NEARLY EVERYTHING IMAGINABLE

THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF UTAH'S MORMON PIONEERS

Edited by
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# Table of Contents

**Preface** ix  
**Prologue**  
Upon These We Bestow More Abundant Honor 3  
Marlin K. Jensen  
Was Joseph Smith a Gentleman? The Standard for Refinement in Utah 27  
Richard Lyman Bushman  

**Mormon Village**  
Golden Memories: Remembering Life in a Mormon Village 47  
Ronald W. Walker  
It Takes a Village: Social Character in Rural Settlements 75  
Dean L. May  
A Peculiar People: Community and Commitment in Utah Valley 89  
Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and David A. Allred  

**Rhythms of Pioneer Life**  
Battle of the Homefront: The Early Pioneer Art of Homemaking 118  
Andrew H. Hedges  
“Oh, What Songs of the Heart”: Zion’s Hymns as Sung by the Pioneers 137  
Richard H. Cracroft  
The Homemade Kingdom: Mormon Regional Furniture 156  
Richard G. Oman  
Mormon Clothing in Utah, 1847–1900 175  
Carma de Jong Anderson  
Dancing the Buckles off Their Shoes in Pioneer Utah 195  
Larry V. Shumway  
“I Have Eaten Nearly Everything Imaginable”: Pioneer Diet 222  
Jill Mulvay Derr  
Common People: Church Activity during the Brigham Era 249  
William G. Hartley  
Reports from the Field: The World of the Woman’s Exponent 296  
Claudia L. Bushman
Life Cycles
Growing Up in Pioneer Utah: Agonies and Ecstasies 316
SUSAN ARRINGTON MADSEN
“Heigh, Ho! I’m Seventeen”: The Diary of a Teenage Girl 329
DAVIS BITTON
Adopted or Indentured, 1850–1870: Native Children in Mormon Households 341
BRIAN Q. CANNON
Everyday Life in Utah’s Elementary Schools, 1847–1870 358
JAMES B. ALLEN
The Effect of Pioneer Life on the Longevity of Married Couples 386
LEE L. BEAN, GERALDINE P. MINEAU, AND KEN R. SMITH
Mormon Cemeteries: History in Stone 404
RICHARD H. JACKSON

Pioneer Lives
Fifty Years Building Utah: Joseph Horne’s Pioneering Contributions 431
HARRIET HORNE ARRINGTON
John Welch: A Pioneer in Paradise, Utah 450
JOHN W. WELCH
In Quest of Betterment: The Lee Roy and Priscilla Arrington Family 469
LEONARD J. ARRINGTON

Epilogue
The Folk Speak: Everyday Life in Pioneer Oral Narratives 485
WILLIAM A. WILSON

Index 504
Fig. 1. Pioneer wagon, ca. 1870. After months of traveling in a wagon, families often used the wagon as an extension of their new home. It was not uncommon to find a wagon in the yard serving as an extra bedroom for months following the establishment of a log home or dugout.
Battle of the Homefront: The Early Pioneer Art of Homemaking

Andrew H. Hedges

On a visit to a local historical site some time ago, I walked through several buildings that had been restored and decorated to look like the homes where Utah's early Mormon settlers had lived. While I was struck with how small these houses were and with the number of children raised in them, I was also impressed with the craftsmanship of the early Saints and their obvious ability to effectively use the natural resources of their new location. Similarly, I gained appreciation both for the difficulties attending the performance of even the simplest household tasks and for the Saints' industry and ingenuity. Nevertheless, I ended my tour with the somewhat smug feeling that pioneer life was not that much different from my own. While the pioneers may have lacked some of the modern conveniences we enjoy today, their accommodations were nevertheless quite adequate, their food plentiful, and their lives relatively uncomplicated. Overall, pioneer life looked rather quaint and cozy.

I have since learned that while the reproductions I saw on that tour are more or less accurate they reflect pioneer life in its later years, after the Saints had time to accumulate the finer things of life and refine their everyday processes. Almost wholly lacking from the tour were reproductions of the Saints' living conditions upon their arrival in Utah and descriptions of the challenges they faced over the next several years—even decades in some of the more remote settlements—as they sought to establish themselves in the Great Basin and surrounding territory. The snug little cabins I walked through followed many years of primitive shelters, backbreaking labor, scarcity, and want.

This essay focuses on the pioneers' home life during these difficult early years and on their efforts to establish homes and provide for their families under less-than-ideal conditions. While both men and
women engaged in this undertaking, the bulk of the everyday tasks within the home fell on the shoulders of the women. They, more than the men, took responsibility for attending to the children’s needs, for planning and making meals out of the available foodstuffs, and for creating a home—a real home—out of whatever shelter was available at the moment. While the men’s duties and responsibilities took them to the front lines of various battles outside of the home, pioneer women served on the front lines of their own wars and skirmishes—engagements that, while not as exciting perhaps as an Indian war or foreign mission, were every bit as important to the building up of Zion. Their story, the battle of the home front, needs to be told.

SHELTER

An appreciation for the accomplishments of pioneer women begins with an understanding of what structures and shelters served as “houses” in early Utah. Very few people had a home waiting for them when they arrived in the territory or the time, tools, and means to build or buy one immediately upon their arrival. The same held for those who were called to settle outlying areas years later. Under such conditions, it is no surprise to learn that the first “house” many immigrants found themselves occupying was the same “house” they had occupied coming across the plains: their wagon (fig. 1). Hannah Nixon’s experience in this regard was a common one. Moving to Salt Lake City from a small settlement on the Jordan River, she and her family moved their wagon box onto the floor of an unroofed, one-room house and spent the winter of 1851–52 living there. Although they built a two-room house the following spring, a subsequent call from Brigham Young to settle St. George required them once again to make their wagon their home until a more permanent house could be erected.1 At least a few families continued to utilize the trusty wagon box even after such a home had been built; Joseph Fielding’s family, for example, which arrived in the Salt Lake Valley in 1848, elected to sleep in their wagons even after they had erected a one-room log cabin.2

Pioneers who settled along the banks of streams frequently constructed crude shelters of the willows that grew in such places. Such “willow shanties” were far from comfortable; Hannah Crosby, for example, who helped settle Bunkerville on the Virgin River, noted how poorly these shelters protected their inhabitants from the “exceedingly hot” Dixie summers.3
Cooler by far, but complete with their own set of problems, were the dugouts a number of immigrants used. As the name suggests, a dugout was constructed by digging a short, broad trench horizontally into the side of a hill or an embankment. The trench comprised the walls and floor of the home and was covered with brush, branches, canvas, and the like for a roof. Of necessity, such shelters were generally quite small; Uhan Parson, for example, an early settler of Huntsville, recorded that his family of seven lived for a time in a dugout whose dimensions were a mere twelve by fourteen feet.

Ann Howell Burt has left us with a lengthy and vivid description of life in such a dwelling. A native of Glamorganshire, Wales, Ann immigrated to America as a child in 1851, came west to Utah in 1852, married, and found herself living in a dugout in summer 1863. “The neighbors,” she recorded in her journal, “call it the Castle of Spiders and it is well named, for I never saw so many reptiles and bugs of all kinds.” She continued:

For several mornings I was puzzled to find my milk-pan skimmed; could not understand what could have done it. So the other evening I sat down behind the door, with my knitting, to watch proceedings, and what was my surprise to see a huge bull-snake come crawling out from the head of our bed and swaying gracefully toward my crude cupboard, began to skim my cream. Now I cover my milk tightly.

Things did not improve over the course of the summer, as subsequent entries indicate:

This is a hideous place. Some days ago, I killed a rattlesnake with my rolling pin, as he came crawling down the steps. I was just cooking supper and the baby was on the floor or rather the ground, for we have no other floor. I was badly frightened. . . . A few days ago, while keeping the flies off the baby’s face as he slept on an improvised bed on the floor, I discovered, to my horror, a large tarantula crawling toward the child. I seized the broomstick, thrust the end of it at the tarantula and when it took hold of the thing which was provoking it I hurriedly put it into the fire.

Ann’s last journal entry about her dugout experience speaks volumes: “We are going to move away from here,” she wrote. “I am weary from fighting all these reptiles.”

The next level of sophistication beyond the dugout was the well-known log cabin. Notwithstanding the favorable press these dwellings have received, they were generally far from snug and inviting (fig. 2). With lumber at a premium, most were equipped with nothing more
Fig. 2. Samuel and Mary Bunting family, 1869. Union Pacific Railroad photographer A. J. Russell captured a Latter-day Saint pioneer family living in Kaysville, Utah, thus preserving cultural information about living conditions on the Utah frontier. Sometimes identified as a polygamist family, Mary and Samuel Bunting pose with other family members. Mary is standing behind her husband in the doorway; they are surrounded by Mary’s mother, her three sisters, and five nieces and nephews.
than dirt floors that could be cleaned—if such a word is appropriate—only by wetting the dust and sweeping it out with a homemade broom. As if that were not enough of a trial, Mary Horne, one of the pioneers of 1847, reminds us that the timber out of which these cabins were constructed was full of bedbugs and that during the first few years of settlement in the Valley, “mice were very troublesome.” These uninvited houseguests intruded in such numbers, she continues, that the settlers could see their ground floor tremble as [the mice] ran about under their covered trails. And when the stones at the corners [of the cabins] supporting their roofs, loosened and fell by the rain, the frightened mice ran in hordes. Sometimes as many as 60 would be caught before going to bed. [The pioneers] had to make their own traps, and one contrivance was a bucket full of water with a board sloped at each end, balanced on the edge, and greased. This caught dozens of mice.

Mary closes her account of this infestation by noting that “the first cat and her progeny were invaluable.”

The early Saints learned from the records kept by trappers, mountain men, and early explorers that Utah was a desert. Accordingly, they built their early cabins with the understanding that the roofs need not necessarily be impervious to rain. Before experience taught them to do otherwise, they made cabin roofs by placing a layer of grass and weeds, “then a good layer of earth,” over poles placed as close together as possible. The finished product was almost flat. Although noted for its warmth, it apparently did little more than slow the rain—which came in torrents at times. Leaking roofs turned the Saints’ homes, with their dirt floors, into muddy messes. As one unfortunate sister recalled, “We had rain out of doors and a mud-fall in the house, for the continued fall of rain so thoroughly soaked the earth over head that the downpour was mud, good-honest-mud.” She continued:

You can imagine the condition our beds and bedding were in, as long as there was a dry spot, we would move it there, but after a while there was no dry spot. One of the family had a babe nine days old, she stayed in bed till it was soaked through, then she was placed in a chair before the fire with an umbrella over her head.

Mary Horne noted that “the flags and dirt formed but a slight protection [against the rain], and it was a strange sight to see [the people] sitting at their tables or on the bed, their heads covered with an umbrella while the rain was coming through the roof long after it had ceased outside.” Melting snow had the same effect on the small cabin Williamena McKay lived in at Huntsville while her husband...
served a mission to Arizona. The snow caused the cabin’s chinking to dislodge, turning its earthen floor to mud.13

Perhaps the most enduring house the earliest settlers could build out of native materials was one of adobe or rock (fig. 3). These were generally better insulated against both the cold and the heat than other shelters, they did not disintegrate in the rain, and they generally provided an effective barrier against the incursions of wildlife. Accordingly, many families built and lived in such homes when conditions permitted. Despite their obvious advantages, however, rock and adobe houses came with their own sets of problems. As Louise Thalmann Hasler, a Swiss immigrant, learned, building an adobe home took a tremendous amount of time and labor. In order to finish just two of the planned six bedrooms of their adobe home over the course of one summer, she had to work side by side with her husband in bringing the adobes from the drying yard into the building lot, unloading them, and placing them on the growing walls. With winter coming on, she laid the shingles on the roof while her husband did the carpentry work inside. The house was ready for habitation by December. Two months later, having done everything from hefting adobes to roofing her home over the course of her pregnancy, Louise gave birth to a healthy son.14

Fig. 3. Mormon family in front of their adobe home in Utah.
Not everyone who attempted to build such a home fared as well as Louise and her husband did. Work progressed so slowly on the rock home Hannah Nixon’s family was trying to build, for example, that winter caught them with no more than a one-room cellar in which to stay along with another family. Similarly, winter burst upon Williamena McKay of Huntsville and her family when only part of their five-story rock home was completed. Heavy snows subsequently caved in that part of the roof they had managed to finish and even toppled some of the rock walls. Such problems could plague these homes even after they were supposedly finished, a lesson Rachel Burton learned the hard way when the east wall of her adobe home, in which she had been living for several months, caved in during a windstorm.

While dugouts, shanties, cabins, and adobe or rock dwellings constituted the principal types of homes for the Saints, circumstances occasionally required them to live in other structures as well. Eva Beck and her family, for example, who immigrated from Germany in 1863, spent their first winter in Lehi living in a former chicken coop. Similarly, Lucina Boren of Wallsburg lived in an empty granary in Heber during hostilities associated with the Black Hawk War. Such structures were utilized for both relatively infrequent and short periods of time but constituted an important aspect of the Saints’ housing prospects all the same.

**Moves and Limited Resources**

The Saints faced at least two other challenges that compounded the difficulties of establishing a home in early Utah. First, many families, either in response to formal mission calls or their own search for greener pastures, made several moves over the course of their lives in the West. Those making a move frequently left established homes and occupations and started afresh. Such moves were generally done by wagon (even as late as the early 1900s) and could be tiring, difficult, and hazardous (fig. 4). While many, if not most, early homemakers faced this challenge at least once in their lives, others faced it far more frequently. Nanna Anderson, for example, moved some twenty times by wagon over the course of her married life and lived everywhere from Canada to Arizona before she finally prevailed upon her husband to settle down.

Second, the resources and materials that could be used to furnish these homes were extremely limited and primitive. Rag wicks in a dish of grease and, later, candles constituted the light source for these early
homes; rope “springs” and straw-filled mattresses answered for beds. Other furnishings were just as humble, and the small stove, single table, two chairs, and straw bed that comprised the sum total of Rachel Burton’s home furnishings in 1856 were probably quite representative of what most young couples could expect to possess at the time.21

Clearly, turning a house into a home under such conditions was no small feat. As we have already seen, it required courage enough to kill a rattlesnake with a rolling pin, endurance enough to haul adobes while pregnant, and self-control enough to withstand plagues of mice and insects occurring on a biblical scale. As the umbrellas in the cabins demonstrate, the ability to improvise was also in heavy demand. All of these virtues, and especially the last, became even more important when the early Saints faced special occasions or extraordinary circumstances. Even though the appropriate materials were not always on hand, holidays, with their special traditions, still needed to be celebrated; babies continued to be born; and sick people still needed medical care. These and other special circumstances had to be addressed as appropriately as possible, and more often than not, the responsibility for doing so lay with the women of the Church.

A little creativity allowed pioneer women to accomplish great things with their limited resources (fig. 5). Sarah Gladhill recalled how her mother, in an attempt to make Christmas more special in their Ogden home during the 1860s, would “take a picture she had brought with her from Philadelphia and not having a frame for it she would take a piece of dark cloth and bind it and hang it up, taking down the one she had put up the Christmas before as it would be fly specked and dirty.”22 Similarly, when Christmas found the pioneers of San Juan County camped in wagons at Hole-in-the-Rock, mothers managed to save the day by filling the children’s stockings—which were carefully hung from the wagon wheels—with parched corn and cookies baked in a Dutch oven.23

The same creativity, mixed with a liberal dose of grit and determination, allowed women like Leora Campbell, one of the first settlers in Liberty, to successfully meet more harrowing challenges. While her husband was away and she was living in a log cabin with no windows and only a hole in the sod roof for a chimney, Leora went into labor just as “an awful storm came up.” “The rain came down in torrents,” she recorded.

