

Folk Ideas of Mormon Pioneers

Jessie L. Embry and William A. Wilson

IN 1997 MORMONS CELEBRATED THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY of the arrival of Brigham Young and the first LDS company to the Great Salt Lake Valley. During the anniversary year, they frequently discussed the experiences of the pioneers. After all this reflection, what will they remember? Will they recall the faith-promoting stories they learned in Primary, Sunday school, seminary, and family home evening? Or will they struggle to find out what “really happened”—if that is ever possible—complete with all the warts?

LDS members will probably do both. Some will heed the work of historians—lay and professional—who have examined the records and published books and articles attempting to explain “the facts.” But others will continue to listen to and repeat the age-old stories. In all likelihood, the stories will be remembered longer. Why? Because they grow out of and support many Mormons’ beliefs, their world view.

This essay grows out of four observations we have made regarding the way Mormons tell the story of the gathering to Zion and keep it alive.

1. Much of what average Mormons know about the church’s past was not learned from reading scholarly books. It comes from listening to stories at home and in a variety of church settings.

2. Most people, Mormons included, are motivated to action, not by what “really happened” in the past but by what they believe happened.

3. One of the best ways to understand what people believe is to examine the stories they listen to and tell, their folklore. We define folklore simply as stories passed from person to person and from age to age by word of mouth rather than by written texts. Such stories may be true or false. But even when they originate in actual happenings, they are often enlarged as they move through time and space to satisfy the needs and desires of both the narrators and their audiences. Just as we shape stories as we pass them along according to our needs, so too do we selectively remember details of past events. For example, there were at least three exoduses from Nauvoo, Illinois, from February to September 1846, but

many Mormons remember only the one in February across a frozen Mississippi River.

4. We re-create the past in the image of ourselves by projecting onto the past the image of what we want our society to be. Then we use stories about the past to justify creating our present society after that projected image. As a result, the stories tell more about *our* desires, hopes, and beliefs than they do about historical people.

METHODOLOGY

To learn what pioneer stories Mormons remember, we gave an open-ended questionnaire to church history students at Brigham Young University (Provo, Utah), visitors to the Museum of Church History and Art (Salt Lake City), and selected LDS ward gospel doctrine classes during January and February 1997. BYU religion faculty members were especially willing to distribute the questionnaire to classes, so we received 889 responses from their students. Volunteers handed out the survey at the museum for two weeks from 10 to 25 January 1997. This period is typically the slowest time at the museum, but it was even slower than usual. We received only 153 responses. Despite the differences in numbers, we compared the two sets of responses. After all, we came to the same conclusions after reading 163 BYU responses as we did after we had read 889. The survey was also given to 107 Gospel Doctrine class members in Salt Lake City, West Valley City, Sandy, Holladay (all in Utah), and a small town in Oregon. Twenty-three early morning seminary students in southern California also answered the questions.

RESPONDENTS

Besides answering the questions posed, the respondents provided biographical information. (See the following respondent break-down chart.) The percentage totals do not always add up to 100 percent because some people did not respond to all questions.

PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

<i>Respondents:</i>	BYU church history students:	889
	LDS Museum visitors:	153
	Gospel Doctrine:	47
	Seminary:	23
	Total:	1,112

*Biographical Information:**Gender*

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
Male	428 (48.1%)	59 (41.5%)	20 (42.5%)	14 (60.9%)
Female	460 (51.8%)	84 (59.2%)	22 (46.8%)	9 (39.1%)

Age

	BYU Church History	Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
under 20	166 (18.7%)	7 (4.5%)	0	23 (100%)
20s	711 (80.0%)	40 (28.2%)	9 (19.1%)	0
30s	4	30 (21.1%)	8 (17.0%)	0
40s	2	20 (14.1%)	7 (14.9%)	0
50s	3	17 (12.0%)	12 (25.5%)	0
60s	1	11 (7.7%)	4 (8.5%)	0
70s	0	13 (9.2%)	0	0

Where were you born? Respondents were born throughout the United States; very few were from foreign countries; Utah and California were the highest.

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
UT	252 (28.3%)	56 (39.4%)	21 (44.7%)	3
CA	165 (18.6%)		3	13 (56.5%)

Are you a lifelong member of the Mormon church or a convert? BYU students joined before age 20; museum visitors ranged from 10 to 65; Sunday school classes varied from 8 to 34.

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
Lifelong	819 (92.1%)	120 (83.9%)	33 (70.2%)	22
Convert	49 (5.5%)	23 (16.1%)	14 (29.9%)	1

Where did you attend public school? Again, the responses were all over the U.S.; Utah and California were the most frequent.

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
UT	205 (23.1%)	56 (39.4%)	22 (46.8%)	0
CA	172 (19.3%)	0	4	19

Where did you learn the information you have given above? Respondents usually gave more than one answer. These were the most common; many did not respond.

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
Church	500	75	25	16
Books	230	44	20	0
Home	225	21	4	2
Seminary	218	18	10	6

Has this information been important to you?

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
Yes	731 (82.2%)	120 (91.5%)	42 (89.4%)	11 (47.8%)
No	76 (8.5%)	5 (3.5%)	4 (8.5%)	5 (21.7%)
Some	6 (0.7%)	0	1 (2.1%)	1 (4.3%)

QUESTIONS

In generating the questions, we thought about stories that we had learned ourselves about the early Mormons. We also talked to other researchers about popular stories. We then wrote twelve questions regarding supposed historical events that might have been elaborated in stories over time. In other words, we anticipated the answers; we felt we knew many stories that Mormons believe.

