

CHAPTER XXXII

THE SALMON RIVER MISSION

Another Mormon outpost was established in 1855, located 379 miles north of the Salt Lake City in the country that was at that time a portion of Oregon, but today is part of Idaho. It was called "The Salmon River Mission."

At the general conference of the Church, April 6, 1855, President Brigham Young called twenty-seven men to establish a mission "among the buffalo hunting Indians of Oregon Country." He instructed them to select a suitable location in the Indian country for the establishment of a Mormon settlement, and to teach the red men the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the arts of peace and civilization.

Thomas S. Smith of Farmington was appointed to be president of the mission. Under his direction the company assembled on the west side of the Bear River in Utah. Shortly after the middle of May the missionaries departed from their rendezvous.

The missionaries journeyed northward to and through the Malad Valley, and then across the divide that separates the waters of the Pacific from those of the Great Basin. Soon they reached Bannock Creek, traveled some twenty miles to Portneuf River, crossed it at McArthur's toll bridge (paying one dollar per wagon), and continued on to the Snake River. Five miles above Fort Hall they repaired an old boat, owned by McArthur and a Mr. Hugo, and used it to ferry their belongings across the river on June 1.

While repairing the boat, the missionaries baptized in the Snake River three Bannock Indian men who had been traveling with them for several days. These were the first converts made by members of this mission.¹

The company followed the west bank of the Snake River to a point within three miles of the present city of Idaho Falls, and then veered northwesterly over a thirty mile stretch of desert. After suffering from the heat and lack of water, the missionaries reached a stream which they called Spring Creek (Birch Creek), filled some barrels with water, and retraced their steps some distance to take the water to some of their famished animals which they had been forced to leave by the wayside.

At Spring Creek the missionaries met a Bannock Indian named

Mattinger, and four other natives who were headed for the Salmon River region. Mattinger encouraged the Mormons to locate on the Salmon River, guided their course in that direction for three days, showed them the Salmon River Pass in the distance, and then left the camp and hurried on ahead to inform the members of his tribe of the approach of the missionaries. Learning from the natives that the Salmon River was the fishing grounds of several tribes of Indians, Smith and his companions decided to locate there.

On June 12, they were met by Sow-wo-o-koo, the Bannock chief with his wife and child, who had ridden on horseback seventy-five miles to welcome the Mormons and encourage them to settle near his tribe and teach them how to work.

He also stated that the camp was welcome to any land that they might select for farming purposes. He was also very anxious that they not go any farther north than Salmon River.²

The following day Colonel Smith and three companions went down the river ahead of the company for the purpose of exploring the surrounding country and selecting a site for the mission. A favorable spot, containing some good meadow and farming land, was located on the Lemhi River which unites with the South Fork of the Salmon River.

On June 18, the company reached the selected site. The missionaries began to dig an irrigation ditch, plow the ground, and build a stockade which they called Fort Lemhi (now Lemhi) in honor of a Book of Mormon character. The stockade was made of logs twelve feet long, three feet of which were in the ground. As soon as possible they constructed a sawmill, a blacksmith shop, and thirteen cabins in the fort. Two massive gates, nine feet high and ten feet wide, were hung. One was situated on the east and the other on the west side of the stockade.

Four days after their arrival, the missionaries had planted several acres of peas, potatoes, corn, and turnips. Hordes of grasshoppers appeared late in July and ate the crops, which made it apparent to the colonists that there would be a scarcity of food before spring. Thereupon President Smith appointed eleven of the group to return to the Mormon Mecca for supplies. They arrived back at Fort Lemhi on November 19, 1855, bringing not only fresh supplies but mail from their relatives in Utah. In December a second party was dispatched to the Mormon settlements

¹Salmon River Mission, May 30, 1858, Ms.

²Ibid., June 12, 1855.

for more supplies. This group returned to Fort Lemhi the following spring, bringing with them twenty-two new colonists.

In harmony with the Mormon land policy, on December 7, 1855, President Smith and some of the other missionaries "surveyed off twenty-two five-acre lots south of the Fort, between the first and second creek, which were drawn for according to their numbers by the brethren present. Some of those present drew for those who were absent."³

On October 9, 1855, William Burgess wrote to George A. Smith in the Basin a glowing report of the excellent country in which they had located and the possibilities it afforded for extensive missionary work among the Lamanites. Quoting:

We can have access to four tribes, Bannocks, Shoshones, Nepertians, and Flatheads. . . . The Indians are very honest here. . . . They abhor a thief, comparing him to a wolf, and they think a wolf is the meanest animal that had

Throughout the winter of 1855-56 the missionaries diligently devoted their attention to learning the Shoshonean language and to teaching the natives the Gospel. Favorable results were attained, sixty-five baptisms being performed before Christmas. By April the elders were able to speak quite fluently the Shoshonean tongue. Trade with the Indians was controlled by President Smith in harmony with Brigham Young's Indian policy.

