

THE MOUNTAIN MEADOWS MASSACRE

THE STORY CONTINUES TO UNFOLD 162 YEARS LATER

by MICHAEL ZIMMER



Utah State Historical Society (both)

ON A FROSTY spring morning in March 1877, just shy of 20 years since the bloody massacre that would forever be linked to his name, John Doyle Lee returned to the scene of what many consider Utah's darkest hours. It wasn't a voluntary appearance. Tried and sentenced to death for his part in the murders of 120 men, women and children at Mountain Meadows, Lee had been brought back to face – alone – the consequences of decisions made by him and others in this lonely dell.

One can't help but wonder at the thoughts that tumbled through his mind as he sat calmly atop the foot of his own open coffin. Did he reflect on that day when, in this very meadow, he had set into motion the events that would begin his slow, downward spiral from grace? Or did he face mortality with the same granite-jawed stoicism that guided him throughout his life – a penniless orphan and convert to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, one of the origi-

nal colonizers of Southern Utah, an Indian agent, a territorial legislator, and finally, a ferry operator on the Colorado River?

That John D. Lee was a man of his word cannot be denied. When freed on \$15,000 bail before his final trial in Beaver, his bondsman and family members urged him to flee to Mexico. His response? He would rather "die like a man than live like a dog."

Although Lee's execution was meant to be conducted in private, word had gotten out and curious onlookers gathered on surrounding hills to observe the proceedings. Guards were posted to prevent interference, but there was no meddling. Three wagons were arranged in a rough U formation with the open end facing the casket; blankets were hung between the wagons to shield the identity of the five-member firing squad. At 10:30 a.m., United States Marshal William Nelson read the official decree of the court, finding Lee guilty of "complicity of murder" and sentencing him to death. Lee himself chose the method.

Above right, Utahns replace stones on the marker, which was dedicated (left) in the 1930s.

A simple monument was erected to mark the place where a group of Utahns attacked a wagon train of emigrants passing through Southern Utah in 1857.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints



After the reading of the warrant, the condemned man rose to speak. He did so for about five minutes. To those invited few standing near enough to hear – a small military escort to protect the federal officers, some newspapermen, a photographer and perhaps two dozen private citizens – there was an unmistakable tone of bitterness as he spoke of his perceived betrayal by former friends and church leaders, but there was no condemnation of the church itself. To the end, he remained convinced he was being sacrificed to protect a greater good.

By all accounts, Lee appeared resigned to his fate, grim but composed as he calmly removed his overcoat and “comforter” and returned to his seat on the foot of the coffin. There was no protest as a blindfold was placed over his eyes, but he did ask that his arms remain free, which was granted. At 11 a.m., Lee raised his hands above his head and sat erect. History records that his final words were: “Let them shoot the balls through my heart! Don’t let them mangle my body!”

As flame and smoke erupted from the blanket-shrouded wagons, the body of John D. Lee was flung backward into the open casket. In the words of a *Salt Lake Tribune* reporter who was there: “The old man never flinched.”

ON SEPT. 11, 1857, a very different scenario played out in that oblong valley 30 miles north of St. George. Although the events leading up to the massacre remain shrouded in accusations and denials, there has never been any question of the outcome. One hundred and twenty bodies – members of the Baker-Fancher wagon train from Arkansas – were too many to be swept under anyone’s rug.

Most Utahns have heard of the tragedy at Mountain Meadows, but beyond the acceptance that Mormons disguised as Indians were the perpetrators, few details of the incident are widely known. That isn’t surprising considering the volumes of conflicting information that have surfaced in the years since. Even today, not everyone agrees on what happened.

What is known is that on a warm Friday afternoon, after four days of siege and sniper fire, the approximately 120 surviving members – out of an estimated 130 to 140 – of the California-bound wagon train surrendered to a Mormon militia carrying a white flag and the promise of salvation. The Arkansans were told that a truce had been established with the attacking Indians. All the emigrants had to do was give up their weapons and turn over the contents of their wagons. Low on food and ammunition, they reluctantly agreed.

