

Images of Early California: Mormon Battalion Soldiers' Reflections During the War With Mexico

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Abner Blackburn appeared baffled with death, fatigue, and army life. Upon Brigham Young's urging he had enlisted in the United States army, marched to Santa Fe, trudded down the Rio Grande toward the present-day Elephant Butte Dam site, and then was ordered to succor a detachment of sick brethren on their return to the New Mexican capital. Frustration marked his life as a soldier in the Mormon Battalion during the war with Mexico, but such an enterprising youngster could seek solace in the fringe benefits of New Mexican culture. Abner Blackburn left history a vivid description of one evening's sortie while passing through a small New Mexican village.

one evening camp close to a village and wear awful dry for something to drink that was stronger than water. Saw an old Padra come out of kind of cellar with a large bottle of the needfull three of us went up to him and told him that we wear dry and had not taken a sniff since we left Santafe He says nither nither no tengo Augedente no tengo veno no no tengo. we pushed him up against the door of the cellar. He fumbled around in his pockets and raked an old rusty key and gave it to a servant who unlocked the door and we followed him in. the man took us back to the further end of the dungeon and lit a tapor and shew us how to draw the good out of the cask with a hollow reed you suck it full. hold it over a vessel and let it run out. then in our glory. we took our time it was slow work. we filled up to the plimsol mark before we suspected anything wrong. started back in the dark for the door. groped around and found it locked well the old devil had us in a trap went back to the cask to die hapy. took another bait of wine. then scratched our heads in a deep studdy how to get out. Hunted

Historical Society of Southern California

for a soft place in the adoby wall and with our bayonets dug out in a short time slipped out and sneaked into camp as though nothing happened. the boys had been hunting for us for an hour they went to the village and enquired for us but the Mexicans had not seen us after things quieted down. after dark we took the boys back crawled through the adoby wall. and with canteens and kettles cleand the old sinners cellar dry the next morning our officer noticed something unusual with the boys. we made it all right with him by giving him a canteen of Nectar for the gods.¹

Images reflect in at least two directions. Blackburn's classical description of a church wine cellar not only depicts a trait of Hispanic culture, but also reflects on his own Mormon society. While he bullied, stole, drank, and shared wine with his fellow soldiers, apparently showing no sign of remorse, Blackburn also accepted the Mexican culture on its own terms without the limiting blinders of stereotyping. He might call the Catholic priest a sinner but undoubtedly would have labeled himself the same. Many other Latter-day Saint soldiers wrote numerous diaries in which they recorded the cultural shock of passing through Mexico's northern frontier. Their valuable eyewitness accounts portrayed Mexico's frontier in turmoil of the United States conquest. These common men left images which were often both more and less accurate than the accounts written by more literate visitors to California.²

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Abner Blackburn and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints matured during an age influenced by Manifest Destiny. In accordance with this widely accepted attitude—the belief that American expansion accomplished the Will of God—Joseph Smith offered “to open the vast regions of the unpeopled west and south to our enlightened and enterprising yeomenry.”³ After Joseph Smith's brutal murder, Brigham Young proceeded to fulfill Smith's vision. He wrote Sam Brannan, the exuberant, strong-willed leader of the Saints living in the Eastern United States, “I wish you together with your press, paper, and ten thousand of the brethren were out in California at the Bay of San Francisco, and if you can clear yourself and go there, do so.”⁴ In those days Mexican California resembled a large amorphous area nominally bordered by the Oregon Country, Rocky Mountains, New

Images of Early California

Mexico, Sonora, and the Pacific Ocean. Somewhere in this bountiful land the Mormons intended to settle.

Although the Latter-day Saints viewed the Mexican War with mixed emotions, it provided a realistic opportunity to emigrate westward. Most Mormons seemed less than enthusiastic in supporting the American cause. For example, when Hosea Stout learned of the war, he confided in his diary, "I confess that I was glad to learn of war against the United States and was in hopes that it might never end until they were entirely destroyed for they had driven us into the wilderness & was now laughing at our clamities."⁵ Antagonism toward the United States became so serious that Brigham Young cautioned his followers not to discuss the war in public.⁶ Meanwhile, the Mexican War provided an unparalleled occasion for the Mormons to emigrate. Taking advantage of this situation, Brigham Young shrewdly sent Jesse C. Little to Washington to lobby for federal assistance in the Mormon exodus.⁷

