The Mormons and the Ghost Dance of 1890

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On 6 November 1890, Maj. Gen. Nelson A. Miles passed through Saint Paul, Minnesota, after a tour of Indian reservations in Utah, Montana, and Wyoming. During his stop in Saint Paul, the general spoke with reporters and speculated on the origins of the so-called messiah craze that was sweeping the western reservations. "Several small parties of Indians have gone westward from their tribes to some point," Miles began, "which, as near as I can locate, is in Nevada, and there they have been shown somebody disguised as the Messiah and have spoken with him." Since Indians from several different tribes had reported speaking with the "Messiah" in their own tongues, Miles concluded that a number of conspirators carried out the impersonation. As to who was instigating the movement, the general stated, "I cannot say positively, but it is my belief the Mormons are the prime movers in all this. I do not think it will lead to an outbreak," he added, "but where an ignorant race of people become religious fanatics it is hard to tell just what they will do."1

The general's opinion proved to be wrong. In less than two months, the "Sioux Outbreak of 1890" led to the infamous Battle of Wounded Knee on 29 December 1890. Miles, in fact, directed the Sioux campaign and had sent the first troops to the reserva-

^{1.} Quoted in "Probably a Mormon Trick," New York Times, 8 Nov. 1890, p. 5.

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tions only two weeks after he stated that no outbreak was imminent. The two-month campaign cost the lives of approximately 175 Sioux and 39 soldiers.²

In the aftermath of the violence in South Dakota, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Thomas Jefferson Morgan placed the blame for the troubles outside the Indian Bureau, hoping to prevent any disruption of the bureau's assimilation programs. General Miles and the United States Army became natural targets. Removal of military influence from the reservations was a prime concern of Indian policy reformers, and they welcomed any attack on the army. Furthermore, the perennial debate over transfer of the Bureau of Indian Affairs back to the War Department was again raging. "The sudden appearance of military upon their reservation," Morgan wrote, "gave rise to the wildest rumors among the Indians of danger and disaster." He added that the army's movements "frightened many Indians away from their agencies into the bad lands and largely intensified whatever spirit of opposition to the Government existed."

Miles disagreed and responded in the January 1891 issue of the North American Review. In an essay entitled "The Future of the Indian Question," he placed responsibility for the outbreak on several groups, including the bureau officials who "compelled the Indians to live upon limited tracts of land and allowed them to... [become] dissatisfied and equipped for war." The general also blamed another class of whites, "those who have committed the great crime of instilling into the minds of these superstitious and vicious savages the delusion that they have a messiah among them."

In his report of the military expedition, included in the Annual Report of the Secretary of War for 1891, Miles expanded on his Mormon conspiracy theory. According to Miles, the Mormons sought an opportunity to cause trouble for the United States in her western territories. Seeing the deplorable condition of the American Indians, they sent word to the various tribes that an In-

^{2.} Robert M. Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 227-28. Utley states that 153 Sioux died at the site and that it is reasonable to assume that others died later of wounds. Casualty estimates ranged as high as three hundred Indians and fifty soldiers.

^{3.} U.S., Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior, 1891 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1891), p. 135.

^{4.} Nelson A. Miles, "The Future of the Indian Question," North American Review 152 (Jan. 1891): 9.

dian messiah had appeared to rescue them from their misery. The general wrote: "It was at this stage of affairs, when driven to desperation, [that the Indians] were willing to entertain the pretensions or superstitions of deluded, fanatical people living on the western slope of the Rocky Mountains, whose emissaries first secretly appeared among the Indians prior to 1889. It was not, however, until the autumn of that year that the widespread conspiracy assumed serious character. They first aroused the curiosity of the Indians by some secret method scarcely realized by the savages themselves and persuaded delegations from different tribes of Indians to leave their reservations in November, 1889."5 From their homes, Miles believed, the Indians were guided to Nevada, where they were shown the messiah. As in his earlier statements, he contended, "There were, undoubtedly, several masquerading in the same robes and disguise as one person." He believed that this group of conspirators taught the Indians the Ghost Dance and wore a "light garment like a shirt or hunter's

5. U.S., Congress, House, Report of the Secretary of War (1891), H. Ex. Doc. 1, pt. 2, 52d Cong., 1st sess., 1892, p. 141.



General Miles and staff members survey the camp of hostile Sioux at Pine Ridge Agency after the Battle of Wounded Knee.

frock, which, after being sanctified, was believed to be bullet

proof."6

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The idea of a Mormon conspiracy behind the Ghost Dance of 1890 did not begin with Nelson Miles, nor was blaming the Mormons for Indian troubles an innovation. Miles probably developed his theory from what he saw and heard on his tour of the reservations and from a number of reports and letters that named the Mormons as conspirators in the Ghost Dance movement. This correspondence included both military reports that passed through his office and letters from civilians and government officials, all of which were eventually included in Special Case 188, the file the

Indian Bureau kept on the Ghost Dance.7

The first hint of a Mormon conspiracy had reached Miles's Chicago headquarters in July 1890. At the end of June, a Northern Chevenne named Porcupine, who had visited the "Messiah" in Nevada, was interviewed by Lt. S. C. Robertson of the First Cavalry. Porcupine had apparently traveled south from his home on the Tongue River reservation in Montana through Wyoming to the rail line. By train, he went on to Fort Hall, Idaho, and the Bannock agency. There he first came in contact with the new dance and tales of the Indian messiah. In the company of a few Bannocks, Porcupine then traveled to the Walker River reservation where he met Wovoka, the "Indian Christ." While he never mentioned the Mormons by name, some of Porcupine's statements aroused Robertson's suspicion. The lieutenant probably added the bracketed comments to Porcupine's account: "All the Indians from the Bannock agency down to where I finally stopped danced this dance referring to the late religious dances at the Cheyenne agency], the whites often dancing it themselves. [It will be recollected that he traveled constantly through the Mormon countryl."8

6. Ibid., p. 142.

8. Maj. Henry Carroll to Assistant Adjutant General (hereafter cited as AAG), Division of the Missouri, 28 June 1890, SC 188.

