

Great Basin Kingdom Revisited

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MY STORY MIGHT JUSTLY BE ENTITLED, to borrow a phrase from Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Epiphany in the Room of a College Dormitory." It all began in the spring of 1939, fifty-four years ago, when I was a senior at the University of Idaho. The university had sponsored a "Religion in Life" week. There were representatives of the major Christian churches and also representatives of the Jewish and Buddhist faiths. Each of the speakers was invited to stay with a particular fraternity, sorority, or dormitory to participate in evening "rump sessions" and to "hold forth" in a public discussion each afternoon at four. General assemblies at 10 a.m. on Tuesday and Thursday for all students and faculty were well attended because university classes were dismissed. The most eloquent of the featured speakers was Dr. Benjamin Mays, then dean at Howard University, who presented the opening general assembly talk in our field house. The son of black sharecroppers, Dr. Mays cautioned us not to confine our minds within a narrow orthodoxy. "Keep the purposes of God and the needs of his children foremost," he urged.

I find the following account in my diary written after his talk. "The great events of history add grandeur to our lives. Like the mountains, they make us feel our insignificance, but they free the immortal mind, let it feel its greatness, and release it from the earth." Clearly whether these are Mays's words or someone else's (and I have since seen a similar statement by Hilaire Belloc), I was inspired by this man who went on to become president of Morehouse College, a black university in Atlanta founded at the end of the Civil War, and died recently at age eighty-nine. One Morehouse graduate who took his advice to heart was the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., who called Mays "My spiritual mentor and my intellectual father." Mays gave the eulogy at King's funeral.

"Religion in Life" week taught me how to present and discuss religious questions before a public body. These educators were frank, open, and informative. They were neither dogmatic nor opinionated. They listened, were respectful of students and their questions, and discussed religious issues in a manner that was serious, meaningful, and sometimes eloquent.

They did not avoid difficult problems, were willing to express personal opinions, and were skilled in utilizing humor to maintain interest and good feeling. There was no attempt to convert, no downgrading of dissenting opinions, no attempt to play on the emotions. These informal addresses were good models for me as I later made presentations to young people's groups in my own and other churches and in my articles on religious subjects for various professional and semi-professional publications.

At the end of the week, trying to reconcile my training in economics with my religious beliefs and feeling inspired, I sat at my dormitory room desk and prepared an outline for a book I proposed to write some day on the social philosophy and practices of the Latter-day Saints. I still have that outline.

That fall I enrolled in graduate school at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. Two years later in the spring of 1941 I was asked to substitute for a professor of economics at North Carolina State University in Raleigh who had suffered a heart attack. As a concession for me to do this, the department at Chapel Hill allowed me credit toward the Ph.D. for courses I might take at North Carolina State in agricultural economics and rural sociology.

For these seminars at North Carolina State, I read all the works in the field of rural sociology, a relatively new discipline at the time. This reading produced two results. First, I became acquainted with the regional studies conducted by Howard Odum, founder of the Department of Sociology at Chapel Hill, who had just published the monumental *Southern Regions of the United States*, an exhaustive analysis of the black man and woman, the cotton and tobacco mill worker, the tenant and sharecropper, the small farmer, and indeed all aspects of the social economy of the South. He had followed this up with a study of *American Regionalism*, which I noted was very scanty on the Mountain West. I thought this is where I might contribute by doing a book on the human problems of the Mormon West. I envisioned studying the social economics of the West much as Odum and his associates had studied the social economics of the South. The emphasis would be on people, particularly rural people.

Second, I discovered in this reading the interest of scholars in Mormon culture. This impression was triggered by the description of the Mormon village in T. Lynn Smith's *Sociology of Rural Life*. Smith was the current president of the Rural Sociology Society, and I did not realize at the time that he had graduated from Brigham Young University and had gone to Minnesota to study under Lowry Nelson. I was delighted to find in the library copies of studies of Mormon communities in Utah by Lowry Nelson—studies that later were combined and published by the University of Utah Press as *The Mormon Village*. This led me into a search for other articles and books on the secular aspects of Mormon life—works by historians,

economists, and literary figures as well as by sociologists. I was excited, fascinated, driven. Though not a large literature, it was thrilling for me to discover. I read in *Harper's* magazine Bernard De Voto's brilliant essay on his Mormon grandfather, Samuel Dye of Uinta, Utah, near Ogden, published under the title "Jonathan Dyer, Frontiersman." Then I found, also in *Harper's*, an article by Juanita Brooks entitled "The Water's In" about Mormons in Bunkerville, Nevada. In 1942 Wallace Stegner published his marvelous little book, *Mormon Country*, with delightful essays on Mormon life. Finally I discovered an essay on the Mormons by that grand old man of economics, Richard T. Ely, "Economic Aspects of Mormonism" published in *Harper's* in 1903.