Disarmed, the weary Arkansans were led out of their bullet-splintered shelter and escorted north. The most severely wounded and some of the smaller children rode in a pair of wagons. The rest walked. Women, children and a few wounded men followed behind the wagons. The rest of the men and the older boys brought up the rear, escorted by armed guards to protect them from native treachery. Although the emigrants were aware by then that whites were involved in the siege, they couldn’t have known these men were one and the same.

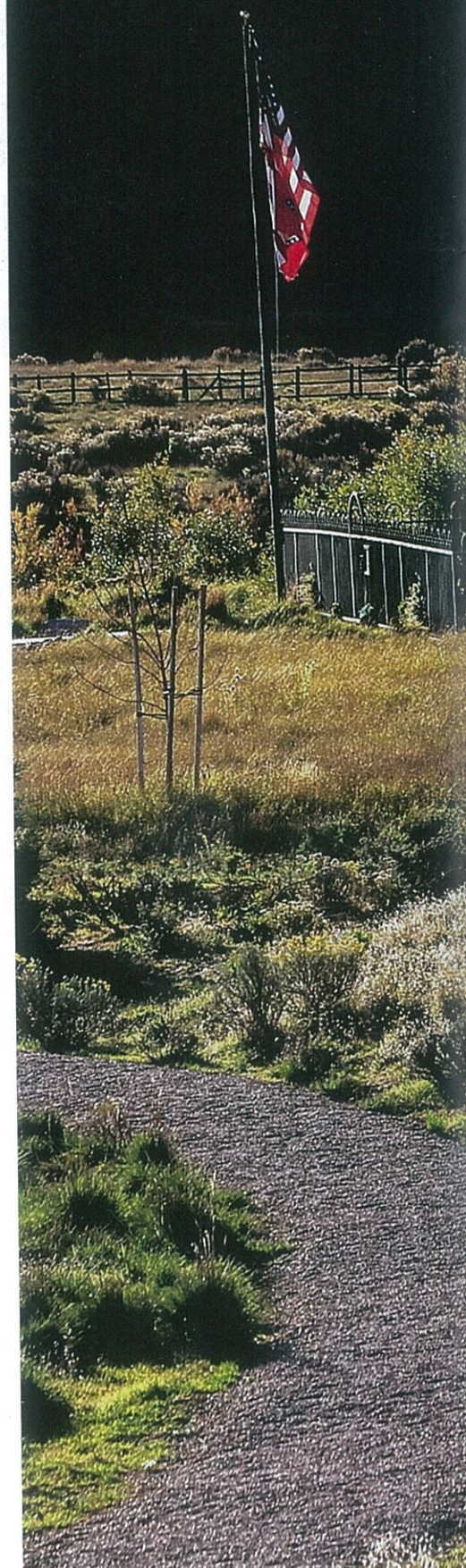
The Arkansas emigrants thought they were returning to Cedar City. Instead, after perhaps half a mile, a loud command to “Halt! Do your duty!” rang across the meadow, and their saviors turned on them as wolves on sheep. Within minutes, all but 17 of the very smallest – those deemed “too young to tell tales,” according to militia major John Higbee – had been cut down by gunfire, blade and club.