^{7.} Special Case 188, The Ghost Dance 1890-1898, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (this file is hereafter cited as SC 188). Special Case 188 begins with a letter from Charles Hyde, of Pierre, South Dakota, dated 29 March 1890. The letter warns of a possible Sioux outbreak in the near future. The last letter in the file is dated 21 January 1898, and was written by Henry P. Ewing, the superintendent of the Hualapai day schools at Hackberry, Arizona Territory. Ewing wrote to inform the commissioner of the continued presence of Pan-a-mite, said to be a Mormon Paiute, who was again instigating trouble among the Hualapai. The bulk of the correspondence deals with the Sioux outbreak and includes the official reports of the reservation agents. Documents received by the War Department that pertained to the Ghost Dance movement are also included.

The following November, in response to an Indian Bureau circular asking about the disposition of the Indians on the western reservations, E. R. Kellogg, the commander of Fort Washakie, Wyoming, reported that there was no "unusual excitement" among the Arapaho and Shoshone of the Wind River reservation. He believed, however, that representatives of the "Indian



Christ" had recently been among them. Kellogg continued that the "Indian Christ" was probably "'Bannack Jim' [sic], a Mormon, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that his attempts to stir up strife have been instigated by the Mormons." 'S Kellogg placed

^{9.} E. R. Kellogg to AAG, Department of the Platte, 27 Oct. 1890, SC 188.

"Bannock Jim" at either the Lemhi or the Fort Hall agency, where Porcupine first encountered the dance.

Miles might also have been aware of letters sent to the Interior Department and the Indian Bureau naming the Mormons as conspirators. In early November 1890, William Plumb, agent for the Western Shoshone reservation in north central Nevada, wrote the commissioner and suggested that "some designing white man or men" were responsible for the Ghost Dance, although he admitted he had no proof. 10 A month later, S. Salomon, the government land agent at Chamberlain, South Dakota, wrote the secretary of the interior to inform him of what he believed to be the cause of the Indian troubles. While returning home from San Francisco, Salomon stopped in Salt Lake City "and visited the Tabernacle in the company of several Eastern gentlemen." During their visit, the group listened to two Mormon preachers who "abused this country in a most outrageous manner." Salomon asked that the secret service be used to investigate the matter and was convinced "they would find that the Mormons are the instigators of the messiah craze among the Indians."11

Thus, Miles was not alone in blaming the Mormons for the spread of the Ghost Dance. James Mooney, a government ethnologist and the first person to study the movement in detail, also detected what he believed was evidence of Mormon influence on the Ghost Dance. This influence he linked only to the religion's doctrine; he found no indication of a Mormon conspiracy to transmit the religion or stir up trouble. Furthermore, Mooney contended that the religion had much more in common with more established faiths, including Christianity. Unlike many who believed the Indians incapable of creating such a widespread movement, Mooney understood that the Ghost Dance was a native reaction to the broken treaties, loss of tribal lands, and assimilation programs that marked the final decades of the nineteenth century. While each tribe incorporated its own traditions into the religion, the Ghost Dance was nevertheless truly a pan-Indian movement.12

William Plumb to Commissioner of Indian Affairs (hereafter cited as CIA), 8
Nov. 1890, SC 188.

^{11.} S. Salomon to Secretary of the Interior, 26 Nov. 1890, SC 188.

^{12.} James Mooney, "The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890," in Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1892-93, pt. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1896).

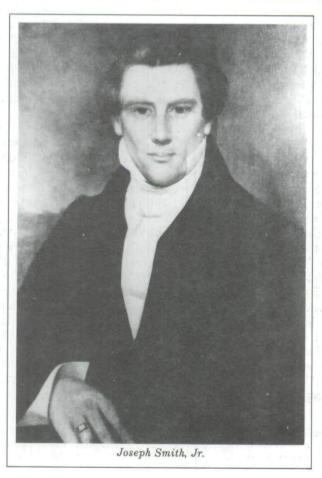
The spirit of the times favored Miles's opinion; the Mormons were roundly blamed for the spread of the Ghost Dance. To many non-Mormons, the "Saints," as the Mormons called themselves, seemed sinister and conspiratorial. Mormons themselves chose to remain isolated and suspicious of the "gentiles," as they called non-Mormons. Persecution and misunderstanding had marked the relations between Mormons and the federal government in the nineteenth century. Further, because of their religion, Mormons had always had a special interest in the American Indians that often caused problems on the frontier. Combine the isolation, the suspicions, and the special Indian policy of the church, and it becomes clear that the Mormons were the logical scapegoats for the Ghost Dance troubles.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was founded far from the deserts of Utah or the Badlands of South Dakota. On 6 April 1830 in a farmhouse in Fayette, New York, Joseph Smith, Jr., and a dozen of his followers first met. Smith was the religion's prophet and driving force from its founding until his assassination in 1844. His theories on the origins and treatment of the American Indians still guided the church a half-century later when the Ghost Dance spread among the Indians. Smith was born in Vermont and moved with his family at age eleven to Palmyra, in the "burned over" district of western New York.13 He soon gained local fame for his ability to use a "peepstone," a device used like a divining rod, to locate Indian and Spanish treasures reportedly buried in the area. Smith, however, showed a deep interest in the Indians even before his treasure-hunting days. His mother recalled that during dinnertime conversations he "could give the most amusing recitals." He told his family tales of the previous inhabitants of the American continent, going into great detail. "This he would do," his mother added, "with as much ease, seemingly, as if he had spent his whole life among them."14

^{13.} During the American religious era known as the Second Great Awakening, "fires" of revival spirit swept the region of New York west of the Catskills and Adirondacks so frequently that the area became known as the "burned over district." Many transplanted New Englanders, given to belief in the perfection of man and in a world of millennial happiness, moved to the area in the early nineteenth century. From around 1800 until the 1840s, the area's residents took part in scores of evangelical movements. The region also gave rise to a number of "primitive gospel" movements in reaction to the evangelical fervor, most notably Mormonism.

