

Transplanted Utah: Mormon Communities in Alberta

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In 1962 Canadian Prime Minister John C. Diefenbaker attended the Seventy-fifth Anniversary Jubilee of Cardston and praised the Mormons in Southern Alberta for their "loyalty to the crown and the country, devotion and service in war and peace." Responding to a speech by Latter-Day Saints (LDS) Church leader Hugh B. Brown who had Canadian and U.S. ties, Diefenbaker explained, "You referred to us as your fellow Canadians. . . . I am very happy to say that in your life and its dedication to our country, and to your country, you do represent to the embodiment of the relationship between our countries (*Journal History*, 28 July 1962 8, 9). Diefenbaker raised but did not answer some interesting questions with this statement. What were the loyalties of the Mormons of Southern Alberta? Were they Mormons, Americans, or Canadians or an interesting combination of all three? While they were patriotic to all three, first of all they were Mormons. Their allegiance to their Church transcended their commitment to any government.

This conclusion matched the expectations of many nineteenth and even twentieth century members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Mormons believed that they were part of the Kingdom of God on earth. While they believed in "being subject to kings, rulers . . . and obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law (Articles of Faith), they also waited for a millennium and a better life when governments would be replaced. Therefore, Canadian Mormons did not recognize the dilemma that their split loyalties presented.

Sources

The major sources for this paper were oral history interviews. Charles Ursenbach, a Mormon leader in Alberta, collected over one hundred interviews with Mormons living in the province for the LDS

Historical Department in the 1970s. The Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University also collected interviews with Mormons from Alberta as part of the LDS Polygamy and LDS Family Life oral history projects. These transcripts provide valuable information on the Mormons in Canada and their views. I also used selective histories, diaries, autobiographies, and church records available at the LDS Historical Department and the Brigham Young University library.

Background

When polygamist Charles O. Card looked for a way to escape the U.S. marshals and imprisonment, he considered going to Mexico. But when Church President John Taylor commented, "I have always found justice under the British flag," he decided to go to Canada. In 1887 he headed an exploration party and selected land in Alberta. In 1890 Church President Wilford Woodruff asked Card to preside over the colonies (Embry 173).

During this time, the Canadian government encouraged Americans to help settle the prairie provinces by providing cheap homesteading land and special settlement arrangements for religious and ethnic groups. As a result, between 1898 and 1914, 600,000 American immigrants, mainly from the Midwest, came to Alberta. In 1911 22 percent of Alberta's residents were American-born. Even in the 1920s half of the residents in the southern section of the province were Americans (Palmer 83).

While the Mormons were not the only Americans moving to Alberta, their leaders worked out some unique arrangements with Canadian business leaders. For example, businessman Elliott Galt contracted with the LDS Church to build a canal. Settlers received one-half their pay in cash and one-half in land. These incentives did not attract enough colonists, so Mormon Church leaders asked some faithful members to move from Utah to Canada (Brigham Y. Card 93-94).

Between 1887 and 1903, the Mormons established eighteen communities including Cardston, Magrath, Stirling, and Raymond. These towns resembled those in Utah. Residents lived in villages laid out with large uniform blocks and went to their surrounding farms to work. Setting up these communities required special laws. For example, the Territorial Assembly's Village Ordinance specified how far haystacks could be from homes with stoves and fireplaces. Mormons pointed out

that they “centralized their efforts” and lived together in town during the winter “for educational, religious and social advantages.” They continued, “Our lots are not large enough to allow us to have our hay stacks the prescribed distance” from fires. Cardston received an exception for hay. The town also received its own incorporation ordinance (Wetherell and Kmet 155).

The LDS Church dominated community life. Recreational activities (usually basketball and baseball) and holiday celebrations were similar to other Mormon areas. There were some unique Canadian features, but for the most part, life was not much different from in Mormon areas. The diaries, life stories, and oral histories of Canadian Mormons reflect the distinctive Canadian and common Mormon characteristics in their comments about citizenship, laws and politics, support of country during war, holiday observations, and recreational activities.

