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Dramas and Curiosities

Contents

THE COVER *Second South looking east from Main Street in Salt Lake City. The Wilson Hotel in the center of the block was a temporary residence of Anne Bradley in November 1906 before she followed former U.S. Sen. Arthur Brown to Washington, D.C., where she shot him on December 8. USHS collections.*

In this issue
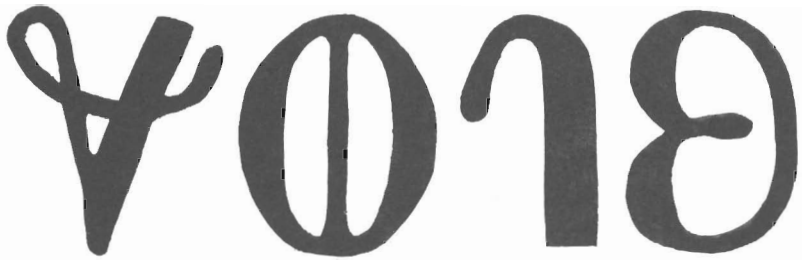
Dramatic events receive so much news coverage today that media reporting and analysis sometimes dwarf the events themselves. No hour-by-hour coverage accompanied the move of almost a third of the U.S. Army against the Mormons in 1857-58 — arguably the most dramatic event in Utah history since white settlement. However, the motives of the Buchanan administration became the subject of controversy almost at once. The first article in this issue looks at various conspiracy theories attached to the Utah Expedition and points out the most likely areas for fruitful research. This unique expedition will undoubtedly continue to fascinate historians.

Other dramas from Utah's past quickly faded from historical view. The fatal shooting in 1906 of former U.S. Sen. Arthur Brown by his mistress and the devastating arsenal explosion of 1876 merit recounting because they remind us that the private passions and cataclysmic events on today's front pages have antecedents and will always be part of the news even when their effect on history is minimal.

By contrast, the little drama enacted at Good Indian Spring in 1859 received no press attention then and likely would not today, for the first steps that humans of different cultures take toward understanding each other are the very antithesis of the violence and destruction that rivet our attention to the nightly news.

The last two articles examine curiosities: psychic phenomena and spelling reform. The warm welcome Sir Arthur Conan Doyle received when he lectured in Salt Lake City in 1923 is in itself curious, given his earlier writings on the Mormons. That he spoke from the Tabernacle podium on spiritualistic matters is even more astonishing. The time, energy, and money the Mormons funneled into creating a distinctive phonetic alphabet when they were still struggling with the problems of settlement and survival remain puzzling, but the origins of many of the curious symbols in the Deseret Alphabet have been illuminated by contemporary research. The symbols above represent the sounds in *Utah* — the scene of countless dramas and curiosities.

Creating a New Alphabet for Zion: The Origin of the Deseret Alphabet

BY DOUGLAS D. ALDER,

PAULA J. GOODFELLOW, AND RONALD G. WATT
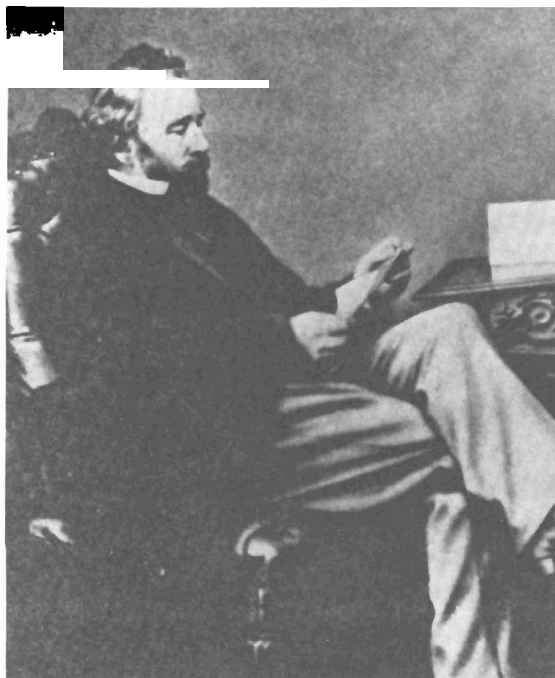
George D. Watt. From a biography by Ida Watt Stringham and Dora Flack.

