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A Matter of Faith: A Study of the Muddy Mission

Monique E. Kimball

INTRODUCTION

This paper is more concerned with the trials of the Mormons in the Muddy River Valley than with culture contact with Great Basin Indians. However, that is not to say that the Mormons did not have contact with local Paiute tribes in the Muddy River region. On the contrary, they not only lived side-by-side, but also assisted each other in the daily living in a harsh environment. Unfortunately, not all of the Indians were friendly, but their unneighborly behavior did not extend beyond stealing livestock. In this, the Muddy Mission Mormons were more fortunate than other settlements to the northeast which were attacked during the series of confrontations with various tribes in the early years of Mormon settlement in the Great Basin and Mojave Deserts.

For the most part, the Muddy River Indians, of which there were several tribes, were more concerned with acquiring food from the Mormons than being hostile. At the same time, the Mormons concentrated on feeding, befriending and conducting transactions honestly with the Indians. Unfortunately, hostilities did exist, mainly resulting from stolen livestock and crops. By a show of force and punishment of Indians caught stealing, as well as convincing rhetoric, the Mormons prevented bloodshed from occurring on the Muddy. Primarily, their task was first to “civilize” the Indians, then teach them the Gospel. The former went far, as attested to in journals written by two settlers, but the latter was never achieved by this early group of settlers on the Muddy River. The favorable relations the Mormons established in six years on the Muddy made it possible for later Mormons to accomplish the second goal.

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The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the reasons behind the failure of the Muddy Mission and factors involved with its success or failure. Some of the factors included such ideological values as equality and unity; however, there was more involved than merely ideology. Using and developing local resources, which led toward achieving self-sufficiency, and the accompanying technology, played major roles in the progress of the mission. These factors and values represent seven principles, or ideals, identified by Leonard Arrington as a settlement strategy of the early Mormons. The principles serve as the methodological approach of this study into why the Muddy Mission failed. Specifically, an examination of two of these principles will be used to demonstrate how successful the Mormons were, or were not, at putting into effect a method of settlement on the Muddy River.

MORMON IDEOLOGY AND ADAPTIVE STRATEGY

In 1847 the Mormons began the trek westward to settle the relatively uninhabited Great Salt Lake Valley. They chose this area because it was distant from other populated areas, it was not an enviable location, and it fit the biblical description of the “Zion of the last days” which was to be built high in the mountains. The first two years or so were very difficult for them in terms of available food and housing. However, through a continuous program of building, planting and purchasing additional supplies from nearby Gentiles (non-Mormons), such as those at Fort Bridger, they survived and began producing enough food and shelter for themselves and the new emigrants arriving in the valley.

Although some people wished to move on to inhabited and more productive looking land or to the gold fields of California, most remained in the Great Salt Lake Valley to build the new Kingdom of God under Brigham Young’s able guidance. How did they succeed in an area that had limited water, alkaline soil and long distances from other people? Arrington attributed it to previous experiences in the Midwest and economic ideals which he summarized in seven principles: (1) The Gathering—the coming together of “the pure in heart” to selected gathering places, or Zions, in preparation for the Millenium or Second Coming. (2) The Mormon Village—the settlement of the gathered people in villages built according to the Plat of Zion. In this plan, the land is divided into three sections: village lots, farming lots and pasturage fields. (3) Property as a Stewardship—all property was consecrated to the Church for the benefit of building the Kingdom. The ideals behind this principle aimed for group unity rather than individualism. Although some people acquired more property under their stewardship, the Church determined disposition of the property in a fair manner by the use of lotteries. This provided each individual with the chance to acquire good as well as mediocre
land. (4) Redeeming the Earth—once the village and property rights were established, then the Mormons concentrated on the “development of local resources.” This principle served both secular and religious needs. For the secular, it developed to full potential all available resources necessary to Mormon livelihood. For the religious, it helped to cleanse the earth of a curse so that man would no longer have warfare, famine or other suffering. Being industrious served both needs of this principle. (5) Frugality and Economic Independence—by achieving total self-sufficiency, the Mormons would remain free from being in debt to Gentiles. To accomplish this meant developing each region’s resources and establishing economic independence from any other region. This was “the goal of colonization, of the settled village, and of resource development.” (6) Unity and Cooperation—without these two ideals, the move to the Great Salt Lake Valley, and its subsequent building and development, would not have been accomplished. By answering the call to a mission, allowing the Church leadership to direct their lives and being cooperative and unified, the Mormons progressed more quickly in the settlement of their new homeland than they would have without accepting these directives. (7) Equality—an early goal of the Church was for everyone to be economically equal on earth and to be so in heaven. The ideal remained evident in the later policies of land and water allocation, public works construction, “cooperative village stores and industries” and immigration.