^{14.} Quoted in Klaus J. Hansen, Mormonism and the American Experience, Chicago History of American Religion series (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 15.

Though the church was not founded until 1830, its history actually begins on the night of 21 September 1823, when Smith claimed to have been visited by the angel Moroni. The angel told him of a set of golden plates that gave an account of the continent's first inhabitants and their descendants. From the



plates, which Smith "translated" between 1827 and 1830, emerged a history of one of the "lost tribes" of Israel. Around 600 B.C., the family of the prophet Lehi fled Jerusalem to escape the impending Babylonian captivity of the Jews. Led by God, they crossed the Arabian desert, built ships, and sailed to the new

promised land, which today is known as America. Two of the prophet's sons, Laman and Lemuel, desired to return to the material comforts of Jerusalem and broke with the family and the will of God. Upon the death of Lehi, his righteous son Nephi assumed leadership of the family group and led them deeper into the wilderness to escape the Lamanites, the descendants of Laman and Lemuel. Because they were evil and sought to destroy the righteous Nephites, the Lord cursed the Lamanites and "did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them." 15

After the resurrection, Smith contended, Jesus appeared in the New World and established a church that flourished for several centuries along with Nephite civilization. During this period, great cities were built and there was peace. But as the wealth of the Nephites increased, they moved away from the holy laws, and the struggle with their dark-skinned brethren began anew. Around A.D. 400, the final battle was fought in what is now western New York. Only twenty-four Nephites survived, among them the historian Mormon and his son Moroni. Mormon recorded the history of both peoples on the golden plates, which his son then hid. It was Moroni who had appeared to Smith in 1823 and told him of the plates. To true believers, the appearance of the Book of Mormon was a sign that God had begun to gather the people of Israel for the millennium.¹⁶

The Book of Mormon taught that the American Indians were the descendants of the Lamanites and that they could, indeed must, be saved. God had spared them since it was the "traditions of their fathers that caused them to remain in the state of ignorance." In the latter days, when the Lamanites were educated as to their true history and accepted the Book of Mormon, they would "rejoice," as "many generations shall not pass away among them, save they shall become a pure and delightsome people." Therefore, the Indians could be saved both spiritually and physically. Their appearance could be restored, and they could become white again. The existence of these "red sons of Israel" was used throughout the nineteenth century as evidence of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. 19

^{15.} Joseph Smith, Jr., trans., The Book of Mormon: An Account Written by the Hand of Mormon upon Plates Taken from the Plates of Nephi (1830; reprint ed., Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), p. 66.

^{16.} Ibid., p. 463.

^{17.} Ibid., p. 230.

^{18.} Ibid., p. 182.

^{19.} Hansen, Mormonism, p. 11.

Today, this account of the origins of the American Indians may seem, to nonbelievers, far-fetched. In the early nineteenth century, however, it was a widely held and popular belief, for it explained why there was no mention of the Indian race in the Bible. Sometime around 1809, the Reverend Solomon Spaulding had composed a story that he claimed was the history of the continent's first inhabitants. Spaulding's Manuscript Found was allegedly a translation of twenty-eight pieces of parchment found in an Ohio burial mound. Critics have frequently charged that Smith used Spaulding's work or Ethan Smith's (no relation) Views of the Hebrews; or, The Ten Tribes of Israel in America, published in 1823, as the basis for the Book of Mormon.²⁰

In encompassing this widespread belief, Mormon doctrine did not contradict the popular scientific or anthropological opinion of the age. In fact, more than any other religion, Mormonism was based on empirical evidence. Before the angel Moroni reclaimed the plates from Smith, eleven witnesses claimed to have seen them. In addition, the Indian mounds throughout the eastern United States and the remains of the Aztec and Inca cities were all evidence of the high civilization of the Nephites destroyed centuries ago by their wild brethren. It should also be noted that a belief in a pre-Indian race that was responsible for the earthworks discovered throughout the Americas was not restricted to the Mormons. As historian Klaus Hansen has observed, "Mormon cosmology fits readily into the framework of nineteenth-century American science—at least as it was perceived in the popular mind."21 Beyond the book itself, Mormon doctrine was comforting to those people who felt left out of the evangelical furor of the age and saw Christian morals declining. Mormonism was a revitalization movement that sought to restore the ancient gospel, and for that reason it was attractive to many. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can be characterized as a unique reaction to the pressures of the age, and it led to a unique interpretation of the American Indians.

From the time of its founding, the Mormon church's Indian policy was guided by its theories on the origins and treatment of the Lamanites, or American Indians. The first Mormon mission to the

^{20.} See Brian M. Fagan, Elusive Treasure: The Story of Early Archaeologists in the Americas (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), pp. 116-17; and Robert Silverberg, Mound Builders of Ancient America: The Archaeology of a Myth (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1968), p. 94.

^{21.} Hansen, Mormonism, p. 82. See also Silverberg, Mound Builders, pp. 88-96.

