

An Early Mormon Settlement in South Dakota

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The first Anglo-Saxon settlement in what is now South Dakota was a camp of Mormons at Fort Vermillion, inhabited from June 1845 to the spring of 1846. Its purpose was exploratory: to help find a place where members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints could settle. Persecution in Illinois, incited by the zealously held beliefs of the Mormons, was the prime reason for their searching for a new home. Before they left Nauvoo, Illinois, the Saints (members of the Mormon Church) had already had a long history of persecution followed by forced moves. Persecution had begun immediately after Joseph Smith proclaimed that in the spring of 1820 he had seen God the Father and Jesus Christ in a small grove of trees near his home in Palmyra, New York. After the publication of the Book of Mormon and the organization of the Church early in 1830, persecution mounted. A new theology, successful missionary work, startling growth, extraordinary claims—all these grated the Mormon's neighbors.

In 1831 the Saints gathered in Kirtland, Ohio, where they organized a strong branch of the Church. Soon another headquarters, called Zion by the faithful, blossomed near Independence, Missouri. But the Saints' missionary zeal, their bloc voting, their views on Indians (who they felt had descended from the Israelites) and on slavery, and their economic success created an imposing threat to the established population. Mobs drove the Saints to Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1837. Nauvoo soon became the largest city in Illinois, with about

twenty thousand people, a liberal charter, and a very prosperous economy.¹

Difficulties in Nauvoo similar to those in Missouri soon resulted in tension, however. Strong rumors of the practice of polygamy and dissension within the Church caused apostasy among some Church leaders. The difficulties climaxed in the mob shooting of Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum in the Carthage, Illinois, jail on 27 June 1844.

Many thought the assassination of Smith would be the end of Mormonism, but they discounted the dynamic leadership of Brigham Young, senior apostle in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the governing body of the Church. Young worked to fulfill two key prophecies of Joseph Smith: the completion of the Nauvoo Temple and the movement of the Saints as a body to the Rocky Mountains. Mobs burned the scarcely completed temple, harassed the Saints, and, finally, gave them notice to be out of Nauvoo by the spring of 1846. Looting, more burnings, and physical violence forced the Saints across the frozen Mississippi River in February 1846. More than a year later, on 21 July 1847, the first Saint set foot in Salt Lake Valley, ending the era of temporary settlements.²

Years before the exodus from Nauvoo, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young had made plans for permanent settlement in the West and had even sent advance groups of settlers westward. One of these advance groups sojourned in South Dakota, forming a settlement that is neglected in most histories of the state and even in Mormon histories. The purpose of this article is to describe in detail this 1845 settlement near Vermillion, South Dakota.

Information concerning the settlement comes mainly from six sources:

1. The documentary *History of the Church* by Joseph Smith is the official record of events that he recorded during his life.
2. Lyman Hinman, a member of the settlement, wrote a letter

1. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1959-60), vols. 1, 2, 3. Hereafter cited as *DHC*.

2. *Ibid.*, vols. 5, 6. See also B. H. Roberts, *The Rise and Fall of Nauvoo* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1900).

- in 1847 to "Brother & Sister Taylor" in which he described his trip into South Dakota.³
3. A six-page summary of the settlement experience was composed by William Kartchner, also a member of the group.⁴
 4. A somewhat negative report of the company's journey was written in 1847 from Winter Quarters, Nebraska, by a couple who had left the company before it arrived in South Dakota.⁵
 5. "The Reminiscences of James Holt," written years later after Holt had arrived in Utah, was until recently the principal source of information on the settlement.⁶ Dale L. Morgan, in the *Utah Historical Quarterly*, quoted extensively from Holt's journal and added excellent editorial comments and footnotes from Hinman, Kartchner, Nelson, and other related sources. This is the only printed account and appraisal of the expedition.⁷
 6. A new source, unknown to scholars until now, is possessed by Chauncey Riddle of Provo, Utah.⁸ His two great-grandfathers, Isaac Riddle and Allen Russell, both were members of the expedition to South Dakota and both wrote about it. The quite extensive Russell account presents a new view of

3. Lyman Hinman to "Brother & Sister Taylor," Winter Quarters, Nebraska, 27 June 1847, Coe Collection, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. Morgan refers to this letter frequently in his article on Holt, cited below.