We made the questions simple so respondents could answer them with just a few words. But we recognized that those giving a one word answer, such as the Nauvoo area was “swampy” before the Mormons settled there, were recalling other stories. Undoubtedly, those who talked about the swampy Mississippi River area recalled the stories of disease and miraculous healings that occurred when the Mormons first arrived. With each answer, there were many stories that respondents could have told about the event.

ANSWERS

Many respondents—whether they attended BYU, visited the LDS church museum, were participants in Sunday school classes, or attended a southern California seminary class—knew the stories that we expected. But there were some surprises. On some questions, nearly half (around 45 percent) of the BYU students did not respond. We propose at least two reasons for this. First, as the pioneer era has receded farther into the past, contemporary Mormon youth, even those with pioneer ancestry, find this past less relevant to their lives than did church members born before World War II. Second, the LDS church has grown rapidly, especially since the war, and many members have no pioneer heritage. Some respondents, though born in the church, are probably the offspring of converts and thus not closely connected to the Mormon past. Though respondents did not always know the stories, that does not mean they do not tell faith-promoting stories. They do tell them but about events occurring in modern times rather than in the pioneer past.

The table at the end of this essay shows the responses to all the questions asked. Space limitations allow us to analyze only a few questions.

Question 2. How did the Saints know who was to succeed Joseph Smith as president of the church?

After Joseph Smith’s death in 1844, at least eight men claimed to be his successor, splintering the Mormon movement. A majority, however, chose to follow the twelve apostles, led by Brigham Young. Although there are no contemporary accounts, many later claimed Young looked

and sounded like Joseph Smith when he spoke at a meeting.¹

Historians continue to debate whether this transfiguration took place and when an account of it was first recorded, but we were surprised to learn that it was not the story many Latter-day Saints remembered in 1997. Some respondents from all groups wrote that Brigham Young was chosen by revelation. Others answered that Joseph Smith had told the Saints who his successor was to be, that the Twelve had the authority to make the decision, and that Brigham Young spoke with power.

Why was the transfiguration not mentioned more often? In the last ten years, church members have seen a transfer of leadership from Ezra Taft Benson to Howard W. Hunter and then Gordon B. Hinckley. Older respondents remember the death of Heber J. Grant in 1945. Since then George Albert Smith (1945-51), David O. McKay (1951-70), Joseph Fielding Smith (1970-72), Harold B. Lee (1972-73), and Spencer W. Kimball (1973-86) have been president. In all these cases, the senior apostle succeeded. As a result, many Mormons believe the twelve apostles have always held the keys of succession. The transfiguration, therefore, is not as important to modern Mormons who believe in the succession by seniority as it was to nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints who saw several options.

Question 5. How did the Saints react when the federal government asked for volunteers for the Mormon Battalion?

When the federal government first asked Mormons to volunteer to fight in the Mexican War, many hesitated. They questioned helping a government which had refused to assist them. However, Brigham Young, who had asked Jesse C. Little to approach U.S. president James K. Polk, was pleased. With Young's encouragement, the Mormons agreed to join.²

According to historian Davis Bitton, the story of the battalion was "ritualized" very early. "This whole experience," said Bitton, "was transformed into a symbol of federal oppression, Mormon heroism, and the overruling omnipotence of God. It was told and retold in those terms;

1. For information on the succession and transfiguration, see D. Michael Quinn, "The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844," *BYU Studies* 16 (Winter 1976): 187-233; Ronald K. Esplin, "Joseph, Brigham and the Twelve," *BYU Studies* 21 (Summer 1981): 301-41. The most recent articles are Reid L. Harper, "The Mantle of Joseph: Creation of a Mormon Miracle," *Journal of Mormon History* 22 (Fall 1996): 35-71; and Lynne Watkins Jorgensen and *BYU Studies* staff, "The Mantle of the Prophet Joseph Passes to Brother Brigham: A Collective Spiritual Witness," *BYU Studies* 36 (1996-97), 4:125-204.

2. For information on the Mormon Battalion, see John F. Yurtinus, "'Here is One Man Who Will Not Go, Dam'um,'" *BYU Studies* 21 (Fall 1981): 475-87; W. Ray Luce, "The Mormon Battalion: A Historical Accident?" *Utah Historical Quarterly* 42 (Winter 1974): 28; and Norma Baldwin Ricketts, *The Mormon Battalion: U.S. Army of the West, 1846-1848* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996).

even participants started remembering it in those terms. The men of the battalion—and later their descendants—were lionized as representatives of truth in a heroic struggle.” He continued that while the story had some truth, the repeated narration “was a selecting out of certain aspects, dramatizing them, memorializing them, and giving the whole the simplicity of a morality play.”³

We were surprised, though, that only a quarter of respondents told this story. Between one-half and three-quarters said that Mormons willingly joined the battalion. The story has changed for several reasons. During the nineteenth century when the stories Bitton talked about developed, Mormons were engaged in struggles with the federal government. For example, polygamy raids and unwanted federal territorial officers turned many Mormons against the government. Eventually, Mormons resolved most of these problems, and a shift of attitude occurred. In 1898 church leaders encouraged Mormons to volunteer to fight in the Spanish American War. In every war since then leaders have asked members to support their governments.⁴ As a result, the story told about the battalion has shifted over the years. As Mormons are encouraged today to support government leaders, the altered story of battalion members willingly volunteering provides historical precedent for present action.