Our house leaked all over, not clear water but mud. There was a place from about the middle of the bed to the head that did not leak. My
husband’s grandmother was living with us that winter. She put me crosswise of the bed, and put her featherbed over me to keep me dry. She put her quilts under the bed to keep them dry. Wet boards were laid down on my bed for me to lie on. A sheet was hung up to the head of the bed to keep out the wind and one across the foot of the bed. . . . Thus I gave birth to the first white child born in Ogden Valley.24

Meals

Pioneer women usually assumed responsibility for preparing meals for the family. This was no easy task in early Utah. Prior to the coming of the railroad, stoves and specialized utensils for preparing food were scarce, as their weight and bulk frequently prevented their being hauled across the plains in wagons. Primitive means of preservation meant that only a few types of foodstuffs could be imported from the outside as well, and initially, pioneers used much of their supply as seed for the following year rather than for food. Poor yields due to crickets and droughts continued to limit the amount of the harvest the Saints could use for food. Mary Horne reported that three years passed before her family grew enough vegetables that they could spare some for the table.25

The net result of these forces was that early pioneer women again faced the all-too-familiar problem of making do with what little they had on hand. Many, predictably enough, utilized a wide variety of native plants—including the famed sego lily bulbs, milkweed shoots, “marrowfat peas,” wild parsnips, currants, pigweed greens, and even mushrooms—as they sought to supplement their families’ diets.26 Conditions slowly improved as the Saints perfected irrigation techniques, obtained a greater variety of seeds, and grew accustomed to the region’s unpredictable weather, but native plants continued to be a staple in outlying areas like Liberty—where Leora Campbell and her husband ate nothing but sego lily roots “for three or four days at a time”—well into the 1860s. After the poor harvest following the entrance of Johnston’s Army into the territory in 1858, Saints like Ann Burt turned again to roots even in more centrally located areas.27

Under such conditions, the ability to improvise was at a premium. Water mixed with parched barley, wheat, and even peas substituted for coffee; cornstalks and watermelons were processed into molasses. Settlers ate the rinds of melons after having first boiled them in molasses.28 Ingenuity, coupled with a strong stomach, became even more important during the lean winter months, when supplies were
Fig. 4. Mormon family, ca. 1867. After their arrival at the LDS Church headquarters in Salt Lake City, many immigrants loaded wagons again and made a trek to a far-flung settlement. Once they arrived in the new settlements, living conditions were in many cases primitive. Note the mismatched team and condition of the horse.
Fig. 5. Utah pioneer home, ca. 1870. A Mormon mother and child pose inside their log home in a pioneer settlement in Utah. Conditions on the Utah frontier were Spartan for many individuals until much later, but this scene could be duplicated well into the late nineteenth century.
low and the chance for outside aid fell off to almost nothing. Mary Horne recalled one family whose stores gave out midwinter but who had a ready supply of fresh milk. Allowing a portion of each day’s milk to stand and thicken, they would then mix it with fresh milk and “eat it for bread.” This constituted their sole source of subsistence for six weeks.⁹⁹ Ann Burt noted in her diary how one family tried to enhance its meager supply of flour over the winter of 1855–56 by mixing it with sawdust—a failure, it turned out. She also recorded the desperate straits of her own family. “We were given a piece of meat by Brother V.,” she wrote.

He had been up in the mountains and carried home a couple of dead animals that had died of starvation during the cold winter. Well, there was not much meat to it, and when it was boiled it was black; still it satisfied our hunger. . . . Oh for a few of the good things we had at home!³⁰

Even when enough food was on hand, the monotony of the fare could challenge even the best cook’s skill. While waiting for her fiancé to arrive in the Valley, Maren Nielson, a convert from Denmark, had her first taste of boiled wheat and fried jackrabbit, a dish which “tasted rather good,” she reflected, although it “was different than anything I had ever eaten.” The dish lost its savor for both Maren and her young family in Sanpete County, however, for it became their standard supper fare. Virtually every night for years, according to her record, she had nothing but wheat and jackrabbit to prepare for her family’s supper, until the dish she had once enjoyed became positively distasteful to her. Her family, predictably enough, was similarly affected, to the point that one of her sons, when asked to give the blessing over yet another meal of wheat and rabbit, gave the “prayer” in the following verse:

Rabbit young, Rabbit old,
Rabbit hot, Rabbit cold,
Rabbit tender and Rabbit tough.
Oh please, Dear Lord,
We’ve had enough.⁴¹

Many pioneer women endured these privations through several months of pregnancy—a fact few historians have appreciated. Unlike today, when well-stocked grocery stores are open around the clock, early Utah women in the so-called delicate condition had to nourish themselves with what they had on hand. At times this could be painfully little, as the story of a woman named Gatha illustrates.
Conceiving shortly after her arrival in the Valley in the fall of 1847, Gatha and her husband lived on rations of a half pound of flour and corned beef over the winter and were reduced to eating thistle greens and buttermilk by the time spring arrived some months later. To make matters worse, Gatha spent the spring days walking beside a team of oxen while her husband followed the plow behind. She did have the good fortune to obtain a piece of bread from the midwife as her due date approached, and some obliging neighbors—"whose kindness," she wrote, "I shall never forget"—gave her a little more. But nothing she ate over the entire course of her pregnancy ever amounted to the "full enjoyable meal" her body needed.32 Gatha was fortunate in that her baby, despite the privations, was a "plump healthy child," but many women were not so lucky.

**Clothing and Bedding**

It was also the pioneer women's responsibility to see that their families had adequate clothing, bedding, sheets, and the like. This, too, was a difficult task in the early days and continued to present a challenge in remote settlements long after a variety of textiles and finished articles of clothing were available in Salt Lake City. In the absence of commercially produced cloth, women again relied on the materials they had on hand to make suitable fabric at home. While a few families were fortunate enough to live both where and when cotton was grown, many of the early Saints, at least for a time, made their textiles from wool or flax. This could be a time-consuming process; flax, for example, had to be soaked in water for some six weeks after it had been picked before it could be spun into thread and then woven into usable cloth. Taking a cue from their Native American neighbors, pioneer women learned how to use native plants like squaw bush to dye their material. And after all this, of course, women did the actual sewing of the clothing or bedding by hand. The whole process was so labor intensive and time consuming that Maren Nielson of Sanpete County routinely worked "all day and most of the night" to keep her growing family in clothes.33

Family members commonly needed articles of clothing made or repaired when none of the materials generally used to do so were immediately available. In these cases, pioneer women again relied on their industry and ingenuity to meet the demand. If necessary, cow or even buffalo hair, which pioneers had carefully collected from sagebrush
and preserved as they journeyed west, could substitute for wool. In a pinch, women used animal skins to patch men’s pants; in times of great need, they even used such skins to make full garments. \(^{34}\) Old clothes, and even clothes still in use, were frequently altered and pressed into service. Maren Nielson, for example, regularly made her daughters’ dresses from her own old clothes, while Hans Christensen’s wife parted with one of her skirts in order to furnish her husband with a much-needed pair of pants. \(^{35}\)

**Home Nursing**

As if making a shelter livable, preparing meals, and seeing that their families were properly clothed were not enough, women regularly shouldered the added burden of caring for sick children and husbands. Large families, the prevalence of disease, and inadequate medical care and supplies combined to make this one of the most challenging duties for pioneer homemakers. Recounting an experience to which many women today can probably relate, Hannah Nixon of St. George recalled how her little Mary, ill from Dixie’s unrelenting summer heat, “used to cry till I didn’t know what to do . . . I felt like I would go crazy, so when I got so I couldn’t stand it no longer I picked her up and went out with her and sat down and cried so she stopped squalling and wanted to know what is the matter Mama.” \(^{36}\) These times were made all the harder when military duty, Church callings, and missions took husbands out of the homes for extended periods of time, leaving their wives—who were frequently ill themselves—to take care of a sick family alone. Such times could test even the most proven Saints. After finding herself and four children gravely ill shortly after her husband left on his second mission to California, Sarah Rich, wife of Charles C. Rich and no stranger to affliction, admitted that “to be left alone . . . with a sick family was rather trying.” \(^{37}\)

Caring for sick children was also one of the most heartbreaking duties pioneer women faced, as days or weeks spent caring for a sick little one all too frequently ended with the child’s death. After the strain of caring for seven children with whooping cough during her family’s first winter in Cache Valley, for example, Henrietta Williams had to face burying two of them. \(^{38}\) The number of children a family might lose through disease was staggering at times. Rachel Robinson buried seven of her twelve little ones, while of the ten children Teresa Duncan brought into this world, six died before adulthood—four of them dying from diphtheria within one week of each other. \(^{39}\)
Income

While the men generally took primary responsibility for providing for their families' economic needs, Utah's pioneer women at times shouldered part of this load as well. With their husbands' resources taxed to the utmost with Church work, farming, and building a house of some sort for their families, women like Sarah Rich and Mary Perkins would have been hard-pressed to furnish their homes adequately had it not been for the initiative they showed in selling eggs, butter, preserves, and dried fruit. Polygamous wives sometimes found it necessary to supplement what their husband could spare for each of his families; for example, Ellen Gunderson—who joined the Church in Denmark, immigrated to Utah, and married A. C. Nielson as a second wife in 1880—supported herself by selling rugs and carpets she wove.

Wives of husbands who had been called on missions found themselves in similar circumstances, and the records clearly indicate that being the wife of a missionary entailed far more than writing weekly letters. Hannah Romney's situation was a common one. After her husband was called on a mission to England, Hannah learned how to make gloves to support herself and her baby. Finding the market for gloves somewhat depressed at the time, she took up nursing, sewing, washing, "or any kind of work," she wrote, "that I could do honestly." Hannah found herself in the same situation again eleven years later, only this time she had five children to support. Taking advantage of the construction of the St. George Temple, this good mother, who was concerned that her growing family be "educated and clothed to correspond with the society we mingled with," again went to work, this time by washing and sewing for the temple workmen. Washing "all day from sunup to sundown" earned her a dollar.

These, of course, are just some of the challenges Utah's early homemakers faced in their efforts to raise families far from the centers of civilization. Women fulfilled numerous other duties as well, including farm work, Church responsibilities, medical care, and education. A full discussion of all that pioneer women undertook would require a book-length treatise. Little of what they accomplished came easily. Insects, snakes, snow, mud, sun, and disease fought them at every turn, and at times it probably seemed as if all nature had channeled its forces against them. This was especially true in their efforts to establish homes in the wilderness, and any history of the period that fails to
acknowledge the challenges they faced in their everyday lives as mothers and wives is woefully incomplete.

Motivation to Endure

Why, one might legitimately ask, did these women endure all that they did? What helped them carry on under such trying circumstances? To answer that they had no choice would be as wrong as it would be simplistic, for opportunities to leave certainly existed. While no small number took advantage of these opportunities, a far greater number did not. Again, why? A few reflections from Ann Burt, one of the women I have quoted extensively, provide what I think is the clue.

In October 1854, at a time when living in Utah promised little more than hard work and hunger, Ann’s husband decided to leave the company of the Saints for California. When Ann, who was pregnant at the time, refused to accompany him, he promptly sold the house she was living in and left. At this critical point, Ann received a letter from a wealthy, childless uncle living in her native land of Wales, a place she loved and missed so much that her every attempt to sing “Home Sweet Home” ended in tears. In his letter, Ann’s uncle informed her that if she would return to Wales, he would make her the sole heir of his extensive wealth and property. Homeless and homesick, without a husband, destitute, and expecting a baby, Ann nevertheless refused the offer. Her brief explanation for so doing, written shortly after her husband left, should be considered a classic among the early Saints’ statements of faith. “He wanted me to accompany him,” she recorded in her diary, “but I could not think of it. It may be better there in a way, but we have come here for the Gospel’s sake, and here I intend to stay and weather it out with the rest of the Saints.”

“We have come here for the Gospel’s sake, and here I intend to stay and weather it out with the rest of the Saints.” In this short sentence, we learn both how and why she and thousands of other Latter-day Saint women faced the rigors of pioneer life. As we have seen, creativity and diligence helped pioneer women meet the challenges they encountered in the valleys of the mountains. Patience, too, and the ability to improvise were important attributes. But Ann Burt’s words tell us that more important than everything else in determining how successfully these wives and mothers would provide for their families in the face of opposition was a firm testimony of the gospel and an unswerving determination to be true to that testimony at all costs. As disagreeable, even fatal, as the bugs, snakes, mud, and disease
may have been, they paled into relative insignificance alongside these simple, yet powerful, convictions.

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Notes

2. Rachel Fielding Burton, “Autobiographical Sketch,” typescript, Archives Division, Church Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cites LDS Church Archives).
21. Burton, “Autobiographical Sketch.” Similarly, Hannah Romney and her husband began housekeeping with “a small cook stove, a bed, three chairs, a small table and enough dishes for three,” while Mary Little began married life with “a feather bed, pillows and quilts . . . a few dishes . . . a bake oven, and camp kettle.” Hannah Hood Hill Romney, Autobiography, in Carter, Our Pioneer Heritage, 5:266. See also Mary Jane Lytle Little, “A Biographical Sketch of the Life of Mary Jane Lytle Little,” in “Autobiographies of Thomas Evans, Priscilla Merriman Evans, James A. Little, Mary Jane Lytle Little,” typescript, 93, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter cited as BYU Archives).


26. Histories of the period are rife with accounts of people using such items for food. The above list was compiled from “Biography of Henrietta E. C. Williams and Enoch Burns,” typescript, 15, BYU Archives; and Nixon, “Biography,” 3.


MORMON CLOTHING IN UTAH, 1847–1900

Carma de Jong Anderson

Being so far removed from the styles of the pioneer period, we sometimes have difficulty understanding early Mormon clothing. For example, what we often see in the LDS historical films made before 1998 are ensembles spurious in cut and colors and quite underaccessorized. For accurate information about what early Mormons would have worn according to their social status and economic ability, I have analyzed and photographed clothing collections all over America and in England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland.

Mormon letters and journals yielded information about clothing’s various sources, uses, textiles, colors, and trims. The terminology of the 1800s, however, is quite different from what is familiar to us. Who among us would immediately understand such terms as *pantalets* versus *pantaloons*, a *palto*, or Brigham Young’s *warmus*? (I venture to say a *warmus* was probably a comfortable woolen coat smock worn by a farmer or craftsman.) In today’s textile terminology, *muslin* has a connotation of crudeness, but in the nineteenth century, this term referred to all weights of fine, white cotton—elegant fabrics. Even the words *smock*, *frock*, or *smock-frock* carried a completely different meaning for pioneers and were solely in the male domain until about 1900. The *frac* referred to in French fashion terms meant a heavily tailored frock coat for a man’s day wear. *Engageantes*, another little-known term, refers to connecting sleeves worn under the flaring sleeves of the 1840s called *pagodas*. Even the use of a top hat differs from modern preconceptions; it was not exclusively for formal wear for most of the pioneer years but remained in a man’s wardrobe as a work hat for the field when the hat became old and damaged.

The difficulty of learning about clothing is increased by a scarcity of photographs and artifacts, such as accessories, pieces of clothing,
Photography did not exist until 1839, when French painter Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre invented the process of creating permanent pictures on metal plates. But daguerreotypes and other photographic images and portraits before 1860 are too scarce to rely upon for a thorough knowledge of historic clothing design among Mormon members. Fortunately, remarkably helpful portraits and scenes can be found in photography collections that contain materials from the broader American and British culture of the 1840s and '50s.

Today there is virtually no folk clothing left from nineteenth-century Utah. True to the immigrant spirit, the European Saints wanted their clothing to match that of the American Mormons. When their traditional folk clothing wore out, it was replaced with the constantly changing international style of clothing worn by the majority of the Church members in the West. Clothing rags (as well as good fabric scraps) were absorbed into rugs or quilts or processed for paper. Emulating the larger social group created for immigrants a comfortable feeling of fitting in, but it did have some tragic effects. For over a hundred years, Mormons continued to lose age-old skills, beautiful styles, and interest in displays of ethnic origins.

The clothing ensembles shown in this photo essay often contain one to three original parts. The other items of each ensemble have been faithfully reproduced so that the textile fibers, weaves, colors, and prints—and most importantly the cut of the pattern—appear original and so that accessories are authentic. All these details had to be drafted from the visual and structural information I have obtained from handling and photographing actual clothing. The ensembles in this photo essay are as accurate as I could presently make them, although after four decades of diligent research I still find bits of startling new knowledge even in my casual reading.

In this photo essay, carefully chosen local models with original pioneer hairstyles provide insight into how some of our pioneer ancestors, ages two to seventy, might have appeared. Certainly these images are preferable to conjuring up images for paintings or sculptures by drawing from memories of children’s book illustrations.

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Double puffs on these flamboyant “Marie” sleeves add to the importance of a shirred-front dress with a high V neckline. Such shirring began to fall out of fashion by the end of the 1850s. An elegant floral calico print is seen with the formal apron removed. Worn throughout the nineteenth century, this original 1840 apron is cross-barred cotton batiste, a fabric likely from France or Switzerland, trimmed in hand-knitted lace edging and insertion. A very common, flat straw hat covers the customary day cap, which was given less and less ruffling as this fashion waned before the Civil War. Many women who wore fashionable small, hollow gold beads in Nauvoo continued to use them for decades afterward. For dancing parties, a lace collar would be added and the day cap left at home. This dress’s very full skirt would be held out further with layers of petticoats and a small hoop.

