

# UTAH HUMANITIES REVIEW

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*"The proper study of mankind is man."*

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## CONTENTS

Fairfax Proudfit Walkup: <i>The Sunbonnet Woman: Fashions in Utah Pioneer Costume</i> . . . . .	201
S. S. Ivins: <i>The Deseret Alphabet</i> . . . . .	223
Leah R. Frisby and Hector Lee: <i>The Deseret Readers</i> . . . . .	240
Marguerite Ivins Wilson: <i>Yours Till—: A Study of Children's Autograph Rhymes in Utah</i> . . . . .	245
Volney King: <i>Millard County, 1851-1875 (An Original Journal, Part Three)</i> . . . . .	261
Charles E. Dibble: <i>The Mormon Mission to the Shoshoni Indians, Part Three</i> . . . . .	279
Clarice Short: <i>Two Poems of the West</i> . . . . .	294

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## DEPARTMENTS

A Regional Bibliography . . . . .	295
Notes and Queries . . . . .	298
Book Reviews . . . . .	302
Contributors' Page . . . . .	308
News Notes . . . . .	309

# THE DESERET READERS

LEAH R. FRISBY AND HECTOR LEE

A part of the program to simplify and rationalize orthography which produced the Deseret Alphabet—perhaps the most difficult part of the program—was to propagate this new system of writing. And the logical place to begin was with children in the schools, whose minds were still untainted by the phonetic absurdities of conventional spelling. But it was not till the movement had almost died that textbooks in the new script were finally issued. In 1868, a first reader (*The Deseret First Book*) was published<sup>1</sup> by the Regents of the Deseret University. It contained thirty-four pages of graded sentences, a transliteration of the names of the cardinal numbers, and a multiplication table; and it was generously adorned with pictures. Later, a *Second Book* of seventy-two pages, for older students, appeared. At the end of this *Second Book* is noted in standard type:

The illustrations used in the First and Second Books are selected from *Willson's Readers* (so justly popular, and so universally used in the Territory), by the kind permission of the author and publisher.

Although every effort was made to introduce the *Books* as textbooks in the schools, the old readers were not discarded. The experiment proved unsuccessful because, in the first place, the undertaking was too expensive. George A. Smith, in a sermon delivered April 8, and printed in *The Star* of May 29, 1869, said:

The manuscript of the *Book of Mormon* is in the Deseret Alphabet, and is now ready for publication. It is designed to publish an edition of ten thousand copies, suitable for the use in the schools. Its publication will involve considerable expense.<sup>2</sup>

That expense was verified in the report of Chancellor Wells, of the University of Deseret, on February 17, 1870:

The appropriation of \$10,000 made by your honorable body at the last session has been expended in procuring works

<sup>1</sup>A teacher's book, printed in Roman type, carried a key to the first half of the *First Reader*. The title page bears the date 1863, but we have found no book of that date printed in the new alphabet.

<sup>2</sup>Andrew Love Neff, *History of Utah, 1847 to 1869* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1940), p. 854.

printed in the Deseret characters, including 20,000 copies of the first and second school books designed for introduction in common schools as readers; 8,000 copies of the first part of the *Book of Mormon*, and 500 of the book complete, and the stereotype plates of all have been secured. There are yet some balances due for services rendered in prosecuting these labors, which will be liquidated as soon as possible out of the sales of the above books, and it is designed, as means accumulate from those sales, to use them again in procuring further works of the kind.<sup>3</sup>

The services of Orson Pratt amounted to \$6,038.05 (he had asked for \$6,537.87) and the total sum for the experiment of the Alphabet amounted to \$20,000, "an educational fortune for that day," observes Neff.<sup>4</sup> Apparently book sales were not good.

Perhaps a more significant reason for the failure of the project becomes apparent when one examines the books themselves. The tailless characters and the monotonous evenness of the lines made words difficult to distinguish. Besides, pronunciation and orthography could not be made uniform. The word *when* is scounded "h-woo-e-n"; *yes* comes out "ye-e-s"; *will* is "woo-i-l"; the article *a* is phonetically "ah"; and the article *the* is alway "th" as in *thy*. The word *university* is pronounced "ye-i-oo-n-i-v-ur-s-i-t-i." The consonants, too, are difficult to remember.

Furthermore, the founding fathers apparently did not consider it their function to entertain the "rising generation" with lessons that were interesting. The following example will show that the exercises are not exactly thrilling. The first two lessons go like this: "I am in. As we go. On to it. I am. He is. It is I. It is he. Am I in? So is he. Is he up? He is up. We go up to it." One can scarcely imagine a frontier youngster held spellbound by such exciting lessons as these: "I see a fly. May I get the fly? Yes, you may get it, but it will fly off. It bit an ox. The ox can run. Can the fly run? Yes, the fly can run up on the high wall."

