

MORMONISM IN THE "BURNED-OVER DISTRICT"

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DURING the quarter century following 1825 the portion of New York State west of the Catskills and Adirondacks exhibited a variety of social experiment and religious novelty unparalleled in American history. Mormonism and Spiritualism originated here, while Perfectionism, Adventism and sensational revivalism flourished as in few other places. Schisms in the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches developed from quarrels bred primarily in this region. The temperance and antislavery crusades, at least during the eighteen-thirties when they were more religious than political enterprises, waxed more strongly here than elsewhere. Fourierist and other communist colonies sprinkled the landscape for a time as in no other state. Antimasonry, both a political party and a socio-religious enthusiasm, spread hence to other sensitive parts of the Northeast. These *isms* raged so like consuming flames that the territory came to be known as the "Burned-over District."¹

Certain of these phenomena have been thoroughly studied in separate histories, but few investigators have tried to look beyond a single channel and view their subjects as evidences of cultural characteristics peculiar to the region and common to all the related movements.² Neglect of

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¹ The phrase was connected chiefly with the series of revivals beginning under the leadership of Charles G. Finney. Opponents used it to suggest spiritual exhaustion, while advocates took it up to indicate the especial concentration of piety which in their view resulted from the religious enthusiasm.

² Outstanding work has been done on temperance by John A. Krout, *The Origins of Prohibition* (New York, 1925); on antislavery by Gilbert H. Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830-1844* (New York, 1933); on the Finney revivals by Robert S. Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College From Its Foundation Through the Civil War* (Oberlin, Ohio, 1943, 2v.); on Fourierist colonies by Arthur E. Bestor, Jr., "American Phalanxes: A Study of Fourierist Socialism in the United States, etc."

this perspective-granting approach has resulted in a few major misinterpretations. One of the most significant of these is the almost universal habit of referring to the development of Mormonism as a typically frontier occurrence.

Though Mormonism holds greater interest for this generation than do many of the other events accompanying its birth, it did not then appear to be of major importance in the Burned-over District. The membership of the church did not exceed thirty-five families when its first westward exodus occurred, and the decisive events in its history occurred in the farther west. Few indeed of the inhabitants of western New York knew more than vaguely of its origin, and not very many maintained a positive interest in its continuation. For this reason evidence is lacking to link Mormonism directly with the other movements of its day in this region. Yet the religion of the Latter-Day Saints shared certain traits with other local phenomena and rose out of common circumstances. Not only was it a growth of this soil, moreover, but it also continued to gain nourishment here, even as the church itself moved westward.

Northward from Canandaigua the rolling hills of the Finger Lakes section gradually descend into the drumlin-studded Ontario plain. Twelve miles take one across the line between Ontario and Wayne Counties to Palmyra, situated on the lower level among the drumlins. Half-way between the two towns, in the center of some of the richest farm land east of the Genesee River, lies the village of Manchester. All three villages and their environs had been early settled and by 1820 belonged to the comparatively limited number of townships in western New York which supported a population approaching sixty persons per

(ms., Yale University, 1938, 2v.); on Antimasonry by Charles McCarthy, *The Antimasonic Party: A Study of Political Antimasonry in the United States, 1827-1840*, American Historical Association, *Annual Report for 1902* (Washington, 1903), I, 365-574; and on Mormonism by Bernard DeVoto, "Centennial of Mormonism: A Study in Utopia and Dictatorship," *Forays and Rebuttals* (Boston, 1936), 71-137.

square mile.³ From Palmyra north to the lake, habitations appeared far less frequently and a journey of thirty miles west or south would reach towns where little land had been cleared more than ten years.

