



Front Matter

The Mississippi Valley Historical Review, Vol. 35, No. 4. (Mar., 1949)

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The Mississippi Valley Historical Review

A JOURNAL OF AMERICAN HISTORY

Vol. XXXV, No. 4



March, 1949

JOHN A. SIMPSON
THE SOUTHWEST'S MILITANT FARM LEADER
GILBERT C. FITE

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PIONEER SOCIALIST PROPAGANDIST
HOWARD H. QUINT

THE CHICAGO RIVER AND HARBOR CONVENTION, 1847
MENTOR L. WILLIAMS

EARLY MORMON JOURNALISM
VIRGIL V. PETERSON

SENATOR BEVERIDGE, J. FRANKLIN JAMESON,
AND ABRAHAM LINCOLN

EDITED BY ELIZABETH DONNAN AND LEO F. STOCK

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY BY

The Mississippi Valley Historical Association

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Early Mormon Journalism

By VIRGIL V. PETERSON

One hundred and nineteen years ago the first publication of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was given to the world.¹ Since that time a constant stream of periodicals, newspapers, and books has come forth expounding the principles and doctrines of this American-born religion which emerged from the frontier in 1830. The spread of Mormonism is in a large measure traceable by the publications founded by the church and its membership. Copies of virtually all these early publications are extant in the church archives in Salt Lake City² and many are available in various depositories over the United States. Most of them are valuable not only because they constitute an excellent source for church history and doctrine but also because they show the trend of the western movement and graphically depict life on the frontier.

Early Mormon journalism falls roughly into three phases, based primarily on migration, missionary activities, and colonization. In these phases there is considerable chronological overlapping. For example, missionary activities had their inception with the birth of the church and were coexistent with the other phases.

The first phase came as part of a frontier movement which lasted approximately twenty years and extended from Palmyra, New York, to San Francisco. The general American pattern of westward expansion was accentuated in the case of the Mormons by continued persecutions which crowded them from their original center in New York to Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and finally to Utah and California. Following the death of the prophet, Joseph Smith, in 1844, several schismatic groups developed. This paper is confined, however, to the activities of the Mormons up to this time and to the body of the

¹ This paper was read at the annual meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association held at Columbus, Ohio, April 24, 1947.

² Some of the rarer copies of this collection will not be available to researchers until reproductions of them have been made.

church which followed Brigham Young to the valley of the Great Salt Lake.

Just prior to the founding of the church in 1830, the first Mormon publication, the *Book of Mormon*, was released for distribution by the publishers of the Palmyra *Wayne Sentinel*. A book of 600 pages, it was printed at a cost of \$3,000 guaranteed to the printer before publication. The edition consisted of 5,000 copies priced to retail at \$2.50 each.

In June, 1832, the first Mormon periodical, *The Evening and Morning Star*, was issued from the church press at Independence, Missouri. A monthly, royal quarto in size, it was edited by William W. Phelps and sold for \$1.00 per year. The following notation appeared in the first issue: "The *Star* office is situated within twelve miles of the west line of the state of Missouri; which at present is the western limits of the United States, . . . and about 120 miles west of any press in the state."

In the prospectus of this periodical the purpose of the paper and the objectives of the editor were set forth as follows:

. . . As the forerunner of the night of the end, and the messenger of the day of redemption, the *Star* will borrow its light from sacred sources, and be devoted to the revelations of God as made known to his servants by the Holy Ghost, at sundry times since the creation of man, but more especially in these last days, for the restoration of the House of Israel. . . .

The Evening and Morning Star . . . will contain whatever of truth and information that can benefit the saints of God temporally as well as spiritually, in these last days, whether in prose or poetry, without interfering with politics, broils, or the gain-sayings of the world. While some may say that this paper is opposed to all combinations under whatever plausible character, others will know, that it is for an eternal union whose maker and supporter is God: thus all must be as they are, inasmuch as they that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same — but wisdom is justified of her children. . . .