Question 7. As the Saints began their journey across the plains, what was their intended destination?

Question 10. What did Brigham Young say when he saw the Great Salt Lake Valley?

The story we expected to hear was that the Mormons, like the Children of Israel, had no idea where they were going but were led by a prophet. Brigham Young had had a vision and would recognize the place when he saw it. This story, of course, is not completely accurate. Before Joseph Smith was killed, he was planning to move to the West. He had read available reports, but he had especially focused on John C. Fremont’s explorations. He knew he wanted to take his people to a remote place where they could practice their religion without the government pressures they had experienced in Missouri and Illinois. For that reason, he eliminated California and Oregon, which looked like inviting places but would not be remote enough. After Smith’s death, Young and the other leaders continued to examine the reports. Simultaneously, Young also sought divine help.

By the time the first company arrived at the Salt Lake Valley, mem-

3. Davis Bitton, “The Ritualization of Mormon History,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 43 (Winter 1975): 74-75.

4. Robert Jeffrey Stott, “Mormonism and War: An Interpretative Analysis of Selected Mormon Thought Regarding Seven American Wars,” M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1974.

bers had broken into three groups. Brigham Young remained with a sick group, suffering from mountain fever. A small advance group charted the route through Emigration Canyon. On 21 July 1847, Orson Pratt and Erastus Snow saw the Salt Lake Valley for the first time. They explored the next day and started plowing on 23 July. Over the next days, the group investigated the nearby valleys, but by 28 July Brigham Young concluded that the Salt Lake Valley held the greatest promise and laid out the temple site.

Young was expecting to build a kingdom in the West, and he knew that it would expand beyond the Salt Lake Valley. Over the years he sent colonists to St. George and Cedar City in southern Utah, San Bernardino, California, as well as to other places in present-day Nevada and Idaho.

But for the center place, Young selected the Salt Lake Valley. Had he seen a vision of the place so that when he saw it he knew he was in the right place? What did he say just before he drove into the valley? On 24 July he saw the area for the first time. According to his prepared history, "The Spirit of Light rested on me and hovered over the valley, and I felt that there the Saints would find protection." In 1877 Wilford Woodruff recalled that Young "had seen the valley before in vision and upon this occasion he saw the future glory of Zion and of Israel, as they would be planted in the valley of the mountains." Woodruff recalled Young's remarks at the time: "It is enough. This is the right place. Drive on."⁵

Over the years this statement became "this is the place," a way of saying that Young only knew where he was going when he saw it. In 1921 the first *This Is the Place Monument* was dedicated at the mouth of Emigration Canyon. As a result, many Mormons believe those were Young's actual words.

According to folklorist Richard C. Poulsen, Mormons created a "migration myth," explaining that "through the transforming expression of folk belief, the landscape is made holy and therefore habitable."⁶ Geographer Richard Jackson has also questioned that the Mormons were wandering around with no clear idea where they were going. The myth started very early, argues Jackson, even among the first pioneers. In 1854 Heber C. Kimball, an apostle with the vanguard group, said, "We could not even get a chart from Fremont nor any other man from which to learn the course to this place."⁷

5. Ronald K. Esplin, "'A Place Prepared': Joseph, Brigham and the Quest for Promised Refuge in the West," *Journal of Mormon History* 9 (1982): 109.

6. Richard C. Poulsen, *The Landscape of the Mind: Cultural Transformation of the American West*, American University Studies, American Literature Series, Vol. 23 (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), quotes from 109-10; Poulsen, "'This is the Place': Myth and Mormonism," *Western Folklore* 36 (July 1977): 246-52, quotes from 252.

7. Richard H. Jackson, "The Mormon Experience: The Plains as Sinai, the Great Salt Lake as the Dead Sea, and the Great Basin as a Desert-Cum-Promised Land," *Journal of Historical Geography* 18 (Jan. 1992): 49.

Why was the story of not knowing where they were going important to the Mormons? According to Jackson, from 1847 until the 1880s, there was still some concern over whether Brigham Young was Joseph Smith's logical successor. But if God had led Young, he must be the prophet to replace Smith. Second, and as important, the Mormons saw themselves as God's chosen people, and like the children of Israel, they needed a wilderness experience of wandering without a destination.⁸

The stories that present-day Latter-day Saints know about where the Mormons were going confirm the belief that God led the pioneers to the Promised Land. While only about half said that the Mormons did not know exactly where there were going, nearly 90 percent believed Young said some version of "this is the place."

Question 8. How did the first group of Saints measure how far they had traveled each day?

We included this story because we learned as children that William Clayton invented the odometer. Of course, that is not true. Odometers had been available for centuries. Orson Pratt could have purchased one in London when he bought other scientific measuring devices. We wanted to know if that story was still accepted and how it has developed.

Brigham Young assigned William Clayton, assistant company clerk, to gather data for future travelers. To do that, he wanted to know how far the group traveled each day. At first he just estimated the distance, as did several other people in the company. Clayton was frustrated that his figures were always two to four miles less than others. Convinced that he was right, Clayton looked for a uniform sized wheel. He measured Heber C. Kimball's wagon wheel and concluded that it rotated 360 times in a mile. Then he tied a piece of cloth (some say red flannel) on the wagon and spent several days counting how many times the wheel went around. He admitted that this was "somewhat tedious," but he discovered his figures were more accurate than the other estimates.