Citizenship

After Card arrived in Canada, he frequently recorded he was “an exile” in a “foreign land (Charles O. Card 19).” At the same time though he also appreciated the freedom that he found in Canada. For example, he sympathized with his fellow settlers at a church meeting in May 1889, “Many times the brethren and sisters here in exile feel they are tried almost beyond what they can bear.” But he continued, “I showed them that we were free. . . . Here we are permitted to . . . build up a settlement in the Dominion of Canada, to the honor and glory of God’s Kingdom (Charles O. Card 53).”

To show appreciation for this new found freedom and to receive the greatest opportunities in a new country, Card and visiting Mormon church officials encouraged the settlers to become Canadian citizens. In June 1896, Card asked the men at a priesthood meeting to “take the oath of allegiance to the Canadian government (Charles O. Card 19).” In a high council meeting in 1901 he “urged all who were aliens to become naturalized as soon as possible (Alberta Stake Minutes 1 November 1901).” Similarly, in 1899 Mormon apostle John W. Taylor “counseled the brethren to become citizens of the Canadian government (Alberta Stake Minutes 27 August 1899).” At a special priesthood meeting in 1903 Church President Joseph F. Smith explained, “ We advise the brethren to secure the rights of citizenship in this land and enjoy all the privileges that you can (Alberta Stake Minutes 6 September 1903).” Card

even explained in a request for new settlers in 1898 in Utah that in order to meet the requirements of the homestead law, "You are required to take the oath of allegiance to the government that protects you (*Journal History* 14 April 1898 3)."

This counsel was probably repeated several times because it was not always followed. Mormons who came to Canada maintained their U.S. citizenship and passed it onto their children. Francis Criddle Russell, who was born in Stirling in 1900, was a U.S. citizen because his parents were. Only one sister, who was born in Canada during a time when U.S. immigration laws prevented her from obtaining citizenship, was a Canadian. Ironically, she lived in the United States but had never become a U.S. citizen. One brother became a Canadian citizen to receive a work license, but the other three, including Francis, had remained American citizens even though they lived in Canada. During the 1950s Russell was one of the three main leaders in a LDS stake (diocese) in Alberta. Since all three were U.S. citizens, "We were all taken to task. ... Some people thought that U.S. citizens should not comprise the presidency of a Canadian stake." He concluded, "There are hundreds of people who've lived here all their lives and they're still U.S. citizens, never have changed (41-42)."

Charles Ursenbach, who served as a Mormon bishop, stake president, and patriarch in Alberta, followed the same pattern. He moved to Canada in 1910 when he was in the second or third grade. He lived in Alberta nearly all his life, but he did not become a Canadian citizen until 1971 when he wanted a passport to travel to Europe. He and other American citizens maintained their U.S. citizenship so they could easily cross the border (Ursenbach 172). As geographer Dean Louder has explained, the Mormons in Alberta were "driven by directives formed by a central government . . . located in Salt Lake City (Louder 272)." With that focus, American citizenship was an advantage in working with the central Church in Utah.

Laws and Politics

Whether they became Canadian citizens or not, the Mormons learned soon after they arrived that they had to obey the laws. The first major area of disagreement was polygamy. In 1888 Charles O. Card went to Ottawa with apostles John W. Taylor and Francis M. Lyman asking for special assistance. The Mormon leaders learned that existing laws

covered most of their immigration and land rights requests. However, Canadian officials refused to allow the Mormons to bring plural wives. As a result, Lyman told the members, "We must comply with every law of the land." In 1889 Taylor "exhorted the saints to observe the laws of the land scrupulously (Embry 183)." Ten years later Charles O. Card "impressed upon the people the necessity of invoking the blessings of the land upon all our labors and upon this nation . . . and live according to the law (Alberta Stake Minutes 28 August 1899)." Apostle Matthias F. Cowley agreed, "The Latter-day Saints should show the inhabitants of this land that they are living pure, honest, upright, and righteous lives (Alberta Stake Minutes 29 June 1901)."