The editor's mode of accomplishing these purposes was ably analyzed by Brigham H. Roberts, a later church historian:

Looking over the pages of this pioneer periodical of the church its defects are easily apparent. Chiefly they consist in a bad choice of matter and a lack of orderly and simple setting forth of the events in which the work of the Lord in these last days had its origin, together with a turgid style which was the vice of nearly all American literature of the period. And yet one can readily understand the cause of these defects. The editors and publishers were anxious to plunge at once into the midst of the things God had

revealed, apparently unmindful of the fact that the world to whom the *Star's* message was addressed was unfamiliar with the events with which the work began. That the Prophet, though having had no training in journalism, keenly felt the defects of the *Star* is evident from the reproof he administered to its editor after the publication of several numbers of the first volume: "We wish you to render the *Star* as interesting as possible, by setting forth the rise, progress, and faith of the Church, as well as the doctrine; for if you do not render it more interesting than at present, it will fall, and the church suffer a great loss thereby."³

The Missourians were not at any time sympathetic with the Mormon incursions and anything that indicated permanency on the part of the new arrivals was looked upon with suspicion. Consequently, after fourteen issues of the *Star* had appeared, Phelps was ordered by a mob to discontinue its publication. His refusal fired the bigots to action and they promptly threw the press from a second-story window, pied the type, and destroyed all obtainable issues of the periodical. Not to be deterred in his journalistic assignment, the editor returned to the main body of the church at Kirtland, Ohio, procured another press, reissued the fourteen numbers, and continued the publication of this periodical through the remaining ten numbers of Volume II. It was then discontinued and replaced in October, 1834, by the *Latter-day Saints Messenger and Advocate*, a royal octavo edited by Oliver Cowdery.

Prior to the expulsion of the press from Missouri in 1833, the *Book of Commandments*, containing the revelations received by Joseph Smith up to that time, was published at Independence. A second and more complete edition entitled *Doctrine and Covenants* was published at Kirtland in 1835, as was also the first *Hymn Book* of the church.

The Elders' Journal, the third periodical, was first issued at Kirtland in October, 1837, with Joseph Smith as editor. Only two numbers were printed when the Saints moved as a body to Missouri. At Far West, in that state, the paper was again revived and two more numbers published. As the third number was in preparation a mob-militia surrounded Far West preparatory to plundering the town. To preserve the press it was buried along with the unfinished third number. Nearly a year afterwards the press was dug up and shipped to Commerce, later Nauvoo, Illinois, where it was used to print the

³ Brigham H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City, 1930), I, 287.

fourth periodical of the church, the *Times and Seasons*, a sixteen-page monthly and later a semimonthly edited successively by the Prophet's youngest brother, Don Carlos Smith, Ebenezer Robinson, Joseph Smith, and John Taylor. It was discontinued in February, 1846, when the Saints abandoned Nauvoo. In the period between 1832 and 1846 four newspapers were also published: the *Northern Times* in Ohio, the *Upper Missouri Advertiser* in Missouri, and the *Wasp* and its successor, the *Nauvoo Neighbor*, in Illinois. The *Nauvoo Neighbor* was the official newspaper during the last three years of the Mormons' stay in Illinois.

On the same day that the Saints began their exodus from Nauvoo in February, 1846, Sam Brannan and 234 other Mormons boarded the ship *Brooklyn* in New York harbor and sailed for California via Cape Horn and the Hawaiian Islands. They landed at Yerba Buena, now San Francisco, in July, bringing with them among other machinery and supplies a press and type and a quantity of paper. In January, 1847, the first issue of the *California Star*, one of California's first English newspapers, appeared with Brannan as publisher and E. P. Jones as editor. This weekly usually contained a few columns in Spanish. According to its masthead, the paper was "devoted to the liberties and interests of the people of California." The prospectus explained its purposes and aspiration:

The peculiar situation of our country, and the absence of all sinister motives forbid the idea of the intrusion into our columns of party politics — the bane of liberty, the usual door to licentiousness, and which defeat the true and noble objects of the press. . . .