Clayton then talked to Orson Pratt and asked if he could design a device that would click each time the wheel went around. At first no one took Clayton seriously, but eventually Orson Pratt asked Brigham Young if he should follow Clayton's suggestion. Young assigned Pratt to work on a design. In a half day Pratt figured out a way to count the wheel's turning using two gear-like instruments. Appleton Harmon, a skilled carpenter, built the roadometer.⁹

8. *Ibid.*, 52.

9. For information, see Norman E. Wright, "I Have a Question," *Ensign* 11 (Aug. 1981): 30-31; James B. Allen, *Trials of Discipleship: The Story of William Clayton, a Mormon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 240-41; and *William Clayton's Journal* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1921), 83, 91, 136-137, 143, 149.

The respondents' answers to the question surprised us. First, many did not respond. We thought more would know about the odometer than apparently did. Although we did not ask directly, we expected some people to say the Mormons invented the odometer. Only a handful did. A few mentioned that William Clayton, Orson Pratt, and/or Appleton Harmon were involved. Second, more people talked about counting the rotations than about making an odometer. Yet those who knew that someone had counted wheel rotations must have heard part of the story. Many even mentioned a rag tied to the wheel.

For us, the story of William Clayton inventing the odometer was told in Sunday school classes to prove that God blesses his Saints and through their efforts blesses the rest of his children. God inspired Clayton to make an odometer to help the Saints, but he also created a device which would be useful for years to come. This oversimplified view was not shared by the respondents.

But like us, respondents were probably not aware of the situation surrounding Clayton's decision to count the wheel's rotations. While there are stories of Young censuring the group for their behavior, these are not widely known. Most Mormons picture the pioneers—the vanguard group and those who followed—working together with no disagreement. Church leaders today talk about their agreement, stressing that they were no dissensions. With this model, many Mormons probably do not believe there were ever any disputes. While they would understand Clayton's frustration in wanting to prove that his mileage measurements were correct and later his anger when Harmon claimed to have invented the roadometer, contemporary Mormons have usually not been taught that those types of conflicts took place among the pioneers. If they are to be models after which we should pattern our own behavior, then the early Latter-day Saints must be appropriate prototypes.

Question 9. What did Jim Bridger think were the possibilities of settling in the Great Basin?

Question 11. What type of vegetation was in the Great Salt Lake Valley when the Saints arrived?

We were taught that Jim Bridger offered a thousand dollars for the first bushel of corn raised in the Salt Lake Valley and that there was only one tree standing in the valley when the Saints arrived. In fact, the Great Basin was not as isolated as these stories imply. Native Americans, especially the Utes, lived in the area. Fremont and other explorers had mapped it. Mountain men had gathered in Cache Valley and the Bear Lake area. Miles Goodyear was living in the Ogden area before the Mormons arrived. Brigham Young and the other leaders knew about the cold winters and water shortages in the valley, but they wanted their homes in

the area because it had few settlers and because it was remote.¹⁰

The vanguard group did consult with Jim Bridger about the possibilities of settling in the Great Basin. William Clayton recalled that Bridger knew about Goodyear and added that "the soil was good and likely to produce corn, were it not for the excessive cold nights, which he thinks would prevent the growth of corn."¹¹

Later Mormon leaders recalled the meeting with Bridger. Church Historian Willard Richards included a story about the impossibility of raising corn in Young's manuscript history. In 1850 and 1870 Young explained in talks that Bridger had said, "Mr. Young, I would give a thousand dollars if I knew an ear of corn could be ripened in these mountains."¹² Glen Leonard has traced the accounts of the corn story and plans to publish an article about its origin. But Leonard questions whether Bridger was making a bet or simply saying he did not know if corn would grow in the Salt Lake Valley.¹³

With Bridger's comments in mind, the Mormons continued to the Salt Lake Valley. What did they see when they arrived? First accounts varied. Orson Pratt and Erastus Snow, along with the others who entered the valley, found water and vegetation along the streams. They also noted that the area was dry and that there were large crickets.¹⁴ Journalist Thomas Bullock wrote that the valley had "wheat grass, which grows six or seven feet high" and other grasses that were "10 to 12 feet high." Wilford Woodruff exclaimed, "We gazed with wonder and admiration upon the most fertile valley spread out before us, for about twenty-five miles in length and sixteen miles in width, clothed with a heavy garment of vegetation."¹⁵ William Clayton was "happily disappointed" because "there is little timber in sight anywhere, and that is mostly on the banks of the creek." He was looking for an isolated area.¹⁶ Pioneer Harriet Young, on the other hand, declared, "We have traveled fifteen hundred miles to get here, and I would willingly travel a thousand miles farther."¹⁷ According

10. Poulsen, *The Landscape*, 109; Richard H. Jackson, "Righteous and Environmental Change: The Mormons and the Environment," *Essays in the American West, 1973-1974*, Thomas G. Alexander, ed. (Provo, UT: Charles Redd Center Monographs in Western History, No. 5, 1975), 21-42.

11. J. Cecil K. Alter, *Jim Bridger* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 124.

12. *Ibid.*, 125.