Indians was launched in 1830, only six months after the church's first meeting. Parley P. Pratt, Oliver Cowdery, Peter Whitmer, and Ziba Peterson traveled from New York to Missouri and, along the way, preached to Catteraugua, Wyandot, and Delaware. This early mission was important to the church, for the migrations caused by the Indian Removal Act of 1830 were seen as manifestations of the gathering of Israel, which was to precede the millennium.²²

The Mormons themselves began to move west. Smith announced that Jackson County, Missouri, was the actual site of the Garden of Eden and it was there that the Saints should build their new Zion. Years later, William W. Phelps wrote Brigham Young and told him of an unpublished revelation made by Smith in Missouri in 1831. The prophet revealed that it was God's will "that, in time, ye should take unto you wives of the Lamanites and Nephites, that their posterity may become white, delightsome and just."23 To frontiersmen, this suggestion of miscegenation was more evidence of Mormon attempts to form alliances with the Indians. A subsequent church proclamation that the Indians would be "united in strength and restored to their rights" was viewed as an open incitement to rebellion.24 Ill feelings led to violence, and the Mormons were forcibly expelled from Jackson County. Smith followed his people east to Illinois, where they settled beside the Mississippi River. In a short time, the Mormons constructed a thriving community there called Nauvoo, but trouble arose again. Joseph Smith was arrested for treason and died at the hands of a mob while awaiting trial in Carthage, Illinois. The faith's new leader, Brigham Young, decided that the best course was to find a place where the Saints could live unmolested by the government and the gentiles.

In the spring of 1846, the exodus from Nauvoo began. In the eighteen months that passed before Young and the first group of settlers reached the Great Salt Lake Valley, the basis of Mormon-Indian relations was laid. While crossing the plains, the emigrants adopted a practical policy centered on separation and fairness. The friendship of the Indians was sought both because of the need to insure the safety of other Mormon emigrants that

^{22.} Donna Hill, Joseph Smith: The First Mormon (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1977), p. 119.

^{23.} William W. Phelps to Brigham Young, 12 Aug. 1861, Historical Division of the Mormon Church, quoted in Hill, *Joseph Smith*, p. 340.

^{24.} Hill, Joseph Smith, p. 158.

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were to follow and because of the moral responsibility the Saints felt toward the Indians.²⁵ This combination of practicality and moral responsibility was the major characteristic of the church's Indian policy during the emigration west and the early years in Utah.

The first contingent of settlers reached Utah in July of 1847. In earlier years, some fur trappers and a few other whites had passed through the Great Basin and come in contact with the Indians. The arrival of the Mormons, however, was to change forever the lives of the Utah tribes, for the Saints were not travelers but permanent settlers. Their conciliatory policy towards the Indians was continued since their small settlements existed at the sufferance of the local tribes. The Mormons, in these early years, were more concerned with building their state of "Deseret" than with Indian affairs. Now that they were isolated, the Mormons set about to turn their church into a nation with a distinct culture.²⁶

The Saints were not successful in establishing their own nation, but the territory of Utah in its first forty years, because of its relative isolation and autonomy, has been compared to a theocratic city-state.27 If this comparison is valid, Brigham Young was certainly its priest-king. As the territory's first governor, Young served as Indian superintendent until the "Utah War" forced his removal in July 1858. Because he held these two positions simultaneously, Young almost single-handedly determined Utah's Indian policy. He was generally guided by his strong religious beliefs about the Lamanites and how they should be treated. "It is our duty to feed these poor ignorant Indians," he wrote in his Journal of Discourses, for "we are living on their possessions and at their homes." It should be remembered, however, that Mormon beliefs were a two-sided coin. It was true that they had sympathy for the Indian, but it was equally true that the Saints were convinced of the inferiority of the Indian race. In his Discourses, Young also wrote, "the Lamanites or Indians are just as much the children of our Father and God as we are. . . . But we are also the children of adoption through obedience to the Gospel of his Son." He contin-

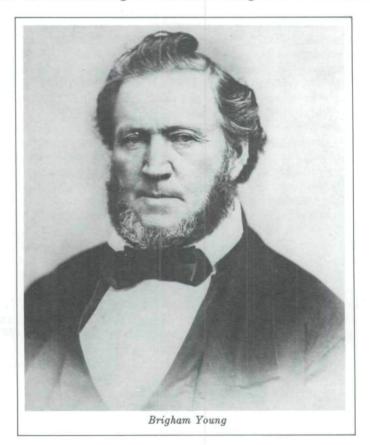
^{25.} Juanita Brooks, "Indian Relations on the Mormon Frontier," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 12 (Jan., Apr. 1944): 3; Howard A. Christy, "Open Hand and Mailed Fist: Mormon-Indian Relations in Utah, 1847-52," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 46 (Summer 1978): 217.

^{26.} Mark P. Leone, Roots of Modern Mormonism (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 18.

^{27.} Ibid., p. 4.

ued, "There is a curse on these aborigines of our country who roam the plains, and are so wild that you cannot tame them." Practicality, tempered by his religious beliefs, characterized Young's Indian policy.

Peace through friendship was, of course, his first choice, but when this failed, Young was not above using force or even asking



the federal government for aid in removing a tribe from the territory. Much of the funds appropriated by Congress for the Utah Indian superintendency were spent on pacifying the Indians liv-

^{28.} Brigham Young, Discourses of Brigham Young (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1954), p. 122.

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ing near Mormon settlements and not on aiding them. After the militia was used to subdue Indians in the Utah Valley in 1850, the killing of Indians became commonplace. The policy of fairness deteriorated to a policy that favored the settler.²⁹ Practicality had won out over moral responsibility.