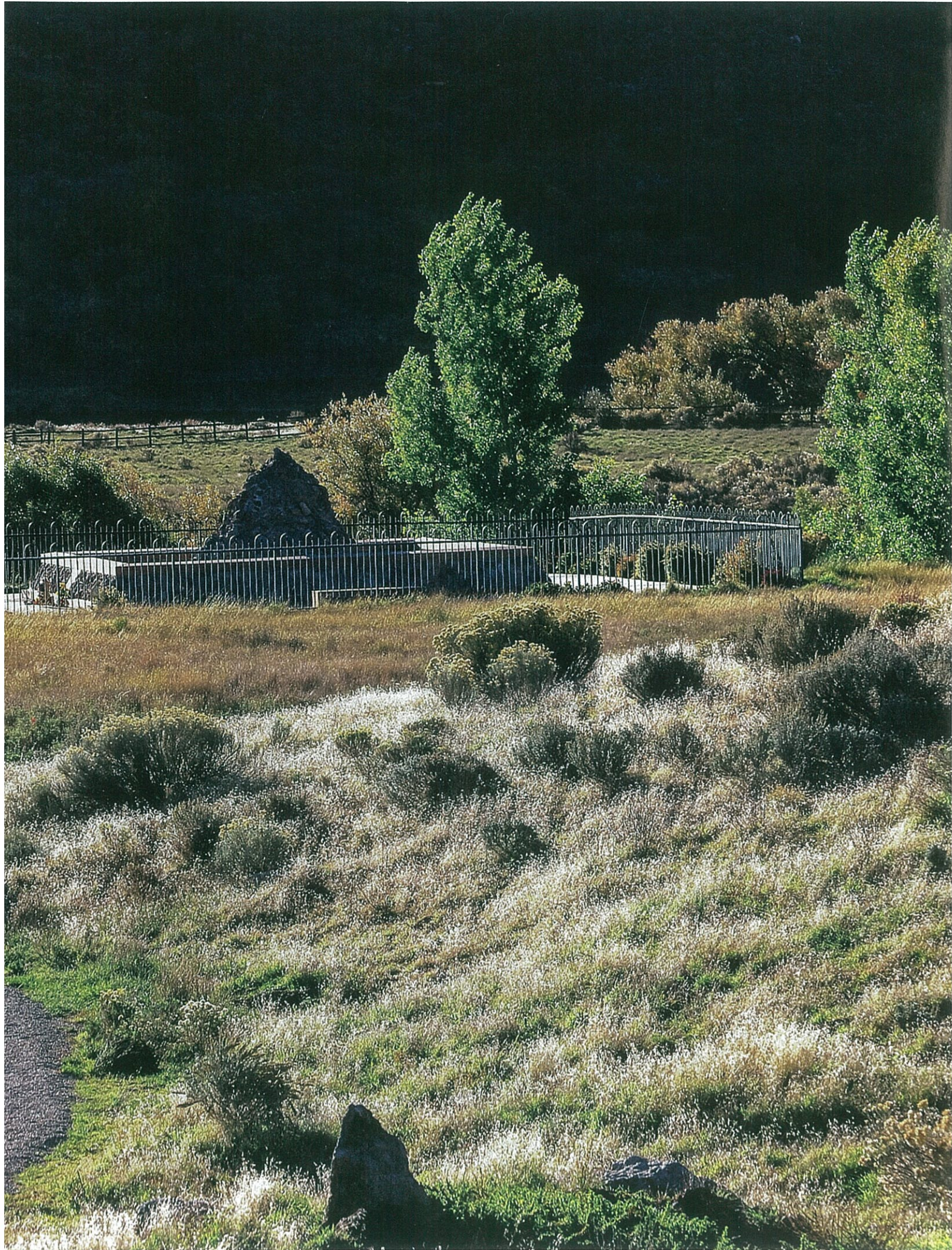
Ironically, these assassins were largely considered men of good character. Many were civic leaders in and around Cedar City; some held ranks in the local militia. All were faithful followers of the church.

Among them might have been a few Paiutes from some of the surrounding bands, said to have been persuaded to join in the attack by militia leaders who promised them a share of the plunder. What wasn’t mentioned, to the Paiutes at least, was that their presence would also allow them to shoulder the blame if word of the massacre got out – although by the time the final massacre took place, some say, most of the Indians had grown weary of the siege and gone home.

Some 120 emigrants died in the controversial attack in this meadow north of St. George.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints







The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which for years distanced itself from the tragedy, owns and maintains the memorial site, designated a National Historic Landmark. Descendants of the Arkansans killed there approved the signage.

