints hoped to return to Utah, there is no solid evidence that Church officials intended to totally abandon the Southern California settlement.41

During the summer of 1857, California newspapers were full of the kind of reports that were leading President James Buchanan to send U.S. Army troops to quell the so-called Mormon Rebellion. These were rapidly eroding what for several years had been a most
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cordial relationship between the citizens of San Bernardino and those throughout the rest of the state of California. Among the subsequent news items were many details of the movements of the military and their Mormon opponents. No one was certain what the final outcome would be, but Ebenezer Hanks was probably correct in observing that a clash of arms or something close to it would cause the faithful Latter-day Saints to hasten to Utah much faster than anything else might. In the meantime, they could be of immeasurable assistance to their beleaguered brethren by gathering much-needed arms, ammunition, and supplies for possible use against the invading army, should such prove necessary.42

It was lurid reports of the Mountain Meadows Massacre and other subsequent mistreatment of overland emigrant trains in the fall of 1857 that ultimately caused the demise of San Bernardino as a haven for practicing members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Until the alienation of the non-Mormon community of Southern California in the wake of those events, there is every indication the colony was to continue, if not flourish. It was only after anti-Mormon hostility mounted in the late autumn, more than four months after Brigham Young received notice of the approach of Johnston’s Army, that the Church leader summoned the faithful to abandon their California homes to return to Utah.43

Late in 1856, the presiding Apostles had instructed the San Bernardino high council and bishopric “upon the necessity of a reformation in the San Bernardino branch.” Similar endeavors were underway elsewhere in Mormondom. Besides vocal encouragement to individual Church members to renew their commitments to the faith through rebaptism, there was also considerable interest in eliminating from Church standing those whose lives were not judged to be in conformity with Latter-day Saint standards of behavior. Thus a number of people were disfellowshipped and excommunicated at this time. Elders Lyman and Rich reported frequently to Brigham Young on the progress of the reformation, but they were never able to state the number fully recommitted had reached beyond five hundred souls. This was probably only one-fifth of the number residing in the vicinity who on some earlier occasion had been baptized as members of the Church.44

By the summer of 1857, it was no longer any secret that many of those who had remained most committed to the LDS religion and its leaders were contemplating removal back to Zion in the mountains of Utah. Brigham Young had made numerous public and private comments to that effect for more than a year. When the official call to return arrived in early November 1857, the
scene was described by Henry Boyle as the obedient “busy selling out, or rather sacrificing their property to their enemies and fitting up” for the return trip. He reported, “The apostates and mobocrats are prowling around trying to raise a row, trying to stir up the people to blood shed and every wicked thing.” Continuing most gloomily, he declared, “O, is it not hell to live in the midst of such spirits? They first thirst for and covet our property, our goods and our chatels, then they thirst for our blood.” He concluded, “I think I shall feel like I had been released from Hell when I shall have got away from here [San Bernardino].”

Probably the most telling commentary on the individuals comprising the citizenry of Mormon San Bernardino after a half dozen years of development was their reaction to Brigham Young’s recall. The year 1857 had seen perhaps the best harvest yet, and flour prices were double what they been several years before. Many who remembered the colder climate, the less productive soil, and the greater personal restrictions prevalent in Utah chose not to heed the request to return. In the words of the late Eugene Campbell, they “chose to forsake the church rather than leave their homes” in San Bernardino.

At the end of 1856, San Bernardino was estimated to have about three thousand inhabitants. George Beattie’s careful study of the make-up of this population concluded that at the time 84 percent of the residents of the area were or had been Mormons. Of these, about 55 percent, which would be almost fourteen hundred, responded to Brigham Young’s call to return to Utah. Since in the next several years some of these went back to San Bernardino in disillusionment, it would be fair to estimate that approximately half of the Latter-day Saints proved committed enough to heed the orders of their ecclesiastical leaders and the other half did not. In comparison with the near unanimity still prevailing in the Mormon settlements of the Great Basin, this was an extremely high percentage of individuals unwilling to meet the requirement to sacrifice their homes or whatever else was asked of them, a basic tenet of the Latter-day Saint religion.

Even though it appears that the Church leaders hoped to maintain at least nominal ties with the San Bernardino colony, until the bitterness surrounding the Mountain Meadows Massacre shattered any such possibilities, it seems likely that, conscious of the declining proportion of fully committed Mormons in San Bernardino, they chose to remove those yet faithful from that negative environment. Sad experiences in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois had proved that life among unbelievers, particularly apostates, was next to impossible. Although one of the initial
purposes for the settlement was apparently to attempt retrieval of some who had strayed from the paths of obedience to Church teachings and authority in coming to California in the first place, experience with the large number of nominal Saints who had flooded to San Bernardino had proved disappointing. With the abundant evidence of lack of success in this endeavor, the advantages of further efforts at maintaining a direct influence in California was not deemed by Church leaders to be worth the cost.

