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Kentucky's Mormon Pioneers

BY LAURA HUNT ANGEL

After binge-watching a few episodes of the hit AMC show “Hell On Wheels,” I became interested in the history of the Mormon pioneers and their enormous influence on the expansion of the United States. My search revealed a family of Hunts (only distantly related) from Muhlenberg County, Kentucky, who joined the Church of Latter Day Saints and set out to help build the new Zion. Here is some of what I’ve learned.

ZION

On Thursday, July 22, 1847, a line of wagons rolled into the Salt Lake Valley in Utah Territory. Their journey, a 1,300 mile trek from Nauvoo, Illinois, had taken 111 days. Their leader, ill and in a wagon some distance from the front of the line, entered the valley two days later. Upon arrival, he simply sat up and declared, “It is enough.” They were, of course, the Mormons, and their leader was Brigham Young. According to Caleb Warnok, author and descendant of one of the earliest Mormon families to reach Utah, many of those in that first wagon train refused to even break bread until they broke ground. Although it was near the end of growing season, they hoped to be able to make a small harvest before winter set in.

Over the next 20 years or so, some 70,000 pioneers would make the pilgrimage to the Utah Territory and join Young in the great Mormon Exodus. During this time, entire communities uprooted, abandoned their homesteads and headed into the western wilderness to the place that Young had chosen as the Zion he had been searching for.

WHAT HAPPENED AT NAUVOO

Joseph Smith was in his early 20s when he experienced the series of visions that led him to write the Book of Mormon. Soon after, at the Fayette, New York, home of Peter Wittmer, a new religious institution was organized that would come to be known as the Church of Latter Day Saints. Converts to the new church began calling Joseph Smith the Prophet, because of the highly detailed visions he described. In 1831, the Prophet and his group of followers, who came to be called Saints, left New York in search of a location that could serve as the religious center for their new church.

Initially, Smith moved the church to Kirtland, Ohio, where carpenter and devoted convert Brigham Young soon joined him. Young had been baptized into the church in 1832; in 1835 he was ordained as an apostle. Shortly thereafter, the Saints struck out for Independence, Missouri, where they hoped to establish Smith’s longed for Zion. After violent confrontations and legal difficulties in Missouri, they moved yet again, hoping to reestablish in Nauvoo, Illinois.

Once there, Smith continued to gain new converts despite heavy public criticism. Many traditional Christians took notice, too, and the number of Mormons in Nauvoo grew. Among those joining Smith and Young in Nauvoo was a settler from Gibson County, Tennessee, named Daniel Durham Hunt, who introduced his 10-year-old son John Alexander to the Prophet. The boy would eventually become a trail leader along the Mormon Trail and, still later, the Bishop of St. Charles, Idaho.

In addition to his deep religious fervor, Joseph Smith was interested in influencing the politics of Nauvoo. He sought the office of mayor and — due in large part to the number of Mormons flocking to the city — was successfully elected. The Prophet soon began introducing new doctrine from both his pulpit and his mayoral office, including the tenet of plural marriage.



Wikimedia

A reproduction is shown of the Fayette, New York, residence of Peter Wittmer, where Joseph Smith and his followers organized what is known today as the Church of Latter Day Saints.



WordPress

This section of Zion National Park is known as Angel's Landing. This is part of the territory that Mormon settlers claimed as the New Zion of their faith.

In 1844, when several prominent Saints voiced dissent, they were quickly excommunicated from the church. Not to be quashed, the former members bought a printing press and were intent on publishing a paper aimed primarily at debunking Smith and his Mormon faith. The paper, called the Nauvoo Expositor, went to press June 7, 1844. The first and only issue accused Smith of violating the separation of church and state and secretly marrying more than one woman.

Within days, the city council declared the newspaper a nuisance and authorized Smith, as mayor, to resolve the problem. He immediately ordered the printing press to be destroyed and any remaining copies of the paper to be burned. As a result, both Smith and the council members were arrested for “suppression of the freedom of the press.”

Before the day was out, most of those arrested had posted bail and returned home. Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were among a small group of men who refused to pay bail. Shortly thereafter, a mob stormed the jail and both of the brothers were killed.

The Mormons were now in desperate need of a new leader, as well as a new promised land. Shortly after Joseph’s Smith’s death, Brigham Young was chosen. Within the year, Young and several church leaders quietly began to seek out a religious center that was unencumbered by the laws of the United States.

OLD HEBRON, MUHLENBERG COUNTY

Among the Christians captivated by Joseph Smith were a small group of worshipers at the Hebron Baptist Church in Muhlenberg County, Kentucky. One of the members, John Hunt, had been kept apprised of the situation at Nauvoo by his second

cousin, Daniel Durham. Whether by the Prophet’s words or by his cousin Daniel, John and much of the congregation of Hebron Church were persuaded to convert to Mormonism. After word of Smith’s murder arrived, they pulled up stakes and headed to Nauvoo to join Daniel. Church records indicate that in 1844 the Hebron church “failed from Mormon power.”