In a short time, however, the military solution proved too expensive. A new policy combining separation, fairness, and assistance was instituted. On 14 December 1854, the Deseret Evening News printed Young's famous statement, "it was manifestly more economical and less expensive, to feed and clothe, than to fight them."30 To prevent further violence, the Mormons built outposts in a fortlike manner, allowed only those with knowledge of Indian languages and customs to trade with the tribes, distributed gifts, and established Indian relief societies in each ward. After the brief "Walker War" of 1853, named for the Ute chief Wakara or Walker, the Saints made improvements in their gift distribution system and relief societies. In addition, "Indian farms" were established to instruct the natives in agriculture. and outpost missions were set up among the tribes.31 The missionary effort was important for two reasons. First, peace would allow the Mormon domain to expand, and second, friendship with the Indians meant the gentiles could not use the tribes against the Mormons. As early as 1851, Mormon traders were active among the Bannock and Shoshone of Idaho and Utah. These two tribes played a major role in transmitting the Ghost Dance to the Plains Indians in 1890.

The greatest Mormon missionary success came in the 1870s. At one point, nearly three hundred Shoshone were gathered at a settlement named Washakie, along the Idaho-Utah border. Most were baptized; some served as missionaries; and many went through the ceremony of endowment, an ordinance reserved for those of proven faith. In December 1874, a Mormon named John Nicholsen reported that there were over eight hundred Indians gathered at Deep Creek in western Utah where about two hundred fifty Gosiute usually resided. The new arrivals, he stated, were from Wyoming, Idaho, and Nevada and were there to share

^{29.} Christy, "Open Hand," p. 227.

^{30.} Quoted in Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 148.

^{31.} Ibid., pp. 149, 153.

^{32.} Lawrence G. Coates, "The Mormons and the Ghost Dance," Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 18 (Winter 1985): 99.

in the "marvelous benefits of Mormonism." From these statements, the efficacy of Mormon missionary efforts seems spectacular, but in fact, only moderate success was ever achieved. While they were in constant contact with the Ute and Shoshone, the Mormons made few converts, and many of these—Chief Wakara is a famous example—were short-lived conversions. Wakara was baptized and ordained an elder in the church in 1849; yet, only four years later he nominally led a war against the Mormons.

The Walker War was started in part by the Mormon refusal to participate in the Indian slave trade. However, Mormons did reluctantly buy children to "save" them. Eventually, the adoption of Indian children by Mormon families became a major theme in Mormon-Indian relations and continues to be so today. After a visit to southern Utah in 1851, Young wrote that he advised the people there to "buy up the Lamanite children as fast as they could, and educate them and teach them the gospel, so that many generations would not pass ere they should become a white and delightsome people." After the territorial legislature passed an antislavery bill in 1852, the Saints made it a point to secure all the Indian children available. Probate judges indentured these children—either rescued or bought from slavers—to suitable Mormon families for rearing. 35

Widespread adoptions continued, especially in southern Utah, for the next several decades and aroused the suspicion of many gentiles. In 1857, the Mountain Meadows Massacre overshadowed Mormon missionary and adoption efforts and convinced many that the Mormons had indeed enlisted the Indians to fight the United States. The summer of 1857 was a tense period for the Mormons of Utah. In the decade since the territory's founding, relations with the federal government had deteriorated, and that summer, word reached Salt Lake City that a column of the United States Army was being sent to put the territory in order. In the meantime, a wagon train of emigrants traveling through Utah to California had enraged the Mormon population. Mormon apologists later charged that members of the doomed wagon train had expressed pleasure at the approach of the army and that some had even claimed to have participated in the violence against the Mormons in Missouri. The train was surrounded on 7 September

^{33.} Carling Malouf, "The Gosiute Indians," in *Shoshone Indians* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1974), p. 117 (146).

^{34.} Quoted in Brooks, "Indian Relations," p. 6.

^{35.} Ibid., pp. 8-9.

by a party of Indians led by white Mormons. John D. Lee, who was later executed for his part in the massacre, convinced the party to surrender on 11 September. While being escorted from the scene by a unit of the Iron County Militia, all members of the group considered old enough to testify against the Mormons involved were slain. Both the militia and the Indians took part in the final massacre. Seventeen children were spared and distributed to Mormon families. The trial of John D. Lee in 1876 and his execution the following year again catapulted the massacre into the headlines. Almost twenty years later as he wrote his memoirs, Gen. Nelson A. Miles, commander of the Military Division of the Missouri during the Ghost Dance of 1890, cited the incident as evidence of the conspiratorial nature of the church. Thus, the 1857 Mountain Meadows Massacre was still fresh in the minds of many westerners in 1890.

Throughout the territorial period, the relationship between federal officials and the Mormon residents of Utah was characterized by mutual distrust and suspicion. The Mormon policies of self-preservation and of safeguarding small settlements through friendship with the Indians, their active missionary work, the marriage of Mormon men and Indian women, and the adoption of Indian children by Mormon families were all viewed by federal agents as evidence of a Mormon plot to build a distinction in the minds of the Indians between "good" Mormons and "bad" gentiles. The Mountain Meadows Massacre was simply this conspiracy come to fruition. Two years before the massacre, Garland Hurt, the United States Indian agent for the territory, wrote the commissioner to complain about Mormon motives. "I suspect that their first object," he began, "will be to teach these wretched savages that they are the rightful owners of the American soil, and that it has been wrongfully taken from them by the whites, and that the Great Spirit had sent the Mormons among them to help recover their rights."38

As a result of the church's stormy and violent history in the East and its troubled relationships on the frontier, the Saints often believed that the federal officials sent among them were spies. There is some indication that the Mormons sought to use

^{36.} See Juanita Brooks, The Mountain Meadows Massacre (1950; reprint ed., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970).