Canandaigua had been one of the first two villages in the Phelps and Gorham lands and it enjoyed a dominant position in the economy of the region until the twenties. The stage line to the Mohawk here crossed the main north and south route which from the days of the Iroquois had connected Irondequoit Bay, Canandaigua Lake and the tributary valleys of the upper Susquehanna watershed. As late as 1824 the Rochester millers did their banking at Canandaigua by pony express.⁴ Soon, however, Canandaigua's relative importance began to decline as that of Palmyra rose. By 1822 the Erie Canal was in limited use. During the same summer daily mail service replaced weekly delivery on stage routes connecting Palmyra with Canandaigua, Rochester and Lyons. At the end of the following summer the canal had opened to the Genesee.⁵

From the beginning Canandaigua had served as the country seat of landowners and their agents. Consequently it became an aristocratic town with an Episcopalian Church. Even the Presbyterians there maintained a conservative tone throughout the period. Manchester and Palmyra, however, were more truly representative of the area, being peopled chiefly by Connecticut and Vermont Yankees. The more evangelistic churches had been estab-

³ Within the three present counties of Monroe, Wayne and Ontario, nine townships, as now constituted, contained in 1820 more than 60 persons per square mile, twenty more ranged between 40 and 60, and sixteen between 20 and 40. The tri-county boundary point was the center of population, while the lake shore and most southerly towns fell in the lower categories. During the next fifteen years, eleven of these towns either declined or increased by less than 10 per square mile. Calculated from figures in Thomas F. Gordon, *Gazetteer of the State of New York*, etc. (Philadelphia, 1836), 532, 595, 763, 764.

⁴ Whitney R. Cross, "Creating a City: The History of Rochester from 1824 to 1834" (MS., University of Rochester, 1936), 90.

⁵ *Palmyra Herald and Canal Advertiser*, July 17, 1822; *Western Farmer* (Palmyra), summer, 1822, *passim*; *Wayne Sentinel* (Palmyra), Oct. and Nov., 1823, *passim*.

lished immediately upon settlement, while schools and newspapers followed in quick succession.

The Great Revival of 1800 spread to this region from western New England, whence came the first missionaries, themselves both instruments of contagion and evidences of the awakening. The effectiveness of the upheaval was only less marked here than in the home territory and in Kentucky, where a separate but similar revival occurred simultaneously.⁶ Of twelve primary centers of enthusiasm in western New York during 1799 and 1800, one was Palmyra and six more ranged south through Ontario County. The next major crest of fervor, which followed the War of 1812, struck at least twenty-two localities in the Burned-over District, again including Palmyra as well as seven other towns within the three counties of which this village is the approximate geographical center. In the early twenties no noteworthy episode seems to have occurred in the immediate vicinity, though seven of twenty-one recorded revivals took place within the same three counties, mostly south of the canal.⁷ The twelve-mile stretch of farm land north of Canandaigua had thus been thoroughly indoctrinated in enthusiastic religion during the entire thirty years of its youth, and though still young in the mid-twenties, it was old enough to exhibit the increased interest in community morals and intensified spirituality which normally came to rural Yankeedom as the problems of civilization replaced the struggle against the frontier.⁸

Here Joseph Smith became a prophet, though not the first in western New York. Jemima Wilkinson had pre-

⁶ An error perpetuated by DeVoto in "Centennial of Mormonism," 75, ascribes the revivals in this region to a postponed, eastward-moving influence from Kentucky.

⁷ [The Rev.] James H. Hotchkin, *A History of the Purchase and Settlement of Western New York, and of the Rise, Progress and Present State of the Presbyterian Church in that Section* (New York, 1848), gives an outline history of each Presbyterian Church west of Madison County. Information from the sketches has been tabulated geographically to supply these data. The Presbyterians were generally the dominant social class, and customarily started revivals which other denominations took up in turn.

⁸ During 1822 and 1823, for instance, a society for the suppression of vice was forming in Palmyra. *Western Farmer*, Feb. 27, 1822; *Palmyra Herald*, Jan. 15, 1823.

ceeded him with the earliest settlement west of Seneca Lake, established in 1789. The New Jerusalem was an isolated venture which soon collapsed, yet a suit over the earthly treasures of the "Universal Friend" dragged on in the courts at Canandaigua until 1828. It is probable that young Joseph had at least heard of this colony and he may have received some impulse toward later notions from the Friend's example.⁹ A precedent closer in time and no farther from his home than Keuka Lake existed in the Shaker colony planted on the shore of Sodus Bay in 1826. The Shakers sold brooms and seeds in neighboring villages. While they may have escaped the notice of the majority of folk, they could easily have attracted the attention of a religious genius.¹⁰