Brigham Young had alluded to the California settlement as a "strainer" screening out those of weak faith prior to their moving on to the center of Zion in the mountains. But to a greater extent, the San Bernardino settlement acted as a magnet for attracting uncommitted Church members from throughout the other Mormon settlements. Thus occurred the reverse of the Church leaders’ intended "gathering.” Those whose common bond was their weakening attachment to the principles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and an unwillingness to “follow counsel” of the Church leaders congregated in the settlement that was most distant both physically and spiritually from the center of Mormondom.48

NOTES

1Amasa M. Lyman and Charles C. Rich to Brigham Young, 23 and 30 July 1850, Brigham Young Papers, Library–Archives, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives).
2Ibid.
5Ibid., 35–36; Eugene E. Campbell, Establishing Zion: The Mormon Church in the American West, 1847–1869 (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1988), 70–71.
6"Manuscript History of the Church, Brigham Young Period, 1844–1877," 20 March 1851, LDS Church Archives.
7Amasa M. Lyman to Brigham Young, 22 April 1851, Young Papers, LDS Church Archives.
9Jensen, “History of San Bernardino,” 25 November–15 December 1851; and 23 February, 23 April–12 May, 8 June, 5 July 1852. Amasa Lyman reported to Church headquarters, “It is our feelings that the spirit of the Gospel is on the increase in this branch of the church, the best evidences of which are exhibited in the disposition of the people to observe and be governed by the council ordained for their edification. They still manifest a disposition to unite their efforts with ours to accomplish the payment for the place and to defer until that time the receiving of their private inheritances, or improving the same,
so our improvements until that time will be the creation of those public conveniences, such as mills, grain houses, such as will suit our convenience best and favor the payment for the place, which, when accomplished will allow us the privilege to locate our inheritance and improve the same, without the chances of their being swept away from us for the indebtedness against the place. Our present arrangements plan this in the spring and summer of 1854... will give us the full and undisputed right and possession of the land of San Bernardino and in addition to this the most of our brethren connected with us in this labor will by the appropriation of their labour and means have secured to themselves a credit that will go far toward the payment for their places" (Amasa M. Lyman to Brigham Young, 11 September 1852, Young Papers, LDS Church Archives).

Amasa M. Lyman and Charles C. Rich to Brigham Young, 21 October 1853, Young Papers, LDS Church Archives.


Amasa M. Lyman and Charles C. Rich to Brigham Young, 31 October 1853, Lyman Papers, LDS Church Archives.


John Brown, Jr., and James Boyd, History of San Bernardino and Riverside Counties, 3 vols. (Madison, Wis.: Western Historical Association, 1922), I:48, states, "For the most part the San Bernardinos do not believe in polygamy... The author, who with his father had lived among the Mormons since early in the settlement's history, should have known 'whereof he spoke.'" Eugene E. Campbell, "A History of The Church of Jesus of Christ of Latter-day Saints in California, 1846-1946" (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1952), observes, "the main objections these disaffected members [of the Church whom missionary Henry Bigler visited at San Bernardino in 1858] made to 'gathering' to Utah were: (1) the climate and the difficulty of making a living; (2) the wife's objection to plural marriage, and (3) a rebellion against Brigham Young's high-handed authoritarianism" (281). See also Rolfe, "Early Political History of San Bernardino County."

Journal History, 19 February, 29 October 1853; 6 April 1854. Apostle George A. Smith followed Brigham Young and Orson Hyde, saying, "The men that have left for California and complain of stringent measures, etc., went because their hearts were corrupt, and they did not love the gospel of Jesus Christ."

"History of Brigham Young," 19 August 1854, copied into Journal History of same date.

Amasa M. Lyman and Charles C. Rich to Brigham Young, 11 March 1854, Young Papers, LDS Church Archives.

Judge Benjamin Hayes to Southern Californian, 19 October 1854, quoted in Beattie, Heritage of the Valley, 225-26.

Quoted in Arrington, Charles C. Rich, 182.

Amasa M. Lyman to Brigham Young, 8 January and 3 May 1855, Young Papers, LDS Church Archives. In the former letter, Lyman reported, "In relation to our strength here, we are rather weaker in righteousness than in numbers. The constant influence of discordant feelings is but calculated to increase an evil already in existence to increase a great extent compared to the union that should mark the labors of the Saints."

