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Mountain Meadows reconciliation

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Daily Herald

The LDS Church has rebuffed a request by descendants of the victims of the Mountain Meadows massacre that the site of the infamous murders of some 100-140 Arkansas immigrants be placed under federal stewardship.

It is the second time the request has been made -- the first being in 1999 -- and the second time it has been rejected.

The question is: Why? Why would the church want to own and maintain the southern Utah site at which a band of Mormons in 1857 murdered a group of unarmed men, women and children? This isn't the usual picture of heroic pioneers fleeing persecution and civilizing the wilderness.

It is a story of overzealous obedience to local church leaders, at least, and at worst cold-blooded vengeance against innocents.

The ugly episode has dogged the church's reputation for a century-and-a-half. The victims were shot at close range, stabbed or beaten to death. Their bodies were not even buried. Seventeen children under age 6 were spared. They were adopted by local families and later returned to their relatives in Arkansas.

Today, there are four known mass grave sites and two memorials.

Descendants want the site to be in the hands of a neutral third party -- namely the federal government -- because they believe the institutional church is complicit in the murders.

"It's not right for the people who had complicity to the killings to be the grave owner," said Phil Bolinger of the Arkansas-based Mountain Meadows Monument Foundation. He is related to 30 of the victims.

There is no dispute about the fact that Mormon leaders in southern Utah orchestrated the massacre. Accusations of higher-level church involvement -- including the suggestion that Brigham Young ordered the killings -- have never been substantiated. Rank-and-file Mormons at the time were horrified by the news, condemned the perpetrators and defended their prophet.

Yet it is also true that Young made no effort to bring the killers to justice. Only one of the leaders, John D. Lee, was convicted of the crime and executed 20 years later. Critics say that Lee was made a scapegoat for many.

Mormon apologists point to the military tension of the time. A large contingent of the U.S. Army was marching against the Mormons to put down a supposed rebellion. News of the Arkansas murder of a beloved Mormon leader, Parley Pratt, had recently been received. And church members throughout the territory had been whipped into a frenzy of renewed devotion by apostolic circuit preachers sent from Salt Lake City, which made them more hostile to outsiders.

But what caused the massacre is hardly the point. The fact is that it happened, and it was conducted by Mormons. It is as painful for the church as it is inescapable. It would be nice if it could be put to rest.

That could happen, the monument foundation insists, if the site were to become a national monument. "Federal stewardship of this grave site ... that's all it would take to put this to bed," Bolinger said.

The church has not only resisted handing the Mountain Meadows grave sites to the government, but has been expanding its land holdings in the area. It intends to administer and maintain the property and to preserve it from either residential or commercial development, a church spokeswoman said.

That is a laudable goal. But Bolinger asks a fair question: "How you do you think the Kennedy family would feel if the Lee Harvey Oswald family had control of the Kennedy tomb?"

The dictionary defines a hair shirt as "an uncomfortable garment made of coarse animal hair and worn next to the skin as a penance." Perhaps control of Mountain Meadows amounts to a hair shirt for the LDS Church.

After 150 years, it may be time to remove it.

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