IN THE 1850S THE MORMON SETTLERS IN UTAH were battling for their very lives. Their first decade of building an empire in the Great Basin had just begun and was still experimental. Yet, amid this struggle for survival, Mormon leaders decided to undertake a basic reform of the English language. They chose to divert time and precious hard currency to create a new alphabet, hardly an action that would yield crops or converts. Nevertheless, they made it the first agenda item of their fledgling University of Deseret, founded in 1850. What motivated their utopianism? What tradition did they

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join in the long line of linguistic dreamers? Where did they turn for their ideas? Did they invent this so-called Deseret Alphabet or did they link into a larger effort to perfect the English language? These questions surround the peculiar story of Utah's Deseret Alphabet.

Everyone who uses the English language has some trouble with spelling; many people have trouble with it all the time. They may complain about the inconsistencies of English orthography as they reach for the dictionary, but not many people do anything about it. However, a few have tried to do something, and for some reform became an obsession.

When someone gets the urge to reform English spelling, either he tries to work within the existing alphabet and get rid of those spellings that particularly irk him, or he tries to invent a whole new alphabet in which each letter represents only one sound and no sound may be represented in more than one way. The first method is usually called simplified spelling; the second produces a phonetic alphabet. Simplified spelling reformers include Benjamin Franklin, Noah Webster, Melville Dewey, Mark Twain, and Theodore Roosevelt. Phonetic reformers include George Bernard Shaw, Isaac Pitman, Brigham Young, and again Benjamin Franklin and Mark Twain.

The earliest American spelling reformer, Benjamin Franklin, designed a new alphabet in which each letter corresponded to one sound and each sound was represented by only one letter. He enlisted the aid of his friend Noah Webster, and it was through Webster that spelling reform achieved its greatest success.[1]

When Franklin first tried to involve Webster in spelling reform, Webster was not interested. But by 1789 he was in favor of it and promoted the subject in his book *Dissertations on the English Language*. He introduced a system of simplified spelling and was responsible for many of the differences in English and American spellings today. Many of Webster's spellings have been accepted into American usage, such as dropping the final *k* from words like music, physic, and logic. His dictionary of 1806 was the first American dictionary of note.

Melville Dewey, the inventor of the Dewey Decimal System, also devised a form of simplified spelling. His reform does not seem to have made much of an impact.

[1] Benjamin Franklin, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. William B. Wilcox (New Haven a London: Yale University Press, 1972), 15: 173.

The Simplified Spelling Board, instituted by Theodore Roosevelt in 1906, attempted to legislate spelling reform. With support from Andrew Carnegie,[2] Roosevelt enlisted some of the nation's leading minds: Nicholas Murray Butler, William James, Mark Twain, Thomas R. Lounsbury, Isaac Funk, and Richard Watson Gilder. In 1906 Roosevelt instructed the government printing office to publish all government documents with the new spellings the commission had developed,[3] but the new spellings were ridiculed in the public press and by Congress.[4]

George Bernard Shaw, the British playwright, was greatly concerned with both written and spoken language. The pronunciation peculiarities of Englishmen and Americans greatly offended him. He saw himself as a great Henry Higgins out to reform a world of Eliza Doolittles. He wanted to find a system of orthography that would represent the actual sounds of the language and establish a standard of English pronunciation. Shaw also thought that a new alphabet could save time and space in printing. He and his friend Isaac Pitman worked together on the reform. Pitman, a schoolteacher in Bath, had developed a shorthand system he called phonography; it formed the basis for modern shorthand. Though he had to struggle to get it established, Pitman shorthand eventually became a national movement with its own schools, journal, and disciples. Shaw believed that Pitman's alphabet proved several things: that a forty-letter alphabet could represent English sounds, that a new alphabet could be accepted because the Pitman system had spread around the world, and that anyone who wanted to learn a new alphabet could do so.[5]