13. Conversation with Glen Leonard, 10 Jan. 1997.

14. James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 257.

15. Jackson, "Righteous and Environmental Change," 24.

16. Allen and Leonard, *The Story*, 257; Jackson, "Righteous and Environmental Change," 26.

17. William W. Slaughter and Michael Landon, *Trail of Hope: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 71-72.

to Richard Jackson, "Even the most optimistic of the Saints recognized that the Salt Lake Valley was in an area with inadequate precipitation."¹⁸

Though the pioneers recognized that settling in the Great Basin would be difficult, they did not see it as the desert that many modern Mormons envision. Jackson points out that the desert image imagined today started early. In 1850 Apostle Willard Richards explained at a celebration that when the pioneers came to the Salt Lake Valley there was "no cheering prospect before them but the earth, covered with black crickets." Church leaders continued to make similar comments. In 1852 Apostle and Church Historian George A. Smith declared, in a statement quite different from Wilford Woodruff's, that when the Saints arrived they found "a desert, containing nothing but a few bunches of dead grass and crickets enough to fence the land." Jackson contends that by 1877 "the tradition was complete, the Mormons had ... found a ... barren desert which had been transformed into a beautiful oasis through the faith and works of the Mormon settlers."¹⁹

This myth was picked up by newspapers throughout the United States and continued in the first histories. For example, in an early history Edward W. Tullidge talked about a "dry sterile desert." In 1892 Orson Whitney wrote that the Salt Lake Valley was a "waste of sagebrush bespangled with sunflowers—the paradise of the lizard, the cricket, and the rattlesnake."²⁰ Other accounts continued to describe the Salt Lake Valley as a desert. Hurbert Howe Bancroft's history said the only green in the valley were "two or three cottonwoods." John S. McCormick's 1980 history of Salt Lake City talked about a desert that blossomed as a rose. Jackson explains that until Thomas G. Alexander and James B. Allen's history of Salt Lake City was published in the 1980s the myth continued. But he concludes, "For most Mormons the official tradition is still that Brigham Young ... selected a desert valley as their new Zion ... and through the intervention of divinity transformed that desert into the gardens of the Wasatch oasis."²¹

Jackson lists several reasons for the creation of this story. The Mormons saw themselves as God's chosen people, but they had been forced to leave their "Zion," the place where Joseph Smith told them that Jesus Christ would return and had been forced to relocate in a faraway place. The fact that the pioneers could raise crops showed that God was helping the pioneers and that they were still his chosen people. It also directly linked the Mormons with the children of Israel. Like those following Moses, they had crossed a wilderness to settle in a desert—complete with

18. Jackson, "Righteous and Environmental Change," 23.

19. Jackson, "The Mormon Experience," 49-51.

20. *Ibid.*, 49, 51, 23.

21. *Ibid.*, 51-52, 55.

a Dead Sea, Jordan River, and Sea of Galilee. The story also served some practical purposes. Jackson talked about Young's "geopolitical" goals and said that Young could convince Mormons to go to areas that were truly deserts because the prevailing view that the Salt Lake Valley had once been a desert could be used to persuade settlers that other desert places could be transformed as the Salt Lake Valley had been.²²

We were surprised that many survey respondents did not know the bushel of corn and one tree stories. Many BYU students did not respond to the questions, and a handful even wrote, "Who is Jim Bridger?" Those who did answer reported that Bridger said it would be difficult or impossible to settle the area. More people answered the question about the type of vegetation in the Great Salt Lake Valley. Still almost one-fifth of BYU students did not respond. Very few knew the popular story of only one tree but were more generally familiar with the story of the undesirable desert. In fact, grouping the responses into those depicting the valley as a desirable or undesirable place to settle is even more revealing. The story of the desert blossoming as a rose, which Richard Jackson says developed in the 1850s, has caught hold and continues almost 150 years later.

Some answers were entertaining. Deserts have cacti, of course, some people said the valley was full of cacti. Others thought there were only weeds or tumbleweeds. Some mentioned sego lilies, probably remembering stories that the early pioneers ate sego lily roots. Two BYU students confused Nauvoo and Salt Lake stories and said the Salt Lake Valley was swampy. Three said it was frozen.

But we should not have been surprised. The story of one tree or a

22. *Ibid.*, 54. Jackson has not researched the exact origin of the one tree story, he thinks the Daughters of Utah Pioneers published it first. Personal conversation with Richard Jackson, 31 Jan. 1997. Volume 2 of Kate B. Carter, ed., *Heart Trobs of the West* (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1940), does have an essay by Nephi L. Morris called "The Lone Cedar Tree" where the tree tells the story. One paragraph reads, "When the first white men came through the mountains they saw me the day of their entrance and made their trail to me. It was around me they decided to build a city. ... When they came in long trains, one after another, week after week, season after season, the tracks they made along side of me became a part of the overland trail. I was the token of the end of the long journey" (242).

In 1933 the Daughters of Utah Pioneers placed a plaque and protective cover around a juniper tree in the grassy strip in the middle of 600 East just south of the 300 South intersection. After vandals cut down the tree in 1958, the president of the DUP, Kate B. Carter, and the director of the Utah State Historical Society, A. Russell Mortensen, debated whether this was the lone tree in the Salt Lake Valley. The argument nearly cost Mortensen his job. In 1960 the Central Company of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers replaced the marker with another which acknowledged "willows along the banks of the streams" but still explained, "[A] Lone Cedar Tree near this spot became Utah's first famous landmark." In 1991 students from the M. Lynn Bennion School planted a Rocky Mountain juniper near the Lone Cedar Tree plaque. Gary Topping, "One Hundred Years at the Utah State Historical Society," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 65 (Summer 1997): 265-72.

desert covered with sagebrush yields the same results. The respondents believe that God changed the weather and the environment for the Saints. This view is valuable to teach young Latter-day Saints that God can do the same for them. Like many of the other stories discussed, this story proves valuable in church settings to teach the role God can play in our lives.