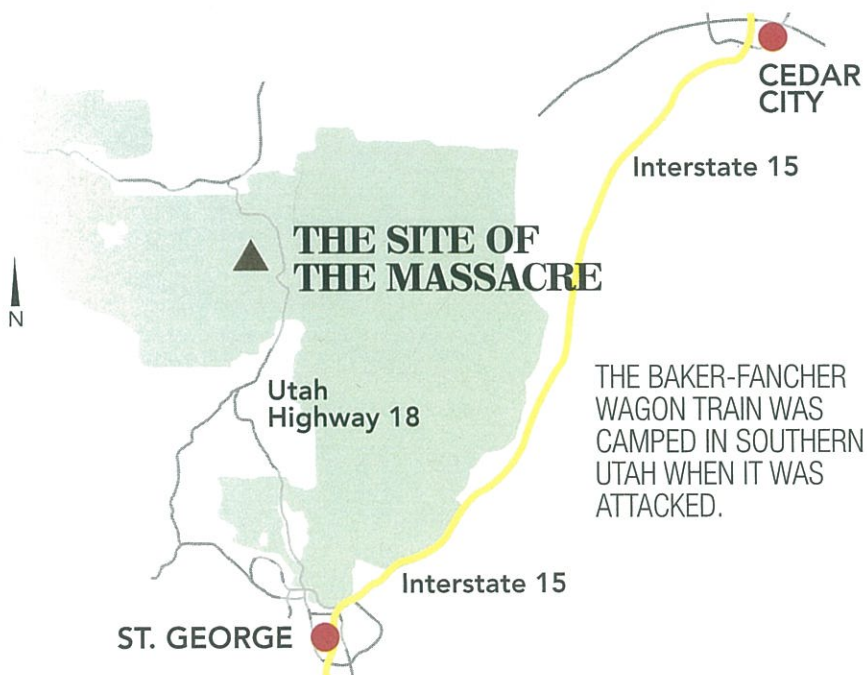
THE ALLEGED MOTIVES behind the slaughter were a potpourri of fear, lies, insults and misunderstandings. Only recently have historians begun to separate the truth from the chaff, and even today there is a lack of consensus. One thing is certain: Utah in 1857, seemingly on the brink of war with the United States, was a place of turmoil and distrust.

After years of increasing defiance by locals who often tweaked federal laws to accommodate Mormon beliefs, U.S. President James Buchanan decided to send troops to Utah to quell what he and others in Washington felt was a brewing rebellion. Confirmation of the army's approach reached Salt Lake City only weeks before the Baker-Fancher train. Given their memories of past injustices in Missouri, Illinois and elsewhere, the Mormons were anxious and suspicious. Fearing a prolonged conflict, church president Brigham Young ordered the brethren to start hoarding supplies, especially food, grain for livestock, and ammunition – the same merchandise passing emigrants expected to replenish in Salt Lake City.

With these goods in relative abundance, yet unavailable to travelers, hard feelings and hostility developed. Rumors of aggression preceded the Baker-Fancher train as it left the Salt Lake Valley. Its members were accused of poisoning a community spring

near Corn Creek that killed a number of cattle and several people who ate the contaminated meat. Also inflaming the Mormon pioneers was a claim that some of the murderers of church founder Joseph Smith – as well as the pistol that was used – were on the wagon train. Although these claims have been largely dismissed by historians, in the weeks before the massacre, they were moving south with the speed of a wildfire.

IN 1857, MOUNTAIN Meadows lay beyond the southwestern-most fringe of Mormon settlement. By the time the Arkansans reached the valley on Sept. 6, they believed they could afford to rest themselves and their livestock before plunging into the Mojave Desert for the final leg of their journey. The loose organization of their camp implies they were unaware of any threat.



John D. Lee was the lone man executed for his role in the Mountain Meadows Massacre.