President James K. Polk appeared confident that he could easily defeat the Mexican army without the assistance of Mormon soldiers. Wisely the President had no desire to alienate the Mormons unnecessarily, and he wanted the United States armies to enter northern Mexico as liberators, not oppressors, of the Mexican people.⁸ If as Polk feared, the Mormons scattered in Iowa territory, reached California before the United States army, they could needlessly antagonize the Catholic Californians with their religious fanaticism thereby causing a more vigorous resistance to the United States conquest.⁹ Enlistment of Mormons into the United States army would both slow the westward progress under Brigham Young and give the government some control over the Mormon forces entering California. By offering the Mormons a chance to volunteer in the United States army the President also hoped, "to conciliate them, attach them to us, & prevent them from taking part against us."¹⁰ As a result government policy makers ordered Stephen W. Kearny to limit the number of Mormon troops to one-third of his command and act "in such a manner to best conciliate the inhabitants (of California) and render them friendly to the United States."¹¹ General Kearny made certain the Mormons were not the first American soldiers to enter California.

Historical Society of Southern California

Meanwhile, Brigham Young decided that his people could not possibly reach California during 1846. Three weeks before the army invited the Mormons to volunteer, Brigham Young stated, "I can safely Prophesy that we will not cross the Mountains this season."¹² When Captain James Allen came to enlist the reluctant Mormons scattered between the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, the Mormon leadership was thrilled. While many Latter-day Saints denounced the plan to recruit volunteer Mormon soldiers, the church leaders realized that it provided an opportunity to earn much needed money and an excuse for establishing settlements on Indian land.¹³ At that time, the Mormon leadership's predominant concern was to secure a satisfactory place—presumably along the Missouri or Platte Rivers—where they could remain throughout the winter. These sites, however, were located within the boundaries of Indian reservations and could only be occupied by whites with special permission from the United States government. Recruiting the Mormon Battalion did not delay the exodus of the Mormon people for a year—that decision had already been made—instead it gave the Mormons a legal excuse for occupying Indian land.¹⁴ Brigham Young succinctly stated his case, "Capt. Allen has pledged himself on the part of the United States that we may stop wherever we choose on Indian lands, in consideration of the five hundred volunteers." The Mormon Battalion volunteers bought desperately needed time required to prepare the Saints for their journey to the West.¹⁵

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Brigham Young and the Mormon church leaders did not hold Mexican land claims in California with the same respect and esteem that they held negotiations with the United States government. In a speech to an assembly of his followers, Brigham Young reasoned ". . . supposing we were to refuse this offer (of recruiting in the United States army); we would have to go to California and have to depend upon our own resources to fight, when if we embraced this offer we will have the US to back us and have an opportunity of showing our loyalty and fight for the country that we expect to have for our homes."¹⁶ This evidence indicated that the church leader was prepared to battle the Mexicans should the latter not permit the Mormons to settle on their land. Other

Images of Early California

church authorities agreed with Young's willingness to fight the Mexicans for their domain. John Taylor, who later became President of the LDS Church, explained:

We are something like Abraham was, wandering not knowing whither we wander; fleeing from a land of tyranny and oppression we are calculated to settle in some parts of California. This according to the laws of nations belongs to Mexico . . . If you go to California you must have legal pretense for going there . . . The US calling upon us to them gives us a perfect right to go there according to the requisition made that we should be disbanded at California . . . if we were to bring in 50,000 inhabitants . . . we would have a lot of land allotted to us.¹⁷

In a letter to church leaders, Brigham Young once again clearly explained his position.

They may stay (in California), look out the best locations for themselves and their friends, and defend the country . . . The outfit of this five hundred costs us nothing, and their pay will be sufficient to take their families over the mountains. There is war between Mexico and the United States, to whom California must fall a prey, and if we are the first settlers, the old citizens cannot have a . . . pretext to mob the Saints.¹⁸

This evidence indicates that Brigham Young and other church leaders considered the Mormon Battalion enlistment a tremendous opportunity to acquire homes in California. They intended to fight, if necessary, for land regardless of the Indian or Mexican claims. As the "first settlers" they would claim the select land without the onus of being interlopers on land pioneered by others as was the case in Missouri. For all practical purposes the leaders disregarded the fact that the Mexican Californians and Indians already lived on much of the choicest California land.