Question 12. What happened when the crickets started destroying the crops in 1848?

The story of the seagulls and crickets was the most universally known. We got the answer we expected. The pioneers hoped for a larger harvest in 1848. The settlers planted their crops, but just as they started to come up, crickets came and started eating all the new growth. The pioneers tried to kill the insects. Then they prayed, and the Lord sent seagulls who ate all the crickets and saved the crops. The seagulls did not stop eating when they were full; instead they threw up in the Great Salt Lake and came back for more.

Historians have examined journals and other contemporary records and found that no one at the time recorded the crickets' arrival as a miracle. They also point out that the crickets came many times. Archaeologist David B. Madsen and historian Brigham D. Madsen have contended that the pioneers should have eaten the crickets—like the Native Americans—and killed the seagulls.²³

However, it did not take long for the seagull story to develop into a miracle. Henry Bigler heard the story in 1849 when he returned from California with the Mormon Battalion. In 1853 Apostle Orson Hyde discussed the event as a miracle in a general conference. The story continued to be enlarged over the years and the seagull became the Utah state bird. In 1913 the LDS church built the *Sea Gull Monument* on Temple Square. Over the years missionaries on the square have used the statue to explain in detail how the Lord protected the early Mormon settlers.²⁴

Historian William Hartley points out problems with the seagull miracle story. First, the gulls had been in the area for years. Second, biologists have shown that when gulls throw up crickets they are getting rid of the parts that they cannot digest. Third, the crickets had almost destroyed the

23. William Hartley, "Mormons, Crickets, and Gulls: A New Look at an Old Story," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 38 (Summer 1970): 224-39; Davis Bitton and Linda P. Wilcox, "Pestiferous Ironclads: The Grasshopper Problem in Pioneer Utah," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 46 (Fall 1978): 336-55; David B. Madsen and Brigham D. Madsen, "One Man's Meat Is Another Man's Poison: A Revisionist View of the Seagull 'Miracle,'" *A World We Thought We Knew: Readings in Utah History*, John S. McCormick and John R. Sillito, eds. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995).

24. Hartley, "Mormons, Crickets, and Gulls," 239.

crops before the gulls came. Fourth, in 1848 frost and drought as well as the crickets got the harvest. Fifth, contemporaries did not see the event as a miracle. Finally, it was not a one-time event. Gulls came in 1849 and 1850 and attacked crickets in other parts of Utah and the West.²⁵

Still, as historians Davis Bitton and Linda P. Wilcox explain, "Religious background was never far from the minds of the Mormons. ... Their very planting of crops was in itself seen as part of the fulfillment of the prophecy that the desert would blossom as a rose."²⁶ Hartley also explained, "The 'Miracle of the Gulls' story remains appropriate as an expression of the faith held by Mormon pioneers and their descendants. To them, God can and does personally intervene in the everyday affairs of men when faith is exercised." So the Mormons gained "confidence ... that God could so act if He willed it."²⁷

Mormons still accept this interpretation. Only 10 percent of the BYU students—the lowest no-response rate—did not put some version of the seagull and cricket story. Why did they remember this story? It is dramatic. It clearly says that the Lord was watching out for his Saints. It has been repeated often in church, school, seminary, and in LDS books. Even a non-Mormon who was mistakenly given the questionnaire at the Museum of Church History and Art knew the seagull story. (This was the only question he answered.)

DISCUSSION

What do stories like these tell us about Mormons' view of the world? In 1975 Davis Bitton wrote, "Although not yet studied from this point of view, Mormonism provides an instructive case study of the ritualizing of the past by a modern group with an unusually acute self-consciousness."²⁸ In other words, Mormons not only learn their history, they turn it into gospel. The history remembered by ordinary people, folk history, may not always square with the way events actually happened, but we must know this history if we are to understand Mormon hearts and minds.

These stories are important for a number of reasons. All people recreate their history to fit their present needs. This idea is not new. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner said, "Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time."²⁹ Or

25. *Ibid.*, 237-38.

26. Bitton and Wilcox, "Pestiferous Ironclads," 354.

27. Hartley, "Mormons, Crickets, and Gulls," 239.

28. Bitton, "The Ritualization," 68.

29. Quoted in Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987), 17.

as Wallace Stegner explained, "Any people in a new land may be pardoned for being solicitous about their history: they create it in a sense by remembering it."³⁰

Bitton has argued that while historians should try to learn "what really happened" in the past (if that is possible), they should not "ridicule all ritualizations of the past. For most of us will possess our history ritualistically or not possess it at all."³¹ In recent years some historians, as well as many folklorists, have moved beyond examining stories simply to prove or disprove them and have examined the narratives to discover how they function among the people and what they reveal about their beliefs. This has been our attempt in studying Mormon pioneer stories.