By following these ideals, the Mormons developed the valley around the Great Salt Lake and expanded into other valleys to the north and south. The expansion reached a second phase by the 1860s: the Mormons were moving further southward into the Lower Virgin River drainage, that is, the Lower Virgin River and Muddy River Valleys. The Southern Mission, also called the Cotton Mission, centered around St. George. Its temporary purpose of growing cotton and other semi-tropical products served as an immediate impetus to its growth. The establishment of the mission on the Muddy River came in 1865 following a disastrous drought suffered in the Lower Virgin River Valley. However, cotton was not the only reason for the Muddy Mission. In addition, it was to provide a supportive base and stopover point for the travel and trade on the Colorado River to its highest point of navigation (Callville or Call’s Landing and, later, Junction City or Rioville) and for travelers bound for California using the Old Spanish Trail or Mormon Road. Moreover, the mission was “to secure land from the invasion of Gentile miners and cattlemen. . . .”

**Chronology of the Muddy Mission**

At this point, a brief chronology of the Muddy Mission will provide the background to the discussion of principles 4 and 5 and their application to the mission.
Anson Call built a landing and warehouse on the Colorado River for trade and travel.  

Thomas Smith led the first group of missionaries to settle near the juncture of the Muddy and Virgin Rivers. The community was named St. Thomas in honor of Smith.  

A second group of missionaries arrived and established a second community nine miles north of St. Thomas calling it St. Joseph, for either the Prophet Joseph Smith or Joseph Warren Foote, a settler.  

Orrawall Simons built a grist mill three miles downriver from St. Joseph. A cotton gin was added later.  

Five people died from malaria at St. Joseph and several families returned to Utah because of extreme summer temperatures.  

A third community developed near the grist mill called Mill Point or Simonsville.  

The Black Hawk War erupted in Utah and Nevada. St. Thomas relocated and built a fort. St. Joseph lost stock stolen by Paiutes and residents were advised to join with either St. Thomas or Mill Point residents. The combined Mill Point-St. Joseph settlers built a fort on the bench overlooking the mill. Water was brought closer by a five-mile extension on the St. Joseph canal.  

Mill Point Fort name changed to St. Joseph, hereafter referred to as New St. Joseph.  

Sandy Town (A) probably under survey; construction may have begun that year.  

A third group of settlers arrived on the Muddy. Most settled the new community of West Point, twenty-five miles northwest of St. Thomas on the Muddy River. It lasted two months because of Indian troubles. Settlers either returned to Utah or moved to New St. Joseph.  

Junction City established on the Colorado River.  

New St. Joseph burned because of two boys roasting potatoes.  

One hundred more families sent to the Muddy Mission. They joined the residents of New St. Joseph who continued building Sandy Town (A)  

West Point reorganized.
1869
1. Sandy Town moved about one mile north to reduce the length of the canal. Sandy Town (B) abandoned after nine months. Residents either returned to the original St. Joseph or established the town of Overton one mile south of the mill.28
2. The Muddy Mission experienced a severe drought.29

1870
1. Brigham Young visited the Muddy Mission during his Southern tour.30
2. The boundary of Nevada and Utah was resurveyed. Nevada recognized that the Muddy Mission was under its jurisdiction and demanded payment of back taxes.31 The Mormons were unable to pay, so Young gave them permission to leave.32 A vote was taken; three individuals voted nay. One family, the Daniel Bonellis's, remained after the others left in 1871.33

LIFE ON THE MUDDY

In discussing Arrington's principles 4 and 5, examination of available archaeological data, historical records and secondary sources become necessary. From these materials, we can determine a more accurate picture of life on the Muddy River.