The *Star* will be an independent paper uninfluenced by those in power or the fear of the abuse of power, or of patronage of favor.

The paper is designed to be permanent, and as soon as circumstances will permit will be enlarged, so as to be in point of size not inferior to most of the weekly newspapers of the United States.

It did increase its size and it did take its place as one of the better weeklies in the West, but it lasted only until June, 1848.

The first printing in Nebraska was an eight-page epistle published by the Quorum of Twelve Apostles of the Church at Winter Quarters, Omaha Nation, in December, 1847. It was signed by Brigham Young and dispatched to the Saints in all parts of the world. At Kanessville, now Council Bluffs, Iowa, the first issues of *The Frontier Guardian* appeared in February, 1849. Published semimonthly and edited by Orson Hyde, a member of the Quorum

of Twelve Apostles, it was designed to assist in the development of the frontier and to furnish information on the Far West for emigrants bound for Utah, California, and Oregon. Of its purpose the editor said:

. . . It will be devoted to the news of the day; to the "Signs of the Times"; to Religion and Prophecy both Ancient and Modern; to Literature and Poetry; to the Arts and Sciences; together with all and singular whatever the spirit of the times may dictate.

It will strongly advocate the establishing of Common Schools along the frontier, and also in the various settlements in the interior, and will try, by all lawful and honorable means, to accomplish so desirable an object.

Being located on the extreme frontier, the *Guardian* will be able to give the earliest reliable information from our settlement in California and in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake. Intelligence from these quarters will not only be welcome but extremely interesting to the great portion of our readers in the "States."

When the Saints left Kaneshville in February, 1852, the *Guardian* was discontinued. It is interesting to note, however, that one of their group, Joseph E. Johnson, remained in Council Bluffs although he had already made the trek to Utah. From 1852 to 1856 he published the Council Bluffs *Bugle*, and in 1854 he started the Omaha *Arrow*, the first newspaper published in Nebraska. He is often referred to as "Omaha's first editor." The Crescent City (Iowa) *Oracle* was founded by him in 1857, and the following year he started the Council Bluffs *Press*. In 1859 he moved to Wood River, Nebraska, where he published the *Huntsman's Echo* for a period of three years, after which he went to Utah where he edited and published a number of small newspapers in the southern part of the territory.⁴

The second phase of early Mormon journalism was a product of the missionary activities of the church. While most of the publications already mentioned were highly beneficial in evangelizing pursuits, they were published by the general body of the Saints as they moved westward. Believing that the "Gospel must be preached to every kindred, tongue and people," the church leaders chose some of their most able men to direct the proselyting. These emissaries used periodicals, newspapers, tracts, and books to reach prospective adherents.

The first such journalistic enterprise, *The Millennial Star*, was

⁴ Julius S. Morton, *Illustrated History of Nebraska*, 3 vols. (Lincoln, 1905-1913), II, 336-37.

begun in England in 1840. This monthly was edited by Parley P. Pratt, who like his brother Orson was a profound thinker and writer. Later it became a semimonthly and then a weekly. It is not only the oldest continuous publication in the church but it is also among the ten oldest continuous periodicals published in England today. In its 108 years of existence it has in general retained much of its original character imparted to it by its first editor.

Comparable to *The Millennial Star* was *Skandinavians Stjerne*, the first Scandinavian publication of the church, begun in 1851 and continued to date. Early in the history of the church other periodicals were published in Germany, Sweden, Holland, Switzerland, France, Wales, India, Australia, New Zealand, and Hawaii.