One of the many people who learned Pitman shorthand in England was George D. Watt who was born in Manchester in 1812. In 1837 he came into contact with Mormon missionaries and was baptized under the hand of Heber C. Kimball. Five years later he sailed for America to join the Mormons at Nauvoo. There he taught classes in phonography, made shorthand notes of official proceedings, and became president of the Phonographic Club of Nauvoo. Brigham Young studied phonography under Watt and began to

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[2] Clyde H. Dornbush, "American Spelling Simplified by Presidential Edict," *American Speech*, 36: 236-38.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Albert C. Baugh, *A History of the English Languages* (New York, 1957), p. 389.

[5] Abraham Tauber, ed., *George Bernard Shaw on Language* (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1963), 183.

think of developing a new alphabet, but the death of Joseph Smith and the exodus from Nauvoo ended his thoughts of language reform. Watt left Nauvoo in 1846 to fulfill a mission in Great Britain. Although family tradition says he went to better his knowledge of shorthand, he spent most of his time in regular missionary labors.[6] He did, however, use his shorthand at two church conferences and at a debate between a Protestant preacher and a Mormon elder.[7]

Soon after the Mormons settled in the Great Salt Lake Valley, Brigham Young revived his ideas about language reform. On March 13, 1850, he presided over the organizational Board of Regents meeting of the University of Deseret and at the next meeting told the board that the language should be shortened. He left it to them to come up a means of accomplishing reform.

On March 20 W. W. Phelps, who appears to have been given the assignment to present an alphabet, explained his method of shortening the language. It was evidently not related to Pitman shorthand. Young was pleased with the attempt but asked why the old (Latin) alphabet would not be acceptable, leaving out some letters that were not sounded. He also raised the question of using phonography. The type of alphabet Phelps submitted is not known, but he had apparently reduced the alphabet more than Young wanted. At their next meeting the board agreed to study the problem more closely before taking further action. They wanted a language that was simple and plain. For this reason they admired the beauty of Indian speech.

The board's feeling of inadequacy in the area of language reform probably prompted Young to send for Watt who was still on his mission. He was released late in 1850 and returned to America, arriving in Utah late in the summer of 1851. Meanwhile, the board was very busy establishing a school system in Utah. In November 1850 some board members spoke of errors in the present orthography and desired a change so pupils might be advanced more rapidly.

During April Conference in 1852 Chancellor Orson Spencer related what the board had been doing about education. Young also

[6] George D. Watt to Willard Richards, February 5, 1848, Willard Richards Collection, LDS Church Library Archives, Salt Lake City.

[7] *Report of Three Nights Public Discussion in Bolton, between William Gibson, H.P., Presiding Elder of the Manchester Conference and the Rev. Woodville Woodman, Minister of the New Jerusalem Church. Reported by G. D. Watt.* (Liverpool: Franklin D. Richards, 1849).

spoke about education, focusing a portion of his sermon on reform of the English language. He believed one letter should not have many pronunciations. Furthermore,

> If there were one set of words to convey one set of ideas, it would put an end to the ambiguity which often mystifies the ideas given in the languages now spoken. Then when a great man delivered a lecture upon any subject, we could understand his words. . . . If I can speak so that you can get my meaning, I care not so much what words I use to convey that meaning.[8]

He also told the congregation that he had given the Board of Regents the charge of reforming English orthography.