4. William Kartchner, "Expedition of the Emmett Company . . . Copied . . . by Isaac Riddle . . .," WPA Collection, Utah State Historical Society.

5. James Nelson and Rebecca Nelson, "A memorandum of the proceedings of Emet's company from memory by James and Rebecca Nelson," Winter Quarters, Nebraska, 10 May 1897, Church Historian's Office, Salt Lake City, Utah. The Nelsons left the group because of their dissatisfaction with Emmett.

6. James Holt, "The Reminiscences of James Holt," Special Collections, Brigham Young University Library, Provo, Utah.

7. Dale L. Morgan, "The Reminiscences of James Holt: A Narrative of the Emmett Company," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 23(1955): 1-33. Oddly, Morgan's copy of the "Reminiscences" varies from the copy in the BYU library. No explanation for the discrepancies has been determined. The BYU manuscript is used for quotes from Holt in this article.

8. Allen Russell, "The Journal of Allen Russell," typed manuscript in the possession of his great-grandson Chauncey Riddle, Provo, Utah.

the expedition that contradicts many parts of Holt's journal. Russell recalls less hardship than Holt, and he is generally more optimistic about the expedition. Where Holt strongly implies resentment toward Brigham Young and Emmett, Russell is more sympathetic, quite able to justify and accept their decisions. The discovery of Russell's journal, incidentally, permits the identification of several members of the company who previously were unknown.

Special attention will be given in this article to the discrepancies between the Holt and Russell accounts. An attempt will be made to draw a truer and more complete picture of the purposes and events of the expedition and the conduct of its members.

On 21 February 1844, in a council of Church leaders, Joseph Smith called for volunteers to explore Oregon and California and to select a site for the gathering of the Saints. It should be remembered that all territory west of the Rockies, including what is now Colorado, was then called California. The volunteers were: Jonathan Dunham, Phineas H. Young, David D. Yearsley, and David Fullmer. Alphonse Young, James Emmett, George D. Watt, and Daniel Spencer were requested to accompany them. Two days later Samuel Bent, Joseph A. Kelting, Samuel Rolfe, Daniel Avery, and Samuel W. Richards also volunteered to go.⁹ From this group of thirteen, only James Emmett followed through and went West. The *History of the Church* later cites a man named Hilmer as a volunteer. The name is mentioned in no other source.¹⁰

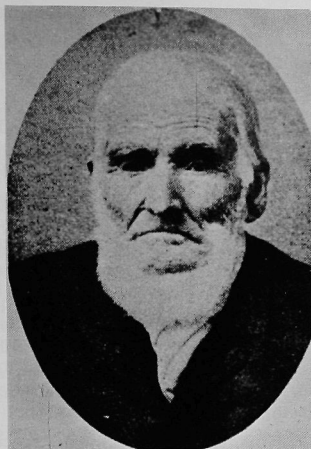
The names that are common to the Holt and Russell journals are: James Emmett, the leader of the expedition, and his family; Jackson Steward (Stewart?); and John L. Butler. Only Holt mentions James Nelson and his wife Parthenia Overton, Henry Heneyman, and William Coachner (Kartchner).¹¹ Names mentioned only by Russell were: Russell himself, Lyman Hinman, John Riddle, William Potter, Gardner

9. DHC, 6:224.

10. Ibid., 7:385.

11. Holt, "Reminiscences," pp. 12-13; Morgan, "The Emmett Company," p. 24.

Allen Russell



Potter (and his wife, a daughter of Hinman's), Armstead Motet (bachelor), Zacariah Wilson and family, William Edwards, William Holt, Jude Allen, Mr. Winn, Burns Jesse, widow Ashby and family, and another widow and family who are unnamed.¹² Isaac Riddle added himself in his own account.¹³

Russell's list adds appreciably to the total: twenty men, one known to be a bachelor and six married, and two widows with families. Nearly all of the company can be identified now, although not with finality.