Although Card stressed obeying the law, he also cautioned the Mormons to "avoid political excitement (Alberta Stake Minutes 28 August 1899)." This seems to be the advice that Mormons have followed in Canada ever since. Except for rare occasions such as prohibition in the early 1900s, the Mormons have not supported political parties as a block or attempted to influence the elections. Card explained at a priesthood meeting in 1896, "Make a good showing at the polls. Told the people they were at liberty to choose either the national parties (Charles O. Card Minutes 6 June 1896 175)." This advice echoed what Mormon leaders told members in the United States when they eliminated the LDS People's party in Utah in the 1890s.

Despite this advise, Canadian Mormons supported some candidates and issues. In 1891 the Mormons followed businessman and Mormon supporter C. A. Magrath's request and elected D. W. Davis to the national parliament. Magrath promised Davis would bring mail service to the Mormons. School was dismissed so everyone could vote, and the conservative was reelected (Charles O. Card 28 February 1891 118; 4 March 1891 118; 5 March 1891 118; Bates and Hickman 97).

Just prior to the 1896 election, Card traveled to Calgary as a delegate to the conservative convention. At the meeting T. B. H. Cockrinae had 80 percent of the delegates so according to Card, "Rather than split the conservatives, they concluded to go solid with him. The convention was a farce. . . as Mr. C had bought the whole field almost." Card left the meeting concluding, "There is so much trickery and scheming in politics, I dislike to embark. However, I do this to aid Mr. MaGarth [sic] who has always been true to our people (8 May 1896 174)." The election day did not increase Card's confidence. "I think God it only comes once in five years. It was an exciting day" with liquor drinking and manipulating of

voters. This time though the Liberal party candidate won 23 June 1896 176).

Occasionally Mormons got excited about elections in Alberta, especially to control liquor. In 1901 Canadian towns voted on liquor sales in their communities. Card recorded, "Our vote was taken all over our district in eight polling divisions and the spirit ran high, averaging two thirds vote in the district." He added that 144 voted against local option and 267 were "on the side of sobriety and sound judgment (30 November 1901 307)."

In 1908 and 1909 the debate over prohibition continued. Stake President E. J. Wood declared that he would not support any candidate who did not favor prohibition. So when Mark Spencer, the mayor of Cardston, declared he would "put business ahead of local option," the Mormon leaders proclaimed "war" on his election for "not sympathizing with right and principle." At a church meeting, Wood declared he would not support anyone who did not obey the Word of Wisdom. When the election was held, Wood declared, "Victory on our side (Nielson, 345-46)."

Wood was not as successful in 1909. Then the liquor candidate for the territorial legislature won in the Primary. Wood declared, "Every drinking man was out and the gamblers and many undesirable citizens supported" the candidate. Wood rationalized, "I would rather be defeated with a few righteous men than to be victorious with thousands of sinners." Although Wood felt he lost the election, his daughter Olive Wood Nielson wrote, "The temperance battle . . . won Edward J. Wood many loyal admirers and . . . cause[d] the faithful Saints to unite even tighter (Nielson, 349-52)."

Over the years individual Mormons have been involved in politics. Aaron Johnson, the first postmaster in Taber, was elected as a representative in Alberta, and then traveled with Stake President Heber Allen and William Probert to Calgary. Johnson endured the debates, but he was upset when he thought he was invited to a banquet but discovered only liquor was served. Johnson soon became disillusioned with his life in Canada, explaining, "Our seven years in Canada among blizzards, Mounted Policemen, and Union Jacks was interesting and trying sometimes." So after a "few more flourishes in Canada, Louise [wife] and our splendid boys returned to the land of the free and the home of the brave (Johnson 91, 104-07)".