^{37.} Nelson A. Miles, Personal Recollections and Observations of General Nelson A. Miles (Chicago: Werner Co., 1896), p. 370.

^{38.} Garland Hurt to CIA, 2 May 1855, quoted in Brooks, "Indian Relations." p. 16.

the Indians in an attempt to keep the federal government and its agents at arm's length. In 1854, a church elder proclaimed that the Indians were "the battle ax of the Lord" and added, "May we not have been sent to learn how to use this ax with skill?" Perhaps the most famous and telling statement in this vein was made by Brigham Young. He wrote to Jacob Hamblin, the famous Mormon apostle to the Indians, on 4 August 1857 and advised him to continue a conciliatory policy towards the Indians and seek to gain their "love and confidence." Young concluded, "they must learn that they have either got to help us or the United States will kill us both." By the 1890s, relations between the church and the federal government had improved, but an atmosphere of suspicion still pervaded the Great Basin when the religion of another prophet spread among the Indians.

The new prophet was a Northern Paiute Indian named Wovoka, or Jack Wilson, as he was known to the whites. He lived his entire life in Mason Valley near the Walker River reservation in western Nevada. After he had achieved fame, Wovoka sought the help of E. A. Dyer, Sr., a storekeeper in Yerington, Nevada, to answer correspondence sent to him by Indians throughout the United States. Much of what is known about the prophet's life comes from a sixteen-page manuscript entitled "Wizardry," which Dyer wrote sometime in the 1950s.⁴¹

At an early age, Wovoka began to work on the Mason Valley ranch of David Wilson and became the constant playmate of the rancher's three sons. Eventually, the Wilsons accepted the young Paiute into their house, where he was called Jack and was exposed to "some religious teachings through family Bible readings, evening prayers, grace before meat [sic], and similar family devotions." Like Dyer, later authors have linked this early exposure to Christianity to the development of Wovoka's Ghost Dance religion. "He learned that white men had certain leaders," Dyer wrote, "wisemen and prophets whom they revered and by whose laws and precepts they endeavored to live." He added that it was not unreasonable to suppose that "yesterday's young Indian might envision himself as some sort of an Indian version of an Old

^{39.} Quoted in Brooks, "Indian Relations," p. 21.

^{40.} Quoted in Brooks, Mountain Meadows Massacre, p. 34.

^{41.} E. A. Dyer, Sr., "Wizardry," n.d., Manuscripts Division, Nevada Historical Society, Reno, Nev. Dyer's son compiled his father's writings for an oral history project.

^{42.} Ibid., p. 2.

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Testament prophet." Wovoka did not aspire to be a chief or a medicine man; rather, he sought to follow in the footsteps of his natural father, Tavivo, and become a Paiute prophet. Although Porcupine and several others, including Nevada Indian agent Stephen S. Sears, said Wovoka claimed to be an "aboriginal Jesus," he claimed only to be a prophet, not the Messiah. 44

Wovoka was revered by the Paiutes after he predicted several miraculous occurrences, including ice falling from the summer sky. "Not too difficult a feat," wrote Dyer, "if one possesses some ingenuity and a supply of ice." 45 Of this same event he added, "as the ice melted the ice water was ceremoniously drunk.... Shortly thereafter, at Jack's order, the whole bunch stripped and plunged into the river." Dyer later concluded that he had "witnessed an aboriginal distortion of the communion and baptism inspired by Biblical tales imperfectly understood." 46

Wovoka fell into a trance during an eclipse of the sun on New Year's Day 1889. When he awoke, the prophet announced that he had "died" and gone to heaven. He had seen all the Indians who had died living there happily. God told him to return to earth and tell all the tribes to dance, be good, and not fight. If the Indians did all this, heaven and earth would become one, the dead would return to life, and the living would never be sick. The whites who did not believe would be swept from the earth, and the game animals the people depended on in the old days would return in abundance.⁴⁷

Wovoka's Ghost Dance was one of six revitalization movements to spread among the western tribes in the post-Civil War era. In 1870, another ghost dance had emanated from the Walker River reservation, this one led by Wodziwob, whose influence has been linked to Tavivo and his son, Wovoka. 48 A decade earlier, Smohalla's dreamer religion had swept the tribes of the Columbia Plateau. In his monumental study "The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890," James Mooney included discussion

^{43.} Ibid., p. 3.

^{44.} L. G. Moses, "'The Father Tells Me So!': Wovoka, the Ghost Dance Prophet," American Indian Quarterly 9 (Summer 1985): 339.

^{45.} Dyer, "Wizardry," p. 4.

^{46.} Ibid., pp. 6-7.

^{47.} Mooney, "Ghost-Dance Religion," pp. 771-74, 777; Arthur I. Chapman to John Gibbon, 6 Dec. 1890, in *Report of the Secretary of War* (1891), pp. 191-94. These two sources are based on the earliest interviews with Wovoka.

^{48.} Michael Hittman, "The 1870 Ghost Dance at the Walker River Reservation: A Reconstruction," Ethnohistory 20 (Summer 1973): 248.