Both of these groups had a history beginning before their location in New York, and though the Shakers long continued to furnish final solace to many a troubled soul who had discovered inadequate spiritual dedication in the other sects, neither of the two had any exclusive connection with this region. Aside from a possible but unprovable and indirect influence on Joseph Smith, neither community derived traits from or contributed measurable character to the Burned-over District. They did not bulk large in the main stream of westering Yankee culture whose peripheral manifestations included Mormonism, Millerism, perfectionism and Spiritualism.¹¹

The Smith family arrived in Palmyra in 1815 when Joseph was ten years old. Fate had been unkind to them in Vermont where each of several different ventures and

⁹ The Friend was tried for blasphemy and acquitted in 1800. Her will was contested during the twenties. One David Hudson published a scurrilous biography, which may have circulated well in the locality. Another edition was issued under a new title in 1844. Robert P. St. John, "Jemima Wilkinson," *New York State Historical Association Quarterly Journal*, XI (1930), 173; David Hudson, *History of Jemima Wilkinson, A Preacheress of the Eighteenth Century*, etc. (Geneva, 1821); *Memoir of Jemima, etc.* (Bath, 1844).

¹⁰ Bestor, *op. cit.*, 20, 21; *Rochester Daily Advertiser and Telegraph*, Mar. 27, 1830; *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, Oct. 4, 1830.

¹¹ Shakerism did undoubtedly influence all American religious experiments and many communal ones, but the problem of making the relationship definable is apparently insoluble.

consequent removes left them poorer than the one before.¹² The years of the War of 1812 had been even harder than more normal times in the home state and the Smith line ran to the visionary rather than to the acquisitive Yankee type. Hundreds of their neighbors were likewise on the move, as a peak of emigration followed directly upon the Peace of Ghent.¹³ In the richer clime of western New York they and their fellow farmers fared better. By maintaining a shop in Palmyra and hiring father and sons to day labor they were soon able to move to a plot two miles south of the village, whence within two or three years more, they undertook purchase of a hundred-acre farm in Manchester. This apparently reverted to the land agents by the time the new church was established.¹⁴

Many of their companion emigrants managed more wisely and made good in the Genesee Country. But some of the successful families had brought an original endowment good for at least down payments on the new farms. Certainly a large minority of respectable tillers of the soil found the high land values here disproportionately above their ability to earn¹⁵ and were heading for Michigan or Illinois about the time the Smiths lost their acres. It is not necessary to assume, with no evidence but the prejudiced, memory-enlarged traditions of unsympathetic neighbors, that this family were squatters or that they were "frontier drifters" of shiftless character. Many an honest, industrious farmer followed the identical evolution, pursued

¹² John H. Evans, *Joseph Smith An American Prophet* (New York, 1942, copyright, 1933), 27-32; B. H. Roberts, ed., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1902), I, 20. Gentile writers touching upon the New York period of Mormonism have superimposed varying interpretations, but added no new facts to the official version. I have therefore preferred to use the Church history and a church-sponsored biography of Smith.

¹³ On the emigration, see Dorothy K. Cleaveland, "The Trade and Trade Routes of Northern New York From the Beginning of Settlement to the Coming of the Railroad," *New York State Historical Association Quarterly Journal*, IV (1923), 208 and *passim.*; and Lewis D. Stilwell, "Migration from Vermont (1776-1860)," *Proceedings of the Vermont Historical Society*, V (1937), 137 ff.

¹⁴ Evans, *op. cit.*, 30-32, gives more detail on the family's living arrangements than others do. The account may rest on documents in the church archives.

