

**THE  
AMERICAN  
WEST**



*Writers and the West*  
*A Special Issue*

# THE AMERICAN WEST

THE MAGAZINE OF WESTERN HISTORY

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*November 1973 / Volume X, Number 6*

*Sponsored by the Western History Association*

PUBLISHED SIX TIMES PER YEAR—JANUARY/MARCH/MAY/JULY/SEPTEMBER/NOVEMBER

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THE AMERICAN WEST is published in January, March, May, July, September, November, by American West Publishing Company, 599 College Avenue, Palo Alto, California 94306. Single copies: \$2.00. Subscriptions: \$9.00; two years \$16.00; three years \$23.00 (outside U.S. \$1.00 per year extra). Manuscripts and communications from subscribers should be sent to the above address; members of the Western History Association

should address all communications to: Everett L. Conley, P.O. Box 8005, Salt Lake City, Utah 84108.

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# The Deseret Alphabet

by S. George Ellsworth

**S**PELLING REFORM, like Mark Twain's remark about the weather, is something everyone complains about but about which almost no one does anything. Many years ago some progress toward easier reading and writing was accomplished through the work of Noah Webster, and further influence may have been exerted through the phonetic alphabets of shorthand pioneer Sir Isaac Pitman. But one of the most ambitious examples of spelling reform is today almost forgotten: the Deseret Alphabet promoted by Brigham Young among the Mormons of Utah.

Brigham Young's own spelling left something to be desired, as he knew, and in 1845 and 1852 he took classes in phonography from George D. Watt, one of the first Mormon converts from England. Watt, who had studied the Pitman system in the land of his birth, was to play a major role in the development of the new alphabet.

The chief purpose of the Deseret Alphabet was to simplify the learning of spelling, reading, and pronunciation through use of simple phonetic symbols instead of conventional letters. It was not—as some may have believed—an attempt to control the thinking of the people, nor was it a move toward isolation and secrecy. As territorial governor and church leader, Brigham Young had a special interest in such reform: he wanted to ease the process of acquiring English among the large number of foreign immigrants in Utah's Mormon population.

The Mormon leader assigned the task of simplifying the written language to the University of Deseret in Salt Lake City. Accordingly, the board of trustees named a committee which included George D. Watt. During the winter of 1853–54 the committee devised the alphabet, and within a few months type was made in the East and brought to Utah.

The new thirty-eight character phonetic alphabet was based to some extent on Pitman's phonography but in larger part upon a system of stenography suggested by Watt. The creation of most of the symbols is attributed to him, though suggestions were required from each committee member. Each of the symbols appeared in but one form: there was no dis-

tinction, other than size, between capital and lowercase letters. No cursive symbols were devised.

Implementation of the alphabet began, with some effort, in the late 1850s. Advocates of the system gave lectures and held classes of instruction. The alphabet was also taught in some of the public schools. For a time Brigham Young's ledger books, various church records, historical accounts, and some diaries were kept in the alphabet. Deseret Alphabet characters also appear on Mormon coins of the period: on one side is the beehive and eagle, on the other, the motto "Holiness to the Lord." The first text published in the Deseret Alphabet was the Sermon on the Mount, which appeared serially in the church's *Deseret News* beginning on February 16, 1859. The best-known use of the alphabet, however, was in two primers created for use in the public schools, excerpts of which appear on the facing page. The cost of producing these books was paid by the territorial legislature, and Orson Pratt was hired to transcribe material previously prepared by the committee. He supervised their printing in New York in the summer of 1868. *The Deseret First Book* and *The Deseret Second Book* sold for fifteen and twenty cents, respectively. In 1869, Pratt also supervised publication of the *Book of Mormon* in the Deseret Alphabet and the first portion of the Mormon scripture in a separate edition for the schools. But with these books the great experiment ended.

Interest in the alphabet had never been high except among those closely associated with it. The characters of the alphabet appeared awkward, the monotony of lines of type without ascenders and descenders made reading difficult, and there were certain linguistic problems. The church leadership was also aware of the prohibitive cost of printing "translations" of all books needed in the territory. But most of all, when Brigham Young died in 1877, the system lost its chief advocate. It was only a matter of time until the Deseret Alphabet became simply a curiosity. ☞

S. George Ellsworth is professor of history at Utah State University and is editor of *The Western Historical Quarterly*. He is the author of *Utah's Heritage* (1972).