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of these two religions, among other revitalization movements. As in the case of the earlier ghost dance religion, Mooney linked Mormon doctrine to the Ghost Dance of 1890. He wrote, "the Mormons took an active interest in the religious ferment then existing [the 1870s]... and helped to give shape to the doctrine which crystalized some years later in the Ghost dance."49 Since Mooney's time, others have studied the religion and have come to similar conclusions. Omer C. Stewart characterized the Ghost Dance as a combination of Northern Paiute and Northwestern Plateau beliefs in periodic world renewal and Christian teachings of the second coming of Christ.⁵⁰ It was the incorporation of a belief in the resurrection that truly changed native religions. Some American Indian religions included belief in the existence of the spirit after death, but the Indian religions of the Great Basin usually included ritual avoidance of the dead as well. In Grace Dangberg's opinion, the belief in benevolent spirits was "not Indian and may reasonably be ascribed to Christian and particularly Mormon influence."51

In his extensive study, Mooney quoted fully the portion of General Miles's report that cited deprivation as a major cause of the Sioux rebellion, but he ignored the portion that blamed disloyal Mormons. On the other hand, he included an excerpt of a "curious pamphlet" published in Salt Lake City in 1892, entitled "The Mormons have stepped down and out of Celestial Government-the American Indians have stepped up and into Celestial Government." The pamphlet was critical of the church for abandoning polygamy and used the Ghost Dance religion as evidence that God had turned away from the Mormons and towards the Indians because of this change in policy. The author reminded the faithful that God had told Joseph Smith "if thou livest until thou art eighty-five years old, thou shalt see the face of the Son of Man."52 According to this prophecy, the millennium would have begun on 23 December 1890. (Joseph Smith had been born on that date in 1805.)

Mooney also suggested that the Mormon "endowment robe," the sacred garment worn within the temple when going through

^{49.} Mooney, "Ghost-Dance Religion," p. 704.

^{50.} Omer C. Stewart, "The Ghost Dance," in Anthropology on the Great Plains, ed. W. Raymond Wood and Margot Liberty (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), p. 180.

^{51.} Grace Dangberg, "Wovoka," Nevada Historical Society Quarterly 11, no. 2 (Summer 1968): 10.

^{52.} Mooney, "Ghost Dance Religion," p. 792.

the ceremony of endowment, may have been the source of the ghost shirt worn by the Sioux. He may have confused the endowment robe with the holy undergarment that was worn by Mormons outside the temple and was said to protect the wearer from all bodily harm. In any case, Mooney contended that the ghost shirt sprang from non-Indian beliefs since the warriors of most tribes went into battle stripped to the waist and carried their protective medicine by a means other than their clothing.⁵³

Wovoka was never baptized as a Mormon, but that does not mean he was ignorant of the doctrine. The first white settlers in



As evidence of Mormon involvement in the messiah craze, some observers pointed to a possible similarity between the ghost shirts worn by Indian dancers and the Mormon endowment robe, a ceremonial garment worn in the temple.

western Nevada were part of a Mormon mission sent to the area in 1850. In that year, the settlement of Genoa, also known as Mormon Station, was established in the Carson Valley. In 1854, the first Indian agent from Utah Territory arrived in the valley. The following year, in an attempt to consolidate the Mormon position in the western reaches of the territory (Nevada), Young appointed judicial officials for Carson County and gave the county representation in the territorial legislature. The Mormon influ-

ence declined in Nevada after 1857, when most of the colonists were recalled to Utah to defend Salt Lake City against the approaching United States Army, but across Nevada and Utah the presence and missionary zeal of the Saints continued to be felt by the Paiute.⁵⁴ The flexibility of most native religions and the constant presence of the Mormons suggest that Wovoka could have incorporated parts of Mormon doctrine in his religion. Moreover, since the Ghost Dance and Mormonism were the strongest millennial religions at the time, it is easy to see how the two could be connected in the popular mind.

Mormons, with their well-established concern for the Indians, viewed the Ghost Dance movement with interest. Their reaction to the religion's spread and consequences gives some indication of why they were blamed for its transmission. In the spring of 1870, the Ghost Dance of the prophet Wodziwob was brought to the Ute by the Bannock and the Northern Shoshone. Many Mormons saw this as a manifestation of the supernatural activity among the Lamanites that was to precede the millennium. Mooney reported, "the Mormon priests accepted it as a prophecy of speedy fulfillment of their own traditions." He added that Orson Pratt, a prominent elder in the church, gave a famous sermon "urging the faithful to arrange their affairs and put their houses in order to receive the long-awaited wanderers."55 In his annual report for 1875, the agent at Fort Hall, William H. Danilson, complained that the Mormons were taking advantage of the recent Ghost Dance excitement among the Bannock, offering free rations to anyone who would travel to Utah and listen to their doctrine. He charged the Mormons with telling the Indians that by being baptized, "the old men would all become young, the young men would never be sick." Danilson also accused the Saints of encouraging his charges to resist the authority of the government by saying to the Indians that "if the soldiers attempted to drive them away not to go, as their guns would have no effect upon them."56

Less than fifteen years later, by the early summer of 1890, the church hierarchy in Salt Lake City received word from the missionaries in the field that the Indians had been visited by Christ.

^{54.} Edward C. Johnson, Walker River Paiutes: A Tribal History (Schurz, Nev.: Walker River Paiute Tribe, 1975), p. 26.

^{55.} Mooney, "Ghost-Dance Religion," pp. 703-4.

Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the Year 1875, p. 258.

President Wilford Woodruff sent elder John King, a Cherokee, to investigate. King traveled to Montana where he learned from Porcupine the details of the latter's visit with Wovoka. So many of the details of Wovoka's religion complemented what King had learned as a Mormon that he claimed Porcupine was actually a disciple of Christ. When his report reached the Mormon capital, many Mormons accepted Porcupine's account as evidence that the millennium was at hand. Woodruff, however, believed that Porcupine had not met Christ but rather one of the Three Nephites of Mormon folklore. These celestial beings, it was said, would minister to the remnants of their race in the latter days.