Sparse though it was, this literature set exactly the right tone. It was well written and suggested what a comprehensive treatment might be able to do.

Then came World War II, and I became involved, first as an economist for the North Carolina Office of Price Administration and then as a private in the United States Army. I was sent to North Africa for a year and a half and then to Italy for another sixteen months. During those three years overseas I inevitably experienced a certain nostalgia for the West and wanted very much to get started on a study of the economic activities of my own people. I wrote to Dr. John A. Widtsoe, formerly president of Utah State University and the University of Utah and a respected writer and scholar, about the possibilities of a doctoral dissertation on the subject. He replied with a very honest letter. It would make a great dissertation, he said. There was so much that could be said and so much in the church archives that bore on the subject. He noted that there were problems getting access to the material, but he suggested that I proceed very quietly, ask at first only for printed works, then for the Journal History of the church, and, as I build their confidence in me as a reliable scholar, gradually move into the manuscript sources. He was sure, to use his image, that I could proceed as the Arabian camel that first stuck its nose in the tent, then its face, then its front, and, moving in gradually, eventually carried away the whole tent. As you can guess, this bashful Idaho farm boy did not react against engaging in such a campaign.

After my discharge in January 1946 I accepted a teaching position at Utah State University and spent each summer for the next ten years doing research at the church archives in Salt Lake City. The archives were then more or less open, and it was exciting to be working on a new approach to Mormon history—following the economic activities, the economic programs, the way of life of the Latter-day Saint people.

I found far more than I ever supposed, far more than the church library people realized they had. There were the records of dealing in coin and currency, of the construction of irrigation canals, of church property own-

ership and management, of church farms, of building projects, of immigration. There were tithing account books of donations for this cause and that, ledger books of ZCMI, the Deseret Telegraph, railroad contracts, Relief Society enterprises, sugar companies, iron works, and coal mines. In short there was an essentially complete record of every important undertaking in which the Mormons were involved, and virtually none of them had been previously examined by any scholar. I could hardly wait to begin writing up the multitude of stories that could be told. From notes taken during the summer I wrote articles during the school year while I was teaching at Utah State and soon had more than half a dozen articles ready to submit.

But I was still a little unsure of myself. Could I write well enough? Did I know how to present the material in a way satisfactory both to scholars and to "ordinary" readers like my parents, neighbors, and non-academic friends?

Here I need to interject a word about my research. I was of course an economist, and economists are normally pictured as dry-as-dust people who are especially interested in numbers, prices, statistics, and abstract theory. I have never been able to forget the charge that economists would make marvelous lifeguards because they could go down deeper, stay down longer, and come up dryer than anybody else. But I struggled to prove that did not apply to me. My training in North Carolina had impressed me with the human drama of events. Commentators had led me to believe that pioneer Mormons were tense and humorless, that their journals were succinct, matter-of-fact, and devoid of humor. That, I am glad to say, was not my experience at all. As I went through the hundreds of diaries, record books, minutes of meetings, speeches, and letters of pioneers and church officials, I found many examples of jesting, satire, parody, wordplay, hyperbole, and jokes. This was particularly true of women pioneers, who saw the humor in situations that the men missed, or perhaps the women were more open in recording local happenings.

Every week I ran across incidents and statements that brought chuckles. I have written on this aspect of my research elsewhere, but let me give an example. I found in the archives approximately 30,000 letters signed by Brigham Young during his thirty years as Mormon leader. About 10,000 of these were responses to individuals who had asked his advice on some personal matter. It is clear that pioneer Utahns considered him to be a wise advisor, so they asked for his opinion. Did he think they should buy a certain piece of property? Should they import a bull this year? Should their daughter accept a proposal for marriage from a certain person the church leader knew? A woman's husband mistreated her, should she get a divorce? And so on. To most of these Young gave serious, well-intended answers. But he had fun in the process. When one person complained about something, Young replied, "Brother Jensen, I have already taken care of that

matter, so don't fret your gizzard about it." Stating that she had become a spiritualist, Elizabeth Green wrote to Young in 1851 to ask that her name be removed from church records. Young wrote in reply:

Madam: We have your letter of December 28 asking that your name be erased from the records of the church. I have this day examined the records of baptisms for the remission of sins in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and not being able to find the name of Elizabeth Green recorded therein I was saved the necessity of erasing your name therefrom. You may therefore consider that your sins have not been remitted you and you are free to enjoy the benefits therefrom.