James Emmett, born in Kentucky in 1803, was appointed the leader of the small group of Latter-day Saint families sent to scout a way to the Rockies. They were instructed to establish friendly relations with the Indians by preaching to them and

12. Russell, "Journal," p. 8.

13. Isaac Riddle, "The Life of Isaac Riddle, An Auto-biographical Sketch," duplicate manuscript in the possession of his great-grandson Chauncey Riddle, Provo, Utah. This also is a previously unknown source.

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preparing them to receive the main body of the Saints, who might come later. They were to keep their actions quite secret on the premise that too much publicity might set off a large, unorganized stampede westward.¹⁴

Emmett selected John Butler and James Holt to accompany him. Butler told a friend named Edwards of the expedition, and word spread further. Soon the entire settlement of Bear Creek, Illinois, joined the group. Evidently, about 150 people were in the original group that left Ramus and Bear Creek, Illinois, in August of 1844.¹⁵

Russell recalled their beginning:

As near as I can remember, we started about the last of August. We crossed the Mississippi River at Fort Madison, or near there some miles above Nauvoo. In the territory of Iowa, we traveled up the country between the Mississippi and Iowa Rivers. Our course was westward and a little to the south, as we followed the Iowa River until spring.

If I remember right, we went about 150 or 200 miles until we reached the settlement on the river. . . . We began building cabins to live in during the winter.¹⁶

Holt suffered personal tragedies on the trip that may account for his soured outlook and the negative tone of his journal:

We traveled up the Iowa River and all met five miles above Kitchen's settlement, which was the highest settlement at that time on the Iowa River. Here my wife died and was buried; She left a child about two months old; my wife died in October and the child soon afterwards. Leander, my eldest son also died there in November.¹⁷

The attitude of Brigham Young and other Church leaders toward the expedition was reported differently in the Holt and the Russell accounts. Holt wrote, sometime between 1 January and 11 February, "Brothers Fullmer and Lyman . . . were sent by Brigham Young to stop us from going any further at present,

14. Holt, "Reminiscences," pp. 11-12.

15. Ramus was about twenty miles east of Nauvoo and was later called Webster, after the Saints left. Bear Creek, about thirty miles south of Nauvoo, was known as the Liberty Branch of the Church. Mormons frequently lived in small settlements near the main gathering places in Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and Utah.

16. Russell, "Journal," pp. 6-8.

17. Holt, "Reminiscences," p. 12.

and have us go back. . . ."¹⁸ Russell, in contrast, referred to the visits of Amos Lyman and a man named Spencer in more neutral tones. Their instructions, according to Russell, were to not go too far, and, when they found a suitable location, they were to make settlement and keep in touch with the Church leaders.¹⁹

This information encourages revising the Holt interpretation, for, apparently, Young was not completely opposed to Emmett nor was he demanding Emmett's return to the fold. Russell affirms that Young was favorable to the expedition and its original purpose but wanted it to remain subject to central Church authority and not to strike out on its own.

About a week or ten days after the visitors came, almost fifty people, among them Russell's parents and brother, left the company.²⁰ Holt neglected to mention the defectors. Those who left the expedition are named in Kartchner's manuscript.²¹

Years later, in Utah, litigation occurred over this incident. Hosea Stout mentioned in his diary a court case between Coons, one of the defectors, and Emmett, the leader:

Thursda [*sic*] Dec 9 1847 . . . I went over the river to attach some property in the hands of Simpson Emmett, son of James Emmett to satisfy a demand against him for property taken away from one Coons, while he was in the wilderness with Emmett. Coons becoming dissatisfied was not willing to stay with them any longer so he was striped of all he had and sent away with his wife & children bare. Simpson Emmett had a cow belonging to Coons or one taken away from him at that time.

Wed Jan 5 1848 Went to H. Council at ten. The case of Emmett came up (Coons V.S. Emmett). . . .

After some time the proposition was made that all such property belonging to any of Emmetts company in dispute be Church property which was decided.