The Desert Evening News carried Miles's statement that the Mormons were probably the "prime movers" behind the Ghost Dance on 7 November 1890. A day later, the editors denied that the Saints had any part in the Ghost Dance troubles. The paper called Miles's opinion "fallacious" and based on ignorance. Woodruff believed that the best course would be for the church to avoid any trouble with the government or the Indians. As tensions increased in the last weeks of 1890. Woodruff advised all Mormons, and particularly his missionaries, to stay out of all conflicts involving Indians.58 After the massacre at Wounded Knee in late December, the church used its press to criticize the government's actions in handling the Sioux outbreak. In an editorial, the Desertt Evening News charged that the government had bungled the crisis by harassing and menacing the Indians with the army instead of removing the causes of the rebellion, namely, the poor conditions on the reservations. 59 Criticism of the government and its policies may have been justified, but launched as it was, so soon after the Mormons themselves had been charged with instigating the movement, it certainly did not help the Mormon cause.

Nearly two years after the Battle of Wounded Knee, H. G. Webb of Moapa, Nevada, wrote the commissioner of Indian affairs to request copies of the last two annual reports. He then rather casually added that he could trace the "messiah craze" to the "Mormons of Utah." "If you care for my arguments," he concluded, "I will endeavor to put them down on paper." Apparently, the commissioner was not interested because no further corre-

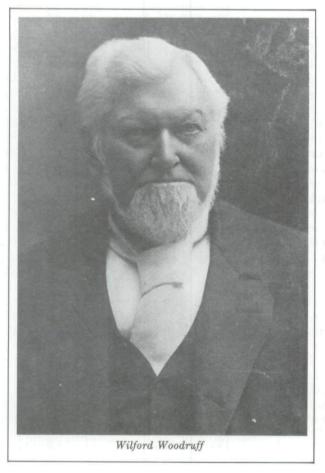
^{57.} Coates, "Mormons and the Ghost Dance," p. 107.

^{58.} Ibid., p. 108.

^{59.} Ibid., p. 109.

^{60.} H. G. Webb to CIA, 11 Nov. 1893, SC 188.

spondence from Webb is included in Special Case 188. This lack of response is not surprising, for when conditions on the reservations cooled, the bureau lost all interest in tracing the causes of the Ghost Dance movement and simply went about its new-found



purpose of assimilating the Indians into the dominant society with all possible haste.⁶¹

Many westerners continued to believe that the Mormons were responsible for the Ghost Dance and the resultant unrest on the

61. L. G. Moses, "Jack Wilson and the Indian Service: The Response of the BIA to the Ghost Dance Prophet," *American Indian Quarterly* 5 (Nov. 1979): 308.

reservations. Because of the church's history of antagonism with the federal government and non-Mormons, it was a natural target for such accusations. For their part, the Saints did little to allay suspicion and remained isolated and at times seemingly hostile towards the government. In addition, Mormon interest in the Indians, stimulated in part by their policy of self-preservation through friendship, made some people suspicious and others angry. The extensive missionary efforts of the church, when coupled with interracial marriages between Mormons and Indians. and the adoption of Indian children led many gentiles to believe there was a Mormon plot to create a distinction in the minds of the Indians between Mormon and gentile. The aim of this plot was said to be the incitement of the Indians to rebellion against the United States, and the Mountain Meadows Massacre was the evidence of the conspiracy's success. The interest shown by the Mormons in the Ghost Dance movements, both in 1870 and 1890, and the belief espoused by several elders that the millennium was at hand were viewed as further evidence of the Mormon involvement in the craze. The hostility of the Mormon press towards General Miles, the Indian Service, and the federal government seemed to be still another sign of their guilt.

Yet. it must be remembered that the Mormon church and the Indian Ghost Dance were the two strongest millennial groups in the West during the late nineteenth century. Mormonism was part of a movement in search of a "primitive Christianity" that occurred in the early decades of the century. It was a quest for simple origins that was characterized by a "withdrawal reaction." The Mormons, and a few other primitive Christian groups, sought to remove themselves from the "world" and its complexities and seek their own relationship with God, much like the Puritan settlers of New England two centuries earlier.62 It may be this "primitive" aspect of Mormonism that explains the Saints' deep interest in the Ghost Dance and why they were blamed for it as well. By combining traditional Indian and Christian beliefs, the Ghost Dance sought to revitalize the Indian culture, to seek a new relationship with God by emphasizing what was simple and good. Like most American Indian religions, Wovoka's doctrine was extremely flexible, and the addition of some Mormon forms, considering the close contact between Paiute and Mormon, may well

^{62.} Weston La Barre, The Ghost Dance: Origins of Religion (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1970), p. 279.

have occurred. In short, the similarities in the doctrines, whether related or coincidental, must have appeared obvious in 1890.

Interest in the Ghost Dance continued throughout the decade. and the bureau did not close Special Case 188 until 1898. The last letter included in the file was from Henry P. Ewing of Hackberry. Arizona Territory. Ewing believed he could trace the religion to its "component parts." "It is simply a combination of the religeon [sic] of the Mormons," he stated, "mingled with that of the Indians."63 The Mormons, it would seem, were inextricably associated with the Indian movement, just as General Miles had implied nearly a decade earlier. The Mormons, however, were linked to the transmission of the Ghost Dance only by rumor and circumstantial evidence. James Mooney and other scholars who have studied the movement found no evidence of a Mormon plot. While the Mormons showed a keen interest in the movement, the fact remains that the Ghost Dance of 1890 was truly a pan-Indian movement. Many whites would not accept the Ghost Dance as an Indian response to the destruction of traditional tribal cultures. and thus they had to believe that more "civilized" peoples had inspired and spread the religion. The Mormons were the obvious choice.

63. Henry P. Ewing to CIA, 21 Jan. 1898, SC 188.

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