Part II – On The Frontier

> *"If God meant to interfere in the degeneracy of mankind would he not have done so by now? …The way of the world is to bloom and to flower and die but in the affairs of men there is no waning and the noon of his expression signals the onset of night…This you see here, these ruins wondered at by tribes of savages, do you not think that this will be again? Aye. And again. With other people, with other sons."*
>
> — *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West*, Cormac McCarthy

FROM THE BEGINNING, America's frontier invited a religious longing for the return of Christ and an exploration of the New World as the place it might happen. It was an open question that occupied clergy, mystics, scientists and even American presidents. Now it was of uppermost concern to Joseph Smith as he restored a "true church" to a continent whose past and future, he believed, were held in the *Book of Mormon*. He would build Zion, a New Jerusalem.

> ***"We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes; that Zion will be built upon this [the American] continent."***
>
> — Joseph Smith, "The Articles of Faith"

It was a natural progression from ancient civilizations of Nephites and Lamanites to a holy city somewhere on the American frontier. The frontier was a landscape for imagining the world as it might be. Joseph was as serious as an owl about Zion and had a vision of gathering a New Israel in America. Whoever joined his church would be a recovered Israelite in a kingdom of God and would greet the returning Christ.

He prolifically wrote additional scriptural text, found converts, turned them into missionaries and town builders, and moved his church from state to state looking for a place to build Zion, only to be chased away again and again. The chasing created a Mormon exodus story of social conflict, violence and pioneer ordeals. They added myths, martyrs and heroes to their origin story of angels and gold plates.

ORIGIN STORIES have a sacred center, a place in the landscape that holds a power no other place holds. For Joseph, the *Book of Mormon* sacralized the entire American continent with its story of civilizations who followed God's command. Through further revelation he learned it had been home to the Garden of Eden, the very beginning of humanity. It was clear to him that a new Zion would be America's sacred center.

ZION —THE PURE IN HEART
— artist unknown, LDS Gospel Source

It could only happen on the western frontier. The frontier held the essential myths to explain how a nation could be made. Recurring narratives made claims about ideal, authentic, good Americanness and its opposites of "wilderness" and "red savages." Romance literature imagined a landscape where American heroes could express the new national virtues by overcoming those opposites. Propagandists sold a classless geography of hope and second chances. You could cut loose even if you weren't sure what you were cutting loose from, take a manly gamble and make a fast buck on free grass. It was in the American character to fall for the pig in a poke promises of opportunity and get-rich-quick schemes.

For Joseph, who abhorred wealth and capitalism, it was an eschatological frontier in the apocalyptic future of the Millennium, where a young religious community could struggle for its survival. His was a call to reimagine America as much as to reimagine the End Times. Religion, not government, would ensure peace and social harmony, and energize the nation toward righteousness. The general welfare would no longer rely on capitalism. Resources would be redistributed to end poverty. The spiritual and the practical could be managed together until egalitarian social order prevailed.

No one was going to sit passively on hilltops waiting for Christ. Zion was a building project for a church of action, and Joseph had a blueprint in mind. It was a Jeffersonian apportioning of land infused with a religious ideology of place. He needed men with skills to build towns and temples, men who knew how to keep order and to prosper. The multitudes would come later. He sent out missionaries to spread the word about the miraculous *Book of Mormon* and the possibility of Zion. Converts began to appear and Joseph saw the small seeds of God's true kingdom on earth and the social order of eternity. Even in the tumult of reinvention on the nineteenth-century frontier, Zion was an audacious move.

JOSEPH SMITH'S IDEALIZED PLAT OF ZION

HARD TIMES were part of the frontier myth, part of reaping the reward, but Zion was never supposed to be a hard times story. But hard times came, and the fault was never seen to be in the theory, it was in the frontier and in human nature.

Joseph first fiddled with Zion in Ohio, in a muddy frontier town near Lake Eeerie. He laid sacred cornerstones, built a small temple and a bank, and grew his small church of Latter-day Saints as a shadow of himself and his new scripture. He sent missionaries to farmers, and to Native Americans who he considered to be direct descendants of the ancient Lamanites (they showed little interest in the *Book of Mormon* version of themselves).

Things went well until they didn't. For one thing, the heavens got a little too open for Joseph, too many personal revelations and ecstasies, and too few lines of authority. For another, experiments with a separate and pious Mormon economy left local businessmen and the governor of Ohio suspicious. It left many of his Saints dubious about his economic wisdom. There were arrests, apostasies and panic, and after early signs of violence between Mormons and Gentiles there was a fleeing to Missouri (in the Mormon world view anyone not a Mormon was a Gentile).