To the woman who complained that her husband had told her to go to hell, he replied simply, "Don't go, sister, don't go!" To the frontiersman who asked him to "bless me with a wife," Young said, "Brother, I know of no woman worth a goat who would be willing to put up with your wild unsocial ways."

In January 1947, shortly after I began my researches, the University of Utah inaugurated a new regional quarterly called the *Utah Humanities Review*. The first issue carried articles by Bill Mulder, just returned to the English department from service as naval communications officer in Okinawa, who wrote on C. C. A. Christensen; Albert Mitchell, just returned to the university after completing his Ph.D. in speech at the University of Wisconsin, who wrote on the pioneer players and plays of Parowan; Lester Hubbard, specialist in eighteenth-century English literature, who wrote on the songs and ballads of the Mormon pioneers; and Charles Dibble, an authority on the Aztecs, who wrote on the Mormon mission to the Shoshoni Indians. Succeeding issues carried articles by Pearl Baker, G. Homer Durham, Helen Zeese Papanikolas, Stanley Ivins, Hector Lee, Lowell Lees, Halbert Greaves, Austin Fife, Rex Skidmore, Elmer Smith, Juanita Brooks, Sterling McMurrin, Harold Folland, Meredith Wilson, Dale Morgan, Leland Creer, and others. I was fascinated and read every word. I finally worked up courage enough to pay a visit to Hal Bentley, the editor, to explain what I was doing and to ask if he would be interested in publishing one or two of my articles. He said he was interested all right, but the articles had to be well written. Knowing that I was an economist, he repeated that insistence several times in our conversation. Well, I needed someone to level with me—could I write well enough for the *Humanities Review*?

I read in our Logan paper one day that Bill Mulder, assistant editor of the *Review*, was going to present a talk in that Athens of northern Utah. I telephoned to invite him to spend the night with us. He agreed. We had a nice dinner, but before he went to bed, I trotted out one of my essays—one on the building of a dam at Deseret in Millard County. Bill presumably read it before he went to sleep and the next morning said he liked it, would accept

it provisionally, but said it could be made a little more artistic. What would Wally Stegner do with it? he asked. How would he begin it, how would he conclude it? and so on.

Well, I fussed with it a little while and then sent it in, and he published it under the title, "Taming the Turbulent Sevier: A Story of Mormon Desert Conquest." By then I had another article on "Zion's Board of Trade, a Third United Order," which he also published the same year. Soon there was one on the law of consecration and stewardship in early Mormon history that he published followed by one on the economic role of Mormon women, quite possibly the earliest attempt to introduce Mormon women into the secular study of Mormon history. At the same time I published an account of the Deseret Telegraph in the *Journal of Economic History*, an article on "Property Among the Mormons" in *Rural Sociology*, and articles on "The Transcontinental Railroad and Mormon Economic Policy" and "The Settlement of Brigham Young's Estate" in the *Pacific Historical Review*.

All of these essays were on particular episodes and practices. How to get a theme to tie it all together? The virtuosity of Mormon leadership was evident, and their articulated goal of building a Kingdom of God was also unmistakable. But how to explain it all? Identifying a unifying factor was like trying to berth an ocean liner without tugs at night. The necessary inspiration came to me also in a kind of epiphany, this also involving Bill Mulder. Bill and Sterling McMurrin had organized in 1950 the Mormon Seminar, which met every Thursday afternoon on the University of Utah campus to explore in critical fashion different aspects of Mormon life and thought. Each week they brought in authorities to talk on such subjects as Mormonism and evolution, Mormonism and psychiatry, the Book of Mormon and the pre-Columbian Indians, polygamy, Mormonism and literature, Mormonism and education, and so on. In March 1951 they invited me to talk on Mormon economic history. This "call" forced me to focus seriously on the meaning of all my research. Influenced by my readings in American history I decided that in pioneer Utah were leaders such as Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, George A. Smith, Daniel H. Wells, and others, who had been brought up in America in the decades before the Civil War, who had been imbued with American ideals prevalent during those years, and who had remained in relative isolation in the Great Basin while the rest of America struggled through the Civil War and the following period of reconstruction featuring an overweening emphasis on private property, individualism, and free enterprising capitalism. Here was a theme for my dissertation. Clearly the basic social and economic objectives of the Latter-day Saints were determined during the first three years after the founding of the church in 1830. They included the gathering of church members into one place, the village form of settlement, group economic independence, comprehensive resource development to prepare the earth

for the Millennium, unified action and solidarity, and equitable sharing of the product of cooperative endeavor. Church officials attempted the redistribution of wealth and income, were charged with the regulation of property rights, involved the church in many types of business ventures, and assumed the ultimate responsibility for the development of the Mormon economy. The institutions and devices established to implement basic church policies in general were flexible, pragmatic, and provisional.