Dressed for hot weather in his international styled, finely tailored clothing, Alexander Neibauer, a Berlin-trained dentist, is dutifully making home visits. The light, unlined linen coat, typical of what Neibauer might have chosen, was sewn totally by hand in the 1840s. A fine topper with beaver fur in the felt makes a stiff and proper hat, originally from London. The dentist’s silk tie, a button-on “stock” tie, matches the standard black hat. The trousers are cream wool with silk striping.
Plate 3. Welsh immigrant of the 1840s

The revered folk clothing of commoners in Wales is still celebrated and preserved. A red wool “short gown” over a chemise is comfortable with a neck shawl of softest lamb’s wool. Under a black-red-and-gray-striped skirt are additional petticoats, each of a different fabric—gorgeously embroidered cotton (broidery anglaise), gray linen, and black flannel. Very fine Irish crochet trim is on her tubular calf-length pantelets, which cover black, clocked (figured) stockings. Women’s best shoes of the mid-1800s had the same high, heavy heels with large buckles as pirates wore centuries before on the Spanish galleons. A woman’s necessary white day cap, with lappets hanging, is under the tall-crowned felt hat, typically worn by both men and women.

Plate 4. Irish colleen

A poor young girl from Ireland wears a tiny shawl of brown jacquard pinned around the low neckline of her chemise to keep her warm enough to scrub clothing in tubs outdoors or sit in the chilly doorway of a cabin to make lace in the bright daylight. Irish lace produced in the mid-1800s was often a minuscule, crocheted pattern, only 25 percent of the size seen today. Her large shawl of red, green, and brown is soft warm wool, her only coat against winter’s blast. Spun, woven, and dyed at home, a green-and-black-plaid flannel skirt (usually called a petticoat) is layered over other serviceable linen or wool petticoats, and the girl’s heavy leather oxfords have nailed and pegged soles.
Former gardener from Staffordshire

Tough, linen coat smocks were worn on ships to Zion and across the plains to Utah as the customary raincoat, warm coat, and work uniform that kept a man’s other clothing clean. The smock features rows of intricate, stretchy smocking on the front, back, and sleeves. Sections of rose-garden embroidery proclaim this immigrant’s former occupation. Sadly for this form of decoration, when an embroidered garment wore out from the rigors of building the West, there was never time to replace it with a similarly decorated garment, and the use of an embroidered badge of occupation died out. This immigrant relishes a flowery neckerchief and an ancient top hat from Hanley, England, which would have been a cast-off from his former employer.

Mary Ann Abel might have worn a prairie dress such as this in 1853 when she arrived in Utah with her husband Elijah and three children. This dress is an original high-quality cotton twill with a resist print grounded in black. It makes an ample wrapper dress (for maternity or travel) of about 1850-65 with a plain front yoke and bone buttons. Bishop sleeves are so full they require the usual shortening tuck on the inside arm seam to prevent them from falling too low. The smoothly braided palm-leaf hat is also original, about 150 years old, with pale ribbons added.
A young miss from Boston or Philadelphia in the early 1850s is ready for visiting and dancing in a voluminous skirt trimmed in gauged pleating on hemline, shoulders, and pagoda sleeves. Typical V-shaped flanges have piped edges flaring over the shoulders, a style that persisted from the late '40s through the '50s. Collar and engageantes (the absolutely necessary attachable undersleeves) are of cotton batiste embroidered white on white. Wealthy, faithful converts from the Eastern States and Upper Canada had lovely accessories: silk shawls, fashionable bonnets with gauzy lace scarves draped over them, gloves, and clocked stockings, each kept meticulously in place. Cotton fabric, still fairly high priced in America, was considered a fine textile when well woven and printed. Its common competitors were the great varieties of silks in most people's wardrobes.
Colonizing blacksmith

In a split-legged leather apron, a hardy pioneer bent the iron for wagon-wheel rings, cornered the wagon boxes, and shoed horses. A simple collarband was most commonly seen on work shirts of the mid-nineteenth century. The shirt is of soft cotton with black and brown woven together, the same colors as the heavier, striped trousers of linen and wool. While the smith dodges sparks from the forge, trouser legs are tucked into calf-high, square-toed boots. A soft-leather pilot cap with a considerable brim keeps some of the sparks out of the blacksmith’s hair.

Leaving behind their grueling jobs of hauling fish to sell in villages by the North Sea, young women immigrated to the western territory. The usual thick, wool short gown covers a long-sleeved underchemise and layers of linen and wool-flannel petticoats. This lassie’s outside petticoat is pinned up on the sides to keep it out of the mud of Utah farms. Wooden-soled shoes, the only kind that would last in wet sand and surf, serve as well for Utah chores. White wool stockings add a modicum of comfort. A Scottish brooch is placed at the front neckline every work day, preserving a touch of femininity during intensive labor.
Plate 10. Immigrant farmers

A grandson helps his aged British grandmother through the snow of mountain country. Settlers brought their typical farmer’s jackets, or paltos; this one has pieced corduroy cuffs and collar as accent on gray-and-white homespun tweed. These garments are nearly always unlined and are therefore not equal to high altitude storms. The man’s painted black straw hat has a modish square crown and adds a little dignity for men who cannot afford dark felt. The linsey-woolsey trousers are broadfall style; they button up horizontally across the front, onto the waistband, and never have pockets in the back. Grandmother’s shawl is wool in greenish-brown, black, and white, with an original red, knitted winter hood. Her striped stockings are held up under the knees by nonelastic garters woven out of tape. An outer petticoat is vertically striped gray-and-red wool, often seen among the weavers in Welsh communities.

Plate 11. Midwife on call

Accustomed to sudden emergencies, this midwife will put on her large apron and walk or ride a horse to a cabin wherever and whenever she is needed. She is wearing her bright, abstracted calico print of the 1840s, accented by turquoise piping on the shoulder flange and cuffs. Her fine, big sunbonnet is wired buckram covered in cheap polished cambric, with crown and curtain made of pieced scraps of heavy black silk. Midwives habitually brought along their knitting or sewing to occupy themselves during hours of waiting and carried extra bread or other foods to the family of the woman in “confinement.”
A charming child displays her Swiss village origin. The Heber Valley in Utah was colonized by many Swiss and Dutch immigrants, and their traditional clothing and customs died hard. Some huge dairy cows in Midway were still wearing decorated Swiss bells as late as the 1970s. This little girl’s *mieder* has ribbon lacing up the front and creative strapping over the shoulders. Symmetrical embroidery designs in blues and white make the back view as interesting as the front; the back is shown off during folk dances. A superfine, cotton-batiste apron displays the famous Swiss machine embroidery available in the last half of the nineteenth century and is embellished with crocheted edging and flowers. Quality silk ribbons are buttoned and bowed around puff sleeves. The clogs are required for seasonal slush. With typical Germanic orderliness, all the girl’s blond hair is stylishly braided around her head.
Woven in a cheerful green, a symbol of fertility, this miniature plaid makes a cool wrapper, or prairie dress, for wear in grain fields and orchards. The pioneer mother’s apron is tied around her higher and higher each month. After the baby comes, the dress will continue to be worn, for a prairie dress is ideal for a nursing mother. Jet buttons are on the high yoke, and hooks close the lower front opening. Sun and rain protection comes from a very broad-brimmed hat of braided straw; the mother’s little boys wear a pilot cap and a small felt hat. The older son is wearing a common skeleton suit; he simply buttons the form-fitting parts together at the waistline. The suit is carefully pieced out of nonmatching fabrics, indicating the family’s poor textile resources. The younger boy literally lives and sleeps in his soft cotton smock of blue, red, and white woven together, making a comfortable shirtlike garment the color of wild purple gentians.
Original knitted lace insertion and edging on cross-barred batiste (see plate 1)

Original hand-woven Danish wool, men's vesting as facing (see plate 15)

An original foundation lace with darned design (see plate 27)

Pleated trim on pagoda sleeve, modern fabric typical of 1840s (see plate 7)

Original heavy gray flannel embroidered in red wool (petticoat worn under Danish skirt, see plate 15)

Plate 14. Close-ups of fabrics
This folk clothing is one of the hundreds of varieties seen on Scandinavian converts from smaller villages. Women in Alborg favored the giant, red-silk bow of this original small calico cap with wool padding, lined in red lamb’s wool fabric for a cold climate. A traditional striped skirt in a particularly rain-resistant goat wool was spun, dyed, woven, and sewn by hand. Heavy silk-tape binding on the hemline secures the brown jacquard vesting fabric pieced together for a hem facing. The black-banded skirt was made at least 150 years ago but is likely 200 years old. With corset-like sections and a front-hooked opening, the sea-blue moiré bodice is trimmed in black, and the apron with black silk lace. Both items are reproductions.

In Utah the stubborn Scottish community long remained culturally cohesive against all forces of assimilation. For example, Robert D. Young always entertained in full kilt regalia. When he was a young man, the whole territory knew his skill at dancing, especially the sword dance. Other Scots rendered lively versions of ancestral legends, doggedly holding onto their heavy brogues. This kilt’s close-fitting wool jacket with silver buttons echoes past generations of kilted soldiers. The bagpipes would have been an expensive item in pioneer days.
This pastel, printed-cotton dress was made by Brigham Young’s daughter when she was sixteen years old and living in Salt Lake City. It features opulent tiers of ruffles sewed to a strong, ugly calico print base for the skirt—paradoxically saving expensive cloth at the same time that the dress was lavishly decorated with ruffles edged in black silk ribbons. Susa used knotted, black silk fringe, which could have come from a worn-out piece of her mother’s clothing. The fitted, boned bodice has a black silk jacquard bow that lies over the bustled skirt in back. A young woman of social rank would have definitely worn a corset, and the model wears Susa’s crinoline, the required wire cage held together with heavy, cotton tapes to shape the skirt and bustle in back. Sleeves with pagoda layers over balloon gathers were very fanciful for a young woman in 1869.

In the finery of the 1870s, Maude Adams, “America’s darling” redhead actress, returned occasionally to the place of her birth, Salt Lake City. This raspberry-red jacquard silk, representative of what she might have worn, has a pleated train and bustle and a high Victorian collar closed with numerous gold buttons. An original black silk cape is edged in velvet and lined in royal-blue silk, quilted for a chilly night. Sumptuous ostrich plumes are combined in a long-tasseled boa and matching plume for the high hairstyle draped in silk-velvet roses. Long gloves and a copper beaded reticule, reminding us of finery supported by Utah’s growing mineral wealth, complete her evening attire.
Plate 19. Traveler to the capital

In 1891 several Utah women traveled to Washington, D.C., to attend the first meeting of the National Council of Women. There, on behalf of the Relief Society and YLMIA, they presented their credentials and applied for membership in the council. Although the women waited in suspense for a time, the organizations were admitted by a unanimous vote. Here one of the representatives is shown in her traveling attire. Her plum-colored wool suit, embellished with black-silk braid on gigot sleeves and jacket, has a lovely lingerie blouse (waist) with a fine Irish-lace neck-piece. Black fur trimming accents the pillbox hat with a wired, silk rosette high in back.

Fine tailoring was the hallmark of clothing in the nineteenth century. This man’s coat (which was always worn with a vest) is a dense fabric of elegant nap. A beaver top hat was used only formally in the 1890s. President Cannon wears it for an evening promenade in downtown Salt Lake City with his tiniest (size two and “feisty”) wife. This is her original couturier dress in clay-colored bengaline silk, accented by acid-green silk velvet. The very high collar is cut out in V shapes, front and back, with only cords of green velvet circling the neck. Black felt is turned upward into the 1890s vertical tricorn hat, decorated with sprays of silk flowers, called artificials. The period shoes with pointed toes lace up almost to the calf.

Plate 20. Mr. and Mrs. George Q. Cannon
By the 1880s and ’90s, many lovely fabrics were readily available in Northern Utah stores. With silk crepe, bengaline, and crepe de chine, as well as silky satins made, after 1889, of the new rayon fibers, women and girls with sewing skills could duplicate the elegance of East Coast items brought to the Wasatch slopes. A large number of local residents in Utah were adept at producing both bobbin and needle lace, along with tatting and crocheting. In addition, machine-made laces were easily obtained on the market. This nightgown-nightcap combination came from Lehi. It features rich faggot-pointed trimming in crocheted edging beautifully executed on silk crepe fabric.

An early Salt Lake black velvet jerkin with pleats, set-in waistband, and gilded buttons up the back is worn with white linen pantalets, patent leather slippers, and a velvet tam. Jaunty red silk plaid makes the hatband and cockade for a bit of silver jewelry—a modish cap for a boy with the comforts of money in 1875 in the center of Mormonism. Many a moppet was trained to walk with this parlor toy, a push donkey still covered in the last remnants of his mohair fur.
At the turn of the century, Clarence Marcellus Barker departed for a mission in Sydney, Australia, two to three months' travel from North Ogden, Utah. His narrowly fitted, double-breasted coat is in an elegant, heavy, silk novelty weave. It was black, is now faded to a dark green, and had possibly been his father's coat in the 1880s. Matching corded silk covers the buttons. A very stiff, high collar is attached to a pleated-bosom shirt. Smooth oxfords and linen trousers are selected for the humid South Seas. A fashionable bowler releases some of the missionary's romantic curls, and leather gloves with a silk umbrella are fashionable, but necessary, accessories for his adventures.

In his one black suit, John Hafen traveled to France in 1891 for training; he was accompanied by other LDS artists who wanted to paint creditable murals for Mormon temples. Leaving a large family on his farm in Springville for a year, he used every moment of his Church-funded trip to study from the best teachers and see museums as far away as Italy. A simple smock like this one was the only protection Hafen had from the staining paints in the studios of the Julian Academy; no gentleman student would be anything but fully dressed while working in class.
Fifty years after Amelia Bloomer and other women attempted “bloomer dresses” and years after Brigham Young’s attempt at a bifurcated style of dress for Zion (which did not catch on with Utah ladies), the new-fangled, pleated bicycling bloomers expressed a Utah girl’s emerging freedom in athletics. This woman’s sailor scarf adds a mannish touch to the Gibson girl blouse, and a typical sailor hat of Salt Lake City, 1900, fits the goose as well as the gander. Authentic no-nonsense, leather high tops make sturdy knockabout shoes for groves and streams where friendly groups cavort and take the air at the start of a new century.

Celebrating the teletype announcement of Utah’s union with the United States, an 1896 citizen wears her dark-green suit with shirred bands and silk piping. The blouse, called a waist, is cream netting and lace with gigot sleeves under the jacket and pouter-pigeon center-front gathering. Large brooches and fancy belt buckles were as popular in the 1890s as they had been in the 1830s. Approaching the end of Queen Victoria’s life, some hats were enlarged markedly into new designs; this is a statehood-period hat in black velvet.

Plate 26. Celebrant of Utah statehood
His cap of 1900 is white linen, golf style; her hat is a miniature straw, decked out in peach roses. His coat is a blue-and-white-striped seersucker, closing high with only the top button; her dress is shadow-striped sheer cotton with geometric blue figures. His narrow tie under a stiff choker collar is silver-blue silk; her sash is pale-blue satin with a bustle bow. The two-piece dress, extensively restored, has balloon sleeves flounced in wide, white lace with darned designs, matching the long, shawl-collar trim. Around the voluminous skirt is a twelve-inch flounce with many yards more of lace. Her white parasol for the garden party is decorated, under and over, with peach lace and chiffon.


Plate 15. Model: Julia Patch. Skirt and cap from Danish immigrants, the Lars Christensen family of Lehi, Utah. Ensemble: Carma de Jong Anderson. Photo: Deseret News, Ravell Call.


### Some of the Native and Introduced Wild Plants Gathered by the Pioneers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common name</th>
<th>Genus and species</th>
<th>Location and other information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greens, bulbs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dandelion</td>
<td><em>Taraxacum</em></td>
<td>perennial, in lawns and waste places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lamb’s-quarter*</td>
<td><em>Chenopodium album</em></td>
<td>annual, usually 1–2 ft. high, valleys and foothills, disturbed sites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lucerne</td>
<td><em>Medicago</em></td>
<td>valleys and foothills, disturbed sites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pigweed</td>
<td><em>Amaranthus</em></td>
<td>annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>redroot</td>
<td><em>Amaranthus retrorflexus</em></td>
<td>annual, 1–6 ft. high, in cultivated fields and waste places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sego lily</td>
<td><em>Calochortus nutallii</em></td>
<td>5–6 inches below surface, on dry plains, foothills, and canyons, 4,400–7,000 ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stinging nettle</td>
<td><em>Urtica dioica (or breweri)</em></td>
<td>1–6 ft. high, along rivers and streams and in other wet sites, in mountains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>turnip</td>
<td><em>Brassica campestris</em></td>
<td>in waste places, escaping from cultivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wild onion</td>
<td><em>Allium</em></td>
<td>in dry soil in open fields, mountainsides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chokecherry</td>
<td><em>Prunus virginiana (or melanocarpa)</em></td>
<td>shrub or small tree, 10–16 ft., along streams, valleys to upper canyons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>currant</td>
<td><em>Ribes aureum</em></td>
<td>5–12 ft. high, along streams and fence rows, occasionally in foothills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>elderberry</td>
<td><em>Sambucus coerulea</em></td>
<td>bushy or treelike, 6–15 ft. high, in mountain valleys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gooseberry</td>
<td><em>Ribes inerme</em></td>
<td>along mountain streams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ground-cherry</td>
<td><em>Physalis longifolia</em></td>
<td>perennial, 1–3 ft. high, stream banks and rich soil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>raspberry</td>
<td><em>Rubus leucodermis</em></td>
<td>2–6 ft. high, in mountain valleys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>serviceberry</td>
<td><em>Amelanchier alnifolia</em></td>
<td>shrub, 3–15 ft. high, in dry soil on hillsides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strawberry</td>
<td><em>Fragaria</em></td>
<td>perennial, rich soil in light shade in meadows and along streams, some species in mountain meadows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wild rose</td>
<td><em>Rosa</em></td>
<td>bushy or climbing shrubs, some species in mountains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(hips)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Also called pigweed.