¹⁵ Land in the Genesee Country ranged in value from twenty to thirty-five dollars an acre by 1833. *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, May 15, 1833.

either by bad luck or poor judgment, and sought better opportunities farther west. Possibly the Smiths, like their neighbors, wasted some valuable time prospecting for Spanish gold at the right turn of the moon. One of the potent sources of Joseph's local unpopularity may well have been the disappointment of those who failed to strike gold in the glacial sands of the drumlins.¹⁶

All of the family could read, and did read at least the Bible. Joseph had some part of a few years' schooling in Palmyra and once belonged to a young men's debating society there. He had not learned more than the rudiments of arithmetic, nor did he write better than haltingly.¹⁷ Probably the family budget required his labor before he could attend school very long. This again was the average experience of the poorer New England emigrants who settled in western New York. Like many Yankees, also, a thirsting for spiritual satisfaction pursued the family. They attended services, at least in revival seasons, and one or another of them was converted or reconverted each time. Some of their neighbors became Baptist when a Baptist led the awakening, and Methodist, Presbyterian or even Universalist by turns. Joseph, the father, was a professed Methodist and Lucy, the mother, and Joseph's elder brother had been most recently Presbyterian when the

¹⁶ The *Western Farmer*, Dec. 12, 1821, reprints an exchange item reporting silver ore "six feet thick" in Ohio. Such ideas were common in this vicinity and elsewhere. The idea of a pre-Indian civilization stemming from the lost tribes of Israel was equally commonplace, with a history running back at least to William Penn. Harriet A. Weed, ed., *Autobiography of Thurlow Weed* (Boston, 1884), 7; and Christian Schultz, *Travels in an Inland Voyage Through the States of New York*, etc. (New York, 1810), 16, comment upon gold hunting expeditions. E[manuel] Howitt, *Selections from Letters written during a tour through the United States*, etc. (Nottingham, England, 1820), 135, 161-163; John M. Duncan, *Travels through part of the United States and Canada in 1818 and 1819* (Glasgow, Scotland, 1823), II, 91-92; and Josiah Priest, *American Antiquities, and Discoveries in the West*; etc., (Albany, 1833), report on the belief in a pre-Indian civilization. Vardis Fisher, *Children of God: An American Epic* (New York, 1939), 29, suggests this probable source of local antagonism toward Smith.

¹⁷ Evans, *op. cit.*, 35, 36; Orson Pratt, *Remarkable Visions*, as quoted by Henry Mayhew, *History of the Mormons; or Latter-Day Saints*, etc. (Auburn, 1853), 21, ff. Notices in the Palmyra papers for letters in the post office and for the recovery of a lost \$200 note, use the names of Joseph Smith, Sr., and Jr. *Palmyra Herald and Canal Advertiser*, Oct. 2, 1822; *Western Farmer*, July 11, 18, 25, 1821.

prophet's thoughts first turned seriously to religion.¹⁸

The Smith family, including the noted son, were in most respects entirely normal people for the time and place. The mantle of prophecy fell on Joseph's shoulders because he was one of many suitable men. Beyond this point speculation as to the reason must rise to faith or sink to coincidence. Some might say that if he were to be resurrected and examined by a modern psycho-analyst he could be accurately labeled with some border variety of lunacy.¹⁹ But the line between crazed and merely unusual minds is even now difficult to draw. By the same test nearly every saint in Christian history and every seer of a vision might be called insane. Another test is more useful. Who believed the whole paraphernalia of Smith's inspirations? Brigham Young, Heber Kimball, J. J. Strang, William Phelps, Sidney Rigdon, Orson Pratt, Lorenzo Snow—these and many other followers were neither more ignorant nor more visionary than the average of their contemporaries.²⁰ Some of them were relatively well educated and others proved to be more than commonly realistic. The mania which established primacy over such minds must have approached genius. It may be called religious or diabolical, depending on one's point of view, but charity and the modern status of the Church of Latter-Day Saints suggest that it should in fairness be called religious genius.

¹⁸ Roberts, *op. cit.*, 3. Martin Harris had been Quaker, Methodist, Baptist, Universalist and Presbyterian in turn, Harry M. Beardsley, *Joseph Smith and His Mormon Empire* (Boston, 1931), 44. This shifting affiliation was not unusual at that time.

¹⁹ DeVoto in "Centennial of Mormonism," 95-104, develops the theory of Smith's paranoia. Later he states it as an accepted fact, rather than a plausible hypothesis, referring to him as a "poor crazed man." Bernard DeVoto, *The Year of Decision 1846* (Boston, 1943), 79.