Several persons present who were contending about their

18. *Ibid.*

19. Russell, "Journal," p. 9.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Kartchner, "Expedition of the Emmett Company."

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property gave up their titles to the church. Coons got some of his back & kept it not willing to yield to the decision.²²

"The company," Russell recorded, "had entered into an agreement to live together and have all things in common, no man called anything his own." He looked down upon those who did not accept the arrangement wholeheartedly.²³ Holt chafed under this necessarily tight control. Russell contended that the agreement was voluntary and that Emmett was merely trying to enforce the common rule. Emmett was not trying, as Holt complained, to enforce equality. This evidence further revises the Holt-Morgan opinion of James Emmett.

Holt stressed the hardships of the trip with the tone of the true sufferer:

Great was the suffering of all the camp. The men hunted as much as possible and when they killed anything, it was divided among them, even a squirrel. When an ox died with fatigue or starvation, it was divided out to the people. They were as greedy for it as if it was the best of beef. No one can have any idea of the suffering of this company, except those who experienced the same. Women and children suffered great starvation and fear, not knowing when they would be massacred by savages or unprincipled whites.²⁴

Russell, on the other hand, repeatedly mentioned the lush pastures and easy food that the company was able to obtain on the trip across northern Iowa to the South Dakota border. Just before Christmas, two days' hunting produced "squirrels, pheasants, turkeys, pararie [sic] hens and quail for the Christmas feast. The women did the cooking in great style." Such provisions were good for the time of year, he felt. After the division of the company, Russell spoke of better feed for the livestock. Also, supplies of wild potatoes and fish greatly satisfied him.²⁵

On careful reading, one finds that Holt implies that the food was sufficient but that he missed the kind of life he had enjoyed

22. Hosea Stout, *On the Mormon Frontier: The Diary of Hosea Stout*, ed. Juanita Brooks (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1964), 1:294-95.

23. Russell, "Journal," pp. 8-9.

24. Morgan, "The Emmett Company," p. 26. This passage is not included in the BYU copy.

25. Russell, "Journal," pp. 9-10

in Nauvoo. The loss of his family might have made him oversensitive. Isaac Riddle's lone paragraph on the Emmett expedition also suggests that sufficient provisions were available, although there were some hard times in the winter.

In the spring we went up the river to a point near the present situation of Omaha then we left the Iowa River and traveled west by north two hundred miles to the Missouri river. We went through much good uninhabited country and crossed many fine streams of water from which we obtained plenty of fish of different kinds. On the Missouri we found the buffalo, and during that summer we had lots of meat. But when winter came the buffalo went away, and again we had hard times. The snow was very deep, clothes were very scarce and for a bed we had a buffalo robe apiece. In the spring we went down the Missouri and near the present site of Omaha. . . .²⁶

Both Holt and Russell describe their arrival in South Dakota as a happy occurrence. Holt relates:

Resumed our journey in March and went to Vermillion, a French trading post and before arriving the French and Indians met us and came to meet us to learn our intentions.

After being informed they exorted [*sic*] us to the fort where we arrived June 17th.²⁷

Russell provides a little more detail.

We followed the river for a distance and then we left it entirely and traveled in a southerly direction. This country was a wide rolling prairie, very little timber. We were in the Sioux Indian Country, but as providence would have it we did not see an Indian until we reached the Missouri River. We met some French traders who were living at Fort Vermillion. They were buffalo hunting. They inquired what our business was in that Indian Country, traveling as we were, and were much surprised that we had not been killed. They invited us to go with them to Fort Vermillion. They said if we tried to cross the Missouri river the Indians would kill us. We accepted their invitation and were a day and a half reaching the Fort.²⁸

Only Russell gives a description of the fort and the surroundings.

We found there four or five log cabins and about fifteen acres of corn about four inches high. Fort Vermillion was situated on a

26. Riddle, "The Life of Isaac Riddle." The first reference to Omaha is obviously wrong. Riddle might have meant Des Moines.