**Faces of the Wilderness** by Harvey Broome, foreword by William O. Douglas (*Mountain Press with the Wilderness Society, Missoula, Mont., 1972; 271 pp., illus., \$7.95.*)

REVIEWED BY DOUGLAS H. STRONG

**T**HIS UNUSUAL BOOK, in the tradition of Thoreau's *Walden*, is a personal account of the experiences of Harvey Broome in wilderness areas throughout the United States between 1938 and 1965. At a time when professional ecologists and political activists are flooding the market with solemn reports of environmental studies, it is refreshing to find a nontechnical work written by a layman who simply relates in a quiet, compelling way what wilderness has meant to him.

Harvey Broome grew up in the shadow of the Great Smoky Mountains where he learned at an early age to appreciate the beauty and allure of primordial landscapes. A founder (1935) and major contributor to the Wilderness Society, Broome, with his wife Anne, joined Olaus Murie, Howard Zahniser, George Marshall, and other members of the council of the society on a long succession of annual field trips into wilderness areas. These excursions began in 1946, and Broome's record of them, kept in journal form at the time of each trip, constitutes the heart of the book.

Unqualified praise for *Faces of the Wilderness* may be withheld by some readers because the author lacks the expertise of a trained naturalist, develops no central theme, and refrains from taking a strong stand on environmental

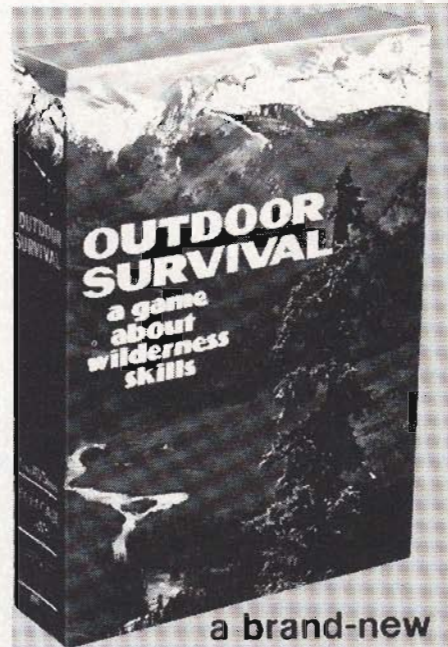
issues. But perhaps it is these very features—or lack of them—that give the book peculiar charm. It is a rich, personal account written by a sensitive observer. Broome relates how he felt and what he thought, as for example, when he watched the approach of a sleet storm on a Colorado mountain peak, walked along the shifting sands of the Oregon Dunes, or searched for a lost companion in the rugged Big Horn Crags of Idaho.

*Faces of the Wilderness* gave this reviewer a new understanding of the diversity of the American wilderness and of the fact that each area has its own qualities and its own very special attractions. Broome had an unusual talent for appreciating this diversity and for identifying the essential character of each place he visited, whether it was the Okefenokee swamp, the badlands of the Dakotas, Mount McKinley, Washington's Olympic Beach, or the canoe country of northern Minnesota. They all entranced and moved him in some special way, and from his experiences we sense unmistakably the value of wilderness, the need to save the few areas left that can be saved, and the rejuvenation that can be experienced by those able and willing to sustain the rigors of wilderness and to accept it on its own terms.

This is a book to be greatly enjoyed by anyone who has had adventures on the trail—and to inspire and entice those who have not. ☞

Douglas H. Strong is a professor of history at California State University, San Diego, and author of *The Conservationists and of Trees—or Timber?: The Story of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.*

**Key to Desert reader stories appearing on page 11.** Lower left: "Come, James, and take a walk with me. Let us go to the hay field. I have seen the men cutting grass, and we may now see them loading the hay. I can turn over the new-cut grass with my hay fork and make good hay." Lower right: "Let us go to school. We will be late for school if we do not make haste. Are your brothers going to school today? No, my brothers James and John are very ill. They cannot go to school today." Upper right: "Do you see this cow? She is gentle and gives a great deal of good milk. She is standing near a large tree, and drives away the flies with her tail. Why does she stand by the tree? The leaves of the tree make a cool shade, and cows love the shade when the sun is hot. If there were no cows, we would not have much milk, or cheese, or butter. You must take good care of your cows, and give them fresh grass and hay, and build a good dry shed for them in winter. Some cows are taught to work, like the ox; but they should not be made to work."



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