We know from the historical records and archaeological data that the Mormons planted wheat, corn, melons, watermelons, sunflowers, peach trees, grapes, pumpkins, the herb saxifrage and general garden vegetables. We also know that they planted more food crops than cotton. For instance, in 1866, 400 acres were cultivated in wheat, corn and other food products, whereas only seventeen acres were planted in cotton.34

Furthermore, the Mormons "cultivated" livestock. These included cattle, mules, goats, chickens, ducks, geese and possibly sheep. The cattle and mules provided the power for plowing fields and hauling wagonloads of goods to market. The cattle, along with the chickens, ducks, geese and goats, provided a ready food source. Bone excavated at New St. Joseph and Sandy Town (B) showed signs of butchering, such as sawed edges on bovine ribs, leg bones and a cranium, and a leg bone from either a sheep or goat. Fecal matter found on the exterior fort side of House 2 at New St. Joseph indicates that the Mormons kept goats or some other small domesticated animals near their houses.35

Based upon bone, nuts and seeds recovered at both sites, archaeological data shows the Mormons used local food sources, too. These included piñon
nuts, deer, possibly turtle and rabbit (both cottontail and jackrabbit) and fish, which might have included the Moapa dace, speckled dace and cutthroat trout.  

Excavating several structures exposed construction methods and materials. The settlers made their houses from adobe bricks using the local soils.
Roofing material came from nearby swamps; these provided willow and tules. Because wood was scarce and the nearest source of pine was probably Pine Valley located about 130 miles northeast, its use was limited to building. Baskets and matting, found in and about the structures at New St. Joseph, were made from local grasses. The baskets may have been obtained from the local Paiutes in exchange for food or clothing.

Necessary to "redeeming the earth" were irrigation canals. Building these canals was part of the Church's public works construction required of every man. These projects were designed not only to provide the communities with the water needed for farming and general use, but also to bring money to areas needing economic stimulus. Projects such as canal and dam building augmented the income of the Muddy Mission. For example, in 1869 canal construction prevented crop failure due to drought. In five days, seventy men built a ten-mile irrigation canal from a tule swamp above St. Thomas to connect with the existing seven-mile canal.37

However, not all of the irrigation canals were beneficial. Those used to bring water to the bench passed through an area of drifting sand requiring frequent cleaning to prevent total water loss. Furthermore, the bench is covered with nonarable blow sand which, even with the use of modern fertilizers, prevents the growth of many plants.38

Because it was necessary for new communities to have individuals knowledgeable in construction, masonry, carpentry and butchering, an effort was made when calling missionaries to include people with these skills. Having a mission begin with the basic skills necessary to building and maintaining settlements away from larger population centers with more developed resources, contributed to economic independence. Archaeological evidence found at Sandy Town (B) and New St. Joseph indicates that each community had a butcher, and New St. Joseph had a cobbler (a shoe last or form was found inside House 2) and possibly a seamstress (straight pins were found at the northern end of the fort). We know from their diaries that Warren Foote was a miller39 and Darius Clement assisted him at the grist mill.40

Other artifacts recovered at New St. Joseph and Sandy Town (B) fall under the heading of household goods. This category includes such things as kitchenware and personal items. Ceramics, one class in the subcategory kitchenware, showed that the occupants of the houses excavated brought a wide variety of stoneware, ironstone and other wares with them to the Muddy. A prevalent pattern was the Amish Snowflake, a blue-on-white stoneware. White ironstone, with various border and rim designs, was another prominent ceramic found at the sites. The identified and dated potters' marks all reveal that most of these ceramics were imported from England prior to 1865. Moreover, these individual households each had at least one of the 1846 commemorative pearlware plates of the Temple of Nauvoo in blue-on-white.
This plate was produced by John Twigg and Company of Swinton, Yorkshire, and included the names of President Brigham Young, his Council of Twelve and the Patriarch as well as a print of the temple.41

Earthenware recovered from these structures may be indicative of the trade carried on among Mormon communities. Historical records state that several potteries in Salt Lake City developed during the twenty years prior to 1866. Further, during the mid-1860s one of these potters, John Eardley, moved to St. George and set up a kiln outside that community. Sherds from New St. Joseph may be representative of his wares but have not been identified as such at this time.42