Once in Missouri, the original Garden of Eden was revealed to Joseph. He was confident he had found a sacred landscape and tried again to establish Zion, this time more theoretically with physical elements of centrality and axis that he imagined extending to satellite communities, perhaps all of America one day.

But things got nasty again. Neighboring land owners began worry about the political and economic clout of Mormons, particularly given Joseph's anti-slavery sentiments. Battles and exchanges of raids took place until there was a flat-out massacre of Mormon settlers. The Missouri governor ordered all Mormons removed from his state, by "extermination if necessary." Mormons were feeling their Mormoness through conflict.

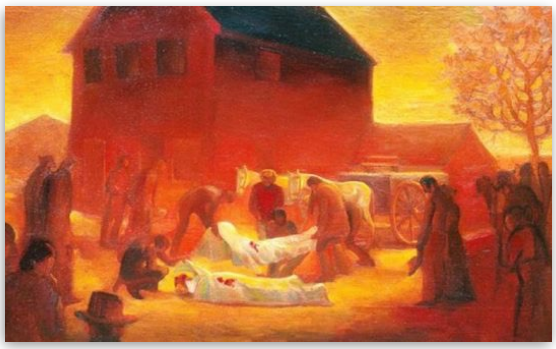
Joseph moved his Saints again. He took them to the banks of the Mississippi River in Illinois where he bought the swampy land of a small town. He named it Nauvoo ("beauty and repose" in Hebrew). He was more realistic about the Americanness of his Saints, allowing secular spaces for commerce. The streets were attractive, houses and storefronts well-built. It became one of the most populous and prosperous cities in Illinois and once again people grew nervous about Mormons in their midst.

TROUBLE IN MISSOURI

"… to the mob that comes on us to disturb us; it shall be between us and them a war of extermination."

An antagonistic local newspaper challenged Joseph's authenticity as a prophet and outed the still secretive practice of polygamy, which he had discussed only with the trusted elite of his church. Joseph called it "false charges" (he knew polygamy would bring trouble). He argued the paper was a threat to public peace. City council agreed and ordered the printing press destroyed. Public outcry raised militias on both sides and brought the governor of Illinois to town. Joseph landed in jail again. This time he was murdered in his cell by members of the city militia left to guard him. He returned fire with a pistol brought to him, along with a bottle of wine, by his supporters before he fell from a window, sat upright in the street and died. It was a moment made for legend.

Joseph's murder gave Mormons a new hero — the martyr — and made the mythology of persecution permanent. They considered his martyrdom evidence that he was a prophet of God whose enemies conspired against him. Before his death, he had told his people "if any more of our brethren are slain or driven from their lands in Missouri by the mob we will give ourselves no rest until we are avenged of our enemies to the uttermost." His words endured beyond his death in an oath repeated for a few decades in Mormon temple rituals to "avenge the blood of the prophets."


THE MARTYRDOM OF JOSEPH

"We've got a problem. There are good people on this earth who think they're doing God a service to kill us."

There were conflicting accounts as to who was to do the actual avenging, the Lord or the Saints. It's likely that Joseph preferred the avenging be left to God, except in those cases where enemies "sought thy life, and thy life is endangered by him, then thou art justified."

In my family, his martyrdom and the frontier "burnings and chasings" functioned as reminders of our history. Grandma Jane, the Scottish branch of the family tree, had an extravagance of spirit for vivifying our history and its legends. She described the murder as an actual witness might, his beatific face lifeless and blood spreading on his white shirt. "The blood of a prophet was shed," she would say whenever she found an occasion to bring up Joseph's martyrdom. She transformed it into a warning about the precariousness of Mormons in the modern world. We might not be murdered for our righteousness, but we were likely to be ridiculed for it.

Though I'm sure she was beyond wanting to literally avenge his blood, she would remind me there was more blood to come, "In the Last Days the bodies of prophets will lie in the streets." Sometimes I tried to imagine that bloody scene in Nauvoo, but I was more concerned with the bodies still to come, and in what cities. I tried to imagine how that might look in black and white on the TV news. It seemed too creepy for television.

The Glory of the Ordeal

MYTHS ARE BORN OUT OF EXPERIENCE. They justify and explain the experience, and point to power beyond the experience. The myth becomes vital to a community. Joseph's origin story was full of fugitive characters — brother against brother in war, sinners whose skin turned dark, Jesus appearing in ancient America — and prized because it answered something about human existence and foretold the future. Frontier persecution gave the Mormons a modern exodus story of direct experience. It was a crossing to safety in which the pioneer became a signifier of faith and a tragic hero and a way to be Mormon.