In the United States *The Gospel Reflector* was published in 1841. Three years later the *Prophet*, a weekly newspaper, was founded in New York City, edited first by William Smith, a brother of Joseph Smith, and then by Sam Brannan. It was printed on the same press which Brannan later took to San Francisco and on which he printed the *California Star*. Its purpose is clearly set forth in its prospectus:

The Board of Control of the Society for the Diffusion of Truth in the City of New York being desirous of promulgating the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in its fulness and ameliorating the condition of fallen man, have thought it wisdom to establish a paper in this city, as an advocacy and herald of [the] Church of [Jesus] Christ of Latter-day Saints, a portion of which at times will be devoted to Agriculture, Commerce, and Manufactures, as well as to the Foreign and Domestic news of the Day. It will likewise be the faithful advocate and defender of the Constitution of the United States whose glory and effulgence is known in every clime, which was battled for and won by our illustrious and patriotic ancestors. The Arts and Sciences shall not be neglected — sketches, narratives, biographies, Mormon essays and poems will also find a place in the columns of *The Prophet* whilst its conductors will endeavor to impart variety and life in its columns.

In April, 1845, the *Prophet* was issued not only in New York but also in Boston. It was discontinued the following month and replaced by the New York *Messenger*.

In the middle 1850's four newspapers were established specifically to advocate and defend Mormonism, including the doctrine of plurality in marriage. These were the *Seer*,⁵ founded at Wash-

⁵ Many of the articles written by Orson Pratt and published in the *Seer* were later

ington in 1853 by Orson Pratt; the St. Louis *Luminary* in 1854 by Erastus Snow; the *Mormon* in New York in 1855, edited by John Taylor; and the *Western Standard* in San Francisco in 1856, with George Q. Cannon as editor and publisher. That there was a need for offsetting the adverse press accounts circulating over the country is reflected in the mottoes adopted by two of these papers. The *Western Standard* said, "To correct Mis-representation we Adopt Self-Representation," while the *Mormon* declared, "It is better to represent ourselves than to be represented by others." This attitude was further reflected in an editorial in an early issue of the *Mormon*:

We have said before, and say now, that we defy all the editors and writers in the United States to prove that "Mormonism" is less moral, Scriptural, philosophical; or that there is less patriotism in Utah than in any other part of the United States. We call for proof; bring in your reasons, gentlemen, if you have any; we shrink not from the investigation, and dare you to the encounter.⁶

Roberts thus described the *Mormon* and its office:

. . . It was a handsome, royal twenty-eight columned weekly. It had a very striking and significant heading, filling up at least one-fourth of the first page. It represented an immense American eagle with outstretched wings poised protectingly above a beehive, and two American flags. Above the eagle was "an All-seeing Eye" surrounded by a blaze of glory, and the words; "Let there be light; and there was light."

The *Mormon* office was situated on the corner of Nassau and Ann Streets, with the offices of the *New York Herald* on one side, and those of the *Tribune* on the other. Elder Taylor was thus in the very heart of Gotham's newspaper world. Selecting such a stand is evidence enough that he did not intend to assume a shrinking or apologetic attitude.⁷

In the fall of 1857 the impending Utah War caused the recall of many colonists and missionaries; consequently, the *Mormon* and the *Western Standard* were discontinued.

The period of colonization in the church constitutes the third and last phase of these early journalistic endeavors. After the settlement of the Saints in the valley of the Great Salt Lake in 1847, colonization soon spread throughout Utah and into Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, and Arizona. Since the church members were rejected by the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve Apostles of the Church as unsubstantiated doctrine.

⁶ Roberts, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, IV, 63.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

far removed from the eastern centers of population, it became necessary to establish newspapers and periodicals to keep them apprised of the events of the time.