Still, church leaders were cognizant of settlements scattered along Mexico's northern frontier. They knew that the Mexican government tolerated nothing but the Catholic religion and this policy would be particularly repugnant to the Latter-day Saints.¹⁹ President Young urged the Mormon soldiers to remain aloof from the inhabitants. He cautioned, "Have no conversation with the Missourians, Mexicans or any other class of people, do not even

Historical Society of Southern California

preach unless the people desire it." He explained to the Battalion's officers that the church would probably establish headquarters in the Great Basin—which was part of Mexican California—but this would not exclude settlement along the Pacific coast. Then he sent the soldiers westward with the prophecy that if they prayed every morning and evening and if they would abide by council, every man would return alive.²⁰

According to Mormon theology, God plays an active role in the daily lives of men. He assuredly would lead the Mormon Battalion safely to California. As the soldiers traveled along the Santa Fe Trail and through the New Mexican cultural centers they had little opportunity to contemplate their California destination. Colonel Philip St. George Cooke, their commander, used Mormon soldiers to build a useable wagon road from Santa Fe to San Diego. Not until they reached Ojo de Vaca (Cow Springs), a well-known New Mexican waterhole situated between the Apache strongholds to the North and Mexican towns to the south, did the Mormon's God presumably intervene and direct them to California. Unfamiliar with the local trails, Cooke's scouts simply did not know how to proceed westward from Cow Springs. Cooke ordered some men to kindle a fire atop a nearby hill as a distress signal, and soon some Mexican and Indian traders—probably *comancheros*—rode directly into the battalion's camp.²¹ From the Mexicans, Cooke learned that an old trail ran from Cow Springs south to Janos where they could follow another path westward through the garrison town of Fronteras toward Tucson. After deliberating the options, Cooke decided to follow this trail.

Cooke's decision brought gloom to the Mormon troops who feared the colonel would lead the command deeper into Mexico rather than westward to California. "Father" David Pettigrew, an aged, grey-haired, patriarch to the men, accused the gentile officers of wanting to enter Janos in order to procure whiskey, tobacco, and women. Prayer, however, could enlighten even their crusty colonel. That evening Pettigrew joined Levi Hancock, the highest ranking church authority among the Mormon soldiers, in visiting each tent to admonish the Mormons to pray that Cooke would not lead them southward into the Mexican towns and possible combat.²² The next morning as Cooke led his troops over a rise just south of Cow Springs, the colonel noticed that the road

Images of Early California

veered southeast to Janos, after a short pause he ordered his trumpeters to blow orders to turn the command westward toward California. Without thinking, Pettigrew shouted "God bless the Colonel."²³ California was the Mormon destination and the decision at Cow Springs was just one example which many men believed proved God guided the Battalion to the Pacific coast.

Once in California the Mormons dreaded they might have to battle its Mexican citizens. While camped at Vallecito, the Mormons heard a rumor from a transient Indian that General Stephen W. Kearny had defeated the Californios and that the latter were fleeing across the Mormon's path to Sonora.²⁴ When other informants confirmed this rumor, Colonel Cooke's hopes for glorious combat duty revived. He decided to march via the Temecula River valley toward Los Angeles in hope of intercepting the escaping Californios.²⁵ Cooke could gain military glory and make a commanding show of strength through the countryside where the richest and most influential Californios lived.²⁶ Cooke's decision to abandon San Diego, the promised town of rest and repose, upset the Mormons who opposed combat duty.²⁷ When a messenger reached the battalion with news that the war in California was over and that the Mormon Battalion should meet General Kearny at San Diego, most soldiers rejoiced. Although many men did not expect the peace to last, most joined Robert Bliss who exclaimed, "God be Praised for his protection over us according to the Word of his Servant the Prophet."²⁸ God intervened to safely direct the Mormons to California and protect His people from combat concluded many soldiers. One they reached San Diego safely, Bliss, with a humble and sincere religious spirit, testified, "We have endured one of the greatest journeys ever made by man at least in America & it is by the faith and prayers of the Saints that we have done it."²⁹