²⁰ Young, all agree, was one of the ablest men of the century and Kimball, his close friend, came a close second. The diary of James J. Strang, published in Milo M. Quaife, *The Kingdom of Saint James: A Narrative of the Mormons* (New Haven, 1930), is a primary demonstration that religious eccentricity was a token of intelligence more than of ignorance. Phelps had edited an Antimasonic paper in Canandaigua, Frederick Follett, *History of the Press of Western New York*, etc. (Rochester, 1847). Sidney Rigdon was an able, if erratic, Campbellite preacher. Orson Pratt had an academy education and later achieved some prominence as a mathematician, Andrew Jenson, *Latter-Day Saints Biographical Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1901), I, 87-91. Lorenzo Snow was an Oberlin student when converted, Fletcher, *op. cit.*, I, 222.

Joseph Smith's early visions and first visit to the hill Cumorah, his four-year vigil, the final digging of the plates, his itinerations meanwhile over the countryside (always until 1830, be it noted, eastward, not westward), the involved process of translation from behind a curtain to a scribe on the other side, his persecutions by the neighbors, his marriage, the gathering of the witnesses, and at last the printing of the *Book of Mormon* and the establishment of the church on April 6, 1830, all of these links in the history of the Saints have lately become increasingly familiar to gentiles as well as Mormons.

In the entire process, circumstantial evidence emphatically denies the old hypothesis, which a few modern historians unfortunately continue blindly to accept, that Smith borrowed the substance of his religion from the Spaulding manuscript. This myth not only distorted Joseph's character and his position in the church, but also bred basic misconception of how religious novelty of any sort arose. It is necessary, if any consistency whatsoever is to be discovered in the variety of allied spiritual experiments in the Burned-over District, to realize that all alike were genuine, native growths, rooted in an inheritance of moral intensity and blossoming in warm evangelistic fervor. Little or no imposture occurred, no conscious calculation of ends to be reached by given means, no chain of directly connected examples leading one prophet in the known footsteps of another. Movements came from common circumstances and affected each other only as they heightened the temperature of contagious zeal or introduced a slight variation in temperament which increased susceptibility to a later development.

The *Book of Mormon* in truth "included every error and almost every truth discussed in N. York for the last ten years," and decided every argument,

infant baptism, ordination, the trinity, regeneration, repentance, justification, the fall of man, the atonement, transubstantiation, fasting, penance, church government, religious

experience, the call to the ministry, the general resurrection, eternal punishment, who may baptize, and even the question of freemasonry, republican government, and the rights of man.²¹

The religion, in addition

restored the primitive church of Christ, stood foursquare on a literal interpretation of the Bible, reopened the channel of revelation, announced the coming of Christ, provided a harbor against the imminent Day of Judgment, and practised apostolic gifts. . . . It was at once millennial, restorationist and perfectionist.²²

Perhaps most important of all was the personal presence of a genuine live prophet to bring directly home to the Yorker-Yankees the consciousness of sin and the hope of new life which orthodox evangelists had been preaching since the first settlement of the region.

Neither this nor any other noteworthy eccentricity, however, rose out of the Great Revival when western New York was newly settled, nor out of ensuing periods of fervor before 1825. While the recruits to Mormonism came from every sect, Congregational, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Free Baptist, Campbellite and Christian indiscriminately, they resided almost invariably in the longest settled neighborhoods of the region.²³ The membership of Zion when it emigrated bodily from New York, furthermore, did not in all probability exceed one hundred persons, but the later converts gathered from this section

²¹ Alexander Campbell, *Delusions. An Analysis of the Book of Mormon, etc.* (Boston, 1832), 13, originally written for the *Millennial Harbinger* in 1831, gives a strictly contemporary view and realizes the appeal of the religion as well as any modern scholar.

²² DeVoto, "Centennial of Mormonism," 85. See also George B. Arbaugh, *Revelation in Mormonism: Its Character and Changing Forms* (Chicago, 1932), *passim*.