The mobilization of capital and the application of administrative controls on the Mormon frontier may have resembled the contemporary devices of large-scale corporations and holding companies. But the continuity of organized cooperation and careful long-range group planning stood out in sharp contrast with the individualism and short-sighted exploitation that often characterized the mining, cattle, wheat, and lumber frontiers of the Far West. As one Western historian wrote, the reigning philosophy was every man for himself, comparable to what the elephant said while he was dancing among the chickens. Whereas dominant American thought after 1865 held that superior results were to be achieved by *laissez-faire* institutions and policies, the seemingly unique policies of Mormon leaders, emphasizing as they did the welfare of the group, were nevertheless consistent with those commonly advocated and applied by secular government in the ante-bellum America that cradled Mormonism.

So I set out during the winter of 1951-52 to write the dissertation while on six-months leave without pay from Utah State. I finished the degree in 1952. "We respect your partisanship," my major professor said at the defense, "but we particularly praise you for not letting it cloud your scholarship and judgment." The dissertation, entitled "Mormon Economic Policies and Their Implementation on the Western Frontier, 1847-1900," included eleven more or less independent essays: the historical and philosophical roots of Mormonism, the economic mind of Mormonism, the principle of consecration and church finances, the principle of stewardship and property institutions, the principle of gathering and the Perpetual Emigrating Fund, church public works, the principle of solidarity and the frontier market, the principle of economic independence and the coming of the transcontinental railroad, religious sanction and Mormon entrepreneurship, and the role of the Mormon church in the economic development of the West.

Dr. Milton S. Heath, my major professor, encouraged me to submit the dissertation for publication by the Committee on Research in Economic History, of which he was a member. I revised and expanded it and submitted it in 1954. The readers praised it and made various suggestions. As I reworked it, however, I could see that instead of focusing on economic policies I would have to do a chronological narrative that would focus on the development and evolution of Mormon institutions, practices, and

policies. I was granted a sabbatical leave from USU in 1956-57 and arranged for a fellowship at Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery to supplement my income since sabbatical pay was only 60 percent of base salary. I spent the year writing what turned out to be an economic history of the Mormons. Emerson wrote that nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm. My work may not have been great, but the enthusiasm was certainly there. Completing one chapter a month, I finished it in a year.

The rewritten work, originally called *Building the Kingdom* and now called *Great Basin Kingdom*, was then resubmitted in 1957 to the Committee on Research on Economic History, which arranged for its publication by Harvard University Press. The book expanded on ideas picked up from Bill Mulder on Scandinavian Mormons, Tom O'Dea on Mormon sociology, Sterling McMurrin on theology, and Feramorz Fox on Mormon economic organization. I also profited from conversations with Lowry Nelson, Hal Bentley, Richard Poll, Dale Morgan, Gene Campbell, Juanita Brooks, Gus Larson, and Ed Lyon. Above all the book built on the indescribably rich and complete Western collection of the Huntington Library. The "finished" manuscript greatly benefitted from the editorial comments of my good friend, S. George Ellsworth, professor of history at Utah State, who went over the document carefully and made many helpful suggestions. I am also indebted to the editor at Harvard Press, who provided consistency and saved me from egregious errors.

An honest, youthful assessment of the published book was made by a nephew of mine who was still in high school and who was induced to read the book by my brother. He wrote, "Dear Uncle Leonard, I think you were a pretty good writer not to make the book no duller than it was. Your loving nephew, Farr."

In general *Great Basin Kingdom* was praised by colleagues, American historians, American sociologists, and others. I will just cite one—the flattering judgment of a fellow economist, Jonathan R. T. Hughes, Distinguished Professor of Northwestern University, who says he still requires his graduate students to read it as an example of good economic history. He called *Great Basin Kingdom* "a giant structure of deep and trustworthy scholarship and judgment with an analysis that is thorough, carefully laid out, and free of theoretical error." "The economic story," he wrote, "is a masterpiece that made the Mormon Zion live again for readers all over the world and for generations to come." Wouldn't that be enough to warm the cockles of any author's heart?

The local reception was especially interesting. A. William Lund and the LDS Church Historian's Office viewed it as a secular treatment with naturalistic explanations of the people and the times. It was not down the line of traditional Mormon history, which was sprinkled with supernatural explanations. Although I received complimentary letters from people such

as John A. Widtsoe, G. Homer Durham, and Ezra Taft Benson, A. William Lund decided if it was not "pro" it must be "anti," so he put a little letter "a" on the index card in the Church Historian's Office. One day I asked someone at the Church Historian's Office what the "a" meant. He said it designated an anti-Mormon work. The label remained that way until I was appointed Church Historian, when at the request of Elder Howard Hunter, a new card was inserted without the "a." President Harold B. Lee assured me that *Great Basin Kingdom* was a monument to LDS history, the finest thing on LDS history since B. H. Roberts's *Comprehensive History* was first published beginning in 1906.