George Washington Brown, a member of Brigham Young’s 1847 vanguard company, recalled how Shoshones in the Salt Lake Valley cautiously welcomed the newcomers with food. Initially, wrote Brown, “the Indians seemed to be afraid of us. . . . It wasn’t many days before some of them came into camp and gave the men some dried service berries and crickets to eat.” Food would continue to be an important factor in Mormon relations with Utah’s native peoples. Likewise, over the next twenty or thirty years, as Mormon settlers greeted companies of immigrants with everything from turnips and melons to plum cakes and feasts, food would mark the end of the pioneer journey and the beginning of relationships in a new land.

In a different sense than we ordinarily suppose, the way to a person’s heart is often through the stomach. Eating may be a routine part of life, but because nourishment is absolutely essential, the study of food in any given culture takes us quickly beyond cook fires, gardens, bins, and cellars to the people themselves. For example, contemporary historians have studied the impact of the frontier and of technological advances on the American diet, but they have also considered such questions as the role of food in affirming social status, provoking domestic conflict, and defining secular and religious rituals. The journals and reminiscences of Utah pioneers are filled with references to lacking, obtaining, preparing, sharing, and relishing food. This brief survey of pioneer diet reveals that food is a fascinating lens through which one can view Utah’s pioneer men and women, a lens that might be used to much greater advantage by historians.

The Initial Struggle to Procure Food

In their temporary settlements along the Missouri River during the winter of 1846–47, the Latter-day Saints had already experienced
the difficulty of nourishing thousands of people in the wilderness. There they had gathered, hunted, planted, and traveled to frontier outposts to replenish the limited provisions they had brought with them. Similar patterns are evident in the initial settlement of the Great Basin. The advance pioneer company entered the Salt Lake Valley on July 22, 1847, with instructions from Brigham Young to begin planting immediately. On July 23, committees staked off an area 20 by 40 rods to plant beans, corn, and buckwheat; built a dam and cut irrigation trenches; mowed grass; and started a turnip patch. The next day, a five-acre potato patch was plowed, and seed potatoes planted. Two days later, corn was planted and irrigated. By July 31, a thirty-five-acre lot had been planted with corn, oats, buckwheat, potatoes, beans, and “garden seed.” Other committees attempted hunting and fishing but met with little success.

Mary Isabella Horne, who arrived in the Salt Lake Valley in October 1847, later summarized the Saints’ difficulty procuring food during the first year or two in the Great Basin:

The cattle being worked down were very poor. The beef had to be boiled all day to make it tender enough to eat. Our cow had to work in the yoke, and consequently went dry, so we had neither milk nor butter. I had to make gruel out of shorts for my children to break their bread in for supper and breakfast. We had a little meat for dinner, no vegetables, but a few segoes and parsnips which the boys dug.

She welcomed the chance to feast upon venison after someone shot a stray deer that had jumped the fence into the Old Fort. She knitted fishing skein for men who went to the Jordan River to fish and wove together willows and brush to fence off a garden in front of her dwelling, where she planted flowers and vegetables, which “finally grew.” At first, she recalled, “very few vegetables could be eaten; they must go to seed for another year.” Melon, pumpkin, and squash vines were productive, so, wrote Mary Isabella, “we had melon preserves and squash butter. For coffee, beans, peas, and sliced carrots were used, with a little molasses boiled in it for sweetening. In this way, everyone kept busy. We had only time to make friendly calls on each other to see how we succeeded under difficulties.”

Mary Isabella also testified that “the Lord preserved us in health in a wonderful manner during those trying times.” She remembered when “swarms of crickets took possession of our fields, covering our
grain like a black pall. Starvation stared us in the face.” She witnessed the miraculous coming of gulls
to save our crops in this barren valley, where we were one thousand miles from any supplies in the East, and seven hundred miles from the west. We must have starved if the Lord had not sent us deliverance. When the crops were gathered we held a grand Harvest Home, all joined in praise and thanksgiving to our Heavenly Father for His protection and blessings upon us. Our crops were light, still we had some to spare to the emigrating Saints when they came in. Wheat was traded for flour and a few groceries, and with a little milk and butter occasionally, and our melon preserves, helped us out the next year, though we had to be very economical to make our provisions last until another harvest.  

Horne’s description reflects the comments of dozens of other Utah pioneers with regard to how they procured food and what they ate. Their diaries and reminiscences indicate that they gathered wild roots, bulbs, and greens when food was scarce; usually struggled to get enough flour; raised vegetables and fruits and processed many of their own foods; ate the meat of domestic and wild fowls and animals as well as fish; and suffered severe crop failures due to grasshoppers, crickets, and drought. The pioneers cooperated and shared with friends and neighbors and often with strangers, and they felt and acknowledged the protecting hand of the Lord in providing them with food.

**Irregular Harvests**

The pioneer experience with food was complex and irregular. Some communities were plagued by drought or grasshopper infestations when others were not. Plentiful harvests in any community might follow or be followed by severe shortages. For example, after the settlers’ difficulties during the first two years of settlement, the harvest of 1850 was abundant and increased each of the following four years. Susannah Clark wrote to her mother from Pleasant Grove in October 1851:

We are all well and enjoying the blessings of a new world, with plenty around us to eat and plenty to spare. . . . We have been blessed with raising a good crop this year. We raised fourteen acres of good wheat, which will make about 400 bushels, one acre of oats (35 bushels), two acres of corn (60 bushels), half an acre of potatoes (100 bushels), half an acre of squash and pumpkins (10 wagon loads), fifteen bushels of beets and other vegetables in proportion. George has raised all this himself, excepting harvest.
Wild Plants Used for Food

Turnip
(Brassica campestris)

Redroot
(Amaranthus retroflexus)

Lamb’s-quarter
(Chenopodium album)
Polly Berthena Huntington, too, recalled that “by the time we reached Springville in 1852 the people who had already settled there had succeeded in raising sufficient grain and vegetables so that food was available for all. Fish were plentiful in the nearby streams and we did not suffer for the necessities.”7 By contrast, Christian Stucki remembered a time in Santa Clara when “many were facing starvation” because flour was so scarce. His father was sick from living for weeks on pigweed greens and roots, and Christian could remember seeing him go along the street, “so weak he had to take hold of the fence.” When he arrived at the home of a neighbor who had just been to Salt Lake to trade dried peaches for flour, he received a sack of grain and a loaf of freshly baked bread, “which he tore to pieces and ate ravishly with trembling hands.”8 Long before the end of the century, however, Utah pioneers succeeded in building a varied and adequate food supply based on different combinations of gathering, home production and processing, hunting and fishing, and trading and buying.

**The Gathering of Roots, Bulbs, and Greens**

When food was scarce, pioneers like Brother Stucki gathered greens and roots as a necessity, whereas in times of plenty, these items were used to supplement other foods. Levi Jackman, who arrived with the pioneer company of July 1847, found himself short of rations and decided to search for the thistle roots he had seen local Indians eat. “I only regretted that I could not get enough of them. They tasted much like parsnip,” he noted in his journal.9 Isaiah Moses Coombs recalled that following the bad harvests of 1854–55, great care had to be taken to preserve the stores of grain. “Greens, wild roots, etc., were freely eaten by all classes so as to spin out the bread stuff until the harvest of ’56.”10 According to William Rigby, bad harvests persisted in Lehi during 1856 and 1857, and as a result, he wrote, “my wife and I ate so many weeds during the summer that our skin became tinted with green.”11 Mary Henrie Cooper remembered that her mother would never eat pigweed and dandelion greens because she had “had to live on them for several weeks one time.”12

When Barbara Gowans moved to Tooele with her parents and grandparents in 1856, wild greens were part of her diet. She recalled going with her grandmother “along the ditch where the willows grew to gather nettles to eat. She would tell me to grip them hard, then they would not sting.” The family simmered the nettles three times in fresh
water to make them edible. Barbara could “remember sitting down to eat nothing but greens. We used nettles, pigweed, and redroot.” Harmon Gubler recollected eating pigweed and lucerne during his childhood in Santa Clara. “We would walk for miles to find some of the lucerne so that we could have it to eat,” he said. One St. George family lived for six weeks on nothing but boiled lucerne “without even salt or pepper.” Others remembered gathering dandelion greens, lamb’s-quarters, wild mushrooms, rose hips, turnips, onions, and artichokes. Isaiah Cox, whose family was among the early settlers of St. George, ate “wild cane which grew along the stream.”

The bulb of the sego would later be memorialized as the food which kept Utah’s earliest settlers from starvation, and indeed dozens of pioneers recounted hungrily searching for sego and other roots. “Mother told us one day that she didn’t have a thing for us to eat,” recalled Lorenzo Hadley, “so my brothers and I went out and dug segoes. Mother thought they would cook up like a potato but they didn’t because they boiled all away and just made the water thick. We put salt on it though and lived on it for two weeks.” Some families found that boiling sego and other wild bulbs and roots in milk made a nourishing, healthful beverage.

The same wild greens and roots that curbed hunger in hard times were in better times considered a delicacy. “We considered pigweed greens a dessert,” declared John Hyrum Barton, who grew up in Iron County. “The Segos we children gathered and ate just as a delicacy,” recalled David H. Cannon Jr., noting that “some people ate them at the table, prepared into some very tasty dishes.” Isaiah Cox dug sego bulbs and remembered that “another choice wild delicacy which we dug along the river bottom was the grass nut,” similar to the sego bulb but larger.

**Berry Picking**

For many pioneers, the gathering of wild berries was even more memorable than the gathering of roots, bulbs, and greens. “Before we could raise any fruit, the fields abounded with ground Cherries growing spontaneously, which we appreciated as a great favour from the Giver of all good,” wrote Lucy Meserve Smith about her early years in Provo. Taking with her the two sons of her sister wives, she used to go before sunrise about a mile into the field and “pick a five gallon can full of the precious fruit and go back in time to eat our breakfast.” What the family did not eat, they sold “for a good price as fruit was scarce every where in the Territory.”
Wild Fruits Gathered by the Pioneers

Currant
(Ribes aureum)

Strawberry
(Fragaria americana)

Serviceberry
(Amelanchier alnifolia)

Chokecherry
(Prunus virginiana)
"The whole country was covered with wild berries," recalled Hyrum Allen, "namely Service, Chokecherries, currants, Raspberries, Strawberries, gooseberries." They were "very thick" and of a "large and delicious flavor," he reported.\textsuperscript{24} It took some time for settlers to become familiar with their various characteristics, however. Wilson Howard Dusenberry and a companion went to the mountains to help drag logs down and "picked a lot of elderberries as we were thirsty and hungry. Was as sick as I conveniently could be . . . learned not to eat raw elderberries."\textsuperscript{25}

Many hands made lighter work of berry gathering. Catherine C. Larsen remembered:

\begin{quote}
When we lived at Sevier, we used to go gathering wild currants, both kinds black and yellow . . . on the banks of the Sevier River. Then we would plan to pick berries in the canyon. A group of neighbors would get in the wagon and plan to be gone for the day. We would be off early and be up the canyon before it got too hot. There was a scramble for the best bushes. One could hear a merry buzz and see a group of busy people getting berries for the winters fruit supply. At noon we all put our lunch together and had a real picnic. Then we were soon back to work. Some of them would knock the fruit off on clothes lain under the bushes and others were busy gathering what they could by hand. As the sun neared the western hills we would put our things in the wagon and start for home. You could always hear a bunch of berry pickers as they neared home, their merry songs filled the clear evening air and this is how we made life worth while. These outings were of a necessity as well as part of our leisure time fun.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

**The Pursuit of Something Sweet**

Wild berries could be dried or made into preserves for winter use. Carl Evirt Jensen of Manti remembered gathering berries in a large bucket all summer long. His mother used molasses to make them into preserves. "Lots of times," he said, "we would have thirty gallons of molasses and preserves, in the cellar for winter use."\textsuperscript{27} At first, sweet syrups were made by boiling down squash and beets. "We used to raise beets and made beet molasses for a sweet," Mary Stapley Bringhamhurst recalled, remembering with fondness the vinegar pies made on special occasions with a savory filling of vinegar, beet molasses, and flour.\textsuperscript{28} Provo pioneers recorded washing sweet sap off the leaves of cottonwood trees along the Provo River—"sugar the thickness of a
knife edge”—and boiling it down into syrup and sugar. Juice also could be squeezed out of cornstalks and boiled down into syrup.

Sugar was the one item that pioneers consistently mentioned as unavailable or terribly expensive. One or two pounds of sugar would be made to last a family one year. “It was used only as medicine for the babies,” Isaiah Cox explained. Jane Sprunt Warner Garner recalled her mother returning from a three-day journey to Salt Lake City to get the family’s “first sugar. It was brown sugar and carefully hoarded in a sugar bowl with a cloth tied over it, to be used only on special occasions, generally when company came and we children got very little of it.” Although scarce, brown sugar was cheaper and more readily available than white.

In the early 1850s, instead of importing large quantities of expensive sugar, Brigham Young and Church officials imported sugar-beet seed and machinery in hopes of setting up a sugar works in the area south of Salt Lake City now known as Sugar House. While the cultivation of sugar beets was no problem, the imported machinery could not be made to produce sugar, and by 1856 the enterprise was decidedly a failure.

Still intent on minimizing imports, President Young advocated production of sorghum cane, which settlers in several areas succeeded in raising. Syrup extracted from sorghum stalks (termed by some settlers “sugar cane”) could be boiled down to thick molasses, and sorghum seed could be used as grain. “Many of the farmers made their own pure molasses from the sugar cane they raised,” Alma Chambers remembered. Fannie Ellsworth Greenwell described how “the juice was squeezed from the sugar cane by running it through large wooden rollers. The juice was then boiled in the large vats of tin. My father had three of these vats and the juice was boiled first in one and then in the second and then into the third vat for the last boiling. He had large homemade wooden spoons to stir the molasses with and wooden dippers to dip it with.” Fannie’s father may well have been the owner of a sorghum mill, one powered by water, perhaps, or one with power “furnished by a boom pole, pulled with one horse.” Such mill owners often took every tenth gallon for their work.

Molasses was used in fruit preserves, pies, cakes, cookies, and candy. James J. Adams, who went to Parowan in 1851, said his family used molasses and “a little honey, when we got bees. I remember the first cake mother made out of sugar, we wouldn’t hardly taste it, as it looked so different from what we were used to.” Until a sugar-beet
factory was successfully established at Lehi in 1891, molasses “remained the principal source of sweet in the territory.”

**Grains and Breads**

While grain was rarely as scarce as sugar, the struggle to get it was a more conspicuous part of the pioneer experience in Utah. Families did what they could to obtain corn, wheat, or other grains and get them ground into meal or flour. For two centuries, corn had been the white settlers’ first crop on the westering American frontier, just as it had been the staff of life for generations of Native Americans. Likewise, corn was the first principal grain in most of Utah’s early households. “I can well remember when flour was Ten Dollars per hundred, and hard to get at that,” recalled Mary Julia Johnson Wilson. “Most everybody lived on corn meal, as we generally had better luck raising corn, and could even grind it in the old coffee mill, a household implement which most every family had in those days.” Graters could also be used for coarsely grinding corn. Manomas Lavina Gibson Andrus remembered that “after about the first year” her family could raise quite a bit of corn. However, her father “would always manage to have a little flour for her mother to have bread to eat because she was sick, but we children usually had to eat Johnny Cake.” Isaac H. Grace from Nephi remembered that “corn meal bread was used extensively to replace flour or white bread. This type of bread was not very well liked, but became a necessity over white bread.” His mother often required that “each of the children must eat two slices of corn bread before they could have one slice of white.”