²³ The four earliest branches of the church were located in Seneca, Ontario, Broome and Jefferson Counties, respectively. Of thirty-four families identifiable as early adherents, only three resided west of the Genesee River, while nineteen were in the vicinity of Manchester, seven in Seneca and Cayuga Counties, two in Oneida and one each in Tompkins, Broome and Jefferson. David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, Missouri, 1887), 33; Clippings in the Mormon collection of Donald Perry, *Enterprise Press*, Shortsville, New York, identify some families. Others are recorded in Jenson, *Encyclopedia*, I, *passim*.

during its advancing maturity numbered well over fifteen hundred.²⁴

In 1860, when a large proportion of the New Yorkers who joined as mature men and women during the early thirties would have departed this life during the struggles on the Utah trail or with the untilled desert, natives of this state in the Utah territory numbered fewer only than those from Illinois. Iowa was a close third and Ohio, Pennsylvania and Missouri ranged in order well behind the leaders. Polygamy among these people increased the size of normally large families. A study of the manuscript census shows the large proportion of Mormons born into the church in Illinois, Iowa and Missouri, children of Easterners who made up the body of members by choice. While relatively few adults from the Middle-West joined the church, New Englanders and Pennsylvanians had often made one remove before conversion and actually resided in New York at the time they became members. No exact analysis can be made, but it is clear that more converts (as distinguished from members born in the fold) originated in this state than in any other, and it may be presumed that the bulk of them hailed from the same Burned-over District which between 1825 and 1850 provided so extensive a personnel for all the other social and religious experiments.²⁵

To discover when within this period the most conversions took place is again difficult, but some basis for a guess is to be found in an analysis of age groups among the New York-born in Utah Territory in 1860. Of nine hundred twenty-three persons so counted, two hundred twenty-one were over forty-five years of age and could have been in the original church, though many of course emigrated and

²⁴ Whitmer, *op. cit.*, 33, says there were 70 members in April, 1830, but by June 1831, they totalled 2000. Included in the latter figure were the members of the Kirtland, Ohio, community.

²⁵ Joseph C. G. Kennedy, *supt. of Census, Population of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census, etc.* (Washington, 1864), I, 578 (Utah nativities), Illinois 1796, New York 1744, Iowa 1551, Ohio 884, Pennsylvania 862, Missouri 716, Massachusetts 523, Vermont 326.

joined in Ohio or Illinois, or later came under the influence of Mormon itinerants combing western New York. The remainder under forty-five were either the children of early members or were later converts, undoubtedly mostly the latter, since the small total number leaving this state in 1830 is known. Persons under twenty-five and families with a member in this group, regardless of the nativities and ages of other members, must have left here after 1835. Of these there were four hundred forty-six, a number larger than half the counted total of New Yorkers in Utah Territory.²⁶

It seems conservative to estimate that of the Mormons from the Burned-over District, at least three-quarters were recruited by missionaries some time after the church itself moved west, during the late thirties, the forties and to a lesser extent the fifties. Western New York was not a frontier during these decades, by any stretch of the historical imagination. Neither were Ohio, Pennsylvania and New England, where Yankee groups responded less intensively, but roughly according to the same time scale. Nor were England and the Scandinavian Countries, whence at least after 1850 came a substantial proportion of the new arrivals in Utah.

There is excellent justification for calling the Mormon Church a religion on the frontier. That it was in terms of its location, for the evangelistic mind which helped breed sensitivity to Mormon Doctrine had little tolerance for such unorthodox offshoots, and kept persecuting the heretics and forcing them westward. The beliefs of the Church of Latter-Day Saints, however, were not western or frontier notions. Neither were its communal ideas. In both respects similarity to other unusual developments in western New York was greater than any affiliation with

²⁶ 8th Census, Utah, Vol. I; *Miscellaneous Territories*. Microfilm, Bureau of Census. Part of the MS. is written in a hand which makes for confusion between N Y and U T. About half the census indicates origin clearly, while age data provide a partial guide in the uncertain portion. 923 of the 1744 New Yorkers were located in the census.

frontier phenomena. In origin and in the continuing growth of the first thirty years the religion was consistently an Eastern occurrence, appealing primarily to Eastern people. Its chief American success came in the Yankee, rural, emotionalized and substantially mature culture of western New York and in neighboring regions which exhibited the same combination of characteristics only less notably, while its European recruits came from the countries which had shared in the evangelical recrudescence on the other side of the Atlantic. Mormonism was indeed a religion on the American frontier, and its story is a moving and significant epic of westward movement, but it has never been a peculiarly frontier religion.

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