THE MORMON TRAIL, CIRCA 1850

Mormons were the most hated white people in America and their prophet was dead. Brigham Young, the second-in-command, took over and said he was giving up on America. He moved his people away from conflict again, further west to "a place that no one else wants." Beyond the Missouri River was a landscape unlike any of them had faced before — the Great Plains, daunting mountains and then the fierce deserts of the Great Basin. But it was also a landscape with an ancient and secret history revealed when an angel appeared to say God wanted to communicate.

"It seemed the Lord fitted the back for the burden. Every day we realized that the hand of God was over us and that he made good his promises unto us day by day …"

— Patience Loader, daughter of an early pioneer family

They needed new myths, shared reasons to survive in that landscape. If Joseph and the *Book of Mormon* were right they were in a landscape meant for them. It was a journey of Mormoness more important than the destination. They saw God's hand in every bush, berry and rutted road vanishing into a river, in every river that froze over or melted just when it needed to. Their wagon trains moved as a community and a culture. They built roads, bridges and ferries. When there was no money for wagons they piled goods into handcarts and pulled them a thousand miles.

As a human experience it was a wretched and sometimes fatal trail of abandoned goods, dead animals and graves, the living ragged and sick with dysentery, cholera and pneumonia. Terrible weather, disease, failing wagons and children buried along the way became a community memory, and so did songs and dances in the camps. The Mormon Trail became a prominent part of a sacred history, more so than the sailing route of Lehi from the Arabian peninsula to the Americas.

The Saints where never sure exactly where they were going. They unhitched their wagons in the Salt Lake Valley, where they saw high mountains as a battlement and vast deserts as arid moats. Brigham promised "millions upon millions of acres of land lie before you unoccupied, with a soil as rich as Eden." Eighty thousand newly-minted Mormons moved into hundreds of new towns in what later became seven states. Methodists, Presbyterians and Baptists opportunistically dispersed churches in frontier towns, but Mormons had a mythic story about themselves and a plan. They built the towns they needed.

Many towns remained small communities — like the town I grew up in — and played their part in the frontier myth of the small community and the open landscape as an opportunity to leave an overcivilized or decaying society behind and create a new one. Zion may have been imagined as a purified religious community, but it turned out Mormons were more American than one might have thought at the time. Even for European converts it was a way to be in America, and to remake themselves in its essential myths.

BRIGHAM YOUNG (CIRCA 1850)

Joseph had become a political actor, but Brigham became a grander actor, as if he was the king of an independent, theocratic nation. His relationship with the federal government was mostly animosity. He set aside circumspection about polygamy and made it central to Mormon theology.

"I am determined to cut every thread of this kind and live free and independent, untrammeled by any of their detestable customs and practices."

— Brigham Young

None of this — the theocracy, the polygamy, the disdain for the federal government — comported with the national identity and its narratives. Countersymbols of the narrative included Indians, outlaws, land barons and Mormons. There were demands for solutions to the "Mormon problem in the West." The U.S Army marched toward Utah to impose constitutional law on theocracy and Brigham threatened to scorch the earth if they arrived. Anti-bigamy laws passed in Congress and federal marshals were sent to "root out an immoral civilization."

The Last of the Sticks

YOU MIGHT WONDER what happened to the gathering of Zion? To what end had the angel in the woods, the prophecies, the frontier violence and the ordeal of the exodus pointed? That's where I come into the story, in a small town in Utah's rural desert country. It began its community life as the last settlement organized by Brigham. He died one week later, after thirty years of Zion-making that earned him a nickname, "The American Moses."

Our settlers were mostly from Scandinavia and Britain, which were fruitful grounds for the early Mormon missionaries. Hans and Anna from Denmark, and Robert and Margaret, newly married in Scotland, crossed the Atlantic and most of America. They joined a congregation in building a church with a steeple that directed their attention to heaven. Their children and their children's children stayed put as the the branches of my family tree.

THE CONGREGATION BUILDING OUR CHURCH (CIRCA 1890)

Fathers and sons teamed their horses in pairs, one pair ahead of the other, hitched them to plows and dug canals to irrigate semi-arid farms. They wore broad-brimmed hats and long-sleeved shirts in summer, added scarves and coats in the fall and kept digging. They built winter dugouts, then houses and brought their families. They were the symbolic families who made a forbidding and uncivilized landscape recognizable as Zion. It was another of those collective memories we appropriated to serve the needs of the present, a circle of wagons and reverence in contrast to an atomized modern world.