Some families raised their own wheat, but the majority seem to have bought wheat or flour or traded goods or services for these essential commodities. Men, women, and children also gleaned wheat after farmers had harvested their fields. Millesant London Osborn Parks, who was separated from her husband, arrived in Utah in 1852 with her five children and settled in Bountiful, where she had some difficulty providing for her family: “She and her children would glean wheat then grind it between two flat rocks. She would then make biscuits, giving each child one and a cup of milk for the day’s allotment of food.” During their first autumn in Payson, John Hafen’s family “gleaned wheat, enough to furnish food for the winter,” and the next fall, they gleaned some seventy-five bushels of wheat. Elizabeth Horrocks Baxter’s mother “often went barefooted and without breakfast to
glean wheat from the fields and then at night would take her gleanings to be ground in the Taylor Mill at Riverdale. She had to crawl across a narrow bridge to get to the mill and had to wait her turn for grinding, yet she was happy in being able to bring home a pan full of flour as compensation for her day’s work.”^44 Henry Excell, who did not come to Utah until 1882, nonetheless remembered going to the fields and gleaning after the harvester “to get wheat for my winter flour. One fall six of us did this under a partnership. Each night we would stack our daily gleanings in the same stack. When we finished gleaning, the thrasher thrashed our stack free, which turned out one hundred bushels of good wheat. The wheat was taken to the miller and ground into flour, and then divided in six equal parts.”^45

Barley was also frequently used. It was the first grain that ripened in the spring. “We had a small coffee mill and it went all around in the fort for the people to grind their barley in,” recalled Olive Aldous. “Then they would make mush with it. I tried to eat a bowl full with milk on but I just couldn’t swallow it.”^46 When John Hock Hinton moved to Dixie with his family, they used their coffee mill to grind grain or sorghum cane seed for making bread. The mill was “also used by all their neighbors for the same purpose.”^47

Various alternatives were used to extend the wheat supply. Mixing cane seed with flour made it last longer. The mother of Margaret Warner Williams Wood learned from the Indians to dry roots and greens to grate and mix with flour for bread.^48 Utah’s native peoples often ground crickets and grasshoppers to mix into bread or added sunflower seeds they had gathered. Martha Ann Clinger Boren remembered eating “bread made from bran with a very little flour mixed in to hold the bread together. When we could not get flour we made bread without. Often mother would scorch some flour which we would make into a mush. We thought this mush the best food, as the taste was different from the bran bread.”^49 Pioneer families sometimes reserved some wheat whole rather than grinding it into flour, soaked the grain overnight in water, and then boiled it for cereal. Because boiled wheat took so long to chew and proved very filling, some families believed it extended their supply of wheat. Lumpy dick, made by slowly adding white flour to boiling water until it is thick like mush, was standard fare in many families and even relished when served with milk and sweetening.®50

Homemade breads of all varieties lingered long in the memories of the pioneers. Saleratus (sodium or potassium bicarbonate), often
washed from the soil, could be cleaned and mixed with sour milk or buttermilk for biscuits. Bread was sometimes made with “salt risin’,” or corn meal mixed with hot water and salt and allowed to ferment. Other bakers used flour yeast, flour mixed with water and sweetener and allowed to ferment. Mary Wilson recalled that “the neighborhood yeast center was a regular part of the community setup of those early days.” Apparently flour yeast could be a stimulating treat. Eleanor C. Bruhn composed in memory of her younger years an “Ode to Aunt Salena’s Yeast.”

We recall our pail, with our flour to trade
For the grandest beverage that ever was made.
No doubt you’re wondering—“what is the drink”
But many’ll agree when they stop to think;
Whether bound for the west or for the east
No drink is finer than Aunt Salena’s yeast.

Our mother would measure our sugar or flour,
And send us forth, at the evening hour.
We’d get our yeast for the homeward trip,
And often, too often, we’d steal a sip.
And when we’d return mother would say,
“Salena’s getting stingier day by day.”

Bread and cake were often baked in a “skillet,” which might be better described today as “an iron Dutch oven or low built iron pot with three legs, which elevated it above the coals or fire, and with a sunk in heavy iron lid, tight-fitting, so that the coals could be placed on the top to insure the necessary heat.” Thomas Samuel Bladen remembered ending a tiring day’s work with a hard, dry crust of bread, which he dipped in the ditch to soften, but he also recalled more plentiful times, when “they could have a spot of molasses in the center of their slice of bread... and they would eat all around the spot of molasses first and save the piece with molasses on for the last precious bite.” Jane Garner took to West Weber’s one-room, white schoolhouse a lunch of bread and molasses. “I can tell you it tasted good by luncheon time when the molasses had soaked well into the bread,” she affirmed. Many families had bread spread with lard for lunch or ate a supper of bread and milk. Rosina Mueller Beacham remembered how her family would put their broken bread “in hot water and make a stew out of it.” She also described the treat her father baked in their oven, which he had “made out of rocks.” He “made a ladle out of a board about 14 or 16 inches in diameter. It was round and had a handle.
We would mix batter out of flour and cream, put some salt and chopped onions in it and an egg. We would put this on the ladle and slip it off into the oven. It made a very good cake,” she recalled.57

**Utah Vegetables and Fruit**

According to historian Richard Hooker, Americans traditionally “disdained any vegetable cookery other than boiling,”58 but early Utahns, like their eastern and western counterparts, still raised and consumed them. The annual Deseret State Fair in 1858 included a vegetable department, which “was not very full” but featured “excellent and choice” samples of squashes, pumpkins, beets, carrots, onions, potatoes, peas, beans, artichokes, tomatoes, corn, parsnips and other roots that were “not to be excelled in any country.”59 Some vegetables were stored in root cellars; others were preserved in brine. However, pioneers did not remember vegetables with the ebullient affection they reserved for Utah fruit.

Melons seem to have been raised with immediate success and were proudly presented as gifts to arriving immigrants and to President Brigham Young as he traveled throughout the territory.60 Mary Isabella Horne credited Leonora Taylor with being “among the first, if not the very first, to plant apple and fruit seeds. The trees were transplanted on their lot in the Fourteenth Ward, where they grew to be very large trees, and produced fine large fruit of excellent flavor.”61 The Fruit Committee of the Deseret Agricultural and Manufacturing Society presented to the *Deseret News* a lengthy report of fruit exhibited at the 1858 State Fair, including such apple varieties as Sweet Mountain Home, Mountain Chief, Fall Spice, Lake, Hamilton Tart, Hamilton Sweet, Green Winter, Big Red, Geninton, and Yellow Bell Flower. The committee encouraged more cultivation of grapes, noted “fine specimens of Apricots,” and recommended the fine flavor and reliability of the Pottawotamie strawberry. The plum and prune trees, it noted, “were few and the trees young.” Pear trees were not mentioned in the report, but peaches were praised and the planting of peach pits recommended since “several who have tried it here . . . have produced trees far superior to the parent.”62

When C. N. Teeter of Idaho visited Salt Lake City in August 1863, he was delighted to have arrived “just in the nick of time to get all the fruit I can eat.” He rhapsodized about Utah peaches: “There is no end to the peaches this city affords, in fact the whole city with the exception
of the business portion is one vast peach orchard, and they have just begun to ripen nicely and in size and quality they cannot very well be surpassed. I ate some yesterday that measured seven and a half inches in circumference."

Many of Utah’s pioneers fondly remembered the abundance of peaches. Harmon Gubler’s family bought one and a half acres in Santa Clara that had “three rows of peach trees on it. . . . We used to dry peaches by the tons for use in the home.” Peach cuttings and apple peelings, like berry gatherings, were popular social occasions. “We had what we called peach cuttings,” recalled Elizabeth Horrocks Baxter. “A bunch of us would gather together and pick the peaches and then cut them in half and spread them out on the roofs to dry. After our work was done we would have a dance or candy pull.” Mary Jane Lambson Davis recorded that her family “dried a great deal of fruit. I dried peaches and traded them at the store for the material to make my wedding dress.” She noted that “it was a real luxury to have a dress of store goods.”

Preserving the precious harvest was critical for winter well-being. Berries, currants, peaches, apples, and other fruits were easily dried in the warmth of Utah’s summer sun. “We would string the musk melons up on a long string and let them dry,” recalled Harmon Gubler. “Some people used to dry water melons, but we never did because they would dry up to almost nothing.” Drying fruit had other disadvantages. “When the fruit, apples and peaches were out on the scaffolds, flies rested on them in clouds. It was the bane of dried fruit. And though they were thoroughly washed before they were used in the winter, the memory of that black cloud of flies would be forever bright,” declared Hannah Hanson Huntsman of Fillmore. “Even after the people started to selling dried fruit to other places our consciences hurt us till we quit.” It is not clear whether or not the cheesecloth often used to cover drying fruit made the process less distasteful to Hannah.

In addition to being dried, fruit could be preserved in barrels, crockery, and tins. Polly Huntington of Springville recalled that “preserved fruit” was an important early industry there. Using sorghum as a preserving medium, the women would pack the preserves in fifteen-gallon barrels manufactured by Springville cooper Suminum Blanchard. “The settlers of Sanpete County were good customers for both the sorghum and the preserved fruit as they had been unable to raise sugar cane in their section,” Polly recalled. In Parowan the jars made
by a local potter were used for preserving fruit. Laura Smith Hadfield, whose family mostly dried fruit, recalled that her mother also “used to preserve fruit by putting it in cans, putting a lid on, and then sealing it with sealing wax.”

Inexpensive glass jars with self-sealing lids, invented in 1859 by John L. Mason, became widely available in the 1860s. Home bottling or canning quickly became popular among Utah women, in part perhaps because of contemporaneous Mormon emphasis on all forms of home production and manufacturing. For many families, picking or buying large quantities of fruit to bottle at home became a harvesttime ritual. Hannah McFarland Bingham of Ogden recalled how “at canning time the women would get together and drive out to North Ogden or Nob Hill . . . to get their peaches. . . . When they went to North Ogden, they would drive a span of mules and it would take them all day.”

John Henry Ward Lister remembered a cannery in St. George where settlers around the area purchased fruit. Eventually, other commercial canneries came to Utah. Commercially canned or tinned fruits, vegetables, and fish became increasingly available after the Civil War, but “consumers could not be certain that they were purchasing really safe cans with properly cooked foods until the 1920s.”

Barnyard Provisioning and Meat Preservation

John Hyrum Barton said his orchard in Paragonah “furnished every kind of fruit and berries that could be raised.” “We always had good food,” Barton remembered. He seems to have relished variety, boasting, “For meat I have eaten nearly everything imaginable: Pork, beef, mutton, chicken, vension [sic], duck, rabbit, sage hen, mtn squirrel, mtn hare, mtn sheep, antelope, horse meat, geese and even porcupine.” Meat, poultry, and fish—staples of the pioneer diet—were sometimes easier to come by than flour. On April 8, 1849, six months after her arrival in the Great Salt Lake Valley, Eliza Marie Partridge Lyman cooked her remaining flour and had “no prospect of getting any more untill after harvest.” Nine days later, her brother Edward brought her “a quarter of beef [and] also drove our cow Frosty to us so that we can have some milk.” Utah’s pioneers actually exported horses and cattle.

Families able to acquire cows, pigs, or chickens stabilized their food supply. Thomas Briggs, who arrived in Utah in 1864, declared
himself prosperous once he and his wife “had two fat pigs in the pen.” Pigs must have been very popular since Briggs noted that at the April 1868 general conference President Brigham Young advised the Saints “to eat less pork and more fowl and fish.” Barnyard provisioning was widespread because it required neither intensive labor nor large tracts of land. “Everyone had their own cows and had what butter, cheese and milk they wanted. They raised their own pigs and had what meat they wanted,” recalled Hyrum Allen of Huntsville.

Harriet Maria Young Brown “just couldn’t get along without butter,” so when she and her husband helped settle the Muddy, “she dug a hole in the sand large enough to hold a milk pan, wet the sand, put a pan of milk in the hole and covered it with another pan. She then spread a canvas over it and kept the cloth wet. As soon as the cream came to the top, she skimmed if off and churned it into butter.” Others had butter with less effort, except for the tedious churning, and many remembered how plentiful butter, cheese, and eggs became over the years. Laura Smith Hadfield, who grew up in Farmington, affirmed that “food was no object . . . as we all had plenty. You couldn’t even give eggs or butter away.”

With only three cows, Isaac Grace’s family in Nephi did not have sufficient milk to make cheese, so they borrowed from a neighbor the use of his cows for a week in exchange for a small quantity of milk and butter, getting enough extra milk to “manufacture cheese on their homemade cheese press.” In October 1853, the editor of the Deseret News noted receiving “a cheese, from the Manti Sisters, of San Pete county; weight . . . we think from 75 to 85 lbs.” He added: “God bless those dear sisters with life, health, and abundance of the good things of earth, so that next year they make cheese twice as big.” Butter, cheese, and eggs were important bartering commodities in many communities, where, as Olive Aldous recalled, “there was lots of exchanging going on but not much money in circulation.”

Annie Clark Kimball described her family’s adobe home, built in the 1870s, with “its thirty-foot deep windlass well which kept food supplies deliciously cold when suspended near the crystal water in a strong basket.” The wells and springhouses could keep dairy products cool but were usually not cold enough to preserve meat. Because fresh meat attracted flies and rodents, it could not be stored near fresh milk and butter in an insulated milk house. Fresh pork, mutton, and beef could be eaten immediately and might be shared with family and friends. It was a treat to be sure, but it could be quite tough—“tougher
than a boiled owl,” as Eliza Lyman described beef brought by a neighbor in 1849. Without refrigeration beef could not be aged, and cooks, therefore, faced the challenge of making tough meat tender with carbonate of soda, perhaps, or by long and slow simmering.

Beef and pork could be preserved through salting down or through corning in a brine of salt, saltpeter (potassium nitrate), and brown sugar or molasses. Elizabeth Baxter told how her father “would go out on the prairie and watch where some cattle were starving to death and when one died he would butcher it and get a piece of the meat and go down to Great Salt Lake to get salt to preserve it.” Fruit could be mixed with cooked meat and preserved in mincemeat. The slaughtering of hogs furnished sausage, bacon, and hams to be “cured” in the smokehouse as well as lard for pies, cakes, and frying.

**Hunting and Fishing**

In many pioneer families, hunting and fishing were critical to the food supply. “Fish and game have always been plentiful here in Utah,” John Henry Ward Lister observed. Indeed, because “there were no game laws then,” it was “a hunters and fishers paradise.” During some periods of scarcity, fish were a particularly important commodity. Peter Madsen arrived in Salt Lake City in 1854 and moved immediately to Provo, where, in 1855, he witnessed the terrible infestation of crickets or grasshoppers. “So thick did they descend that they fairly darkened the sun,” he recalled. The black hoards destroyed most of the promising small crop along the Provo River and then “made their way to the shores of Utah Lake which they attempted to cross and were drowned by the wagon loads. Many of them were eaten by the fish.” He recounted how shortly thereafter the people were saved by the fish:

People came to the lake. From Sevier on the south to Salt Lake on the north, they came with wagons and barrels and salt prepared to take fish home with them for food during the winter months. Their crops were destroyed and they were weak from hunger....

They all camped along the river near where it empties into the lake and we made preparations to supply them with mullet and trout which were quite plentiful at that time. Having been accustomed to fishing in Denmark when a boy, I was prepared for this important duty of furnishing food for starving people, and I will always remember the scene along the river bank after the first day’s catch had been distributed. The campers were in little groups
around the campfires where they were broiling fish on hot coals and
eating them with relish that only those who have been through an
experience of this kind can appreciate.

The bishop of Provo sent men to help and all day and all night
the fishing went on. The Saints came and remained on the river
until they had enough fish salted to last them during the winter;
then they left for their homes to give others room who were equally
needy. For weeks the work went on. Nobody ever asked who did the
work or who received the fish. We were all comparatively equal in
those days and all we asked was enough to eat until we could raise
crops to supply us food. I have always regarded this as one of my
greatest opportunities for doing good.®

David Moore remembered plenty of fish in the Ogden area, as well
as an abundance of wild chickens, ducks, and geese. He recounted
how they “would roast turkeys by tying a string to the turkey’s legs and
hangin[g] it from a nail in the mantle. They would then get up a good
fire and give the turkey a twirl over it.” Moore said he “couldn’t see how
people could ever go hungry unless it was the lack of ammunition.”®

During the early years, particularly, such a lack was likely. James
Moss remembered feasting upon the jackrabbits in Grass Valley that
were destroying his family’s crops—after his parents “called for the
Indians to come and kill the rabbits with their bows and arrows.”® “It
was sure hard for us to get enough to eat during those times when the
grasshoppers were so bad,” recalled Lorenzo Hadley. “There were
plenty of wild duck and chickens around here but we didn’t have
much am[m]unition. Daddy only had a few loads left after our trip
over the plains.” The resourceful fourteen-year-old Lorenzo “found a
piece of lead that we had fetched from England . . . hammered this out
flat and cut some small pieces out for shot and loaded the gun and
went down to Greenwell’s slough in West Weber where the ducks
were thick.” It was the first time he had ever shot a gun, but he killed a
total of nine ducks, and he and his brother “cleaned up four or five of
them for mother to cook for us that night.” Lorenzo soon found people
willing to pay him fifteen cents a piece for dressed ducks. “That fall,”
he recalled, “I shot and sold enough ducks to buy myself a suit of
clothes worth fifteen dollars besides buying all my am[m]unition.”®

Hunting, like home production of foods, could be an important
source of income. Albert Garrison Garner of Huntsville recalled hunt-
ing deer and selling their hams “for 9¢ per lb. to Elec Brewer of Ogden
who then sold them to miners in Montana.” Garner “also hunted Pine
Hens and sold them to a man (by the name of Berdsley) who ran the Rail Road Hotel in Ogden."^94

**The Struggle with Hunger**

Some pioneers who grew up in Utah in the last half of the nineteenth century never recalled struggling for food. "Some stories were told of how people had to eat roots to keep alive but I knew of no one but who had plenty to eat, maybe not much of a variety, but they had plenty of what they raised," declared Brigham Dalton of Rockville. Even he, however, recalled the rationing of flour in hard times.^95 Inevitably, those who struggled with shortages and hunger remembered and remarked with emotion on their experience.

