

Among the Mormons

A Survey of Current Literature

Edited by Ralph W. Hansen

*I would the gift I offer here
Might grace from thy favor take.*

John Greenleaf Whittier, *Songs of Labor*

An article in the June 1, 1968, *Church News* entitled "BYU Gets Rare Books" described items of early Mormon interest recently purchased for Brigham Young University. What did the BYU Library buy and where did the money come from? Purchased was *The Reflector*, a newspaper of Palmyra, New York, which printed pirated portions of the Book of Mormon in its issues of January 2, 13, and 22, 1830. The Prophet Joseph secured an injunction which ended the illegal publication of extracts from the yet unpublished Scripture (published in March, 1830). This interesting item is one of many from the Thomas Winthrop Streeter Collection of Americana being auctioned by Parke-Bernet Galleries of New York. For bibliophiles, the Streeter sale has been one of the most important sales held in this country, both in terms of quantity and quality of the materials offered. Over two million dollars has already been realized in twelve sessions, and two more are yet to be held.

The significance of the Brigham Young University acquisition is not that BYU obtained some rare books, but that these were obtained by purchase rather than as gifts. When I was associated with the BYU Library as University Archivist and Transcripts Librarian, money for the purchase of expensive books and manuscripts was difficult if not impossible to come by. It was a simple economic fact that in improving a weak library collection, the Y was constrained to focus on general book needs before investing in esoteric, albeit important, research materials.

But I digress. The money for this purchase, and several other items bought at the same auction, came from the "Friends of the BYU Library." Many libraries have "Friends" organizations, members of which pay five or more dollars a year to belong and in exchange may receive from the library a periodical describing recent acquisitions or may attend an annual or semi-

annual meeting. They most certainly will be dunned for additional funds to buy "the most important book to come on the market this year." The "Friends" program at the BYU appears to be well financed. To illustrate, Mr. Streeter purchased *The Reflector* for \$410 in 1945. The Gallery estimated that it would sell for \$1,000. The bidding must have been spirited, for the sale price was far in excess of the estimated figure.

Those of you who have attended auctions know how widely prices fluctuate — sometimes way above and sometimes below an established value. Book auctions suffer from the same forces that affect other auctions. If many buyers are competing for the same item the price is bound to go above expectations. If there is no competition the price reflects this fortunate (if you are a bidder) happenstance. For example, Parke-Bernet offered a set of the *Times and Seasons* for which they expected to receive \$2,000. This Mormon newspaper sold for \$900. On the other hand, a printed copy of Sidney Rigdon's *Oration Delivered on the 4th of July, 1838 at Far West, Caldwell County, Missouri* was expected to bring \$3,000 and sold for \$3,500. An 1849 *Constitution of the State of Deseret* was estimated at \$3,500 and brought \$4,250.

Pretty heady figures. I can visualize some of you heading for grandfather's trunk in the attic hoping to find next summer's trip to Europe with a frayed cover. Don't bother. Even though a bookseller once wrote a book with the alluring title *Gold in Your Attic*,¹ chances of finding a real winner are very slim. If rare book librarians had ten dollars for every old family Bible they were offered they could really buy some fine books. Age in itself does not enhance the value of books. But that's another story.

Speaking of winners, the Streeter sale offered a copy of the *Deseret Second Book*, a primer once used to teach the Deseret alphabet in Mormon schools. The volume sold for \$50. In the late 50's and early 60's the L.D.S. Church Historian's Office was selling the same book and companion works over the counter for twenty-five or thirty-five cents each. In cleaning a basement storeroom several thousand mint copies of the primers were discovered. I acquired several hundred copies of each volume for use by the BYU Library Exchange Department. Needless to say, this was a very popular item with our exchange partners and helped us to balance our exchange accounts. Normally when so many copies of a presumed-to-be-rare book hit the market the bottom falls out of the price. Evidently booksellers have not heard of this cache for I still see Deseret alphabet books offered for amounts from fifty to one hundred dollars. By the way, the Church Historian's Office no longer sells Deseret alphabet readers over the counter.

Let us look for a moment at the prices of what is sometimes called Mormon Americana. Suppose you found a document or printed item in your possession which you were reasonably certain was scarce and perhaps had monetary value. Should you try to sell it or give it to a university? How could you verify its value? My information is not completely current, but I don't know of any

¹This has just been updated by Van Allen Bradley as *The New Gold in Your Attic*, a guidebook for book hunters with an up-to-date price index and guide to more than 2,500 valuable American books and pamphlets.

well-to-do collectors in Utah at present (not since Herbert Auerbach died in 1945). This fact influences the Utah sale value of what you have to sell. How about the Church Historian's Office? Unless times have changed there is an understandable reluctance to spend tithing money on such purchases. Besides, the Church Historian probably already has a copy unless it is an original manuscript. How about the universities? This would be a good place to start. The University of Utah is placing special emphasis on its Western Americana collection and the Brigham Young University has long had a fine Mormon Collection plus the Hafen Collection of Americana, which is strong in western history. (I am not conversant with Utah State University's activities in this regard.)

Most university libraries will have *American Book-Prices Current* and its British counterpart *Book Auction Records*, which annually list prices received for auctioned books in their respective countries. These are accurate sources for price information *provided* the publication in question has sold at an auction within the last decade. Earlier listings would not reflect current value and even the recent quotations must be used guardedly. The journal *Manuscripts*, published quarterly by the Manuscript Society, has a regular column devoted to a report of the auction market for letters, diaries and other manuscripts, which can supply price information, if not pleasurable reading. However, for expert advice ask for the Rare Book Librarian, Manuscripts Curator, or whatever he is called at your local university.