27. Holt, "Reminiscences," p. 12.

28. Russell, "Journal," p. 10.

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beautiful place close to the Missouri on the north side. It was here at Fort Vermillion that I was married to Harriet Massina Hutchins March 21 1846 by James Emmett, with John Riddle Witness. On the east down the river was a large grove of timber. The majority of the trees were cottonwood. At the north was a large bottom land perhaps two or three miles wide and about thirty miles long. On the south across the river was a narrow bottom but it soon came to a bluff which arose in a rolling prairie interspersed with small groves of timber. We decided to stop there for the summer.²⁹

Russell also is the only one to describe the activities of the men during their stay in Vermillion.

The French traders wanted some building done so we all went to work. We planted corn and vegetables, plowed and built a correll for our stock. I was appointed to heard and care for the stock the first part of the season. When haying time came I made hay racks. We made graineries by cutting down large cottonwood trees and hewing them on two sides. The buildings were about twenty feet in length and eight feet wide and ten feet high, with split timbers hay and mud for covers. We hunted Buffalo and in the summer put up many stacks of hay for the traders and some for ourselves. But the stacks caught fire and burned it all. We kept our stock on the bottoms.³⁰

Morgan, in the *Utah Historical Quarterly*, supplies information about the Frenchmen at the fort. It was established by P. Chouteau, Jr., and Company. The trader called Brewer by the Mormons was probably Theophile Bruguere. He had two wives, both daughters of the Indian Chief Eagle. There was another half-Indian, Henry, sometimes referred to as Ongee. Henry, who Holt said had been educated in Petersburg college and was able to speak English, became a good friend of the Saints.³¹

The association of the Saints with the Indians concerned Thomas H. Harvey, Superintendent of Indian Affairs at St. Louis. He reported to Washington that

a small party of emigrants from Wisconsin, bound for Oregon, traveled across the country last spring, to the mouth of the Vermillion, on the Missouri. When they arrived there they concluded that it was too late to proceed, and determined to remain there until next spring, and with this view proceeded to plant corn, buckwheat, &c. I understand

29. Ibid., pp. 10-11.

30. Ibid.

31. Morgan, "The Emmett Company," pp. 27, 28, 30.

from persons familiar with the character of the Indians who frequent, in the winter, the neighborhood where this part is located, that their property, if not their persons, will be in great danger should they remain there until spring, as they contemplate. I have instructed agent [Andrew] Drips to point out to them the dangers of their situation, and to induce them, if possible, to fall back within the boundaries of Missouri, and winter there.³²

The Saints did not mention a visit by the Indian agent, nor any contention with the Indians. With one later exception, the Indians and the Saints seemed to be on friendly terms. Holt recorded a faith-promoting encounter with the Indians that was not mentioned by Russell.

Bennett [*sic*] went about fifteen miles to see the Indian Chiefs who were drying their Buffalow meat for their winter's provisions. They were of the Sioux nation. After he told them his business (being able to converse with them in their own tounge) he returned with seven of their chiefs. One of the chiefs named Henry, who had been educated in Petersburg college and had settled in this place. They brought several bales of dried Buffalow meat as a present, which was very acceptable and we made a feast for them of the best we had. Emmett gave Chief Henry the Book of Mormon to read and after he had read the preface and explained it to his comrades they gave a great shout of joy; they danced, sang, shouted and had a joyful time. Emmett asked them why they were so happy; they told him their great chief, who had died twenty years before, had told them that the whites would bring them this very year, the record of their forefathers, and they had almost forgotten it until he presented them with this book, and they felt to rejoice; they wished him to stop with them and teach them to farm. We went out in a few days and killed two or three loads of buffalo which helped us in the line of provisions greatly.³³

The exception to peace was a threat of war in the fall of 1845. Russell describes it thus:

So far as Indians are concerned, we were not troubled except in the fall of 1845 at Fort Vermillion. The Indians came in from a hunting trip and decided to kill all the white people, but through the pleadings of the French Traders wives, who were squaws, we were saved.³⁴

32. Harvey to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 10 September 1845, in U.S., Congress, Senate, Exec. Doc. 1 (Serial 470), 29th Cong., 1st sess., 1846, p. 536, cited in Morgan, "The Emmett Company," p. 29.