Begging for food was likewise painful, though it seems to have come more easily for children. Elizabeth Baxter was nearly three when she and her impoverished family were returning to Ogden after staying in Spanish Fork during the population's move south in 1858. "We didn't have much to eat and I went begging," she recollected frankly, remembering tasting butter for the first time when one woman gave her hot biscuits with butter.^96

Asking to borrow flour when her family had none was difficult for Harriet Weaver Taylor's mother, who "had never had to do anything like that over in England." Harriet's mother "took a little brass kettle and went down to a neighbor," asking the lady who came to the door if she could borrow a little flour to be returned in a day or two when the family received flour. But, recalled Harriet,

> the lady said that if she loaned flour out that way, that she would soon be in the same fix as mother. Mother was terribly hurt and turned and started for home. The lady must have felt ashamed because she called to her to come back, but mother wouldn't go back, she said, "Too late!" The next day we had 200 pounds of our own flour come. Those surely were hard times.^97

Stories of refusal to share, food theft, or ungrateful recipients are far outnumbered by accounts of generosity and gratitude.^98 Edward Frei's father, "a very reserved man," cried when his neighbor gave him half a sack of flour to feed his hungry children. As he left for home, the neighbor's wife called him back and "turned a dipper full of nice warm biscuits on a napkin" for the Frei children.^99 "The people as a whole were very good about dividing their food supplies with their neighbors. This fact saved many families from going hungry,"
Isaiah Cox affirmed. David Cannon recollected many occasions when he saw his father “trade food to some needy person for work, when he could easily have done all of his own work himself.” Mary Cooper proudly emphasized her hometown’s reputation for sharing: “Some of the men used to say, if a family was in need of food, clothing or a place to live during the winter, they came to Panguitch because they knew they would be taken care of.” George Washington Brown and his wife Wealtha hauled threshing machinery into the Uintah Basin one fall and were sent enough flour and pork to help them make it through the winter. “We kept on loaning out our flour until we had none for our own use,” Wealtha recalled. The pork George had cut up and stored “in the wheat at the Co-op granary” also disappeared. “Well, people got so hungry that someone had helped themselves to most of it but I don’t blame them, they were hungry.”

**The Blessing and Protection of the Lord**

If, indeed, among Utah’s pioneers it “was a universal practice to be generous” and “a common thing in those days to see one neighbor divide her last pan of flour with her neighbors,” it was in some measure because Latter-day Saints believed they were building Zion, where God’s people would be “of one heart and one mind” and where there would be “no poor among them” (Moses 7:18). They labored in the Great Basin desert, they believed, by God’s appointment and with his approval. “The Lord was with those early day pioneers and provided ways and means for them to exist,” William Bethers testified. Accounts of seagulls devouring crickets came to symbolize the numerous occasions and varied ways divine intervention furnished hungry Saints with food.

Sometimes the miracle came through the ministerings of an inspired brother or sister. At the end of her family’s journey across the plains, Margaret McNeil Ballard recalled, their food “gave out,” and they arrived in Ogden in October 1859 without a cent and very weak with hunger. Seeing a pile of squash in a field, Margaret’s mother sent her to beg for some at the home nearby. The old woman who answered Margaret’s knock at the door said, “‘Come in, come in, I knew you were coming and have been told to give you food.’ She gave me a large loaf of fresh bread,” Margaret recounted, and later “she came and brought us a nice cooked dinner.”

In other instances, nourishment wondrously appeared to sustain a hungry person or family, calling to mind the manna provided the wandering children of Israel or the feeding of the Prophet Elijah by
ravens (Ex. 16:14–35; 1 Kgs. 17:6). Abigail Cox Heaton recounted how her parents, who helped settle Manti, were amply supplied with food until a summer when “droughts left them almost in the throes of famine.” Like other families in Manti, the Coxes lived on greens that summer until even they became so sparse that “women and children fairly scoured the land for greens.” Abigail’s young brother Walter returned one afternoon with a “few spindly weeds” that “were scarcely enough for one person, let alone a family of seven, and the children were crying for food.” That night, “the family prayed in humility for something to eat.” The next morning, they knelt again in prayer before a reluctant, but obedient, Walter left to search for greens. According to Abigail’s account, he was successful:

In a short time he returned to the dugout with a basket of crisp stalky greens; even his mother was amazed. He was almost breathless as he told her of having found a large patch of the luscious weeds just as if they had been planted in rows, and on the same ground where many had been searching the previous day. Never had they eaten such good greens, and for days the people of the Manti Valley gathered baskets of greens that seemed to satisfy their hunger and even, some claimed, put flesh on them.

Utah’s pioneers gradually built a food supply steady enough to see them through hard times and assure future abundance. They later reflected with pride on the hard work and resourcefulness that forged the tradition they bequeathed, a tradition that included helpfulness and sharing and a humble acknowledgment of God’s hand in their survival and achievement. After all, they were witnesses to the fulfillment of the Lord’s ancient promises that in the last days his house “shall be established in the top of the mountains . . . and all nations shall flow unto it,” that “the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose,” and, further, that “in this mountain shall the LORD of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things” (Isa. 2:2; 35:1; 26:6).

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Notes


7. Polly Berthena Huntington [b. 1849], Questionnaire, question 20, WPA Biographical Sketches, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter cited as Bio. Sketches). Ronald W. Walker graciously shared with me his notes from this collection and encouraged my further research in this remarkable source of recollections of the pioneer experience. The sketches fall into two categories: narratives and answers to a standardized WPA questionnaire. The narratives I have entitled “Personal History”; the answers to the questionnaire, “Questionnaire.” Page numbers accompany the narratives; question numbers accompany the questionnaire. To give a chronological sense of the pioneer experience, I have included the year the pioneer was born in brackets. These dates come from the register to the collection and are unverified. Since almost all quotations in this paper come from WPA transcriptions, typographical errors should not be interpreted to reflect the spelling of pioneers. All references in this article to Bio. Sketches refer to the Utah State Historical Society’s WPA collection.


12. Mary Henrie Cooper [b. 1866], Questionnaire, question 33, Bio. Sketches.


17. Brian Q. Cannon examines the experiences of Utah’s early settlers with the sego lily and the flower’s evolution into a cultural icon in “The Sego Lily, Utah’s State Flower,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 63 (winter 1995): 70–84.


22. Cox, Questionnaire, question 33.


See also Lucy Meserve Smith, “Historical Narrative,” 264.
30. Cox, Personal History, 2.
32. Alma D. Chambers [b. 1858], Questionnaire, question 20, Bio. Sketches.
34. Chambers, Questionnaire, question 34.
37. Conlin underscores the importance of corn to western pioneers. Conlin, Bacon, Beans, and Galantines, 12.
41. Leaving grain in the field to be gleaned by the poor was a long-standing tradition with biblical antecedents. (See Lev. 19:9–10.)
45. Henry Excell [b. 1858], Questionnaire, question 34, Bio. Sketches.
46. Aldous, Personal History, 2.
52. Mary Julia Johnson Wilson, “Ancestral Sketch and Memories of Mary Julia Johnson Wilson, 1776–1877,” 20, typescript, BYU Archives.
60. Historian’s Office Journal, March 13, 1851, and August 24, 1861, manuscript, Church Archives.
64. Gubler, Personal History, 3.
68. Hannah Hanson Huntsman [b. 1865], Questionnaire, question 20, Bio. Sketches.
69. Huntington, Questionnaire, question 29.
73. Williams, *The Way We Ate*, 118.
74. Barton, Questionnaire, question 20.
75. Eliza Marie Partridge Lyman, Journal, April 8 and 17, 1849, quoted in Godfrey, *Women’s Voices*, 248, 250. The original holograph journal is located in the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.
78. Allen, Questionnaire, question 18.
80. Hadfield, Personal History, 6.
81. Grace, Questionnaire, question 24.
83. Aldous, Personal History, 4.
89. Lister, Questionnaire, question 32; Barton, Questionnaire, question 32; Excell, Questionnaire, question 32.
91. David Moore [b. 1851], Questionnaire, question 18, 32, Bio. Sketches.
93. Hadley, Personal History, 8.
98. For example, the journal of Henry W. Sanderson mentions the theft of two sacks of his flour in the Salt Lake Valley in the summer of 1847, in account of “Caroline (Emmeline) Sessions,” in *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 1:502. Ephrasia Cox Day, born in Fairview in 1854, recalled rationing of bread “the first ten years” and complained, “We had to give our supper each day to some English people and the thing that got me they were not a bit careful with their foods and would waste too much.” Ephrasia Cox Day [b. 1854], Personal History, 1, Bio. Sketches.
100. Cox, Questionnaire, question 23.
102. Cooper, Questionnaire, question 24.
105. Earl, Personal History, 2.
108. After the widow of Zarephath shared the last of her meal with Elijah, she was blessed with continuing divine sustenance, and her own “barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD” (1 Kgs. 17:16).
In this 1868–69 view of the Brigham Young family compound can be seen the octagonal bell tower and the roof of the family schoolhouse. Exceptionally well equipped for its time, the school served both the family and some of the townspeople. Its pupils remembered it fondly for the bell calling them to school at 8:45 a.m. and the apples roasting on the ledge around the stove. Savage and Ottinger, photographers.
Elementary education in pioneer Utah was a study in contrasts. Some children had no formal schooling at all while others obtained a rather complete education for the times. Some attended school in tents, crude and ill-equipped log huts, or private homes while others enjoyed well-built schoolhouses with adequate desks and all the latest texts. Some learned little more than the three R’s while others obtained skills that helped them support themselves and their families and also prepared them to earn a living later on. Some, no doubt, cared little for school while others could hardly get enough. Some found themselves the objects of severe and sometimes painful discipline while others enjoyed loving teachers who seemed never to use force.

Heber J. Grant, born in 1856 to a widowed and poverty-stricken mother, began his formal schooling at the Doremus School in Salt Lake City. There, in addition to whatever he learned, he was the object of at least one sound thrashing by the schoolmaster. Later he went to a home school, taught by Sarah Elizabeth Foss Cowley (mother of Matthias F. Cowley). At age eight, he attended Brigham Young’s private school, perhaps the most well-equipped school in the territory. The following year, he moved with his mother to St. George, where he went to school in a tent, but before long he was back in Salt Lake City, where he came under the tutelage of some of Utah’s best and most famous early schoolmarms: Camilla Cobb and Mary and Ida Cook.1

Ellen Burton was not so fortunate. In 1866 her family arrived in Utah and settled in Kaysville. Out of necessity, it fell to Ellen to help clear the farmland of oak brush, fight crickets, and plant and tend a garden and orchard. Though anxious to go to school, she could not do so except during parts of two winters because her help was needed at home. At harvest time, for example, it was her job to cut the grain...
with a scythe, then bind it in bundles. "I used to make myself miserable by wanting to go to school," she later recalled. "I felt that my parents and family were unfair for not making some arrangement for me to attend school. We had a neighbor with two girls about my age, Clara and Sarah Beazer. They went to school all the time and were always asking me why I didn’t go. This made it harder than ever for me to stay home and work."^2

Slightly more positive was the story of Elvira Elanor Coombs of Cedar Valley. In 1863, at age six, Elvira was left an orphan along with several brothers and sisters, from whom she was soon separated. Taken in by a Mrs. Spiken, a schoolteacher, she was severely mistreated, but she was soon relocated to the home of Robert Birkbeck, where she was adopted and she changed her name to Ella. She was not allowed to attend regular school, though the Birkbecks taught her at home. At age fifteen, she was apprenticed to a shoemaker. Later she went to a telegraphy school and became one of the first telegraphers in the territory.^3 Such practical education was not uncommon for Utah’s young women, who often had to help earn a living both before and after they married.

These and myriad stories like them represent the widely contrasting experiences of Utah’s pioneer school-age children, who are the focus of this paper. The discussion concerns the problems, challenges, and activities connected with everyday life in elementary school during the difficult first quarter century after the Latter-day Saints arrived—1847 to the early 1870s.^4

**Mormon Attitude toward Education**

The importance of education was one of the fundamental values promoted by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.^5 Therefore, in addition to whatever natural desire for knowledge they may have had, Church members often felt a religious commitment to learn all they could and to have their children do the same. One such parent was Marin Kristin Nielsen, an immigrant from Denmark who settled with her husband, Andrew Christian Nielsen, in Sanpete County. After she learned English (it is not clear whether she went to a school), she decided to teach her children in her own home school. The quest for intelligence became the family motto:

While I was settling myself in America, I read something that stayed with me through the long years and short ones to follow.
Framed on the wall where I usually spent my busy hours was a short verse stitched in black letters on muslin. I asked Sister Oveson, the lady of the home where we were staying, what the words said. “Why that is the motto of our Church. The Glory of God is intelligence,” she explained, and added that we were the only people in the world who belonged to the true Church, and we must show the world that we are the learned people.

As the children grew older, it became more difficult to keep them at home. In the evenings when we always had one hour of home school, one of the boys called it “skull practice.” “Why do we have to study every night?” This was the usual complaint. When this outburst came, and it came often, I told the children that because we were the chosen children of the Lord, we must develop ourselves spiritually as well as physically; that we must read as well as work. Then I would always point to the embroidered motto hanging on the wall and ask, “Don’t you want to be one of God’s chosen?”

Nevertheless, such religious commitment was often accompanied by a pragmatic view of education, reflected in the words of Orson Spencer, chancellor of the Board of Regents of the University of Deseret. Rebuking those who, he said, subverted spiritual knowledge to the learning of men, he exclaimed, “The boy that drives an ox team from Council Bluffs [Nebraska] to Salt Lake acquired more amplitude of intellect, than by two years of drilling in dead Latin.”

Furthermore, not all parents were as committed as Marin Nielson. As late as 1868, Robert L. Campbell, territorial superintendent of schools, complained of the “reprehensible” “apathy and indifference” displayed by local school trustees, many of whom failed to visit their schools even once a year. Equally disturbing, he went on, was the fact that “parents do not visit the schools as often as they should, so that there is but little stimulus to the indifferent schoolteacher and but little encouragement to the energetic and faithful.” High enthusiasm among some parents coupled with apparent apathy on the part of others and a wide range of conditions that affected both the quantity and quality of a child’s schooling are only a few of the multitude of problems and issues that influenced the progress of education in pioneer Utah.

**The Beginning of Pioneer Schools**

The story of Utah’s schools begins with sixteen-year-old Mary Jane Dilworth, who at the request of Brigham Young opened the territory’s
first school just three months after the vanguard pioneer company reached the Salt Lake Valley in 1847 and only three weeks after Mary Jane herself arrived. School was conducted in a tent inside the newly constructed fort. A few sections of logs served as seats for the nine children in attendance, and the teacher’s desk was a camp table. The first day’s lesson consisted of psalms from the Bible. Later, during the winter, Mary Jane moved her pupils into a small log house just completed by William Bringhurst as one of the buildings making up the fort. Its roof was piled high with dirt, and its floor was hardened clay. The one small window opening was covered with thin, oiled cloth, for no glass was available. A wagon box was broken up to provide benches and crude desks, and a fireplace provided heat.

There were no free, tax-supported schools during the early years of Utah’s pioneer history, but, as was the case in Salt Lake City, a privately supported school of some kind was usually available within a few weeks or months of the founding of each new community. The ecclesiastical organization of the Church proved to be a perfect vehicle for the establishment of these schools. By 1850 plans were under way for the construction of schools in each of Salt Lake City’s nineteen wards. Bishops took the initiative in organizing them and finding teachers, and classes were conducted in the same buildings as those used for church meetings.

Something similar happened in each community throughout the territory, though in the rudimentary stages of colonization the facilities were sometimes even more primitive than those of Salt Lake City’s first school. In the settlement that became Parowan, for example, George A. Smith opened a grammar school on February 21, 1851, only five weeks after the arrival of the families called to the Iron County Mission. It was an evening school, held in Smith’s wickiup—a makeshift shelter composed of three wagons, a few wooden slabs, and some brush. The five children in attendance shared one grammar book, learned by the light of a campfire, and shivered in the cold. However, according to Smith, they seemed eager to learn. As he wrote in his journal six days later, “My scholars assembled round the camp fire, freezing one side and roasting the other, listened earnestly to my lecture on English Grammar.”