"We endured willingly many hardships and cheerfully made many sacrifices in order to carry on what we sincerely believed to be God's works in subduing a desert and advancing civilization."
— journal of a wife and settler (1880)

When one of them died, it was common to remember their family line as a company of pioneers who had shared the experience of "the fearful mobbing" and had been delivered from "the bitter enemies," as those "with children hungry, almost naked, footsore and themselves nearly done for." Women were remembered as "a faithful wife, mother, and saint," who had "gone to rejoin her family, husband, children and the martyred ones." There were celebrated for maternal care under extraordinary conditions. Men were remembered for "answering the calling," and for dutifully and safely bringing those women (sometimes plural wives) and children, with "all their worldly goods loaded into a wagon," to complete "the bulwark of Mormonism." These memorial memories were never questioned. They were proof of our worth.

IT'S THE 1950s, and we are well short of a hundred years in that rural corner of Zion. Our standoff with the federal government is long over. Like the rest of our church, we've given up theocracy, communalism and polygamy. There are two ideologies — ours and America's — that are no longer entirely oppositional. But to some extent we still try to maintain a subaltern identity.

"The end of polygamy was more than simply the end of a marriage system; it was an admission that, in large measure, the Mormons attempt to make of themselves an independent civilization had failed."

—The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith, Matthew Bowman

We still believe in some kind of Zion (it's more about high moral character than geography now). We expect to play some part in the end of the world, but we're not sure when. We've kept the collective memory of an idiosyncratic community even though we've dropped certain historical elements in order to land somewhere between peculiarity and assimilation, wondering how much of each is too much. Our pioneers are still archetypal heroes. They signify the exertion of an idealized past that should still inform our present goals. The *Book of Mormon* is still tangible proof of our power, though it's as much script as scripture in the drama of being Mormon.

A two-lane highway comes out of the mountains and fastens us to other small towns like beads on a string — more like the cheap Chinese ones than anything expensive. It's our Main Street. If you're someone from somewhere else, driving for whatever reason on that highway, you see us as typical western hopefulness, a town of low-slung buildings and square houses. In our postwar enthusiasm we remade Main Street to be more like America. But businesses are still family histories, and everyone knows the pedigrees of resales, expansions and failures.

LAST OF OUR COOPERATIVE STORES

"What I say is, a town isn't a town without a bookstore. It may call itself a town, but unless it's got a bookstore, it knows it's not foolin' a soul."

—American Gods, Neil Gaiman

Little remains of the settlement days. There's the old Co-Op Mercantile from our half-hearted attempts at communalism. You bartered with eggs, grains or labor if you had no money. No one was turned away. Uncle Mackell runs it now. He added electrical appliances and transistor radios to the line of goods.

The old church you see is from the 1890s. My great-grandparents helped build it and it's still the tallest building in town. In its day it was the most expensive church in the county, built of brick and with intricate woodwork by a local craftsman. Now the foundation is failing in our soils which don't bear heavy weight well. It no longer galvanizes Main Street, but our past hasn't entirely vanished into myth yet.

SCHOOL AND CHURCH ON MAIN STREET

There's a grocery store with Swanson TV dinners in the frozen goods case (built and operated by Maurice), a drugstore with soda fountain stools and a hamburger grill (Walt and Verna own it and live in the apartment above), a movie house (Ted and Willard are partners), a tavern where high school boys use a pool table in the back and sneak six-packs of beer out the side door (it's old Klecker's place, who likes to talk about baseball and claims he played one season for the Chicago Cubs).

There's a post office at the corner of Main Street and Center Street (Myrna is the clerk who leaves a note in your mailbox and hands you the package over a counter), and a town hall with a fire truck parked next to it. There's a twentieth-century piece of field artillery and a flag pole in the lawn, and a metal plaque with names of the county men killed in the world wars.

It's early summer and the boxelder leaf roller has nearly defoliated the trees planted by the first settlers. The rest of the trees have died or been removed as improvements to properties and sidewalks. Modest houses are in good repair with decent paint and roofing and solid chimneys. Green lawns green are signs of respectability at the rough edges of the West. We want to be a respectable people. We're trying hard.

There's a new school. When the old school burned down the townspeople went on strike against the idea of their children being bussed to another town. They marched on the school board and got their new school. "We raised all the money we could and then demanded a grant from state," grandpa Will, the Scottish branch of the tree has told me. He went to law school and is the only attorney in town.

It's summer and there are no school classes, so you see me climb into the gunner's seat of the town hall cannon (I'm not sure which war it's from). I'll fire at imagined wartime enemies — mostly "Japs."