The Mormons held the California landscape in an exceedingly favorable light. To many it was indeed a land of promise where a kingdom might be built to usher the literal reign of Jesus Christ. Once through the terribly arid Imperial desert they reached Warner's ranch, a resting place on the Southern immigration route similar in many respects to Sutter's fort on the California trail. Around Warner's ranch the land seemed overrun with cattle and horses.³⁰ This was the California of their dreams and the men re-

Historical Society of Southern California

joined in typical LDS fashion, "What to us could be more lovely or more cheering at the present time, a hearty 'thank God' come from every bosom."³¹ Later as they feasted on fresh beef and mustard greens along the San Luis River valley, several men exclaimed this was undoubtedly a fine country where the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints could live with ease.³²

During February and March 1847 the Mormon Battalion remained stationed at San Luis Rey, a strategic position located between San Diego and Los Angeles. In an earthy poem Levi Hancock depicted the region's potential:

I now can tell a better story
Than I could about Sonora
For the soil is little wetter
And the land a little better
I think 'twill bring corn and potatoes
Beans and cabbage and tomatoes
Raise all things to suit our notion
Along by the Pacific Ocean.³³

"Man can live easy here for he has to cut no grass and raise no more grain than to make his bread which is easy done after he has his farm fenced and houses builded," speculated Hancock. "There is," he continued, "a plenty of feed here for all our cattle and sheep on the hills around and by hearing a man may raise thousands of heads of cattle and horses . . ."³⁴ Agreeing with Hancock's favorable impressions was Robert Bliss who explained:

It is the most delightful climate I ever saw
the Grass Wheat & Oats that are Natural makes the
finest pasture for our mules & beef cattle; here
are many kinds of trees I never saw before, the Date,
Cocoanut Olive Pepper &c &c I observe the Peach
in full bloom & English beans Pease cabbage Plants
&c &c 3 or 4 inches high that have come up themselves
since the desertion of the town; here are the most
beautiful vinyards I ever saw the stems of last year
will hold a pint of Grapes & probably more they are
of the Raison kind; hogheads of wine could be made
here every year.³⁵

Images of Early California

Not only did the Californian land sustain rich varieties of plant and animal life, but Henry Standage offered the ultimate religious sanction when he declared, "God being pleased to remove his people into so healthy a country Surely the Times of Restitution has begun."³⁶

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For a few months the LDS soldiers interacted with the Californios in both Los Angeles and San Diego. Their experience in Los Angeles tended to confirm an underlying mistrust between the two cultures, but the San Diego events proved that the Mormons and Mexican Californians could mutually contribute toward a better society.

Four companies of Mormon soldiers guarded Los Angeles. About 5000 residents lived in adobe buildings surrounded by acres of productive vineyards, orchards, and large ranches. "This is indeed a beautiful country," wrote Henry Boyle, "if the inhabitants were good and as beautiful it would be a Paradise in reality."³⁷ What especially disgusted some Mormons were the bars and gambling houses which apparently vied in numbers with private homes. Henry Standage charged that the inhabitants "are in general very idle, profligate, drunken, swearing set of wretches, with but very few exceptions. Spaniards conduct in the Grog shops with the squaws is really filthy and disgusting even in the day time."³⁸

The Mormons tended to remain aloof of the Los Angeles Californios who continued to enjoy their many festivals and holidays frequently celebrated by gambling, horse racing, and drinking.³⁹ At one representative fiesta the Californios turned the Los Angeles plaza into an amphitheater for a grandiose bull fight. They invited everyone including the Mormon soldiers. The LDS considered the invitation a ruse to draw them into town while Californian conspirators captured the Mormon built Fort Moore. Instead of enjoying the celebration the Saints remained in their fort with guns and cannon loaded for an expected attack. While the Mormons scanned the horizon for enemy soldiers, the Californios enjoyed an exciting four day fiesta.⁴⁰ This feeling of conspiracy, mistrust, and antagonism tended to dominate cultural contacts in Los Angeles.