The first attack was launched on Monday, Sept. 7. Although only 3 years old at the time, Sarah Baker would recall that bloody morning for the rest of her life. Her family had been sitting down to a breakfast of quail and cottontail, she said, when the first shots rang out. Her father, George Baker, was struck and wounded, as were between 10 and 15 others, at least seven of whom were killed. Others – perhaps as many as 20 – would die as the siege dragged on for another four days.

With the initial attack repulsed, the Arkansans pulled their wagons into a tight circle and chained the wheels together so they couldn't be moved. Then they dug trenches inside the circle for better protection. At least two other attacks were launched in the following days, but the Arkansans drove off their assailants. Survivors and victors alike described the stench of dead cattle bloating in the sun, of badly wounded men



Wikimedia Commons

National Park Service

and women, of swarming flies, dwindling water and no fresh food. Sharpshooters from the surrounding hills kept the emigrants in a constant state of agitation and despair.

Sarah, one of the 17 survivors under the age of 6, never forgot. "[E]ven when you're that young," she would write decades later in her memoirs, "you don't forget the horror of having your father gasp for breath and grow limp, while you have your arms around his neck, screaming in terror.

"And you wouldn't forget it, either, if you saw your own mother topple over in the wagon beside you with a big red splotch getting bigger and bigger on the front of her calico dress."

Rachel Dunlap remembered hiding in the sage during the Friday massacre with two of her sisters lying dead beside her. Nancy Huff was 4 at the time, and would write later in life that she saw her mother shot in the forehead, and "women and children [who] screamed and clung together."

IF YOU GO

THERE ARE NO playgrounds here, no picnic tables or shaded campgrounds. The wind rustles the sage as it did over 160 years ago, and birds still sing in the brush, but there is an almost palpable somberness that hangs over the site at times. As if the fear and desperation that once blanketed this lonely meadow can't quite let go.

Today, the Mountain Meadows Massacre site is a National Historic Landmark 40 minutes north of St. George on Utah Highway 18. The property is owned and maintained by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Hiking trails crisscross the meadow, and signage approved jointly by the church and descendants of the Arkansas families help explain what happened. Benches and restrooms are available..

Four monuments occupy the site; a fifth rests on a hill overlooking the meadow, with a view stone that points out locations – such as the wagon site – where the acts of violence were committed.



Harald Eide



Top: Dan Lund. Left and above: Harald Eide

Interpretive signs, agreed upon by descendants of the emigrants who died and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, attempt to explain the 162-year-old tragedy.

THOSE WHO VISITED the meadow in the days and weeks afterward discovered the hastily buried bodies of the slain – infants, children and adults – already dug up by coyotes and wolves. As word spread, Southern Utahns began placing the blame on Indians, but the accusations weren't sticking. By October, California newspapers were reporting on the massacre, and rumors of the church's participation were spreading. But while word travels swiftly, governments move at a much slower pace. It was March of 1858 before Congress ordered an official inquiry, and 1859 by the time the first official reports were recorded.

Captain Charles Brewer was a surgeon with the judicial investigating party that visited the site in May of 1859. He reported finding human bones, hair and scraps of clothing scattered across the scene. Many of the skulls, he wrote, bore marks of violence, such as bullet holes and blunt trauma, and others had been "cleft with some sharp-edged instrument."

Major James Carleton reported similar findings – dispersed bones and clothing and locks of hair caught in the sagebrush. Most of the skulls, he said, had been "shot through with rifle or revolver," which he felt implicated mostly white participants, as Indians in that region and at that early date were still armed mostly with bows and arrows.

Federal Judge John Cradlebaugh, in charge of the investigation, interviewed several local Paiute leaders who reinforced the growing belief that white men had done most of the

killing at Mountain Meadows. A Paiute leader called Jackson told Cradlebaugh that a man – probably John Lee or one of his interpreters – had promised the Indians a large share of the spoils if they helped eliminate the Arkansans. Jackson claimed the Paiutes went to the meadow to observe, but didn't take part in the fighting. Others allow there were a few Indians among the aggressors, but not many.