Grandpa Will walks past on his way to the post office. He'll talk with Myrna who likes to talk about public improvement projects, like a new reservoir in Joe's Valley. He's is an optimist with faith in community-building. He waves his arm toward Main Street, "Might not look like much to outsiders, but I see God's country."

WALLACE STEGNER WROTE an account our exodus, *The Gathering of Zion*. He reserved most of his praise for the pioneers. It's an admiration for perseverance and empathy for hardship and tragedy, what we knew as the work and the glory. Brigham is praised as America's greatest colonizer, despite Stegner's considerable doubts about his authoritarian practices once he got his people out of the wilderness. He was not satisfied with much of Mormon doctrine and not always precise about it. He credits Mormon pioneers with being "the most organized, disciplined, and successful pioneers in our history." As he did with the West and the frontier in general, there is some debunking of myths in light of how they match up with lived experience.

"In all its history, the American West never saw a more unlikely band of pioneers … They were not colorful—only improbable."

— *The Gathering of Zion,* Wallace Stegner

No one I knew read Stegner at the time. I'm sure we would have been flattered by his admiration of our pioneer heroes for their "suffering, endurance, discipline, faith, brotherly and sisterly charity … Especially their women. Their women were incredible." His acknowledgement of the "endurance and faith necessary to break the Western wilderness" would have resonated with our public memory of our exodus to safety. We would have been less flattered by his characterization of the early Saints as prone to "human cussedness, vengefulness, masochism, backbiting, violence, ignorance, selfishness, and gullibility." He saw modern Mormonism as a religion ill-suited for the modern world, and Mormons as "indomitable only in the pack and adventurous only on orders." Zion had become a a drab, smug and colorless society slumbering in the "last of the sticks," Perhaps worse, in Stegner's view, we were living in America's "most spectacular landscape" without really noticing the splendor.

He had a point about our appreciation of the splendor. It was as nominal and merely picturesque as most Americans. We would not have been the ones, as Barry Lopez later suggested, to write "odes to the Triassic reds of the Colorado Plateau." We had left a pre-mortal world for an earthly one to demonstrate faith, obedience and good moral character, and to earn our way back to an exalted home in heaven. It didn't matter much what was left of earth after we left it.

All Things Must Fail

JOSEPH THOUGHT HE WAS BIRTHING A NEW WORLD — he was hardly the first — and that Zion could be built by capable builders and a coherent plan. Brigham sculpted his ideas about God, polygamy, humanity and salvation into a church rather than a cult scrambling around the frontier. But surely they both understood that all things must fail except God's love, and that civilizations always collapse. It's a central concept of the *Book of Mormon*.

"Without a Zion, and a place of deliverance, we must fall; because the time is near when the sun will be darkened, the moon turned to blood, the stars fall from heaven, and the earth reel to and fro."
— Joseph Smith

A utopia is hard to maintain, it needs to stand outside of history and requires a breaking away. Part of its virtue lies in what's required to reach it. But human nature works against a utopia, and so does cultural momentum. Mormons crossed the frontier with the apocalyptic imperative of a spiritual family willing to give up their past for a new pastness. But they were always Americans at heart. When their millennialism faded they chose to settle in for the long run (as my family had done). Those who could afford large and fashionable houses built them, and prosperity was a providential blessing. They valued free enterprise more than communalism. Zion turned out to be about finding a way to still be "in the world."

Experience is fugitive, it keeps getting away from us. We make a myth about it and hope maybe it won't get away. But the early myths can get in the way when you're no longer a religious community struggling to survive as a separate civilization, so you make new ones. In my growing up years, the mythic imperatives of Missouri, Ohio, Nauvoo and the exodus of a persecuted people had given way to hoping for that right balance between peculiarity and assimilation, and trying to be what we believed America wanted in a model religious minority.

Hardly anyone talked about polygamy or some of the other peculiar aspects of Joseph's cosmology — like my chances of becoming a god in my own right — or Brigham's harsher instructions to stay away from the outside world or his almost war with the U.S. Army. We enjoyed economic booms of coal and uranium and endured the busts. We built a city park and another new school. We added a church building with nothing distinctive about it. The federal government helped with water projects and put an interstate freeway close to us.

But the narratives of Joseph and Brigham and their visions of a world to come still marked us a part of a distinct culture. They held symbols, myths and rituals that were irreplaceable to a community who prized them as essential to its existence. Whatever else you or I may think of them, they had persisted over generations, which is a mark of all great origin stories and myths.

FIRST DENTIST TO STAY PUT IN GOD'S COUNTRY

"We seem to prefer the model of origin by a specific moment of creation — for then we can have heroes and sacred places …[But] historical origin need not match contemporary functions."
— Stephen Jay Gould