One of the most noted Mormon politician was Nathan Eldon Tanner, a stake president and later Mormon General Authority. Tanner recalled that until 1934 he was not interested in politics although he was involved in the community and boy scouts. However, during the 1930s William "Bible Bill" Aberhart campaigned throughout the country about the virtues of Social Credit. He planned a meeting at the Cardston school, but since it was being redecorated, Tanner opened the LDS Church's tabernacle. Tanner chaired the meeting and then became the president of a study group. He ran on that party's ticket and was elected to the Alberta Legislature in 1937. He continued until 1962, serving as speaker of the house his first term and also a minister to various departments in the provincial government (19-20).

During the time Tanner was in office, his party dominated some Mormon communities. Charles S. Matkin explained that Magrath was "90% Social Credit" because the residents "thought so much of [Tanner]. Matkin refused to run as a liberal during that time because he was not really interested in politics and did not want to oppose Tanner, he refused (Matkin 20-21). Mormon towns also supported the Social Credit party in the national elections in 1935. Support dropped some in 1940 (Bell 103, 136).

Charles Ursenbach's interviewees rarely mention politics. Ursenbach might have known they were not involved and did not ask. On rare occasions when Ursenbach did ask about political activity, responses were similar to Horace Ririe who had been a member of the local school board, "I don't think I was ever much in politics. I don't think I am much of a politician today. My church told me that I was to vote for the man rather than the party. I had kind of followed that (21)." Other interviewees agreed; they did not consider community positions such as school boards as being political.

Support During Wars

Although Mormons were not actively involved in politics, they did support Canada in wartime. During World War I and World War II, Canadian Mormons fought with the Canadian and British forces. Those on the homefront helped raise money and supported the war effort. According to historian Howard Palmer, Mormon leaders asked young men to train as military officers before World War I "in order to offset criticism about their patriotism." These men were among the first sent to

the battle front (168). Ulrich Redd Bryner remembered “half a dozen boys from Raymond” were sent to England within a day after war was declared in 1914. Some of these men were killed in battle (30).

An article in the official Mormon magazine, the *Improvement Era*, confirmed Mormons' allegiance to Canada: “The Latter-day Saints have proved their loyalty to the government under which they reside, by sending a number of their boys to the front, who have the record of being some of the finest specimens of manhood in the ranks. Some few already have been killed by the shells of German guns.” Canadian leaders asked for 500,000 men to support the war effort. According to the article, only Alberta met the quota (E. Pingree Tanner 11).

Mormons were also active on the homefront in Alberta. According to the *Improvement Era* article, Mormons grew 36,000,000 bushels of grain that was shipped to Lethbridge. “The fact that virgin soil of Alberta has yielded so abundantly over the past few years cannot help but have its effect though small it might be on the duration of the present . . . struggle (E. Pingree Tanner 11).” Hyrum Isaac Sabey collected funds for the victory loan drives and was the chair of the finance committee in 1918. He proudly recalled that his area met its goals and “went over the top three times” before any other area in the country (17). One time Magrath raised \$4,500, which amounted to a donation of four dollars for everyone living in town (E. Pingree Tanner 11).

Mormon Elmer L. Spackman remembered after the war Mormons were not as sure about cadet training in schools. “That was just during or just after the first Great War and a lot of the boys from Raymond and southern Alberta and Stirling were drafted in the war and had to go overseas and the parents didn't like it very much. They thought . . . the cadets [were] just preparing for another war 29).”

Despite these concerns between the wars, Mormons also supported the British and Canadian efforts during World War II. Canada entered the war in 1939 with England, and Mormons were sent to fight. Thomas T. Mendenhall explained he was too young to fight in World War I, but his son volunteered for World War II. The son fought with British gunners and was killed. Mendenhall, who only had one leg, supported the war effort from home. He ran the farm until another son returned from a mission (24).