Amasa M. Lyman to Brigham Young, 3 May 1855, Young Papers. Lyman recounted asking one disaffected sister from Cedar City why they were again locating in a Church settlement, to which she candidly (and prophetically) replied that she and her husband had "concluded that it would not be more than 2 or 3 years before that a mob would drive [the Mormons] away and then they could get land and improvements cheaper than elsewhere."

Amasa M. Lyman, Journal, 21 November 1853 and 7 December 1854, LDS Church Archives.

Beattie, Heritage of the Valley, 228-37; Lyman, Journal, 21, 22, 26 April 1855 and 20 May 1855.


Ibid., 22 April 1855. Ironically, some years later Amasa Lyman was defendant before other Church authorities in a case also involving freedom of conscience. At that time Lyman too would choose freedom over Church membership (see Lorettia L. Hefner, "From Apostle to Apostle: The Personal Struggle of Amasa Mason Lyman," Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 16 [Spring 1983]: 90-104).

Rolfe, "Political History of San Bernardino."

Jenson, "San Bernardino," 17 August 1855.

Ibid., 28 November 1855.

Brigham Young to Amasa M. Lyman, 29 January 1855, Lyman Papers.

Amasa M. Lyman to Brigham Young, 3 May 1855, Young Papers.

Charles C. Rich to Brigham Young, 1 November and 2 December 1855, Young Papers.

Brigham Young to Charles C. Rich, 29 November 1855, Rich Papers, LDS Church Archives.

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"Rolfé, "Political History of San Bernardino." According to this contemporary observer, "by this time the apostolic owners of the ranch who were selling off their lands in small parcels to settlers, mostly of their own faith, had become somewhat cautious as to whom they sold and thereby enabled to become members of the community, particularly guarding against granting facilities to any who might make them trouble or be antagonistic to their influence in the community or disturb the peace and harmony thereof."

"Beattie, Heritage of the Valley, 239. It is not certain how long the Van Leuven family was away from the Loma Linda area, but they did eventually return to occupy much of the land for a long time after the departure of Lyman and Rich.

Ibid., 240; Jenson, "San Bernardino," 13, 18 April 1856; and Richard R. Hopkins to Amasa M. Lyman, 2 May 1856, Lyman Papers.

Charles C. Rich to Brigham Young, 1 November 1855, acknowledges mission call and makes request that he be permitted to move his families back to Utah; see also Arrington, Charles C. Rich, 202–6. Amasa M. Lyman to Brigham Young, December 1856, Lyman Papers, LDS Church Archives.

Hanks paid $25,383 for his third interest in the ranch, along with apparently raising another $10,000 among fellow northern California Church members (Arrington, Charles C. Rich, 202).


Hopkins to Amasa M. Lyman, 7 May 1857, Lyman Papers.


Hopkins to Amasa M. Lyman, 5 November 1857, Lyman Papers. The San Francisco Daily Alta California, 12 November 1857, reported, "arms and ammunition continue to be forwarded from San Bernardino [to Utah]." The report specifically mentions five hundred revolvers, powder, and duck for tents.

Daily Alta California, 12, 14 October 1857. The Los Angeles Star, 9 May and 3, 10, 21 October 1857, listed at least three other alleged attacks on emigrants passing through Utah; for the recall to Utah, see Brigham Young to William Cox, 7 November 1857, Young Papers, LDS Church Archives.

Los Angeles Star, 2, 9, 16, 30 November and 17, 20, 22 December 1856; 1 February 1857; Amasa M. Lyman and Charles C. Rich to Brigham Young, 7 February 1857, Young Papers.

Boyle, Diary, 16, 17 November and 4 December 1857. Brigham Young was also inclined to describe the situation in terms of hell. In a June public address in Salt Lake City, referring to San Bernardino, he stated, "Hell reigns there, and ... it is just as much as any 'Mormon' can do to live there, and that it is about time for him and every true Saint to leave that land" (Desert News, 10 June 1857).


Jenson, "San Bernardino," 27 December 1856, population estimate citing Western Standard, a Mormon weekly published in northern California, apparently drawing on a report from the Los Angeles Star; Beattie, Heritage of the Valley, 311–14. Beattie cites several newspaper notices of Mormons who had answered the call to return to Utah but who had subsequently returned to San Bernardino (see Journal History, 10 May 1858, for Brigham Young virtually browbeating former San Bernardino stake president David Seeley into returning to California).

After 1857–58, there was no organized branch of the Church in San Bernardino for more than a half-century. Agents of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints did establish a branch in the area. Campbell, Establishing Zion, has suggested an exodus of perhaps thousands from Utah in the 1850s—a subject that needs much further study.