Nothing was done, however, until a regents meeting a year later on April 12, 1853. Present were Brigham Young, Willard Richards, Orson Hyde who was the chancellor-elect, Albert Carrington, W. W. Phelps, John Taylor, George A. Smith, Ezra T. Benson, Wilford Woodruff, Franklin D Richards, Lorenzo Snow, Erastus Snow, Jedediah M. Grant, John Vance, and George D. Watt. Vance and Watt were not members of the board but were present because of the topic under discussion.

Vance remains a mystery figure in the introduction of orthographic reform in Utah. He was very prominent in the beginning, but little is known about him. He was born November 8, 1794, in Tennessee, spent some of his early life in Illinois where he was introduced to the Mormon church, and arrived in Utah with the Jedediah M. Grant company on October 2, 1847. He was a bishop at Winter Quarters, a counselor to Bishop William G. Perkins of the Seventh Ward, a member of the high council, a school commissioner, and a justice of the peace.

At the meeting on April 12 "Brother John Vance presented a new system of writing the consonants and vowels of his own discovery of the characters to those sounds commonly used in phonography." The board discussed sounds by combination. Later, in a letter to Brigham Young, Watt discussed Vance's amalgamation principle, which seemed to bring two sounds under one symbol.[9] The board concluded that the new system took half the amount of writing as present-day English and double the amount of space as phonography. The board seems to have had a problem deciding between reducing the number of characters to be similar to a shorthand or having one symbol for each sound. The reason for this

[8] *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London, 1854-86), 1: 71.
[9] Watt to Young, August 21, 1854, Brigham Young Collection, LDS Church Library Archives.

was probably Brigham Young's own ambiguity on the subject. Vance's writing seems to have been a compromise.

The subject of reform of the language came up at the next board meeting on September 20, 1853, when Brigham Young said that phonography and a system of hieroglyphics would provide a good method of instruction for children.

A month later, on October 27, the board, on a motion from Daniel H. Wells, appointed Parley P. Pratt, Heber C. Kimball, and George D. Watt as a committee to bring the board a new alphabet. Ten days later Pratt, 'speaking for the committee, presented an alphabet to the board and called it Pitman's Phonographic Alphabet in Small Letters. The new alphabet of forty characters, each with a distinct sound, was actually Pitman's phonetic alphabet called phonotype. The committee had even prepared a visual display of the alphabet. Then at the next meeting, the board discussed alphabets for Indian languages but did not consider the new alphabet for that purpose. Watt was elected secretary of the board and for the next few meetings kept the minutes in phonotype.

The assignment at the next meeting was for each board member to present his own alphabet. Wells suggested phonography and "in a neat speech gave his reasons for so doing." Ezra T. Benson "presented the old alphabet." Pratt favored phonotype; Wilford Woodruff also favored phonotype with three small changes. William Appleby and W. W. Phelps apologized for not bringing in a new alphabet. Phelps said it was too difficult, and yet in 1850 he had presented a "Mormon" alphabet to the board.

A few days later, with Brigham Young and John Vance in attendance, Vance again presented his alphabet to the board. Young told him that combining more than one sound in one character would not solve the problem. Each sound should have one simple sign. He also emphasized "that the object of the board was not to shorten or lengthen the written language but to give to every sound its accompanying sign in the formation of words." The regents, led by Young, then went through each sound that was part of phonotype and phonography and approved them individually. They also named each sound. The process was continued at the next meeting. Phonotype had forty characters, but the board approved only thirty-eight.

When the regents met again Willard Richards said that Pitman's phonotype was not the right alphabet. He wanted a completely new

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Ɑꞁꙅꙅᚐꞁꞁ ꞀᒐᏢꙌꙅᗺꞁꞁ.