33. Holt, "Réminiscences," pp. 12-13.

34. Russell, "Journal," p. 11.

Holt, giving great detail about the problem, blames the situation on a horse-trading deal. Two Church members who had come from Nauvoo to visit wanted to return to Council Bluffs by water, and so they desired to sell their two horses.

There was a Frenchman who kept a station near by for a fur company; he offered them thirty dollars for one and thirty five for the other but Emmett thought the sum too small and bought them, giving fifty dollars for one and sixty dollars for the other, taking the means out of the company's treasury. The Frenchman became very much offended because he could not get the horses, so he got the Indians drunk and incited them to attack us and gathered about half a mile from our camp and started towards us to kill us; one of their chiefs came on ahead to have a counsel with Chief Henry, who dissuaded [*sic*] him from the purpose and he returned with Henry and met the Indians near our camp in time to prevent them from attacking us, although they were in the act of raising their guns to fire at us, and some did fire and the bullets whistled about our wagons, but no blood was shed; our women and children were very much frightened. The Indians were very angry at the Frenchman and wished to kill him, but only wounded him at the time, but later killed him.³⁵

The expedition received three visits from Church leaders. The first, that of Fullmer and Lyman in January-February 1845, has already been cited. They brought instructions from Brigham Young in Nauvoo. By the fall of 1845 the threat of mob action in Nauvoo was constant. Brigham Young was pressing to finish the temple before the Saints left for possible sites in the West, including Salt Lake Valley. Emmett himself went to Nauvoo and guided two brethren, John S. Fullmer and Henry G. Sherwood, to the Vermillion settlement. According to Fullmer, they arrived on 13 September 1845 and returned to Nauvoo on 3 October, where they gave a lengthy report of the trip. Fullmer's account substantiates Holt's description of the Indian difficulty and also gives much credit to Ongee (Henry) for making peace with the estimated one thousand Indians.³⁶

John Butler, second in command to Emmett in the settlement returned to Nauvoo with Fullmer and Sherwood. In

35. Holt, "Reminiscences," p. 13. Morgan cites Elliot F. Coues, ed., *Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri*, 2 vols. (New York, 1898), 2:288, 297. According to Coues, Bruguere was still alive in 1851. Morgan, "The Emmett Company," p. 30.

36. *DHC*, 7:495-98.

the spring of 1846, Butler and James Cummings brought to Vermillion instructions for the company to travel down the Missouri and meet the main company of Saints on the way from Nauvoo. Holt recorded the visit: "In the spring we put in garden seeds and were preparing to plant corn and raise a crop when John Butler returned . . . so we broke camp and traveled to the Bluffs, where we met the Church."³⁷

Russell's account reflects the feelings of the group:

We imediatly began repairing our wagons and yokes for the journey. When all was ready we started, and although we had little to eat and wear we were happy to know that we would soon be with the main body of the Saints and traveling towards the rocky mountains. It seemed to put new life into the people.³⁸

Most of Emmett's company went on to join Bishop George Miller for the trip west. Both Holt and Russell and their families, however, stayed in Iowa for a few years to build up their supplies. They left in separate companies for the Salt Lake Valley in 1852. Evidently, all who had not left Iowa earlier followed Church counsel and left in 1852.³⁹

The information in Russell's journal adds significantly to our knowledge of the Mormon settlement at Vermillion, South Dakota. The newly discovered account of a contented member of the expedition suggests a more favorable view of Emmett's relationship with his company and with Brigham Young than Holt gave. The Saints' habit of keeping diaries gives hope that even more information may be found about this historically important event.

37. Holt, "Reminiscences," p. 13.

38. Russell, "Journal," p. 11.

39. Andrew Jenson, *L.D.S. Biographical Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson Memorial Association, 1936), 4:308. This reference reports that Andrew Jackson Stewart (Steward?) left in 1850. See also Russell, "Journal," p. 14.

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