Few—if any—of the students we surveyed seemed too concerned with explaining how their stories reflected their world view. None of them said the stories were important because they explained their belief systems. But as folklorist David J. Hufford has explained, "Most people believe a large number of things that they never explicitly state as propositions, even to themselves. The natural vehicle of folk belief, perhaps of most belief, is stories that show what is true by what is said to have happened."³²

Whether the stories come first and generate supporting beliefs or the beliefs come first and generate supporting stories is the old "which came first, the chicken or the egg" question. As Maxine Miska, another folklorist, has explained, "Belief in the supernatural or the transcendent is clearly not simply the result of one's experience. Belief systems provide *a priori* interpretations for experience."³³ Folklorists call such interpretations *memorates*—that is, personal experiences with the extraordinary or seemingly supernatural interpreted, sometimes after discussing the experience with others, according to the dictates of one's belief system.³⁴ According to folklorist Sandra Dolby Stahl, "[M]anipulation of the reality involved is for the sake of rhetoric—to persuade the listener toward an appreciation of the cultural truths represented by the story."³⁵ She explains that sometimes those stories develop over time. It takes a reflective look back to understand the cultural meaning of the event.³⁶

30. Quoted in Bitton, "The Ritualization," 84.

31. *Ibid.*, 85.

32. David J. Hufford, "Beings Without Bodies: An Experience-Centered Theory of the Beliefs in Spirits," *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore and the Supernatural*, Barbara Walker, ed. (Logan: Utah State University, 1995), 20.

33. Maxine Miska, "Aftermath of a Failed Seance: The Functions of Skepticism in a Traditional Society," Walker, 90.

34. See Lauri Honko, "Memorates and the Study of Folk Beliefs," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 1 (1964): 5-19.

35. Sandra Dolby Stahl, *Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 18.

36. *Ibid.*, 23.

These folklorists' comments help explain the stories Mormons tell about the early pioneers. Historians have examined accounts of the events narrated in these stories—events believed by many Mormons to have actually occurred—and found that almost no one at the time of occurrence saw them as supernatural or miraculous. The stories developed as church leaders and members reflected on the experiences and saw the hand of God. As Hufford explains, "One person's miracle is another's coincidence, one person's mystical experience is another's sense of awe at the beauty and majesty of the universe, one person's visit from the dead is another person's dream."³⁷ Usually some time must pass before people take that "reflective look back" and discover how God directed an event. Only then will they and those to whom they recount the event see it as a miracle.

The events we are concerned with here may or may not have actually occurred, at least not as they are depicted in the stories. The folklorist's task, however, is not to debunk what people believe the past to have been but rather to discover in a given culture the forces that give rise to belief narratives and to measure the influence of these narratives on the lives of people. Folklorists are as interested in truth as historians—not so much the truth of what "really" happened but the truth of what, why, and how people believe events happened. These latter truths are important because they help us understand what makes people tick. Often we are motivated more by what we believe happened than by what actually occurred.

As Apostle M. Russell Ballard stated in October 1996 general conference, "Our pioneer ancestors sacrificed virtually all they had, including their lives in many cases, to follow a prophet of God to this chosen valley." Ballard explained why: "Perhaps one reason they sacrificed and endured for all of us was to leave a legacy of faith for all of us to help us feel our urgent responsibility to move forward in building up the Church throughout the world."³⁸ Or to put the same ideas into folklore terms, the lesson of the pioneers "have been drilled into [generations of Mormon young people] as they have been encouraged to press on and on in whatever tasks they have been given in building up the kingdom."³⁹

SUMMARY

What beliefs do these stories reinforce? One of the most important is that God blesses people who help themselves—the Protestant work ethic.

37. Hufford, "Beings Without Bodies," 27.

38. M. Russell Ballard, "Faith in Every Footstep," *Ensign* 26 (Nov. 1996): 23.

39. William A. Wilson, "The Study of Mormon Folklore: An Uncertain Mirror for Truth," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22 (Winter 1989): 99.

So the Saints had to fight off the crickets. They also had to pray hard before getting the help of the seagulls. In the same way, the area which became Nauvoo was a swamp, but by hard work, the Saints made it a beautiful city. The Great Salt Lake Valley was a desert, but through the same hard work it blossomed.

But Mormons also believe that, once they have done all they can, God will come to their aid in all their worthy endeavors. Some believe God froze the Mississippi River so the Saints could cross. He provided the opportunity for the Mormon Battalion to serve. He sent the seagulls. Stories of these events, learned by lifelong Mormons and converts in their church classes or in their families, teach the principle that God watches over them, that he cares for them.

The stories also validate the narrators' belief that they are members of the "only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I, the Lord, am well pleased" (D&C 1:30). Like the children of Israel, Mormons believe they are the "chosen" people, and that through them, the Lord will bless all the earth. To cement that relationship, Mormons, like the Old Testament prophets and people, make special covenants with God, and in return God blesses them. The stories they tell of the trek west and of other events in pioneer history reinforce this belief. Often the stories are oversimplified. But because people tell stories about what interests them most or is most important to them, the narratives may teach us more about what is centrally important to contemporary Mormons than we can learn in other ways.

The events recounted in the stories have been transformed into a mythical picture of the past whose stories probably tell us more about the values, attitudes, and beliefs of those telling the stories than they do about the events described. There is nothing mystical about this process. As we said at the outset, as people hear the stories at home, in Primary, in Sunday school, and then pass them to their own children and students, they will change them, often unconsciously, or will selectively remember details, to meet their present needs. The story of the Mormon Battalion shifts its emphasis through repeated tellings over the years because we need a story that justifies our contemporary belief that we should all be loyal citizens. The story of the seagulls and the crickets develops into an account of divine intervention because we need to believe that God will still make things work out all right in the face of present-day crises. Stories of the trek west and the settlement of the Great Basin develop into heroic narratives of God directing the affairs of the Saints because we need empirical evidence for the belief that we were and still are the Lord's chosen people. In other words, we tell the stories we tell because we must tell them in order to provide historical warrant for what we are or want to be in the present.