Long Sounds.			Letter.	Name.	Sound.
Letter.	Name.	Sound.	ꞁ	....	p
ꙅ	....e	...as in....eat.	ᗺ	....	b
Ɛ	....a	" ate.	ꞁ	....	t
ꙅ	....ah	- art.	ꙅ	....	d
Ꝋ	....aw	" aught.	C	....che as in *ch*eese.	
O	....o	" oat.	Ϛ	....	g
Ꝋ	....oo	" ooze.	ꙅ	....	k
Short Sounds of the above.			ꙅ	....ga...as in...*g*ate.	
ᛁ	......as in......it.		ꟼ	....	f
ᛁ	" et.		ᗷ	....	v
ᛁ	" at.		⅃	....eth..as in .*th*igh.	
ᛁ	" ot.		Ƴ	....the " *th*y	
ᛁ	" ut.		ꙅ	....	s
ꟼ	" book.		ᛟ	....	z
Double Sounds.			ꝺ	....esh..as in..*fl*esh.	
ꙉ	....i....as in ...*i*ce.		ꙅ	....zhe " vi*si*on.	
ꙅ	....ow " *ow*l.		ᚔ	....ur " b*ur*n.	
Ƴ	....ye		ᛚ	....	l
ꙍ	....woo		ꙅ	....	m
ꟼ	....h		ᚺ	....	n
			ꞃ	....eng.as in.*leng*th.	

Deseret Alphabet from The Deseret
First Book, *1868.*

one, for the old symbols jumbled with the new ones would only confuse the learner more. Orson Spencer, W. W. Phelps, and Jedediah Grant agreed. Watt mentioned that the committee had been instructed to retain as many of the old letters of the alphabet as possible, and Woodruff told the board that if they found fault with the committee's alphabet they should present a better one. Near the end of the meeting Young walked in. He had not been there long enough to understand what had taken place, but he said he did not see any difficulty in establishing the new alphabet. The inscription on the reverse side of the display sheet made by the committee says, in phonotype, "rejected."[10]

[10] Phonotype transcripts of Board of Regents minutes, LDS Church Library Archives.

The detailed Board of Regent's minutes end with that meeting. However, a short summary of later minutes provides some insight into what happened afterward. Between November 22 and December 22 the board worked on the new alphabet and asked the committee to devise a phonotype, alphabet completely different from the English alphabet. Parley P. Pratt, a member of the committee, probably did not attend, because on November 22 a note from him asked that he be allowed to withdraw from the board temporarily because of other commitments. Heber C. Kimball never attended board meetings; thus it was left to George D. Watt to construct the new alphabet. The summary minutes simply state, "From November 18 to December 22, the board labored and investigated the matter of a new alphabet diligently, then they adopted unanimously the alphabet presented by their committee. The same is now denominated the Deseret Alphabet."[11]

Where the characters for the Deseret Alphabet came from is not known. Several commentators have tried their hands at identifying the source of the peculiar characters. Hubert Howe Bancroft compared the letters of the Deseret Alphabet to some of the characters that the Book of Mormon plates were in,[12] and some similarities can be seen, mostly in characters that are also similar to Greek letters. The Book of Mormon characters do not seem to have been an important source for the Deseret Alphabet.

Brigham Young's secretary, T. W. Ellerbeck, wrote that Watt created the alphabet by designing some of the characters himself and taking others from the ancient alphabets shown in Webster's unabridged dictionary.[13] Hosea Stout also credited Watt with working out the characters.[14] Jules Remy, a French visitor to Salt Lake City, reported that the alphabet originated with W. W. Phelps,[15] and Floris Springer Olsen said that some of the characters in the Deseret Alphabet could be traced to Pitman characters.[16] The evidence indicates that Watt did most of the work on the alphabet. It is still unclear, however, where the characters themselves came from.

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[11] Summary of Board of Regents minutes, LDS Church Library Archives.

[12] Hubert H. Bancroft, *History of Utah* (San Francisco, 1890), pp. 712-13.

[13] Samuel C. Monson, "The Deseret Alphabet," *Utah Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters Proceedings*, 30: 23-29.

[14] Hosea, Stout, *Journal of Hosea Stout*, ed. Juanita Brooks (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1964), 2: 509.