Once gathered at Nauvoo, the Saints began leaving for Utah in stages. Three of John and Jane Hunt’s sons moved to Utah a few years ahead of their parents. Daughter Cene and her husband Jefferson reportedly returned to Kentucky after a short time in Iowa.

A fourth son, Jonathan, never went to Nauvoo, although he was a convert. Jonathan suffered from consumption (tuberculosis) and remained in Kentucky, where he operated a grist mill for many years. After John Hunt died out in Ogden in 1857, Jane sent a series of letters to Jonathan, finally persuading him and his wife, Susan Nanney Hunt, to sell their Kentucky farm and join the rest of the family in Utah.

Not sure that he would even survive the journey, Jonathan sold his Kentucky farm. With two feather beds, clothing and not much else, he and Susan caught a steamboat at the Green River, made their way to the Ohio River and then to Evansville, Indiana. From there, they took a train to Council Bluffs, Iowa, and stayed for two weeks with Jonathan’s sister Elizabeth and brother Enoch, who had joined a branch of the Saints known as Josephites.

Once at Ogden, Jonathan’s health waxed and waned. An uncle, Amos Hunt, was a fellow Mormon and aware of his nephew’s poor health. He convinced Jonathan, his wife Susan and mother Jane to move nearer to him in what was then Washington County



Photo by Laura Hunt Angel

Of relatively recent origin, Mormon Muffins are tasty little gems filled with bran and nuts. They can be found at bakeries and restaurants throughout Utah.

near the town of Gunlock. With the help of his uncle and several others in the community, Jonathan managed to live to the age of 55. Over the years, he and Susan had a total of nine children, several of whom settled in Bunkerville, Nevada. Daughter Idella Hunt Leavitt compiled an informative and entertaining account of the family’s experiences from Kentucky, to Utah and beyond in a manuscript entitled, “The Hunts of Bunkerville, Nevada.” Her work is widely available online free of charge.

Jane Hunt, wife of John and mother of Jonathan, died in 1877. Although she never returned to Muhlenberg County, she never forgot their first home at Old Hebron, as evidenced by the town in which she died: Hebron, Utah.

THE RECIPES

No green Jello here (the state dessert of Utah) — just the plain and hearty fare that Mormon cooking personifies.

Mormon Muffins

No one seems to know the origin of these ubiquitous bran muffins. Though not of pioneer origin, they are packed with enough fiber and protein to power you through your busiest mornings. This recipe, used by several Mormon-run restaurants in Utah, makes about four dozen, but it can easily be halved. Prepare the batter the night before baking, and if you don’t want to bake them all at once, any uncooked batter can be refrigerated for several days.

5 teaspoons (2 ½ tablespoons) baking soda
2 cups boiling water
1 cup shortening (I used butter)
2 cups sugar (a substitute will also work)
4 eggs
1 quart buttermilk
5 cups whole wheat flour

1 teaspoon salt
4 cups bran bud cereal (such as All Bran)
2 cups bran flake cereal
1 cup chopped walnuts (I used pecans)

In a medium-sized bowl, combine the boiling water and baking soda and set aside. In a separate bowl, blend the shortening and sugar until light and fluffy. Add the eggs one at a time and mix well. Alternately add the buttermilk and whole wheat flour, then stir in the cereals and walnuts. Cover and refrigerate the batter overnight.

When ready to bake, preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Grease muffin tins or spray with non-stick and fill each tin with batter. Bake for about 30 minutes. Remove from oven and cool in the pan for about five minutes before taking them out. Serve with honey butter or try them with a drizzle of buttermilk syrup.

Buttermilk Syrup

Unlike Mormon muffins, this recipe for buttermilk syrup does appear to be one that the old Mormon pioneers used. It’s rich, caramel-y sweetness is a nice change from maple syrup. In addition to pancakes and French toast, use it to top sweet rolls or even bread pudding for a touch of genuine pioneer flavor.

½ cup butter
¾ cup sugar
½ cup buttermilk
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon vanilla flavoring

In a small saucepan over medium heat, melt the butter and then continue to heat it, stirring occasionally until the butter begins to brown. (Watch closely, because it can go from brown to burnt rather quickly.) Transfer the butter to a saucepan large enough to accommodate the foam that will occur when you add the baking soda. Whisk in the sugar and buttermilk and heat, whisking constantly, until the sugar is dissolved and mixture begins to boil (about five minutes). Remove from heat and stir in the baking soda and vanilla. Serve warm. Refrigerate any leftover syrup and reheat before serving.