An analysis of some of the emigrants' remains was conducted in 2000 by an assistant professor of anthropology at Syracuse University. Her conclusions, based on the types of wounds and native weaponry of the period, also seemed to support limited Indian involvement.

AFTER NEARLY A CENTURY and a half of distancing itself from the affair, the church no longer denies the involvement of Southern Utah brethren who believed they were heeding the wishes of church apostles. Indeed, the church has taken steps to help heal the animosity that has festered for so long between it and those most viscerally affected by the affair – notably the descendants of the Arkansas emigrants and members of the Paiute tribe.

Phil Bolinger, of Hindsville, Arkansas, president of the Mountain Meadows Monument Foundation and a descendant of the Fancher family, says the Fanchers, Bakers and other families who lost kin in the massacre have started to come to terms with the tragedy – due in no small part to the church's recent openness. Terry Fancher,

president of the Mountain Meadows Association, shares that view. He points out that the monuments on the site today have been funded in large part by the church. Still, neither man feels the full story has been told.

Dorena Martineau, cultural resource director for the Paiute Indian Tribe of Utah, agrees. She says the tribe's alleged participation in the massacre is the lingering result of the original attempts by Southern Utahns to shift the blame. "We had no involvement," she says with emphatic frustration.

Martineau points to written accounts that claim the militia furnished the tribe with firearms, and promised them more arms and ammunition, along with cattle and other plunder, if they assisted in eradicating the Arkansans. Then she asks: Considering those volatile times, who would give guns and ammunition to Indians? Not the local settlers, she insists.

Non-Indian historians note that there was no organized Paiute tribe at that time; not like today, with a central government and recognized officers. In Utah and elsewhere, Paiutes were a loose affiliation of linguistically connected bands. While the vast majority of Paiutes may not have been aware of the massacre until they were accused of the crime, it's possible, perhaps even likely, historians say, that a few local Paiutes were on hand.

Even so, former church historian Richard E. Turley, co-author of 2008's *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*,

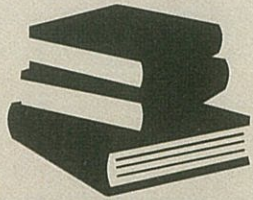
stresses that it's important to accept that the real culprits were members of the local militia. If any Paiutes did participate, he said, it was because of coercion by high-ranking officials in Southern Utah. Turley, now director of the church's Public Affairs Department, has devoted considerable time

and effort to setting the record straight about what happened at the meadows.

Like others, he wants to see the wounds that were created by John D. Lee and others so many years ago healed – and believes only the truth, a “complete and honest evaluation of the tragedy,” can achieve that. 🐾



T.O. Smith



FURTHER READING

FOR THOSE WANTING to know more about the events surrounding the Mountains Meadows Massacre, these sources are recommended:

- *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*, by Juanita Brooks (Stanford University Press, 1950)
- *Blood of the Prophets, Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, by Will Bagley (University of Oklahoma Press, 2002)
- *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, by Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley, and Glen M. Leonard (Oxford University Press, 2008)
- The Mountain Meadows Monument Foundation – mmmf.org
- Mountain Meadows Massacre Descendants – mtnmeadowsmassacredescendants.com
- Mountain Meadows Association – mtn-meadows-assoc.com