Early in April, 1856, ninety bushels of wheat, barley, oats and peas were planted. When summer came the grasshoppers again destroyed the crops. This forced the colonists to send another expedition to Utah for supplies.

The people at the Salmon River Mission would have experienced intense suffering for lack of food if it had not been for the abundance of fish in the river. Throughout the summer fish was the main food and they dried a supply for winter. They caught tons of them on willow traps, and wagon loads were sent to Utah.

In May, 1857, the missionaries were honored with a visit of Brigham Young, from the Mormon headquarters, accompanied by his counselors, most of the Twelve Apostles, and the Presiding Patriarch of the Church. The President's company was composed of one hundred fifteen men, twenty-two women, five boys, with one hundred twenty-six horses and mules, twenty-eight carriages and twenty-six wagons. No doubt such a caravan of ecclesiastical dignitaries left an everlasting impression on the Mormon frontiersmen when it visited their distant hamlets.

³*Ibid.*, December 7, 1855.

⁴William Burgess to George A. Smith, in *ibid.*, October 9, 1855.

The avowed purpose of this particular trip was "to visit the settlement on the Salmon River, to rest their minds, to invigorate their bodies, and to examine the intervening country."⁵ As usual on such trips, Brigham's party made careful "observations relative to distances, fertility of the soil, amount of water, and conditions in general."

Sunday, May 10, a meeting was held at Fort Lemhi, at which the Church officials gave many fine instructions to the missionaries. In the words of Samuel M. Beal:

Perhaps the most stirring bit of advice was given by Heber C. Kimball and Daniel H. Wells, when they urged the young men to "marry native women, that the marriage tie was the strongest tie of friendship that existed." However, President Young modified this advice to the extent that they should not be in a hurry, and should marry young girls if any.⁶

The advice for the Mormons to marry the Indians was a deviation from the common practice. One other company of missionaries to the Indians—the group at Fort Bridger and Fort Supply, Wyoming—were given instructions to marry "the young daughters of the chief and leading men," but in neither mission was such a practice carried on very extensively. At Fort Lemhi, "several of the young men made overtures to the dusky maidens, but the parents refused to let their daughters go, or at least seemed unwilling."⁷

Before leaving the Salmon River Mission, President Brigham Young complimented the elders on their work, advised them to build a fort enclosure for the livestock and machinery adjacent to the stockade, and promised the colonists that upon arriving back at the Mormon headquarters he would send them reinforcements. Thereupon, after the President's party left for Utah, the missionaries enclosed a space sixteen rods square with a wall, built of clay, rocks, and grass, three feet wide at the bottom, two at the top, and nine feet high. In October, 1857, the new contingent of settlers arrived, making approximately 100 colonists at Fort Lemhi.

After making careful observations of the country while on their trips to and from Fort Lemhi, President Young and his associates were well pleased with the possibilities for establishing Mormon settlements northward. Up to this time the major emphasis in Mormon land settlement had been southward from the Mormon

⁵*Deseret News*, June 10, 1857.

⁶Samuel M. Beal, "The Founding of the Salmon River Mission," *Deseret News* "Church Section," January 1, 1938.

⁷*Ibid.*

Mecca. Immediately following the "Utah War" (1857-1858), northern Utah and Idaho received the major portion of colonists.

At the beginning of 1858 conditions at the Salmon River Mission were very favorable for a permanent Mormon community. The crops had been good that year, and the missionaries and the Indians were on very congenial terms. But within less than three months the mission was abandoned, never to be reoccupied by the Saints. The two factors which brought about the doom of Fort Lemhi as a Mormon colony were the coming of Johnston's Army to Utah and an Indian attack on the Salmon River Mission.

On February 8, 1858, a band of Shoshone Indians were entertained at the fort and given the usual freedom around the premises. They seemed to be on very friendly terms with the colonists. A few days later, John W. Powell, a mountaineer who lived with the Indians, "dressed and painted himself as they did, and was one of them in all their deviltry," warned one of the Mormons that the Indians were planning to attack the colonists.

However, no attention was paid to the warning and no special precautions were taken by the missionaries to protect themselves against an Indian uprising.

On the morning of February 25, at 10 a. m. the Mormons at Fort Lemhi were attending the regular routine of activities when suddenly about 200 Indians made an attack. When the savages began to encircle the livestock, the herdsman attempted to drive the cattle into the stockade. George McBride, in a courageous attempt to head off the frightened cattle, got on his horse, "uttered a yell, and dashed over the hill and down among the Indians." He was met by a volley of bullets, one of which lodged in his body, and he fell from his horse dead. The savages stripped him of his clothes, scalped him and mutilated his body, and took his horse and revolver.