Historical Society of Southern California

Amidst similar rumors of a Californios revolution or Mexican reconquest, company B guarded San Diego. The Mormons appeared confident despite the possibility of a counterattack. One soldier maintained, "They will have to fight here for our guns are loaded ready to apply the match any moment."⁴¹

As time passed prejudice on both sides dwindled. At first San Diegans feared the Mormons, but this wore off as the Saints proved to be "quiet, industrious, sober, inoffensive people" who worked diligently to improve the local economy.⁴² Good will resulted from the government policy which encouraged the soldiers to work with the Californios to improve the city.⁴³ As the Mormons became better acquainted with the Californios mores, the soldiers began to hold them in higher esteem. Robert Bliss explained, "We are getting acquainted with the Spanish here they are very friendly & inteligent many of them live like gentlemen."⁴⁴

Generally, the Mormons held mixed impressions of the Californios. Most of their negative attitudes came from rumors of combat, but even primary observation reflected both disgust and appreciation of the Californios. While some Latter-day Saints saw the Californios as degenerate, barbarian, wretched, others portrayed them as intelligent gentlemen. Perhaps the Mormons saw the Californios as degenerate, barbarian wretches, others typed group, therefore both images could reveal the truth.

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The *Book of Mormon* purports to be a history in which the Lamanites—ancestors of the present-day American Indians—play a decisive role. Just about all of the soldiers' writing depicting the California Indians was favorable. The first interaction came at Warner's ranch where a few friendly Indians agreed to serve as interpreters, scouts, guides, and cattle drovers for the Mormon Battalion.⁴⁵ These Indians astounded the Mormons with their magnificent display of cow punching. The Indian performance beat

. . . any thing entirely, the Indians on horseback throw the lassoos and catching cattle by the head and legs and throwing them and holding them down by having the lasso wound round and round the horn of the saddle. Their skill beat anything I ever saw; they throw with so much certainty.⁴⁶

Images of Early California

Generally Mormon diaries contain little prejudice against the Indians. While the Californian Indians lived in many diverse subcultures and tribes, they served mainly as pawns in the broader United States-Mexican conflict. Some Indians favored the United States as liberators, a few sided with Mexico, while others attempted to remain neutral or uninvolved. These divided sympathies left many Indians and Mormons in confusion. For example, while passing through the Temecula Valley, the Mormon soldiers observed smoke ascending from many surrounding fires. Almost instantly, a band of about 150 warriors formed a battle line across the road. Armed with muskets, lances, bows and arrows, knives, and other glittering war implements this formidable warrior force posed for action. Everyone expected a fight. The Mormons feared that the Indians supported the Californios while the Indians thought the Mormons were the Californios. Once these antagonists fortunately discovered the mistaken identity, the Indians quickly regrouped into a welcome line and heartily greeted the Mormon soldiers.⁴⁷

Once in San Diego the Mormon soldiers frequently observed groups of Indians who entered town to trade, gamble, sing, drink, and fight.⁴⁸ It was a common practice for the Californios to put unruly Indians in the stocks or whip them in public. On one occasion an Indian was whipped seventy times on his bare buttocks for attempting to kill his mother.⁴⁹ The Mormons generally appeared sympathetic toward the abused Lamanites. In reaction to the overall treatment accorded the Indians, Robert Bliss wrote that the Native Americans were:

. . . the greatest Slaves I ever Saw here and in the most abject Poverty Occasioned by Catholic Religion & I have not doubt God who is just will bring the Spanish nation to an account for their abuse to the Lamanites from the days of Montezuma untill the present time; when he Weights the Nations in the balance then we who have Suffered so much will bring in our Acct.⁵⁰

The Latter-day Saints empathized with the persecuted Lamanites and their *Book of Mormon* beliefs frequently engendered more sympathy toward the Indians than the Spanish-Mexicans.

On several occasions battalion officers sent troops stationed in Los Angeles on search and destroy missions against marauding

Historical Society of Southern California

Indians. Twice during April 1847 Colonel Cooke ordered parties to guard Cajon Pass to prevent the Indians from sweeping down from the high desert to steal cattle and horses in the Los Angeles basin. Elijah Elmer, a participant in the sorties, expressed an opinion probably held by most of the soldiers when he wrote ". . . I hope that we shall not (see any Indians) for I do not want to fight them at all. They are all wild and do not know us from anybody else."⁵¹ Later in May Cooke ordered another patrol to prevent Indian raids in the countryside surrounding Isaac William's ranch. They surprised a small band of Indians in a mountain cave and killed five or six. Two Mormons, Benjamin F. Mayfield and Samuel Chapin, received slight wounds in this engagement—the Saints first and only battle with other humans. The Mormons reacted with horror and disgust when their Californian guide—unknown to the Mormons—sneaked out, scalped, and removed the ears of the dead Indians. Californian law offered a premium price on wild Indian scalps.⁵² After the soldiers' last sortie, Lieutenant James Pace wrote, "All of the Battalion seemed glad that my Indian hunt passed off as well as it did without shedding there (their) blood."⁵³

For the Mexican War era, the Mormon soldiers held an uncommonly high amount of respect and compassion for the Indians. Their beliefs certainly showed influence from the *Book of Mormon*. The Latter-day Saints tended to blame the Spanish government and Catholic Church for the Lamanites pathetic condition. God, they believed, would chastize those institutions, meanwhile the contemporary Mormons showed little inclination to fight or destroy the California Indian tribes.