**Early Efforts at Territorial Supervision and Funding**

In 1850 the territorial legislature placed the supervision of all education under the control of the regents of the University of Deseret.
Even though there was little money to support schools locally, the regents visited the various communities regularly and made every effort to improve the quality of education. They attempted to control subject matter, approved teachers, selected textbooks, and constantly urged the improvement of physical facilities. In 1851 the territorial legislature created the office of territorial superintendent of schools. An 1852 law provided for the establishment in each town of at least one school supported by local taxation. When the office of county superintendent of schools was created in 1860, the territory had in place a legal system for establishing and supervising all the schools.

Despite the fact that territorial law allowed Utah’s cities to levy taxes for school purposes, most communities were slow to do so. In the rare instances where public money was raised, it was used for constructing schools and not for paying teachers. In 1866 the town of American Fork became the first community in Utah to provide a free public school where taxes were used both to maintain the physical facilities and to pay teachers. At times, public funds were used also to pay for educating children from impoverished families.

**Amount of Schooling: How Much Was Enough?**

As with everything else in pioneer education, the answer to the question of how much schooling was enough (or, frequently, how much families could afford) varied with the winds of circumstance. Many children finished most of the elementary grades, and some went on to secondary schools, but the formal education of many others was meager. Some had only a few years or months of schooling, many attended only irregularly, and some had no formal schooling at all. Statements from some pioneer leaders suggest an unusually high level of education at the time, but their claims were usually more rhetoric than substance. As Fred Buchanan, a careful modern student of Utah educational history, has observed,

> although [Brigham] Young’s history records that in 1849 a number of schools were established in Salt Lake City to teach Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French, German, and Tahitian as well as English, there is no evidence to support the notion that such schools were anything other than the attempts of a few individuals trying to prepare the Mormon missionaries for the task of converting the world. 

In reality, “book learning” often had to take a backseat to such immediate challenges as supplementing meager resources, creating homes
and farms, contending with drought, dealing with the Native Americans, and confronting the U.S. army in the 1850s.

In the early 1860s, Superintendent Campbell held high hopes for the future. “As a Territory,” he reported to the legislature in 1863, “we have peace, and extensive ability exists with the people, to establish and sustain good common schools in every ward and district, not only three or six months in a year, as appears at present most common; but ten or eleven, wherein every child, no matter how poor, may find admittance.” Reality, however, fell far short of Campbell’s ideal. Even those children who attended school did so only sporadically, and on any particular day, well over half of those eligible were not in school at all. The statistical data reported to the legislature was incomplete, but in 1860 the two counties with the most complete information reported that not even a third of their children attended. Davis County was the home of 1,020 children ages six to eighteen (the report did not distinguish further with respect to age), but only 362 (35 percent) of those were enrolled in school, and only 235, or 24 percent of the whole, attended on a daily basis. At the same time, only 562 (43 percent) of Utah County’s 1,286 children were enrolled, and only 386, or 30 percent of the whole, attended regularly.

Eight years later the picture was improving, but it was hardly up to Campbell’s expectations. Davis County’s enrollment had increased to 56.5 percent, and attendance was up to 40.5 percent of the total number of children, while Utah County had jumped to an enrollment of 65.5 percent with an attendance record of 44 percent. The territory’s most populous county, Salt Lake, had an enrollment of only 46 percent and an attendance record of 36 percent, while the territorial average was 56.5 percent of the school-age children enrolled with 39 percent of the total attending regularly.

Underlying these averages were a multitude of differing circumstances and experiences. Some families could barely afford to send their children to school for even a short time. Children in many, if not most, families, could attend only sporadically, for they had to spend at least part of their time working on the family farm or elsewhere in order to keep the family solvent. In many cases, schooling was cut short at a very early age. Michael Peter Monk, for example, went to work at age ten, effectively ending his formal education. Poul and Niels Peder son, who emigrated with their mother and stepfather from Denmark in the 1850s, obtained only one month of American schooling—in Salt Lake City. In 1857 at age nine, Margaret Simmons emigrated from
London with her parents. Anxious to go to school but having no money, she spun yarn and knitted socks for the teacher in order to pay tuition. Her schooling lasted for only six weeks, however, after which she went to work at a variety of jobs, earning $1.50 to $2.00 per week and giving it all to her mother, who had six children to care for. Alma Platt Spilsburg’s parents were called by Church leaders to settle in southern Utah in 1862. The move to Grafton (now St. George) ended Alma’s schooling when he was only twelve years old, for from then on he had to help his parents with their work. Caroline Pederson, who grew up in Holladay in the 1860s and 1870s, learned to read, write, and spell, but she did not have access to the books needed to broaden her education beyond the rudiments. At age fifteen, when her mother became seriously ill, she dropped out of school entirely.

Christopher Alston also faced educational challenges, but in an effort to gain all the learning he could, he often worked all day and then went to night school. He described his limited schooling, obtained in Sugarhouse in the 1860s, as follows:

I attended school with no books, excepting a primary grammar brought from England; Paul Leichtenburg was my teacher. I went into the canyon with a yoke of oxen to take out logs to sell for fuel etc., to help make a living for my mother and fatherless brothers and sisters. I being the eldest of the five children. Later, I attended school at night, Professor Lucien W. Peck being instructor. He gave me special permission to come in late when I did not get home from the canyon in time for the opening class work.

Other students also made special accommodations in order to attend school as much as possible. Joseph Openshaw went to the Seventeenth Ward school, then the Twentieth Ward school, then to a private school conducted by two women in their home, then back to the Twentieth Ward. Later he and his brother George took turns attending Karl G. Maeser’s school, each going every other day. They needed money for tuition and other school expenses, so between the two of them they held down a daily job, Joseph working one day while George attended school, then trading the next day.

In Smithfield, Lucy Smith was eager for an education, but the poverty of her family made obtaining one difficult. Nevertheless, she often arose early in the morning to help with the family wash and other tasks and then trudged off to school. In the wintertime, she had to wrap her feet in rags to protect them from the snow and cold. Fortunately, she was able to stay in school at least until she was sixteen.
Such stories were not unusual in pioneer Utah, as families struggled the best they could to eke out a living and, at the same time, give their children the education desired. Clearly, with some, the question was simply how much schooling was essential when compared with the other demands of pioneer life.

**Going to School: Physical Facilities**

As might be expected, the physical facilities enjoyed by those who attended school varied greatly according to both time and location. The children among the first settlers of Utah’s various communities often found themselves huddled together in tents or wickiups, such as those used by Mary Jane Dilworth and George A. Smith in Salt Lake City and Parowan, or sitting beneath a willow bowery that doubled for church and school. Some were fortunate enough to go to school in the home of a friend, relative, or some other local citizen attempting to use his or her talents to earn a living as well as provide some cultural improvement. Part of David Layton’s schooling, for example, took place in his father’s house in Kaysville, where his oldest sister, Maggie, was the teacher. Ada Arvilla Burke Earl wrote of her early schooling in Farmington:

> The first school we attended was in the home of Apostle Amasa Lyman and his wife Paulina was the teacher. We started school at a very early age and I remember carrying bread and a jug of milk for our lunch and Mrs. Lyman would give us dishes and spoons to eat our bread and milk in. She taught us the alphabet by having us sing it... We sat on benches around the walls of the room... We studied from McGuffey’s and Wilson Readers.

Very quickly, however, especially in Salt Lake City, Church and civic leaders set about constructing schoolhouses in each ward, most of these buildings also serving as meetinghouses, community centers, and theaters. In Huntsville, the “Old Rock House” served as a school and civic center. There Edward Anderson went to school, Sunday School, musical events, choir practice, and every other kind of gathering. Students attending the first school in Hatton, Millard County, were taught in the largest and best room of the home of Peter Robison. Later they went to a new building that served as both a schoolhouse and a church.

Many of the early Utah schoolhouses were one-room log or adobe buildings, although by the 1870s these were giving way to more
substantial and commodious frame, brick, or rock buildings. The first schoolhouse in Spanish Fork was built during the winter of 1856–57 from adobe taken from the abandoned fort at nearby Palmyra. The floor consisted of slabs sawn from logs taken out of the canyon by George A. Hicks when the snow was two feet deep. The single, sixteen-by-twenty-foot room boasted six twelve-pane windows and had a fireplace in one end. By the summer of 1862, Salt Lake City boasted twenty-four school buildings, described by George A. Smith as “about 20 by 30 feet” and “well finished.” Children in the Twelfth Ward in Salt Lake City attended what O. H. Riggs called the “best fitted up schoolhouse” in the territory. Built of adobe, it had six windows, ceilings and walls that were plastered and whitewashed, and painted woodwork.

Open fireplaces provided heat in some schools, but cast-iron stoves were more often employed. In Huntsville each family was asked to haul one to three loads of wood to the “Old Rock House” in order to heat the combination school and civic center during the winter. Most buildings were simply not adequate for long-range needs, and many soon suffered from lack of maintenance. In 1874, for example, the territorial superintendent described two particularly bad schools. In one, a basement was used by the primary department, but, reported the superintendent, “it was immediately apparent that ventilation was not neglected, for the schoolteacher complained that about one-third of the panes of glass were broken.” Not far away was another school, described as “small, poorly lighted, and entirely destitute of ventilation.”

For some children, sheer discomfort no doubt added to the problems of learning. Unventilated, often-crowded classrooms were bad enough, but uncomfortable seats were even worse. Early school furniture was usually homemade, for importing it seemed much too costly for the pioneer economy. The furniture differed from school to school, but some general patterns were common. In the early stages of community development, children sometimes sat on portable stools, if not on the floor or ground. Later they sat on slabs fastened to the four walls of the classroom, and still later they used backless planks set in the center of the room so that everyone could face the teacher. The highlight came when they began to sit on individual seats that were attached to desks.

In 1857 children in some southern Utah communities sat on high, backless slab seats designed to accommodate their parents but not the children, whose feet were left dangling in the air. In Holladay, students
entering the first schoolhouse saw only one desk, which ran the entire length of one side of the room. The thirty-five scholars who attended the first year could not all sit there at the same time, so they had to take turns doing their written work. Anna Starr began school in a one-room building in Cottonwood, where she sat on wooden benches but also, along with other students, used a desk near the teacher’s when practicing writing. Students in the first schoolhouse in Spanish Fork sat on benches consisting of wooden slabs, smooth side up, with two legs on each end and one in the middle for extra support. Their writing desks were equally crude. By contrast, children in the Twelfth Ward in Salt Lake City enjoyed individual, stationary seats and desks, much more comfortable than the slabs their southern Utah cousins squirmed on. Later, however, the cousins themselves enjoyed new schoolhouses furnished with backed, finished-plank seats and long writing desks around the walls.

Learning tools varied from school to school. In some, such as the school attended by Peter Monk in Spring City’s stone fort, students used charcoal or chalk to write on slates. In other cases, paper and ink were available, and students wrote with quill pens. Some schools had practically no books, maps, or other visual materials while others enjoyed many such conveniences. In the Salt Lake City First Ward school, each child was fortunate enough to possess a slate and a few books, but textbooks at other schools were often at a premium. Peter Monk had one book to learn from, a blue-back speller.

In the town of Palmyra in the 1850s, a student was considered well equipped if he or she owned a McGuffey’s reader, an elementary spelling book, and a copy of Smith’s arithmetic. According to George A. Hicks, a former pupil, Palmyra students used the New Testament and the Book of Mormon or “most any kind of book we could get.” The teacher, Silas Hillman, owned the only grammar book in town, “Kirkham’s Grammar,” and taught from it orally. Young George “graduated” at the end of his first quarter under Hillman with “high honors,” being able to read in the New Testament or Book of Mormon “without making many mistakes in the pronunciation of the words—with a very limited knowledge of arithmetic and none whatever of grammar or history.” Although the availability of learning tools improved over time, in 1874 the territorial superintendent discovered that only half the children in attendance at one school had books and there were no charts or other visual aids to help the teacher.
Though Utah’s pioneer teachers enjoyed few material resources for their classes, they were often innovative with what they had. Ogden’s first teacher, Charilla Abbot, described how she began:

The colony wished me to keep school, which in our meager circumstances I undertook. Finding a chicken feather, I made a pen, and I made a trial at it. . . . We had to collect letters from scraps of papers and from old books. These we pasted on paddles. We also made letters on the inside and outside of our hands. In this way the children learned to read and write.\(^{42}\)

The fireplace provided charcoal for writing on their hands. In Alpine, Elsie Booth’s geography lessons were conducted on the floor of the classroom. While the younger children were at recess, the older ones sprinkled and swept the floor in preparation for what would happen next. When class reconvened, wet and dry places were used to represent the land and water surfaces of the earth, as students were asked to point out various locations they had read about in the textbook.\(^{43}\)

Amy Adams began school in the Salt Lake City First Ward, under the tutelage of Susan Eliza Savage Angell. With precious few teaching materials available, Mrs. Angell wrote the numerals, including Roman numerals, and the letters of the alphabet on strips of cardboard that she handed around the room so that the children could copy them to their slates. Some of the cardboard strips also contained mottoes for the more advanced students to copy, such as “Many birds of many kinds, many men of many minds.”\(^{44}\) Such austere school buildings, furnishings, and teaching materials were commonplace in the early history of most Utah communities, though they gradually gave way to more commodious facilities and better teaching supplies.

**Unusual Family Schools**

Among the best schools in early Utah were a handful of family schools founded by men such as Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball, who, as a result of their plural marriages, had over fifty children each. These schools, also open to other people, were well equipped and well taught and tended to offer the best in educational opportunities during the pioneer period.

One of the finest school buildings in early Salt Lake City was Brigham Young’s private school, built of adobe in 1853 but later enlarged and dedicated on Christmas Day 1860 (see p. 358). A fine-looking piece of architecture, it boasted an octagonal bell tower above
School desk designed by Brigham Young, Salt Lake City, ca. 1865. Brigham designed these sturdy desks to match the sizes of the children attending the family schoolhouse thereby providing a degree of comfort unusual in Utah schools. This desk was used by Brigham's daughter Susa.
EVERYDAY LIFE IN UTAH’S ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS • 371

the vestibule. Students entered through the vestibule, which was about eight feet square, where they were undoubtedly tantalized by the bell rope hanging from the ceiling but just out of their reach. The main room, which they entered through double doors, was square with about an eighteen-foot ceiling. Two high, oblong, vertical windows on each side and in the front provided plenty of light. In the center of the room was a large, round cast-iron stove, with “yards and yards” of stovepipe stretching to the chimney corner. In sharp contrast to the crude, rough-sawn desks in some other schools, those in the Brigham Young school were sturdy and well built. Painted green, they also had spacious compartments under their drop lids for storing books and belongings. Available teaching tools included slates and pencils as well as wall charts—something few early schools could afford.

The bell at Brigham Young’s school rang each morning at 8:45 a.m. to call students to school. At 9:00 it rang again to signal that school was in session. The students were not always attentive, for, as one of Brigham Young’s daughters recalled, the lids on their desks were sometimes used to hide behind as they clandestinely munched an apple or read a note from a boy. Nor could she forget the two-inch ledge surrounding the stove in the middle of the room, for there each morning the students placed apples that slowly baked until lunch time. The delicious aroma of the sizzling apples made it nearly impossible to wait until noon. On each Friday afternoon, regular classwork was suspended, and scholars found themselves engaged in giving orations, participating in spelling bees, playing organ solos, singing, and reading the school paper. However, such a school experience was clearly the exception to the rule in those early pioneer days.

The Indispensable Teachers

Like everything else about school life in the nineteenth century, the teachers under whose tutelage Utah’s pioneer students sat were a varied lot. Teachers’ ages ran the possible gamut, and both women and men taught. The sixteen counties that turned in statistics in 1868 reported a total of 134 female and 164 male teachers. Some were well-trained professionals while others were hardly trained at all. Efforts to establish training programs for prospective teachers were largely unsuccessful in the period under consideration, though a normal department was added to the University of Deseret in 1869. But whatever his or her training, the teacher was at the heart of whatever
Plain City School, ca. 1884. Teachers (on the left, William S. Geddes, and on the right, George H. Carver) pose next to an adobe building with their (mostly) female students in the Mormon pioneer settlement of Plain City. One little boy sits on the second row by a girl who appears to be his sister.
Plain City School, ca. 1884. The same teachers pose with most of their male students—at least one and maybe two boys sat with the girls. Some young person is hiding around the building’s corner. The variety of clothing, ranging from that of the fully suited boy on the left to the barefoot boy seated on the bench, may indicate differences in resources that often affected the amount of schooling a child received.
educational experience a pioneer child had. Unfortunately, he or she was also too often unsung.