Other homefront efforts included Red Cross work and war bond drives. For example, Joseph Y. Card organized the Red Cross in Beazer

and Raymond (12 February 1940). Charles Matkin, the vice president and then president of the Red Cross in Magrath, recalled the women's knitting projects. Matkin also chaired the boys and girls' committee and supervised the sale of war saving stamps at schools in the Mormon area. The Air Force in Lethbridge loaned him a propeller which he presented to the school with the highest percentage of stamps sold during a month. When Matkin delivered the propeller, an airplane flew over the school and dropped a Union Jack flag. Matkin was proud that every school in the area had the propeller at least once (23, 29).

Several interviewees summarized the effects of World War II. According to Leora A. Sheffield Duce, "I've seen two world wars take the cream of Canadian young men. It was the thing to do to enlist. Unless some parents pulled a few strings to get their sons away to school or on missions or something it was something that you did, or else were looked down on for not doing (10)." John O. Hicken who was a bishop recalled that ten young men from his area died in World War I and fourteen died in World War II. When Ursenbach asked, "Do you feel like your ward members supported the government," Hicken replied, "Oh yes absolutely. Our people were faithful Canadians. Those killed in action prove this (56)."

Holidays

One area where Mormons showed their loyalty to Canada but also their loyalty to their church was in their celebrations. In small communities throughout Mormon country, residents stopped traditional work on holidays and gather together. Mormons had a big party for the Fourth of July in the United States, Cinco de Mayo in Mexico, or Dominion Day in Canada. But they also regularly celebrated on 24 July, the day when Latter-day Saints remember Brigham Young entering the Salt Lake Valley.

Mormons observed Dominion Day the first year they were in Canada. In 1887 Canadian neighbors E. N. Barker and H. A. Donevan reminded the Latter-day Saints that 1 July was a holiday. Jane E. Woolf Bates wrote, "We must, of course, show our allegiance to the land of our adoption. . . . Preparations were immediately under way similar to those we had made in the states for the July 4th celebration." According to early settler Jonathan Layne, the Mormons built a small shelter and invited all the settlers in the area. "We had picnic, speeches, song and

toasts, swinging, foot racing, horse racing, and jumping, until about sundown." The next year according to Bates, "Dominion Day came and went, with a celebration patterned after the one of last year (Bates and Hickman 26-29, 65)."

According to J. O. Hicken, "Dominion Day was the big holiday of the year" in Raymond (56). Some oral history interviewees also remembered Dominion Day celebrations in small Mormon communities such as Aetna and Cardston. They usually started with a cannon blast and a band driving around town. There were parades, followed by patriotic programs. In the afternoon there were sport activities for all ages and usually a baseball game Embry 180). Winnifred Newton Thomas remembered the new dress and shoes for the First of July and the continued celebration of 2 July for Cardston day. She also remembered the rodeos that were "even as good as the Calgary Stampede has today (19)."

Dominion Days continued to be kept with such enthusiasm that some Canadians wondered what the Mormons were doing. As R. C. MacLeod explained in his history of the North-West Mounted Police, "Perhaps because of public hostility the Mormons made a considerable display of celebrating Dominion Day every July first. The police regarded this phenomenon with curiosity since instead of making the Latter Day Saints [sic] less conspicuous it only made them more so. Canadians generally tend to be undemonstrative on the occasion (Embry 180)."

The Mormons also celebrated on 24 July, a Utah holiday honoring Brigham Young's entrance into the Salt Lake Valley. Mildred Newton Stutz remembered it was not usually in Cardston but in towns like Glenwood or Magrath. "I think maybe we expected Glenwood to come to Cardston on the first and second and they in turn would expect us. . . . In order to have a successful celebration, they would expect the Cardston people to go and patronize them (20)."