Another herdsman, Orson Rose, dropped into a heavy sage brush when the Indians began the attack. The red men literally riddled the brush with shot, but Rose escaped unharmed. Later he moved from that dangerous spot to the thickets in the creek bottom, where he nestled in seclusion under their hospitable protection until the shades of night time provided opportunity for him to return to the fort.

Some of the other herdsman were forced to seek protection from the bullets of the savages in the stockade. But President Smith and Ezra Barnard made one more desperate effort to rescue the livestock. They mounted two horses and hastened in pursuit

of the herd. Six warriors turned and opened fire upon them. A bullet passed through Smith's suspenders and lodged in his horse's jaw. The horse lurched and threw its rider off. While he was remounting a bullet passed through his right arm. Smith and Barnard failed to rescue the cattle but they did succeed in reaching the fort again without further difficulties.

Several other Mormons hid in the brush when the savages made the attack. Later they left their hiding place and carried Fountain Welch into the fort. Welch had been shot in the small of the back, stripped of his clothes, robbed of his weapons, and struck over the head with a gun, but he was still alive.

Several months previous to the Indian attack, the missionaries had built a second fort two miles south of Fort Lemhi and eighteen men were living in it, presided over by M. D. Hammond.

During the Indian attack, the inhabitants of the lower fort were on their way to Fort Lemhi when they met the savage warriors. They were immediately fired upon, which resulted in the wounding of L. W. Shurtliff and Oliver Robinson and in the death of James Miller. All but Miller escaped in the brush while the Indians took the oxen and burned the outfit.

When night arrived there were still six missionaries who had not arrived at the fort. Thereupon President Smith sent out a searching party of ten men while the others stood guard and gave first aid to their wounded brethren. McBride and Miller—both dead—and Andrew Quigley, who had been wounded in the shoulder and beaten over the head, were discovered and brought into the fort.

Three days later B. H. Watts and E. J. Barnard were sent on horseback to Salt Lake City to report the condition at Fort Lemhi to Brigham Young and find out what should be done. Upon receiving the information regarding the attack and in view of the existent troubles between the Mormons and the federal government with the solution not yet in sight, the Mormon leaders decided to call the settlers at Fort Lemhi and those at the other outpost settlements back to the Basin. It was apparent that the frontier outposts could not be defended at that time, so they must of necessity be abandoned. Brigham Young realized that to attempt to defend the Salmon River outpost would be most difficult, as it was located over 350 miles from the nearest Mormon settlement. The nearest towns to the east were located on the Iowa and Minnesota frontiers and to the west was the settlement in

Willamette Valley, and on the north "there was no limit to the endless stretch of barbarism."

B. H. Watts returned to Fort Lemhi on March 21, accompanied by eleven men. Two days later, Colonel Cunningham, with 100 soldiers, wagons, and other necessary supplies arrived, and on March 25, Captain Horton D. Haight, with fifty more men reached Fort Lemhi. The latter two groups were part of the territorial militia. They had been sent by Governor Young for the purpose of moving the missionaries on the Salmon River to a spot of safety in Utah.

The members of the Relief Expedition helped the settlers gather what cattle they could find and make preparations for the abandonment of Fort Lemhi. However, one hundred thirty-six cattle and twenty-nine horses were never recovered from the Indians.

Old Chief Snagg and a number of his tribe who were still friendly to the Mormons were at the fort when preparations were being made to leave. President Smith gave them 1,000 bushels of wheat. "This old fellow and his immediate followers wept upon the departure of the missionaries."⁸

On March 26 eleven men were sent in advance of the main body to inform the Church officials of conditions at Fort Lemhi since the Indian attack. Four days later, while crossing the Portneuf River, they were attacked by a group of savages. W. Bailey Lake was shot in the head and instantly killed while trying to cross the stream. Lake's companions protected themselves as best they could in the willows and from that position returned the fire upon the red men. No damage was done to the Indians, as they rode good horses and kept them in motion. However, two of the Mormons' horses were killed, another and a mule wounded, and seventeen other horses escaped, leaving the ten white men only six horses. Leaving nearly everything behind, they hastened on to Salt Lake City, arriving there early in April.

The main body of missionaries left Fort Lemhi on March 27, accompanied by the militia. Snow was deep and the weather was cold and stormy, resulting in much difficulty and suffering *en route* to the Basin.

Upon arriving in Brigham City on April 11, the settlers from Lemhi were surprised to find that town and the other northern Utah settlements deserted. The people had joined "the move" southward, occasioned by the approach of Johnston's Army. At

that point the Lemhi settlers were disbanded; each followed his own course to settle wherever he wished.

The Salmon River Mission was never re-established, but shortly after an amicable adjustment of the Johnston Army episode many of the former inhabitants of Fort Lemhi were numbered among the early settlers of southern Idaho.