Some of the personal items recovered include buttons and shoes. The buttons ranged in material from bone to metal. Of the ceramic buttons recovered, at least two were calico buttons, a style popular during the 1860s. These buttons had patterns similar to fabric patterns used in clothing at that time.43
Shoes from the excavated structures were in various states of disintegration. Heels and shoe tacks survived more than the soles and uppers. However, two nearly complete shoes were recovered, one from each site. Because leather shrinks in the intense heat and aridity, it is impossible to determine the original size of either shoe.

Although self-sufficiency was the goal for each community, trade played an important role in the lives of the people on the Muddy River. There were several forms of trade carried on, external with Gentiles, internal within the Church and internal within the mission. No matter how much the Church wished the people to remain free from dealing with Gentiles, in the Southern and Muddy Missions it was a matter of survival to engage in trade with local miners and travelers. Individuals in the Muddy Mission traded with miners in the Pahranagat Valley to the north. Abraham A. Kimball wrote in his diary that he and two other settlers took salt from the mine below St. Thomas to Pahranagat Valley and received cash for the three loads.44 For fresh meat and produce, miners paid with cash and empty tin cans.45

Internal trade within the Church included trade with the rest of the Southern Mission, particularly the annual fall fair in St. George where the Mormons could trade, usually buying and selling on credit. Payment would be made with harvested seasonal crops.46 Other trade involved the exchange of flour, wheat and salt for supplies, manufactured goods and other materials not available in the Muddy River Valley.

The Colorado River trade was another means of bringing money and goods into the Muddy Mission. Settlers exchanged their wheat and flour for cash and kind at Callville. However, this lasted for only two years. The building of the transcontinental railroad north of Salt Lake City helped to end the trade on the river.

Internal trade at the Muddy Mission entailed the exchange of goods and supplies from new settlers who did not have flour or produce. It also involved the exchange of services for surplus flour, wheat or other produce. Kimball's trip to Pahranagat Valley meant borrowing four mules to pull his wagonload of salt. He paid for their use with bacon purchased at Pahranagat.47 Foote's payment for running the grist mill was two-thirds of all tole and smuttings. Tole is the miller's portion of the grain taken as payment for grinding. Smuttings are wheat parts with smut, a black fungus, and serve as a food source.48

Despite all of the trade, though, the Muddy Mission inhabitants did not do well. There are several reasons for this. First, a new community, to succeed as planned by the Church leaders, required a lot of manpower. The Muddy Mission never had a large population and listed less than 100 working males during its six years. Desertion was prevalent and of those called to build up the mission, most never went. The Muddy Mission never received a full complement of pioneering families. Without those prospective settlers, the
men of the Muddy Mission were hampered in accomplishing public works construction, maintaining irrigation canals on a daily basis, and doing the work needed for tending their crops. Further, moving several times, as in the case of the St. Joseph and Sandy Town communities, took men away from the fields to survey lots, build houses and dig canals. The heat, disease and Indian troubles added to the dilemma faced by the settlers on the Muddy.\textsuperscript{49}

Second, the settlers were not prepared technologically to effectively develop the Muddy River Valley, particularly with regard to irrigation technology. The soils of northern Utah were more stable than those found in the Virgin drainage system. Here the soils were soft and subject to heavy flooding. In the Muddy River Valley, the Mormons, fortunately, found a more stable environment in terms of water availability. The Muddy provided a regular source of water and was not subject to flooding as was the Virgin. Furthermore, the early irrigation canals provided little trouble. However, the canals dug to the bench sites required more energy than was available. Mormon technology involved lining the canals with adobe clay and "tamping the bottom and sides of the channel" to slow down water seepage. However, "the sandy soil drains water rapidly, and it refuses to retain any appreciable amount of water even after days of soaking."\textsuperscript{50} Foote had indicated early on that to build a canal to the bench was not practical because of the drifting sands and heavy water loss into the soil.\textsuperscript{51}