Jehzeel Gibb Merkley recalled that in Magrath there was a celebration on Dominion Day or 24 July. She always got a new dress so she liked the 1 July celebration because she got the dress sooner (Clarke 15). Lola Fay McPhee who lived in Frankburg recalled 24 July celebrations were very much like other communities' Dominion Days with wake up guns, a parade, and a devotional at ten. A member of the Mounted Police from High River would speak, followed by a drama about the life of Joseph Smith and his vision. Her mother did a ribbon

dance. There was an afternoon of sports, followed by a children's dance (6).

Sports

For Dominion Day or the 24th of July there were usually baseball games against neighboring communities' teams. Baseball was a game that Americans brought to Alberta and Canada, and Mormons continued to play for their summer recreation. Other Albertans also played baseball, but throughout most of the province, the wintertime sports were hockey and curling. But in Mormon Alberta the Latter-day Saints played basketball. The first basketball game in Alberta was in Stirling in 1901. According to a Raymond history, "The love for the game of basketball came with the settlers. . . . So important was the game to the sod busters and ranchers that on 1st July 1903 a game between Raymond and Stirling was played on a dirt field (*Raymond Remembered* 12-144)." In 1914 a Stirling team won the Alberta championship beating the YMCA team from Calgary (Spackman 22).

Utah-imported teachers at the Mormon Knight Academy in Raymond started playing basketball there when the school opened in 1910. They enjoyed the game so much that they even played on a concrete floor at first. Raymond, a community of less than 5,000, continued to excel at basketball. Once basketball extended to the entire province, Raymond's senior men's team, the Union Jacks, won the provincial championship seventeen times in fifty years. Between 1921 and 1941 the team won fifteen Alberta championships and in 1923 won the national championship.

Other teams from Southern Alberta also dominated. In 1948 and 1949 the Alberta Canning Company sponsored the Magrath Rockets which won the local tournaments and went to Winnipeg to compete. Community senior teams were the basketball focus in Canada until professional teams developed (Matkin 28). Without local teams, the towns supported school sports, and basketball dominated in Mormon towns. Of fifty-nine champions in the Alberta School Athletic Associations in six boy and girls categories, thirty-two were from Southern Alberta. In 1971 three men from Raymond were on the Canadian national team (Palmer 232; Bowie and Day 1-2, 4-7).

Individual Alberta Mormons also talked about the role of basketball in their communities. Leith Ingram Johnson remembered playing

basketball at the Knight Academy (11). V. A. Wood, who was born in Cardston in 1911, remembered he started playing basketball in Grade 5, and there were organized teams from Grade 6 through high school (4). George Robinson Whitehead, who moved to Claresholm, Alberta when he was two in 1908, helped organize one of the first basketball teams there at the Mormon Church. He explained, "We were not quite as lucky as in the south. They had basketball teams but up in the north where I lived it was all hockey." Ursenbach even called Whitehead the "father of basketball in Claresholm (33)"

Studies suggest several reasons why basketball was so important to the Mormons. The chinook winds which can change temperatures from freezing to fifty degrees Fahrenheit prevented outdoor ice rinks. But the same studies also saw a religious link between basketball and the Mormon Church. An article in *Maclean's Magazine* declared, "Mormon churches throughout southern Alberta, as elsewhere, usually have a basketball court attached--part of the Mormons' emphasis on healthy minds and healthy bodies (Nemeth 49)."

Summary

The oral histories with Mormon Canadians from Alberta concentrated on the role of the LDS Church in the interviewees' lives. That was partially because the projects were interested in religious experiences, but it was also because the Church dominated their lives. Autobiographies and diaries also focused on the Church. If readers did not know the person lived in Canada, they would think that they were reading about someone who was from Utah. In the same way, most oral histories with American Mormons also emphasized church life. Why? Although the Mormons in Canada and the United States were loyal citizens of their countries, their lives centered around their religion. For that reason, not all Mormons living in Alberta became Canadian citizens. They supported the government by fighting in wars and occasionally participating in politics. They celebrated Canadian holidays but also had unique Mormon celebrations. Even in their recreation they maintained some "Mormonism" with their focus on basketball instead of hockey.

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