Some teachers lived at home; others came from out of town and boarded from house to house, frequently at the homes of their students, where they were usually given the best bed to sleep in. At times they taught school in the homes where they stayed. In 1875, for example, eighteen-year-old Leona Mortensen began teaching in Elsinore. Having a total of ten students, she lived and taught in one house for about a week and then moved on to another.\^49

Some teachers changed schools often, trying to find a position where they could be secure and earn a comfortable living. It was difficult, however, for they were usually responsible for collecting their own pay, which often consisted of produce rather than cash and was sometimes not forthcoming. Their work was hard and frequently went unthanked by communities preoccupied with other things and apathetic to the problems of financing good education. Even when they were paid in cash, their incomes were meager, with tuition fees ranging from three to six dollars per quarter in 1868.\^50

Though teachers varied in quality, many pioneer students were blessed with outstanding ones. They included Camilla C. Cobb, who began the first kindergarten in Brigham Young’s private school and is credited with being the founder of Utah’s kindergartens; Mary Jane Dilworth Young; Mary and Ida Cook; Karl G. Maeser; Robert Campbell; and Warren and Wilson Dusenberry.\^51

When he began teaching in Provo, Wilson Dusenberry recorded some of his reactions. A few excerpts from his diary illustrate the frustrations faced by many teachers as well as something about the children they taught and the ultimate satisfaction that often came at the end of a series of struggles.

[February 20, 1863]: Brother Warren sick so I had to teach his school. The little brats were determined on having a spree. I checked their cheer a little, however.

[March 26, 1863]: Learned that a schoolteacher needs a false face, so that he can laugh! Some of the scholars told me they did not like me as well as Warren. Children are the personification of candor, but how necessary it is for us to forget it when we grow up.

[April 20, 1863]: Penned a pig for the seventh time. Returned from school very hoarse—cause—incessant talking.

[August 4, 1863]: The people of Provo are too unconcerned or too lazy to visit the schools. I know that the scholars have learned something!
[November 5, 1863]: At school all nearly are sick. Tried to sink into an oblivious sleep but could not with the “botherations of the school.”

[November 6, 1863]: The last day of school. I’m pleased and sad. The little cards of merit and prize books were held in a “sacred light,” judging from the clasp of their little hands as they passed out with their “Goodby, school master.” Who can teach school without forming ties of affection! Not I.52

Despite the fact that there were many fine teachers in the territory, Superintendent Campbell constantly complained about the persistent lack of quality, urging both improved pay and better training facilities as the answer. In his 1863 message to the legislature, he was particularly concerned with poor teacher salaries. He urged the legislature and other citizens to use their influence to pay schoolteachers liberally “with sufficient of that kind of pay which would enable them to procure ample clothing for themselves and families.”53 In other words, payment-in-kind was simply not adequate for teachers trying to raise families. He also urged the legislature to appropriate funds to defray the tuition of students who had mastered their elementary education and were willing to declare in writing their intention to qualify themselves as teachers.54

The Curriculum: A Study in Pragmatism

Some of Utah’s pioneer schoolchildren may not have seen much difference between school and Sunday School, for the LDS Church influenced the course of study in many ways. Although a number of teachers who were not Latter-day Saints were employed in various communities, especially after the 1860s, for the most part those who taught in the period under consideration were believing Latter-day Saints who taught their church’s values. In 1857 the teachers in the Twelfth Ward school in Salt Lake City were Bishop L. W. Hardy and his assistant Miss E. R. Bunnell. They taught their students to read with the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants as texts, although they also taught writing, arithmetic, geography, and grammar.55

The Bible and the Book of Mormon were used as textbooks in early Utah schools not only because these scriptures were the most readily available readers but also because teachers and administrators saw no problem in using the school to instill the religious values of the community. Superintendent Campbell wrote as late as 1873:

Our lot has been cast in lands favored with the Bible. We have been taught from our infancy that “the fear of the Lord is the
beginning of wisdom;” and shall our common schools be the first place to ignore this sentiment...?

Are we not apt to be narrow in our educational ideas, and to give undue weight to intellectual culture... Any educational system that fails to give due prominence to religious and moral training is defective...

The common school code of Utah does not require nor AUTHORIZE educators to inculcate RELIGIOUS TENETS, but all teachers are advised to open their schools by prayer, and to inculcate the “fear of God,” and morality, both by precept and example.56

At first the territory had no prescribed curriculum—teachers taught what they thought best. Eventually, the territorial legislature suggested certain subjects for study, such as spelling, reading, writing, geography, grammar, arithmetic, bookkeeping, mathematics, astronomy, history, languages, music, and art. Considerable time passed, however, before all these subjects were offered to most pupils, including those in Salt Lake City. Neither was there a uniformity of textbooks in the period under discussion, although the educational committee’s 1861 report to the legislature indicated that the most commonly used texts were “Webster’s Elementary Spelling Book, McGuffey’s Series of Readers, Smith’s Grammar, and Ray’s Arithmetic.”57 During the next decade, the territorial superintendent recommended various other readers and texts that were popular throughout the nation. He also recommended that curricula be expanded to include drawing, sewing, and vocal music.

What was actually taught usually depended on the interests of the teacher, which often included the practical skills necessary to making a living in the pioneer economy. In 1862, A. P. Welchman advertised the opening of a juvenile day school in the Salt Lake City Ninth Ward, boasting that there he would provide more satisfactory progress than schools of “mixed grades.” His view of the practical needs of the community was revealed when he announced that his curriculum would include land surveying, perspective drawing, and fortification.58 At age seven, Anna Maria Dorius began to attend a regular school in Ephraim, but she also went to a special school conducted by a Mrs. Otterstrom. There she learned to embroider, braid straw hats, and make straw trimmings and ornaments. These skills served her usefully throughout her life.59 In the 1850s, Hannah Hood Hill attended Sister T. D. Brown’s home school in Salt Lake City, where she learned sewing and other kinds of needlework.60
In 1858 a Mrs. Cooke advertised the opening of a school for girls in her home in the Salt Lake City Fourteenth Ward. There, for $5 students could take advanced English, for $4 they could attend the primary class, for $12 they could take lessons on the melodeon (a small reed organ), and a $3 charge was made for the use of Mrs. Cooke’s books and instrument. Mrs. Watmough, an English immigrant, taught about fifty students—all in one room—whose educational level ranged from beginners to the eighth grade. “We used to have some nice times at school,” recalled Joseph Openshaw, who started in her school in the 1860s in the Salt Lake City Seventeenth Ward. The older students studied plays, which they presented on Friday afternoons, while the younger students gave songs and recitations.

In Alpine, around 1860, English immigrant Elsie Booth helped her husband teach in the regular school during the winter, but she concluded that children could also profit from a short-term summer session rather than being left to wander the streets. Apparently many of the families in Alpine (or, as it was called then, Mountainville) were better off than pioneers elsewhere who had to keep their children working year-round. For several years, therefore, Elsie conducted a ten-week summer school in the meetinghouse, teaching geography, reading, writing, spelling, and singing.

In the 1850s, the curriculum in Ann Jane Wilden’s school in Cedar City included sewing, something Ann dearly wanted to learn. She asked her mother for some quilting pieces, but her mother had none, so Ann found some old rags and also obtained a few pieces of cloth from some girls at school. Her mother refused to let Ann take her only needle to school, but desperate to learn, Ann took it anyway and promptly lost it. She took the punishment meted out at home, but later her mother was able to secure enough needles for both of them. However, they had no thread, so Ann resourcefully went to the barn, obtained some horsehairs, and sewed with them. Whatever else she learned in school, the fact that she ultimately became an expert at quilt making was the most practical long-range result.

For a time beginning in the early 1860s, some teachers attempted to teach the Deseret Alphabet, a curious system of phonetic characters intended to help foreign immigrants learn to speak English. Devised by George D. Watt, the alphabet had the enthusiastic endorsement of Brigham Young as well as Superintendent Campbell. A few readers as well as sections of the Book of Mormon were printed in this alphabet,
but few people seemed to take it seriously. After Brigham Young's death, it became little more than a curiosity.\(^{65}\)

Some pioneer children might have been surprised if asked what grade they were in, for their schools had no such distinctions. Rather, schooling usually meant learning along with children of different ages and sometimes even with adults. In Springville, for example, the oldest children of Jacob Houtz went to school with their father's new wife, Bridget Daly Houtz.\(^{66}\) In 1857 an average of seventy students, ranging in age from four to twenty-five, attended the Twelfth Ward school in Salt Lake City. The younger students, about a third of the total, comprised the "infant class."\(^{67}\) When Mary Elizabeth Lightner Rollins taught school in Minersville in the 1860s, she had married men in her classes.\(^{68}\) Because age did not correlate with ability but the readers were graded, teachers sometimes kept track of students according to the reader they were studying rather than by age.

**Of Hickory Sticks and Kindness: The Problem of Discipline**

Although their parents often reminded them that they were God's chosen people, at times pioneer scholars did not seem to act as if they were. Tardiness, truancy, and various kinds of mischievousness were not unheard of. Some teachers were exasperated to the point of sheer frustration while others calmly took it in stride. To correct the problems, they employed various disciplinary devices, from the hickory stick to unexpected kindness. Many seemed convinced that the adage "Spare the rod and spoil the child" was just as scriptural as "The glory of God is intelligence" (D&C 93:36) and that students could be helped along on the path toward "light and truth" by a stinging backside.

Territorial officials frowned on physical punishment, but many schoolchildren were hardly aware of that. All they knew was that if they did not behave they were in for something serious. When O. H. Riggs visited one school in 1874, he found a "venerable matron" in charge who was over sixty years old. "The substantial ferule held in her hand demonstrated that she had not been careless in acquiring the means of correction," he noted with apparent disapproval.\(^{69}\) The teacher may have felt intimidated, however, by the fact that she was in charge of a hundred pupils, seventy-two of whom were in attendance that day in a room too small to adequately accommodate forty.

In 1875 students in Orderville were under the tutelage of Robert Marshall, an Irish Protestant minister who seemed to know little about
effective discipline. When he went in search of a switch to help along the education of a disobedient scholar, it was reported, the rest of the class “sure had a good time while he was gone.” At times Marshall felt obliged to go in search of an absentee. When one student playing in the street was asked why he was not in school, he simply replied that Mr. Marshall had not yet come for him. Meanwhile, back at the school, as Marshall hunted down truants, the other students did what seemed only logical: they left.  

Other forms of discipline sometimes varied in degree with the frequency of the offense. In Palmyra, Silas Hillman required an offender to do nothing more than stand in the middle of the room after the first infraction. After the second offense, the student had to stand on one foot for a designated period of time; after the third, he stood on one foot with one arm raised; and after the fourth, the hapless scholar could expect to stand on one foot with one arm raised holding a stick. The next offense brought the humiliation of the dunce cap. In Salina rowdy or uncooperative students were sometimes imprisoned under the platform used to elevate the teacher’s desk, though some of them escaped by tunneling out the back way.  

Some teachers, however, seemed incapable of harshness and found other ways to impose discipline. In Ogden, Alice Tucker was caught chewing on the hard sap she found under her rough log seat, a practice forbidden by the teacher. She was required, therefore, to sit in the window, where she promptly went to sleep. This was hardly severe punishment, but at least she remembered it. In Cottonwood, a teacher named Mrs. Andrus took the opposite tack. Instead of punishing poor behavior she tried to reward the good. Every Friday, students who had earned such a reward were invited to her home, where she entertained them with her singing and piano playing.  

A Period of Transition  

A number of changes came to Utah education in the latter part of the century, including the founding of several Protestant schools as part of an effort to combat Mormon influence and, in response to those schools, the establishment of increasing numbers of Latter-day Saint academies. In addition, as Charles S. Peterson has observed, a class of well-trained professional teachers arose. After 1874 territorial taxes were allocated for school purposes. These changes all enhanced educational opportunities for Utah’s children, resulting in a
period of transition from the often makeshift pioneer education described in this paper to the more highly structured educational establishment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1890 the legislature enacted a law providing for free public education (no tuition was to be charged), but only in the early twentieth century was that goal finally achieved.

CONCLUSION

Some writers have been exuberant in their praise for early Utah education, but the fact remains that educational achievement varied greatly in the first quarter century of Utah's territorial history. Whether formal schooling was part of everyday life for pioneer children depended on the winds of circumstance, and for those who did attend school, daily life in the classroom varied according to the place, the school, the curriculum, and the teacher. Learning was sometimes inhibited by uncomfortable and inadequate furniture as well as inadequate learning tools, but even under these circumstances it was often enhanced by dedicated and skilled teachers.

Much of the education offered was directed toward the practical needs of a pioneering economy, which called for reading, writing, and arithmetic as well as various practical skills. Most school-age children in Utah needed little more to survive. Farming, merchandising, mining, and other common pursuits simply did not require more formal education, though they usually required on-the-job training. Girls often learned sewing and other practical skills, not only because they wanted to, but also because such training would help them provide for the family. Some went to telegraphy schools for the same reason. Some young men and women went on for professional training of various sorts, but they clearly were the exceptions more than the rule. In the sense, then, of providing the necessary preparation, rudimentary pioneer education was perhaps as adequate for its time as advanced education is for modern times.

Although education beyond the basic skills was not necessary to survival, pioneer Utah was not a cultural backwash. Many teachers, some of whom were unusually well educated, worked hard to instill in their students a love of learning and of the cultural arts, and many students took advantage of the opportunities thus provided. In 1913, George H. Brimhall, then president of Brigham Young University, remembered with fondness his own childhood schooling, which began toward the end of the period under discussion:
The mothers of that epoch had ambitions—not so much for themselves as for their children, and these ambitions were reinforced by the religious conviction that education is salvation,—it was part of their creed.

... Education in Utah has had no backwoods era. Fifty years ago this winter my teacher in the little hamlet of Cedar Fort was the honorable Zerrubbabel Snow, a member of the first supreme court of the territory of Utah... Over forty years ago, in the little town of Grafton, on the Rio Virgin, it was my good fortune to come under the training of one of the best teachers I have ever known, in the person of Henry I. Young. In makeup he seemed to me the prototype of the author of the Monroe Doctrine, whose picture was in my geography, and in disposition I thought of him as I did of Washington. In my early teens the great man of our town was my teacher, Silas Hillman, a man of eastern training. He was justice of the peace and a general legal adviser of the town folk.

Then later I had the good fortune to become educationally intimate with Robert Campbell, a scholar of whom it is said, “He worked all the time...”

[Then, after listing many more excellent teachers who influenced his life, Brimhall remarked:] Glancing back over this line-up of departed educators, with the famed philosopher and mathematician, Orson Pratt, at their head, and seeing also the community leaders still with us who have retired from teaching, and then viewing the multitude of trained teachers at this noblest of all tasks, it can be said of Utah, “She has had no cause to plead pedagogical poverty.”

Though education in pioneer Utah may not have reached the standard enjoyed in some other parts of the country, the valiant efforts of the teachers in that era helped lay the foundation for what Charles Peterson describes as “the flowering of learning and education in the last quarter of the nineteenth century which itself became one of several important points of embarkation for remarkable achievements by Utahns in the twentieth century.” Equally important, those who took advantage of the best their pioneer communities had to offer, even for a short time, remembered it as an important contribution to their lives and, because of it, passed on to those who followed a heritage greatly enriched.

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Notes


4. While several previous works have traced the history of education in Utah, none have considered in detail the everyday life of pioneer schoolchildren. Unless otherwise noted, for basic historical information, including some administrative details, I have relied upon John Clifton Moffitt, *The History of Public Education in Utah* ([Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press], 1946); and Bruce L. Campbell and Eugene E. Campbell, “Early Cultural and Intellectual Development,” in *Utah’s History*, ed. Richard D. Poll (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1978), 295–315.

5. There is a plethora of literature on this subject, but Milton Lynn Bennion, *Mormonism and Education* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1939), still provides one of the best treatments of general Mormon attitudes toward education.


34. Maud Lewis, "Early School Teacher of Palmyra and Spanish Fork," in Carter, Heart Throbs of the West, 2:143.
39. Samuel Kirkham, English Grammar in Familiar Lectures . . . : Designed for the Use of Schools and Private Learners (Rochester, N.Y.: Wm. Alling, 1829), was extremely popular, going through many editions.

46. “President Brigham Young’s Private School,” in 5:274–75.

47. Moffitt, *Reports of the Superintendents*, 29. There were more female than male teachers in only Salt Lake County (thirty-seven women and twenty-nine men) and Box Elder County (nine women and eight men).

48. Normal schools (or departments) typically offered a two-year program preparing their students to be teachers.


63. Talmage, “Elsie Edge Booth,” 1:35.


74. Hansen, “Anna—100 Years,” 392.


