

The New York Times

With Only God Left as a Witness

What led to an 1857 massacre in Utah is still in dispute, and a new film seems to renew the controversy.

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Published: January 22, 2006

LOS ANGELES



Dan Powers

Jon Voight plays a Mormon elder in "September Dawn," about a traumatic event in Utah history in which a wagon train of settlers was slaughtered.

AS the new year dawned, Jon Krakauer's "Under the Banner of Heaven" - about a "divinely ordered" double murder in 1984 by two members of a breakaway Mormon sect - was fresh off the best-seller list. Warren Jeffs, the polygamist prophet of this splinter group, the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, was on F.B.I. wanted lists. And the world's first-ever "Mormonsploitation Retrospective" ("Passion! Polygamy! Pamphlets!") of vintage fear-mongering anti-Mormon movies had just finished at the fringy Pioneer Theater in the East Village in Manhattan.

In public relations terms, this is not the easiest time to have the words "Latter," "Day" and "Saints" anywhere close together in your name.

And the going may get rougher after the filmmaker Christopher Cain finishes his new movie about one of the darkest moments in Mormon history, the Mountain Meadows massacre of 1857, in which 137 pioneers from Arkansas were killed in Utah by a raiding party whose ties to the Mormon church are still in dispute.

The film, "September Dawn," stars [Jon Voight](#), Lolita Davidovich and [Terence Stamp](#) (Dean Cain, the director's son, makes a cameo appearance). Two newcomers, Trent Ford and Tamara Hope, play a frontier Romeo and Juliet in a romance played out against a drama of a mass murder that continues to engender controversy almost 150 years after the fact. Financed independently by September Dawn and Voice Pictures, it is currently being screened for distributors.

An early look at parts of the picture - viewed in a West Los Angeles editing room with Mr. Cain and his longtime editor, Jack Hofstra - suggests that there will be fresh debate when it finally reaches the public.

As the story unfolds, a company of pioneers arrives from Arkansas. A couple of young lovers-to-be - one a Mormon, the other part of the ill-fated wagon train - meet amid a toxic atmosphere of suspicion and rancor. A Mormon raid ends with a castration, an enemy's testicles neatly nailed to a door. All the while, the territorial governor and president of the church, Brigham Young, played by Mr. Stamp, is heard in voice-over, encouraging vengeance, violence, "blood atonement" and divine justice.

"And by the way," Mr. Cain said, "I didn't write any of his dialogue," explaining that it was all in the depositions that Young gave after the massacre. "I sat here watching this a couple of weeks ago and I was thinking: 'Maybe I made that up. I don't think he would have said that.' And I went back and pulled it up and, man, he did."

In a statement, Michael Purdy, a representative of the Church of [Jesus Christ](#) of Latter-day Saints, disputed historical claims that Young ordered the killings in a drive to keep non-Mormons out of Utah. Mr. Cain, whose movies have included "[The Principal](#)," "[Young Guns](#)," "[The Next Karate Kid](#)" and "Gone Fishin,'" had left filmmaking and retired to his home in Aspen. But he was lured back when a friend, Carole Whang Schutter, who now shares a writing credit on "September Dawn," pitched him the idea of a film about the infamous attack.

That the 1857 massacre occurred on a Sept. 11 only added to the significance Mr. Cain found in the event: at a time when fundamentalist extremism seems to dominate political dialogue around the world, revisiting murders that occurred for religious reasons, he thought, seemed timely. "You start asking yourself the question," said Mr. Cain, a soft-spoken and often dryly funny filmmaker of 62. "What makes a young kid - of any faith, in any part of the world - strap a bomb on his back and walk into a school, or a mosque, or get on a bus full of innocent people, and blow himself and them all up? You ask yourself that question, and as you do, you start looking around and all of a sudden, it's what religious fanaticism can turn into."

While Mr. Stamp plays the church leader in the film, Mr. Voight plays a fictional Mormon elder whose two sons fall on different sides of an age-old question that is hardly exclusive to pioneer-era Utah: Does one follow one's faith wherever its elders say it leads or does one exercise the free will and judgment presumably bequeathed by God?