Come Play IN OUR BIG BACKYARD



Canyon Pintado Hill Climb Sept 6-8



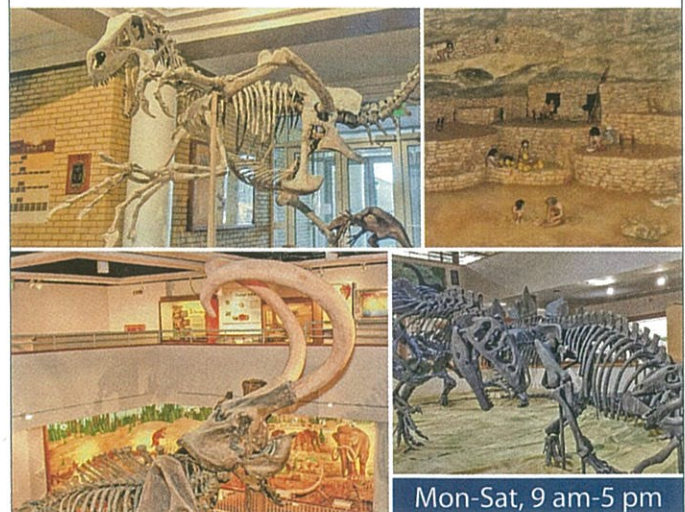
Rangely, Colorado



For more information:
970-675-5290
rangelychamber.com

Got an hour?

We have dinosaurs, a mammoth
and prehistoric Indian artifacts



Mon-Sat, 9 am-5 pm

Closed on major holidays

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY EASTERN PREHISTORIC MUSEUM

155 E Main St • Price, UT
usueastern.edu/museum



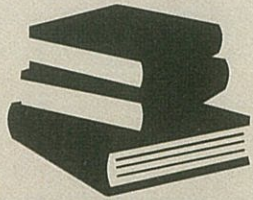
stresses that it's important to accept that the real culprits were members of the local militia. If any Paiutes did participate, he said, it was because of coercion by high-ranking officials in Southern Utah. Turley, now director of the church's Public Affairs Department, has devoted considerable time

and effort to setting the record straight about what happened at the meadows.

Like others, he wants to see the wounds that were created by John D. Lee and others so many years ago healed – and believes only the truth, a “complete and honest evaluation of the tragedy,” can achieve that. 🐾



T.O. Smith



FURTHER READING

FOR THOSE WANTING to know more about the events surrounding the Mountains Meadows Massacre, these sources are recommended:

- *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*, by Juanita Brooks (Stanford University Press, 1950)
- *Blood of the Prophets, Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, by Will Bagley (University of Oklahoma Press, 2002)
- *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, by Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley, and Glen M. Leonard (Oxford University Press, 2008)
- The Mountain Meadows Monument Foundation – mmmf.org
- Mountain Meadows Massacre Descendants – mtnmeadowsmassacredescendants.com
- Mountain Meadows Association – mtn-meadows-assoc.com

Come Play IN OUR BIG BACKYARD



Canyon Pintado Hill Climb Sept 6-8



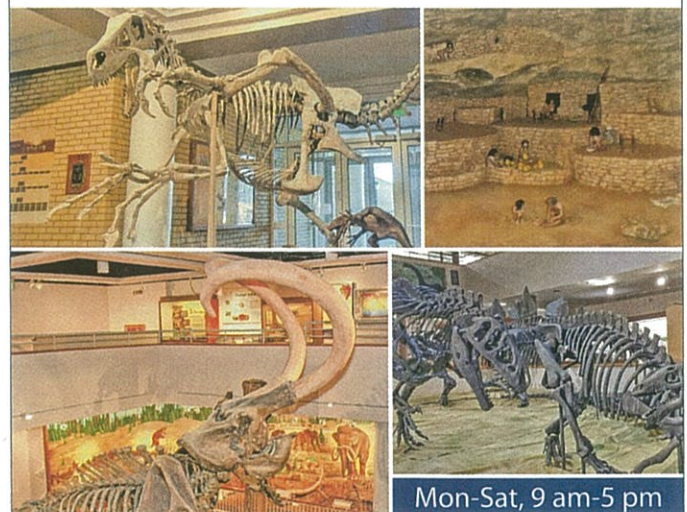
Rangely, Colorado



For more information:
970-675-5290
rangelychamber.com

Got an hour?

We have dinosaurs, a mammoth
and prehistoric Indian artifacts



Mon-Sat, 9 am-5 pm

Closed on major holidays

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY EASTERN
PREHISTORIC MUSEUM

155 E Main St • Price, UT
usueastern.edu/museum