If the university library does not prove fruitful, try an antiquarian book-seller. The yellow pages of your phone book will lead you to those in your community. But don't be disappointed if the price offered isn't what you anticipated. As a matter of fact, you would likely do better, and Mormon scholarship would certainly benefit, if you gave your coveted book to a research library as a gift and claimed the value as a tax deduction. The simple economics of the antiquarian book business works to the disadvantage of selling your prize locally (i.e., Utah) for a fancy price. For example, an item which you might sell for \$300 to a Salt Lake dealer has no place to go for resale in Utah, so it must go to the east or west coast. The Salt Lake dealer sells your item to another dealer — say Edward Eberstadt of New York — for \$600. Eberstadt may well list it in his catalog for \$1200 and get it. Buyers with the necessary capital look to sellers like Eberstadt for quality merchandise, and they are willing to pay his premium prices. Such sales are the lifeblood of the antiquarian book business and although sellers may feel cheated when they learn the ultimate sale prices as compared to what they received, this is merely the necessary mark-up for sellers to stay in business.

A perusal of some recent Eberstadt catalogs is an educational experience for the potential or neophyte aficionado of Mormon Americana. Catalog #165 lists volume one of *The Deseret News* for sale at \$3,500, while volumes two through four are listed at \$1,250 each. Succeeding volumes decrease in price down to volumes seven and eight, which cover the years of the Utah War (1857–58). Volume eight is listed at \$2,500, primarily because portions of the volume were published at Fillmore City after the Saints fled Salt Lake

before the advancing Johnston's Army. Presumably, fewer issues were printed during this hectic period, thus creating an artificial scarcity represented in higher prices today. Thereafter, the sale price of bound volumes of *The Deseret News* decreases sharply.

So far emphasis has been on published works. Looking at manuscripts, we find that Eberstadt had a manuscript copy of James J. Strang's "Ancient and Modern Michilimackinac, Including an Account of the Controversy between Mackinac and the Mormons" for sale at \$7,500. Eberstadt also listed a Brigham Young letter at \$250 and two letters by Lt. Gen. Daniel H. Wells of the Nauvoo Legion at \$500. Why so much for Strang and relatively less for Brigham Young? Content, availability (Young letters appear on the market more frequently than do those of Strang), and demand all influence price. In the final analysis, someone has to be willing to pay the asking price and obviously Strang is a hot item.

Utah has long been a paradise for collectors of Western Americana. Part of this bonanza is due to the Mormon proclivity to write diaries; part is due to the nature of Mormonism, which has attracted wide attention and fostered publications by friend and foe alike. The keeping of diaries was encouraged by Brigham Young, thus providing present-day Utah historians with a wealth of original sources unrivaled by most western states. In one sense, the abundance of original sources in Utah is a mixed blessing. Diaries that have absolutely no historical or genealogical value are frequently brought to libraries as valuable (dollar-wise?) sources for the historian. Fortunately there are also many of fine quality, some of which have been edited and published. In my own travels around Utah, I have often found that the librarians of such institutions as the Huntington Library have, like the ubiquitous Kilroy, already been there. Some fine Utah and Mormon historical documents reside in the Coe Collection at Yale, the Bancroft Library at California (Berkeley), the Houghton at Harvard, and other institutions, some of whose collections have been described in these pages in past issues. Although this situation locates original sources for the study of Utah and Mormon history away from Mormon research centers, scholars are grateful for the work of preservation performed by these libraries at a time when Utah's institutions were not adequately prepared to assume the responsibility. Albeit adequate historical and university libraries now exist in Utah, Mormon manuscripts still have a tendency to migrate out of the state.

I previously indicated that to my knowledge Utah has had no major collector of Western Americana since Herbert Auerbach passed way. Auerbach, of the Salt Lake department store, was born in 1882. He studied music and mining, but his interests were increasingly drawn to merchandising and real estate management in his native Salt Lake. Music remained a life-long interest, and Mr. Auerbach collaborated with Anthony G. Lund, Tabernacle Choir director, on religious songs. Traveling as a mining engineer, Auerbach had opportunities to interview pioneers, trace diaries, and in general search for historical information. I was told (perhaps this is apocryphal) that Auerbach advertised the wares of his store by air-dropping leaflets over Utah's rural

communities. As part of the advertisement he solicited books and manuscripts which would be considered in trade for purchased items from the store. After Auerbach died in 1945, an effort was made to keep his collection in Utah, but the executors believed that a larger sum could be realized if the collection were auctioned in London. The sale in England was disappointing and the remainder of the collection was sold by Parke-Bernet in New York. As long as there are sales such as the Auerbach and Streeter auctions, opportunities for bringing Utah and Mormon manuscripts back to Utah — although at an increase in price — can be taken advantage of by Utah's institutions. Once such items are obtained by libraries, they rarely if ever are available for future sale. The current trend is for libraries to acquire the type of material we have been considering for research collections, thus depleting the grist of the auction market. Therefore, contrary to what I said previously, do head for grandfather's trunk and dig out that trip to Europe — there *may* well be gold in your attic, as well as an opportunity to contribute to the basic materials needed for the important task of understanding our history.