Asked to comment on the making of Mr. Cain's film, Mr. Purdy, the church representative, responded: "While no one knows fully what happened at Mountain Meadows nearly 150 years ago, we do recognize that it was a terrible tragedy for all involved. The church has done much to remember those who lost their lives there. We want to honor, respect and recognize them."



Dan Powers

A scene from the film "September Dawn."

"During the 1999 dedication of the Mountain Meadows memorial," Mr. Purdy wrote, "Gordon B. Hinckley, current president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, said: 'I sit in the chair that Brigham Young occupied as president of the church at the time of the tragedy. I have read very much of the history of what occurred here. There is no question in my mind that he was opposed to what happened. Had there been a faster means of communication, it never would have happened and history would have been different.' "

Asked to elaborate, Mr. Purdy said, "Regarding the reference to a 'faster means of communication,' Brigham Young sent a messenger by horseback to tell those at Mountain Meadows to not interfere with the wagon train. The messenger did not arrive in time to prevent the tragedy."

This, like many key claims about the massacre, has remained open to

challenge. As the Mormon Utah historian Juanita Brooks wrote in her 1950 study, "The Mountain Meadows Massacre," "The complete - the absolute - truth of the affair can probably never be evaluated by any human being; attempts to understand the forces which culminated in it and those which were set into motion by it, are all very inadequate at best."

What is known is that settlers en route from Arkansas were attacked over a number of days - either by Paiute Indians, a mix of Paiutes and Mormons, or Mormons dressed as Paiutes. After being deceived by a flag of truce, they were ultimately slaughtered. Children under 10 were spared, and adopted by Mormon families, until federal forces returned them to Eastern relatives.

Mr. Cain has chosen to tell a version in which the Paiute tribe was enlisted to help fight the supposedly hostile forces impinging on their land, but then quit the fight when they realized they were being duped.

In writing the script, Mr. Cain said, he and Ms. Schutter were helped by a great-granddaughter of Brigham Young, who has left the church and become a born-again Christian.

"But the entire massacre itself," he said, "and the stuff with the Indians leading up to it, is taken from John D. Lee's confession, which was 25 to 27 pages long." Lee, a high-ranking lieutenant of Young's, was the only man prosecuted for the massacre; he was executed by firing squad in 1877 and went to his grave claiming that he was being sacrificed for other people's sins, a view echoed in the title of a 1961 biography by Brooks, "John Doyle Lee: Zealot, Pioneer Builder, Scapegoat."

The year of the massacre was an especially tense one for the Mormons of Utah, whose history in many parts of the United States had, from the start, been one of persecution. In the spring of 1857, President

Buchanan replaced Brigham Young with a non-Mormon as governor and sent soldiers to enforce his decision. Young declared martial law, and on Sept. 15, just four days after the massacre, issued an order forbidding federal troops from entering the territory.

In the scenes that Mr. Cain and Mr. Hofstra were still molding into final shape, the violence perpetrated against the settlers' wagon train leaves very little to the imagination. And the intonations of the bearded Young - Mr. Stamp plays him as austere, remote and steely - give the narrative a sense of Old Testament wrath: "Will you love your brothers and sisters likewise, when they have committed a sin that cannot be atoned for without the shedding of their blood?" he asks.

"I don't see any reason to soft-pedal anything," Mr. Cain explained of his movie's unblinking approach. "This was a horrific act - they murdered 140 men, women and children and they did it in a vicious, violent way, and if you're going to show that, I think you have to show what caused it. It's not like somebody got excited one day and shot somebody. They bashed their heads with rocks."

Of his prospective Mormon viewers, Mr. Cain said he expected particular resistance to the film's treatment of Young. "I mean, they don't like the fact that we're doing the Mountain Meadows massacre to begin with - it's kind of a dark day in their history," he said. "But I believe what we're doing is accurate. I believe that we're making a movie that has a certain power behind it."

The picture's real power, Mr. Cain added, will most likely come not from history, but from its insistence on making the past personal. "You can have all the rhetoric you want come out of your mouth," he said. "But when you make it specific, a name, a beating heart, it becomes something else."