[15] Jules Remy and Julius Brenchley, *A Journey to the Great Salt Lake* (London, 1861), 2: 185.

[16] Floris Springer Olsen, "Early Nineteenth Century Shorthand Systems and Possible Similarities between Any of Them and the Deseret Alphabet" (Masters thesis, Utah State Agricultural College, 1952), p. 49.

It seems evident that the sounds (not the letters) of the Deseret Alphabet were borrowed entirely from Pitman shorthand. Observers have long cited Pitman as a source,[17] but now the tie is complete. In 1980, A. Hamer Reiser, longtime Pitman writer in the Church Office Building and the last of a long line of secretaries beginning with George Watt and continuing through David W. Evans who recorded general conference sessions in Pitman shorthand, examined the sounds of the Deseret Alphabet and confirmed that they were Pitman. He compared them to his own Pitman primer and explained how close the similarity was. With that insight the authors searched for an early Pitman primer, one that could have been used by Watt in Nauvoo and in the University of Deseret regents' meetings. At the Library of Congress the 1847 edition of Pitman was found; it corresponds completely to the Deseret Alphabet and seems to establish that the thirty-eight sounds and the structure of the Deseret Alphabet were borrowed entirely from Pitman.

If the sounds of the Deseret Alphabet are now known to have been borrowed from Pitman, the design of the letters remains a mystery. There are several hints but no neat package of information to explain the origin of the letters. As mentioned above, some have thought that they were borrowed from an unabridged Webster's dictionary. William Nash postulated that the 1848 edition of the unabridged dictionary was used by Watt. On page lxxxiii Nash found a full-page chart of the Ethiopic Alphabet but after careful examination concluded that only eight of the Ethiopic characters were similar to Deseret Alphabet characters and that "the similarities . . . are probably accidental."[18]

Recently, following a hint that Willard Richards had a book entitled *Diacritical Remains and Antiquities of Ancient Britain*, David Abercrombie of Edinburgh suggested that William Camden's book *Remains Concerning Britain* might have been the volume owned by Richards. Paula Goodfellow's examination of the 1605, 1623, and 1657 editions of *Remains Concerning Britain* produced no characters that could have served as models for the Deseret Alphabet.[19]

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[17] S. George Ellsworth, "The Deseret Alphabet," *American West* 10 (November 1973): 10. A dissertation to be completed in 1985 by Douglas A. New, "History of the Deseret Alphabet and other Attempts to Reform English Orthography," will be useful to future scholars.

[18] William J. Nash, "The Deseret Alphabet," May 1957/MS, p. 23, University of Illinois Library, Urbana. Stephen W. Stathis of the Library of Congress located both the 1848 and the 1841 dictionaries of Noah Webster. The former was published in Springfield, Mass., and the latter in New Haven. Both include the Ethiopic Alphabet and alphabets with Hebrew, Samaritan, Arabic, and Syrian symbols.

[19] Abercrombie to Goodfellow, December 22, 1982.

Another suggestion is that the characters were adapted from the Pitman symbols. Both the Pitman and the Deseret Alphabet short sounds have a straight line as part of the symbol. The Pitman characters are differentiated by a dot or a dash in a certain position along the line. The Deseret characters have curls, lines through, or lines slanting off of the perpendicular line.

As mentioned earlier, Brigham Young suggested that a new alphabet could be adapted from the existing (Latin) alphabet. Following this clue one, can find several convincing adaptations. The *e*, for example, is turned upside down in Deseret. The *oo* is an *O* with a line drawn down the middle to suggest two parts. The *b* is merely a reverse capital *B*. The *che* symbol is simply a capital *C*. The *zhe* sound in *vision* is represented by an *S*. The *o* is an *O*, the *g* a stylized *g*, and the *w* a *W*. A backwards capital *N* stands for the sound *eng*. The *l* is an *l* with a lefthand tail on it very much like a cursive *l*. The *t* is an upside down *t* without the crossbar. The *n* is a stylized *n*. The letter representing the sound *ye* could be considered an adaptation of *y*.