The first issue of the *Deseret News*, an eight-page, three-column newspaper, appeared on June 15, 1850. It was edited by Dr. Willard Richards and printed on a small wrought-iron Ramage press purchased by Judge William W. Phelps in Philadelphia and brought to Winter Quarters, Nebraska, and thence to Utah in 1847. It was a weekly priced at \$5.00 per year or fifteen cents per issue. As paper was hard to obtain, it did not appear regularly. Brigham Young had early felt the need of bringing light industry into the area in order to make the population less dependent on outside sources. In keeping with this policy a paper mill was proposed as early as the summer of 1850 and members were urged to send their old rags to the *News*. In the issue of November 30, 1850, the editor made an appeal: "Rags! Rags!! Rags!!! Save your rags. Everybody in Deseret, save your rags; old wagon covers, tents, quilts, shirts, etc., etc., are wanted for paper. The most efficient measures are in progress to put a paper mill in operation the coming season in this valley and all your rags will be wanted." The paper mill was built and the machinery installed but the rags came in so slowly that, according to the editor's complaint, the mill could not operate one day per month. On June 22, 1854, the first sheet of the *News* printed on homemade paper was circulated. The paper was a bit coarse and grayish in color but very substantial. When commercial newsprint was available the home product was not used, but during the Civil War and immediately afterwards paper shortages from both sources necessitated the omission of an issue occasionally. Shipments of paper from the East were sometimes burned in Indian raids, and these losses, together with lack of sufficient water to operate the paper mill, made the supply inadequate.

Money was not easy to obtain in those early years of sacrifice in taming the desert; consequently, subscriptions to the *News* came in slowly.⁸ The editor repeatedly threatened suspension if better sup-

⁸ The bishops of the church were asked to act as agents for the *News* and to urge the people of their churches to avail themselves of the paper. Borrowing a neighbor's paper was discouraged even in editorials.

port were not given. Arguing that typesetters must eat, and that commodities were quite as welcome as cash, he pleaded with the people to pay their subscriptions in grain or other crops, and at one time offered an allowance of \$2.00 per bushel for wheat. Calling for "a reciprocity of action on the principle of brotherly love," the issue of May 3, 1851, invited subscribers to "bring us your wheat, corn, butter, cheese, eggs, etc., or pay the cash as soon as you can. . . . Our printers are in want of eatables; they cannot work without bread, and we wish our friends and patrons who have not done it to bring us of their substance, that we may be able to feed the laborer, and we will continue to print." Payment in kind was again emphasized on December 11, 1852: "Wanted in exchange for the News, a few dozens of beaver, otter, mink, marten, wolf, fox, deer, antelope, sheep and other light skins which may be useful in manufacturing gloves, wash leather, linings, etc., or whose furs may be appropriated to clothing and various domestic purposes; also 25 calves and 50 pigs."

That the printers had other troubles than a dearth of newsprint and a scarcity of food is evidenced by excerpts in the closing weeks of 1853. "If the readers of the News would continue to read the News," the issue of December 8 lamented, "they must hand over some tallow and lard by the light of which we may write, and some wood to keep our fingers warm. *No mistake on this subject* and we wish our agents to *look* at it." Two weeks later the editor announced: "A few gallons of Sugar House molasses wanted immediately at this office for the purpose of making rollers in order to continue printing the News." For this commodity, of which there was "none in the market," the *News* would "pay a liberal price in cash." And would not some patron provide "A few pieces of sponge . . . for cleaning type, rollers, etc."?

Although the *News* continued as a weekly, a semiweekly was published beginning in 1865 and a daily commencing in 1867. The weekly and semiweekly editions were designed for rural subscribers and the daily *News* was intended primarily for city consumption. This practice was continued for many years.

During the so-called Utah War the church printing plant was moved from Salt Lake City and divided between Fillmore and Parowan. The *News* was printed first at one town and then the

other in order to confuse General Albert Sidney Johnston's army as to the location of the press.