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Along with the Californios and Indians, the Mormons interacted with other United States soldiers in California. Of all people the Mormon soldiers most detested the California Volunteers under John C. Fremont. Even the Mormons who previously settled under Sam Brannan in Upper California refused to support Fremont in the Bear Flag Rebellion. William Glover, one of the residents, explained, "I thought we didn't want anything to do with the Missouri mobbers, as there were many in Fremont's company that turned scale."⁵⁴ Ever since they had been driven

Images of Early California

out of Missouri during the latter 1830's most Latter-day Saints held an especially strong hatred for that state and its inhabitants. The embers of discontent once ignited in the Missouri prairies easily burst into flame along the Pacific Coast.

For the first few months of United States rule, John C. Fremont and Stephen Watts Kearny bickered over the rightful claim to supreme American authority. Fremont made Los Angeles his capital and stationed his troops in nearby San Gabriel. General Kearny could do nothing. In a letter to the Adjutant General, an exasperated Kearny reiterated Fremont's refusal to obey his orders and explained, ". . . as I have no troops in the country under my authority, excepting a few dragoons, I have no power of enforcing them."⁵⁵ As soon as Kearny learned Cooke was leading the Mormon Battalion to Los Angeles he ordered the command to San Diego to ascertain their loyalty.⁵⁶ Assured of the Mormons support, Kearny forced a showdown with Fremont. Not only did the Mormon Battalion give Kearny superior military strength, but later when Kearny led Fremont eastward toward Washington and a court martial, fifteen of the sixty-four members of the Kearny-Fremont party were Latter-day Saints.⁵⁷

The California Volunteers probably started much of the resentment which initially greeted the Mormons in San Diego. Henry Bigler recorded the form of anti-Mormon prejudice.

Some of the leading men of the place told some of our men that when they heard that a company of Mormon soldiers were coming there that they had a great notion to pack up and leave, for they had been told that the Mormons would steal everything they could get their hands on, not only that but that their women would be in danger of being insulted by us.⁵⁸

As the Mormons took odd jobs and industriously worked to improve San Diego much of the opposition disappeared, but the conditions worsened in Los Angeles.

Both the Mormons and Missourians carried their mutual antipathy westward. For example one Mormon report asserted that the California Volunteers, ". . . have been using all possible means to prejudice the Spaniards and Indians against us by telling them we would take their wives &c thereby rousing an ex-

Historical Society of Southern California

citement through the country.”⁵⁹ On several tense occasions individuals from the Mormon Battalion and California Volunteers met in Los Angeles. At times regular soldiers in Kearny’s 1st Dragoons defended the battalion boys. One supposedly shouted, “Stand back; you are religious men, and we are not; we will take all of your fights into our hands.”⁶⁰ After Colonel R. B. Mason visited the two hundred men at Fremont’s camp on April 23, he reported that the Mormons were not safe in their camp along the San Pedro “as the Missouri Vols. had threatened to come down upon us.”⁶¹ One evening Colonel Cooke even ordered the Mormon soldiers to load their guns and fix their bayonets to prepare for an incipient attack by Fremont’s men.⁶² In reaction to the problems, Cooke ordered the Mormon troops to a small hill just south of Los Angeles where they built Fort Moore. The fort not only would keep the Mormon Battalion in military control of Los Angeles, but also afforded protection in case Fremont’s men attacked.

The California experience brought no reconciliation between the Mormons and Missourians. Their antagonism divided the loyalty of United States troops in California and could have led to disastrous consequences had the Mexican forces been more powerful. Probably wife stealing emerged as the most popular anti-Mormon theme. This charge, which probably reflected the hearsay scandals of polygamy in Illinois, might have united Catholic Californios to prolong their opposition to the United States conquest. For the United States it was fortunate that the animosity generally appeared confined among the American troops.