Obviously, other Deseret Alphabet letters are not related to the Latin. Alternative sources for some of them are not hard to find, the most fruitful being the Phoenician Alphabet[20] where the *n* symbol is most distinct. The Phoenician *m* appears in the Deseret upside down for the short vowel in the word *hot*. The Phoenician *b* could be turned upside down and become the Deseret short vowel in *at*. The Phoenician *l* resembles the Deseret *t*. The Phoenician *n* is very close to Deseret *eng*. The Deseret double *o* could have been adapted from the Phoenician *q*. Of the many alphabets examined, the Phoenician seems to be the most similar to the Deseret. Nonetheless, many letters cannot be found in the Phoenician or by adapting Latin letters. Many other possibilities exist. There are a few matches with Hebrew and Greek, and even runes offer some comparisons.

The scholar is left with an incomplete detective job. It seems likely that the committee referred to several existing alphabets to design the new Deseret Alphabet characters. Researchers may one day find additional sources from which characters were borrowed. On the other hand, Watt or Richards or Phelps or even Brigham Young may have designed some characters fresh.

[20] Hans Jensen, *Sign, Symbol and Script*, tran. George Unwin (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1969), pp. 291, 452. See also Ernst Doblhofer, *Voices in Stone* (Souvenir Press, 1961), p. 35; Alfred C. Moorhouse, *The Triumph of the Alphabet* (New York: Henry Schuman,), fig. 30; and Ignace J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press,), p. 137.

Why Mormon leaders undertook such an exotic experiment as the Deseret Alphabet is hard to understand. Certainly in 1853 they had more urgent business. Yet they allocated thousands of dollars of hard currency to have the new alphabet cast in type in New York. Cash was especially dear to the Saints who were trying to bring immigrants to Utah and to procure necessities for building an empire in the Rocky Mountains. They could ill afford to waste cash.

Spelling reform seems a strange concern for a group of people trying to build the kingdom of God. However, the Mormons believed that someday there would be a great reform in language and a perfect language would be restored to earth. A resolution of the Deseret Typographical Association affirmed that the Deseret Alphabet was just a step in this great reform,[21] a belief that provides a glimpse into the utopian mind set of the Mormons. They were convinced that they were building a new society uniting religious principles with political and economic activities. In many ways the Deseret Alphabet was just one more aspect of the perfect society the Mormons were hoping to build in anticipation of Christ's return.

On a more practical level, Brigham Young felt that children should not be forced to spend long hours sitting quietly in school "on a hard bench until they ache all over." They should be able to move around and do things that interest them. The Deseret Alphabet would make it easier for children to learn to read, and they would not have to spend as much time in school. He also told the Board of Regents that the alphabet could aid foreigners in learning English.[22] A later theory states that the alphabet could have been designed to keep the children of Deseret protected from outside influences.[23] This argument does not seem to fit evidence from the period of the designers' deliberations.

The Deseret Alphabet has to be considered an expensive failure. Several primers were printed, classes were held, and attempts were made to convert the Saints to using the alphabet. But even during the lifetime of Brigham Young the project failed to gain solid support, and following his death the alphabet silently died. The cumbersome alphabet characters failed to capture the imagination of the church membership. The alternative of using Pitman

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[21] Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, August 2, 1855, microfilm in Special Collections at Utah State University, Logan.

[22] Ibid., January 31, 1859.

[23] A. J. Simmonds, "Utah's Strange Alphabet," *True Frontier*, November 1968, p. 28.

Title page from The Deseret First Book, *1868.*

shorthand characters would not have gained a following either. So the Deseret Alphabet remains a historical curiosity, a testament to visionary men who succeeded in building an inland empire but could not replace the existing culture that surrounded them despite its linguistic imperfections.