Today the *Deseret News* is the principal official organ of the church and has a wide distribution among its members. It has more than fulfilled the expectations of its original editor, Dr. Richards, who announced in the prospectus:

Motto — "Truth and Liberty." We propose to publish a small weekly sheet, as large as our local circumstances will permit, to be called "Deseret News," designed originally to record the passing events of our State, and in connexion, refer to the arts and sciences, embracing general education, medicine, law, divinity, domestic and political economy, and everything that may fall under our observation, which may tend to promote the best interest, welfare, pleasure and amusement of our fellow citizens.

We hold ourselves responsible to the highest Court of truth for our intentions, and the highest Court of equity for our execution. When we speak, we shall speak freely, without regard to men or party, and when, like other men, we err, let him who has his eyes open, correct us in meekness, and he shall receive a disciple's reward.

We shall ever take pleasure in communicating foreign news as we have opportunity; in receiving communications from our friends, at home and abroad; and solicit ornaments for the "News" from our poets and poetesses.

Utah's first daily newspaper was the *Pony Dispatch* which began in the summer of 1861. Issued as a single sheet by the *Deseret News*, it grew out of the need of supplying the public with the information contained in the voluminous dispatches arriving by pony express. Many of the dispatches concerned events of the Civil War, and it was not fitting that a week should elapse between the publication of each group, or that they should take precedence over the sermons and religious discourses of the general authorities of the church. This gratis service to *News* subscribers lasted only a few months, for dispatches were soon reincorporated into the weekly issues, presumably because of paper scarcity and abandonment of the pony express in the fall of 1861.

Unique in early Mormon publications are two readers and the *Book of Mormon* printed in the Deseret alphabet. A phonetical alphabet consisting of thirty-two letters and sounds, it was purely a Mormon invention. The idea germinated with the Board of Regents of the University of Deseret in 1853, and was executed by a committee consisting of Parley P. Pratt, Heber C. Kimball, and George D. Watt. Designed to "simplify the orthography and read-

ing of the English language," the attempt soon proved abortive, due principally to "the difficulty of application, involving the effacement of etymologies and the disconnection of roots from their derivatives, together with the limitations of the community."⁹

With the influx of converts migrating from Europe to Utah came the problem of language. Many of the older generations found it extremely difficult to gain a speaking and reading knowledge of English. For the accommodation and edification of these people, four Scandinavian papers, *Utah Posten*, *Bikuben*, *Morgenstjernen*, and *Svenska Harolden*, were founded at Salt Lake City between 1873 and 1885. *Der Beobachter*, a German paper, was founded there in 1890.

Settlement of the Saints in Utah gave an opportunity for growth and expansion to the church which had been impossible under its seventeen previous years of peregrinations. Auxiliary organizations such as the Sunday School, Primary, Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association, and Young Women's Entrenchment Society were organized, each of which founded periodicals to guide and support its work. *The Juvenile Instructor*, founded in January, 1866, was "designed to educate the rising generation of the Latter-day Saints and to give support to the Sunday School movement."¹⁰ *The Contributor*, founded in 1879 by Junius F. Wells on behalf of the Young Men's Organization, afforded the young people of the church an opportunity for literary expression. In 1897 it was succeeded by *The Improvement Era* into which was later incorporated the *Young Woman's Journal*, a companion magazine to *The Contributor*. In June, 1872, *The Woman's Exponent* was founded as the official organ of the Relief Society, a woman's auxiliary which was organized by Joseph Smith in 1842 at Nauvoo. *The Exponent* later became *The Relief Society Magazine*.

In the pages of these early Mormon periodicals and newspapers one may find many of the underlying factors which went to make up the culture of the West. Publications of the migratory period mirrored frontier life and the westward push which placed the Mormons beyond incessant persecution. The missionary papers contained the stimulus which led men to seek a new religion and a new life in the vast regions of the undeveloped West. Lastly, in

⁹ Roberts, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, V, 80.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 478.

the colonization phase, the pioneers of the press pictured the growth of the Mormon communities and the development of a cohesive commonwealth formed by the labors of those who conquered the desert and made it "blossom as the rose."