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If God created a bountiful environment for California, Satan also found a comfortable home in Mexico’s northland. The Mormons openly admitted their temptations and shortcomings. For example, on 14 January 1847 as the soldiers marched through the Temecula Valley, a terrifying cloudburst blasted the command. “Sam hill, how it did rain!” exclaimed one man, “it was cold, and it seemed that it would kill every animal in camp.”⁶³ Rain soaked blankets, guns, supplies, and everything else. God, Himself, seemed to open the heavens with His wrath upon the Mormons because so many had “become bassly wicked.”⁶⁴

Images of Early California

For several months a struggle for power between the highest religious authorities and the ranking military leadership had been festering. Although the military officers called a few religious meetings, they could not control the abominable moral conduct of some Mormon soldiers. The temptations of California life proved too strong.⁶⁵ After reaching Los Angeles, one of the first things many Mormons did was go on a drunken binge for a few days. According to one eyewitness, “. . . in the afternoon (of March 24) the seamy of drunkenness was lamentable. The screams & yells of drunken Mormons would of disgraced the wild Indians much more a Latterday Saint.”⁶⁶ The spree lasted from March 23 to 25 when the men started to sober up “and act like they began to know themselves.”⁶⁷ Although the company leaders at Los Angeles tried to retain spiritual leadership they could not regain the more religiously inclined soldier’s confidence. One lieutenant, for instance, failed to maintain his troop’s goodwill because he “threatened to cut heads off too much if they did not do thus and so.”⁶⁸

On April 4 Jefferson Hunt, senior captain of the battalion, declared that the military officers who had previously been appointed directly by President Brigham Young ought to take responsibility over all religious meetings. Later that month, however, the Seventies, a church body charged with preaching and missionary work, assumed control over the religious life of most soldiers. As Levi Hancock, one of the Seven Presidents of the Seventies, asserted, none of the military officers had the right to preside over the Seventies unless they were ordained a Seventy. As a result, under the instigation and guidance of Levi Hancock and “Father” David Pettigrew, the Seventies assumed religious leadership over the Saints while effectively excluding the military leaders from their decisions.⁶⁹

The Seventies in the Mormon Battalion held their first meeting on 18 April 1847, as a self-appointed quorum to combat several evil practices of the soldiers. Levi Hancock wanted to stop the drunkenness and swearing. He was astounded to hear reports that some of the Mormon soldiers at San Luis Rey had been “making free with the squaws.”⁷⁰ In a private meeting the Seventies selected Stephen St. John to be the President of the Quorum.⁷¹ In a speech, St. John said that the Seventies ought to stop the

Historical Society of Southern California

evils of "drunkenness, swearing, and intercourse with the squaws &c."⁷² In a unanimous decision they "resolved to use all possible means in righteousness to stop Drunkenness horedoms & evry other abominable practice."⁷³ They agreed to disfellowship any Mormon who refused to repent after defiling themselves with women or who branded public or private horses and mules as their own personal property. After this meeting, Levi Hancock and David Pettigrew assumed the dominant role at all religious functions."⁷⁴

In conclusion, the torch of leadership had been passed from the military to the spiritual leaders in the Mormon Battalion. This power transfer resulted from both the inability of the military leaders to perform satisfactorily their responsibilities as "fathers" to the brethren and the behind-the-scenes leadership of Levi Hancock and his cohorts in the Seventies. This issue which had been growing for several months reached its climax when many Mormon soldiers fell to the evil temptations of California.⁷⁵ Along with their role in determining the parameters of acceptable moral behavior, the Seventies also provided leadership in the soldiers return home. Although the Mormon Battalion split into several factions for its return journey eastward, for many men, the new leadership represented a victory for orthodox Mormonism.

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Like the Puritans who left England to create a light in the wilderness, the Mormons paradoxically fled persecution in the United States and espoused the American cause in Mexican California. Church leaders seized the opportunity to join the American forces and encouraged their members to enlist in the army. The call for five hundred volunteers did not delay the 1846 westward migration, instead it gave Brigham Young a viable excuse for settling on Indian land along the Missouri River. Church headmen also assumed California would fall to American conquest, and decided their destiny should march along with the United States army. With apparently little empathy for the Spanish and Indians, the Mormon hierarchy argued that enlistment afforded an unequalled opportunity to stake healthy claims to California. Land, whether along the Missouri River or in Califor-

Images of Early California

nia, was the main benefit to be acquired in forming the Mormon Battalion.