The educators did not object to such colloquialisms as "I have a nag"—a touch of frontier realism, no doubt. And they were most anxious to let the primer exercises teach practical lessons. The books convey the kind of practicality that one would expect in an isolated, self-supporting, desert community. "When we get up at sunrise," suggests that

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 855.

<sup>4</sup>*Loc. cit.*

ideal of industry and thrift observed by the people who called their land "Deseret."

Two lessons are devoted to riding horses and owning guns. "A gun is good to keep off the dogs and bad men at night," we are told. There are lessons on how to dig a well, how to grow rhubarb, or "pie-plant," how to train a colt, how to weave a hat, and how to care for fruit trees. That it is necessary to go to school is another precept that one would expect here, for the Mormons kept their teachers busy even while crossing the plains, and held school in wagon-boxes and tents after arrival in the valley.

Bible quotations are included, with the entire *Sermon on the Mount* occupying the last several pages of the *Second Book*. *The Lord's Prayer* and some of the *Proverbs* also appear.

There are several science lessons which, of course, leave much to be desired by way of complete information, but at least science was not ignored. The sun and stars, animals, insects are all discussed, though of necessity in rather superficial fashion. Lesson 17 in the *Second Book* is called "The Stars," and follows the poem "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." It says:

The poetry, printed above, called "The Little Star," is often spoken by young boys and girls. It tells very happily their thoughts about the star. But there are many things which the youthful do not know about the stars. There are also many things about the starry heavens which are unknown to the aged and the learned. The stars are too numerous to be counted by men: many of them are at a very great distance from the earth which we inhabit. They are also much larger than this globe.

At the end of each book are the multiplication tables, and a table of Arabic numbers with the equivalents spelled out in the Deseret characters. Book Two adds Roman numerals and a table of contents.

And of course moral lessons are not overlooked. There are several on the necessity of strict obedience to parents. Honesty is praised in several exercises, and the reader is admonished to "feed the cow," and to "let the cat lie near the warm fire!" He is urged to be good to the poor, and to shun tobacco and those who use the "filthy weed." Even the lesson on play is more didactic than gamesome, with its insistence on children's duties and on propriety. Lesson XLV (see illustration) reads:

It is pleasing to children, to have their seasons of play, and



to have their choice sports. This is right, and it is good for children thus to amuse themselves, at a proper time and place.

The see-saw on this picture is one of the plays in which youth indulge, and with many it is thought to be a very fine pastime.

These children enjoy their frolic, and are glad to have such times. They live in the country, and were it not for their plays and games, they would be dull; but they have all sorts of sport, and they enjoy it too; for they are healthy, and full of vigor. They breathe the pure air. They rise early in the morning; and have all their little tasks to perform; and when these are over, they have leave granted them to play.

The "literature" of the readers is in the *Second Book* only, and consists of poems such as "The Star," mentioned above, "Little Drops of Water, Little Grains of Sand," and a few others. The poem "To a Grand-child" begins:

Oh speak the truth, my pretty child,  
Oh speak the sacred truth;  
'Twill blossom in your coming years,  
If planted in your youth . . . .

Two other poems are interesting here because they convey so well the flavor of Mormon pioneer thinking:

#### THE GOOD BOY

When Earnest was a little boy  
He learned to read and spell;  
He always went in time to school,  
And got his lessons well.

What his dear mother bid him do,  
He never failed to try,  
He never spoke a naughty word,  
And never told a lie.

And when he grew to be a man,  
Good people loved him well;  
And of his kind and noble deeds,  
The little children tell.

God loved him too, and when he died,  
He took him up above;  
And placed him in a happy home  
Where all is peace and love.

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The lark is up to meet the sun,  
The bee is on the wing;  
The ant his labor has begun,  
The groves with music ring.

And shall I sleep when beams of morn  
Their light and glory shed?  
For thinking beings were not born  
To waste their time in bed.

With the coming of the railroad in 1869, school books became more plentiful. There came also the distracting influences of the outside world. Gradually the Deseret Alphabet was forgotten, and today it is little more than a curiosity to the few people who know about it. The University of Utah has a collection of first and second readers that cannot be read without a key; the Church has a font of type that cannot be used; and a few of the older citizens have memories of a queer looking alphabet which they studied long ago in school, and from which they derived only a lifelong handicap in spelling English words in the conventionally inconsistent way. To the historian, the Deseret Alphabet is little more than a "noble experiment." But to the folklorist it becomes another significant expression of that yearning found in the hearts of all people—the yearning for a more perfect and harmonious society that made possible the conquering of the West.