SURVEY QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

1. *What was the site of the city of Nauvoo, Illinois, like before the Saints settled there?*

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
Swampy/marshy	697 (78.4%)	119 (83.8%)	38 (80.9%)	11 (47.8%)
Other answer	113 (12.7%)	0	0	0
No response	79 (8.8%)	0	0	11 (47.8%)

2. *How did the Saints know who was to succeed Joseph Smith as president of the church?*

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
Brigham Young appeared as Joseph Smith	449 (50.5%)	59 (31.5%)	18 (38.3%)	4 (17.4%)
Revelation	117 (13.2%)	27 (19.0%)	10 (21.3%)	4 (17.4%)

3. *When did the Saints leave Nauvoo?*

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
1846	163 (18.3%)	63 (41.5%)	21 (44.7%)	4 (17.4%)

4. *How did they cross the Mississippi River?*

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
Frozen	275 (30.9%)	59 (41.5%)	15 (31.9%)	3 (13.0%)
Ferry/raft	292 (32.8%)	38 (26.8%)	17 (36.2%)	6 (26.1%)
Both	106 (11.9%)	31 (21.8%)	10 (21.3%)	0

5. *How did the Saints react when the federal government asked for volunteers for the Mormon Battalion?*

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
Considered/went	227 (25.5%)	32 (22.5%)	18 (38.3%)	1 (4.3%)
Willingly went	501 (56.4%)	106 (74.6%)	25 (53.2%)	12 (52.2%)
No response	150 (16.9%)	0	0	12 (52.2%)

6. *After the Saints left Nauvoo, where did they establish communities as they waited to cross the plains?*

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
Winter Quarters	431 (48.5%)	86 (60.6%)	24 (51.1%)	3 (13.0%)

7. *As the Saints began their journey across the plains, what was their intended destination?*

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
Rocky Mountains	208 (23.4%)	20 (14.1%)	8 (17.0%)	0
Unknown	107 (12.0%)	10 (7.0%)	4 (8.5%)	2 (8.7%)
Zion	135 (15.2%)	26 (18.3%)	8 (17.0%)	0
California	117 (13.2%)	3 (2.1%)	2 (4.3%)	3 (13.0%)
West	63 (7.1%)	20 (14.1%)	4 (8.5%)	1 (4.3%)
Great Basin/Utah/ Salt Lake	50 (5.6%)	43 (28.1%)	21 (14.9%)	7 (30.4%)
No response	143 (16.1%)	0	0	0

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
Not defined	513 (57.7%)	76 (53.5%)	24 (51.1%)	3 (13.0%)

8. How did the first group of Saints measure how far they had traveled each day?

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
Counted wheel rotations	245 (27.6%)	62 (40.5%)	28 (26.2%)	7 (30.4%)
Odometer	202 (22.7%)	55 (35.9%)	42 (39.2%)	1 (4.3%)
Counted steps	19	3	0	0
Stars	3	1	0	0
Other answer	37 (4.2%)	5	0	0
No response	383 (43.1%)	28 (18.3%)	22 (20.6%)	15 (65.2%)

9. What did Jim Bridger think were the possibilities of settling in the Great Basin?

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
Impossible	246 (27.7%)	64 (45.1%)	12 (25.5%)	5 (21.7%)
Difficult/slim	190 (21.4%)	38 (26.8%)	12 (25.5%)	1 (4.3%)
Version of corn/ wheat	22 (2.5%)	12 (8.5%)	7 (14.9%)	0
No response	409 (45.3%)	0	0	0

10. What did Brigham Young say when he saw the Great Salt Lake Valley?

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
This is the place	623 (70.1%)	82 (57.7%)	18 (38.3%)	16 (69.6%)
This is the right place	131 (14.7%)	32 (22.5%)	12 (25.5%)	0
Similar responses	42 (4.7%)	18 (12.7%)	0	0
No response	93 (10.5%)	0	0	0

11. What type of vegetation was in the Great Salt Lake Valley when the Saints arrived?

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
Desert	168 (18.9%)	15 (10.6%)	4 (8.5%)	3 (13.0%)
Sagebrush	248 (27.0%)	60 (42.3%)	20 (42.6%)	1 (4.3%)
None	108 (12.1%)	4 (2.8%)	2 (4.3%)	7 (30.4%)
One tree	12 (1.3%)	12 (8.5%)	1 (2.1%)	1 (4.3%)
No response	172 (19.3%)	0	0	0

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum
Good place to settle	44 (4.9%)	16 (11.3%)

12. What happened when the crickets started destroying the crops in 1848?

	BYU Church History	LDS Museum	Gospel Doctrine	Seminary
Seagull miracle	779 (87.6%)	136 (95.8%)	40 (85.1%)	16 (69.5%)
Other	10 (1.1%)	3 (2.1%)	3 (6.4%)	3 (13.0%)
No response	100 (11.2%)	3 (2.1%)	4 (17.4%)	4 (17.4%)