Colleagues used it in Utah history classes: at Brigham Young University Jim Allen, at Utah State University George Ellsworth, at the University of Utah David Miller. Each independently asked his students to read the book, write a report on it, and among other things speculate on whether Arrington was a Mormon. Each of the three professors then reported the students' reactions. About half of the students at each institution thought I was a Mormon, and the other half thought I could not be because the book was written so dispassionately. I regarded this as a profound compliment. There is a school today that contends that Mormon historians, if they are real Mormons, should so declare it and should engage in what my editor at Alfred Knopf called "cheerleading." I tried not to do that in *Great Basin Kingdom*.

In 1963 some five years after *Great Basin Kingdom* appeared, I received two notices that were exciting. The first was word that the book had been placed in the president's library in the White House, the only book dealing with the history of the Mountain West and one of four books on the history of the American West as a whole. The second was an invitation from the University of Texas to give two lectures on the Mormons in their television series of seventy addresses on the History of American Civilization. The Ford Foundation had agreed to finance the series to be directed by that grand old man of American history, Walter Prescott Webb. Apparently Webb had been very impressed with *Great Basin Kingdom*, and in this televised series that included such people as Arnold Toynbee, Richard Hofstadter, Arthur Schlesinger, Dumas Malone, C. Vann Woodward, Allan Nevins, Arthur Link, Henry Steel Commager, and other noted historians, he had also invited me.

My first lecture was on "The Significance of the Mormons in American History" and the second on "The Mormon System of Cooperation." The series was widely used in university classes. Many young historians in seeing my name card at a historical convention have said they saw me in the Webb American Civilization series.

A follow-up was the invitation to give the annual luncheon address to the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association held at

UCLA in 1964. Not long afterwards I received an invitation to join the UCLA faculty as Professor of Western History, to take the place of John Walton Caughey who was retiring. Wanting to stay in Utah, however, I did not accept the offer.

The hardback of *Great Basin Kingdom* was exhausted in 1965. There followed a paper reprint in the Bison series of the University of Nebraska Press. The eighth printing has now been exhausted, and the Harvard Press has asked for bids from three university presses: the University of Utah Press, Utah State University Press, and the University of Illinois Press. The University of Utah Press has announced that a new printing of the Harvard University Press edition is scheduled to appear in the summer of 1993.

In 1988 on the thirtieth anniversary of the appearance of the book, the Mountain West Center for Regional Studies at Utah State University and the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University sponsored a symposium called "*Great Basin Kingdom Revisited.*" They invited prominent national historians, sociologists, economists, geographers, and literary historians to comment on the book and its impact on Western studies. The eight papers delivered at the symposium, which was held in Logan, have since been published by Utah State University Press under the symposium's title, *Great Basin Kingdom Revisited.*

The writing of this book led me in many directions. I have done studies on such federal programs in Utah as reclamation projects, defense installations, and New Deal programs. With some collaboration, I have done book-length biographies of William Spry, Charles C. Rich, David Eccles, Edwin D. Woolley, Brigham Young, Harold Silver, Charlie Redd, Alice Merrill Horne, and many shorter biographies in other books and journals.

I have done business histories of U & I Sugar Company, Tracy-Collins Bank, Hotel Utah, and Steiner Corporation. I have also been interested in women's history and in collaboration with my daughter, Susan Madsen, have published *Sunbonnet Sisters, Mothers of the Prophets*, and a study of rural LDS women. During the past two years I have written a history of my native state of Idaho commissioned by the legislature of Idaho, which will be published by the University of Idaho Press in late 1993.

My experience of almost fifty years in the field of Western economic history and biography has confirmed the worthwhileness of Mormon studies. Whether one's interest is the relation of religion to economic life, the appropriateness of certain institutions for survival in a semiarid region, the importance of the role of women, or the virtues of cooperation and community-mindedness, a study of the Mormon experience is rewarding. We now have a rich literature, one that grows richer every year. There has been a flurry of studies on the sequel, twentieth-century culture, the most recent being a history of the Mormon welfare program by Bruce Blumell and Garth Mangum, published by the University of Utah Press in 1993. I

hope myself in the years ahead to do a book on the economic programs of the New Deal of the 1930s.

All of this is the product of that epiphany in a college dormitory in 1939.