The Mormon diarists left a unique picture of the people living in California. Had a popularity pool been taken among the Mormon soldiers, the results probably would have showed the Indians winning with the Californios and Missourians trailing far behind. The Mormon writings did not reveal a strong racist attitude frequently attributed to Americans.⁷⁶ As a result of church experiences, the Mormons tended to stereotype both the Indians and Missourians. The California Indians appeared idealized decedents of *Book of Mormon* Lamanites, and several writers personally identified themselves clearly with the persecuted Indians. The Latter-day Saints tended to blame the Catholic Church and Spanish culture for persecuting the Indians.

While idealizing the Indians, diarists frequently denounced the Missourians. They stereotyped the Missourians as mobbers who still conspired to destroy the Mormon people. Satan worked hand in hand with the Missourians. Such an image may help to explain the enthusiasm Mormons exhibited in supporting Stephen W. Kearny in his contest with John C. Frémont over the supreme American authority in California.

While church experience contributed to the stereotyped portraits of abused Lamanites and Missouri mobbers, it offered no framework to categorize the Spanish Californians. While the Californios culture shocked individual Latter-day Saints, the diarists usually observed the Californios as individuals whose qualities varied from indolent wretches to refined gentlemen. Mormon depictions of the Californios frequently offered refreshingly honest accounts with a minimum of racial stereotyping.⁷⁷

Along with creating images of California and its people during the Mexican War, the Mormon diaries reflect on the Saints own culture. Most of the soldiers were probably basically religious men who tried to live by the teachings of their faith. Presuming that God daily influenced the lives of men, the soldiers found incidents to substantiate their beliefs. They searched for the workings of God in history, and found Him active in guiding them safely to California and protecting them from possible com-

Historical Society of Southern California

bat with the Californios and Indians. Using deductive logic the soldiers usually found enough examples to warrant their original premises.

California offered a land of bountiful richness waiting to usher in the millennium, and—at the same time—Satan prospered and escalated his temptations. Many soldiers succumbed. Like other Americans, LDS soldiers drank, swore, stole, and found fleshy pleasures satisfying—at least for the time being. Satan's temptations and human frailty, however, produced internal reform and a recommitment to the LDS religious life. The Mormons split into factions. Some followed Captain Hunt or Levi Hancock while others reenlisted as Mormon Volunteers,⁷⁸ leaving more than a few to remain in California.⁷⁹

Later, the discharged soldiers of the Mormon Battalion were less than enthusiastically welcomed by church authorities when they entered Salt Lake City. Brigham Young accused the former soldiers of being, "Idol, Lazy, & indolent & with very few exceptions are disipated, indulging in vice & wickedness."⁸⁰ Having experienced army life in California, the boys seemed more self-willed, independent and less willing to accept commandments from the church authorities. Church leaders held most of the men in low esteem, and President Young attested, "I know that the lowest scrapings of Hell were in that Bot (Battalion) . . ."⁸¹ From 1848 until 1855 the ex-soldiers were veritable outcasts from the more respectable elements of saintly society in the Salt Lake Valley.

The First General Festival of the Renowned Mormon Battalion heralded a general rapprochement between the battalion boys and church leaders. By 1855 it was obvious to Brigham Young that contention loomed on the horizon between the United States and the Mormons.⁸² Like them or not, the battalion soldiers formed an available body of trained military personnel. Church authorities hoped to separate wheat from chaff and build a force to defend the kingdom. For those who remained loyal to their church, Brigham Young resurrected the favorable image of the Mormon Battalion. The reunion fostered the creation of a contingent of true believers that marched behind Brother Brigham's banner in the forthcoming Utah War.⁸³

Images of Early California

NOTES

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Historical Society of Southern California

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Images of Early California

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⁶⁸ Elmer, Journal, June 10, 1847.

⁶⁹ Hancock, Journal, April 4, 1847.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, April 14, 1847.

⁷¹ Golder, ed., *Journal of Henry Standage*, p. 217.

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⁷³ Pace, Diary, April 18, 1847.

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