Third, one reason for the mission, growing cotton, lost its purpose quickly after the Civil War with the redevelopment of cotton production in the southeastern United States. The coming of the railroad into Utah added to the mission's economic demise by inexpensively bringing goods, including cotton, allowing the Mormons to stockpile goods from outside Utah.\textsuperscript{52}

This change in the market seriously affected the price for cotton lint. Bleak included information on three years of the New York Price Index for cotton in his \textit{Annals}:

\begin{table}
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
Year & Low Per Pound & High Per Pound \\
\hline
1865 & $ .35$ & $1.20$ \\
1866 & .32 & .52 \\
1867 & .15\% & .30 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{New York Price Index: Cotton}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{50} \textsuperscript{51} \textsuperscript{52} SOURCE: James G. Bleak, \textit{Annals of the Southern Utah Mission}, Book 1 (Utah Writer's Project, 1941), pp. 192, 240, 255.

To make matters worse, Church aid and loans, made since the Southern Mission began, stopped in 1869. Greater hardships resulted for the Mormons on the Muddy because they had no market for their poor quality cotton lint and badly needed clothing and tools. Their morale, adequate at the best of times, took a severe blow because of Brigham Young's disappointment in the
mission during his 1870 tour of the Southern Mission. Soon after this, the mission learned that it was within Nevada’s boundary and the state demanded payment of back taxes, to be paid in coin. For a mission already suffering from economic collapse, this demand proved to be too much.

CONCLUSIONS

By 1870, belief in the Church and its ideals were all that remained of the Muddy Mission. The mission had become a hard taskmaster and provided important lessons that many of the settlers later employed in their new settlement of Orderville in southeastern Utah. The challenge encountered in the Mojave Desert served to strengthen the ideals of the Church so that the first Muddy settlers could succeed in their new home. The next Mormon settlers to the Muddy River Valley were more successful because their goals were different, and they were better prepared to face the challenges found there.

Ideals alone cannot predict success. The desire to be self-sufficient and restrict trade with Gentiles was not as effective as Mormon leaders wanted. Archaeological and historical documentation indicate a greater dependence on relations with the outside world, regionally and nationally, than policies dictated. The extensive ceramics manufactured in England attest to the inclusion of Mormons in world trade patterns prior to and after the move to Salt Lake. Moreover, the decline in cotton prices badly affected the Muddy Mission in such a way as to inhibit its ability to alter its economic focus. Although the Mormons learned the importance of planting wheat and other crops toward self-sufficiency, cotton still determined their economic future.

There were other factors at play in the Muddy Mission as well. From a demographic point of view, the problem of sufficient manpower plagued the mission from the start. Ecologically, the bench proved to be unsatisfactory for building irrigation canals. Technologically, the settlers were successful until they tried to develop the bench as a City of Zion. Here their experience in the Great Basin could not prepare them for the Mojave Desert. Finally, although partially successful, self-sufficiency and the cotton industry may well have been self-defeating aspects of the Mormon settlement and economic strategies of the mission on the Muddy River.

NOTES

1 This paper was completed and presented in October 1986, one year after Dr. S. George Ellsworth presented his “Mormon Settlement on the Muddy.” I became aware of his paper, as did the editors, in July 1987 just prior to publication deadline. Therefore, there was not an opportunity to incorporate any of Dr. Ellsworth’s observations or data into this paper.

2 Pearson S. Corbett, “A History of the Muddy Mission” (Master’s thesis, Brigham Young University,


3 Ibid., 24.
4 Ibid., 25.
5 Ibid., 26.
6 Ibid., 28.
7 Ibid., 29.


10 James Leithead, Excerpt from Journal cited by Kate B. Carter, comp., *Heartthrobs of the West* (Vol. 7) (Salt Lake City: Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, 1946), 485.

11 There is no documented evidence as to the origin of the town’s name. Andrew K. Larson wrote that it was named for Foote in *I Was Called to Dixie, The Virgin River Basin: Unique Experiences in Mormon Pioneering* (N. P.: Deseret News Press, 1961), 142. Corbett contends that it was to honor Joseph Smith, as Foote and other St. Joseph settlers had known him personally. "History of Muddy Mission," 73.


16 Ibid., 201.


20 Corbett, "History of Muddy Mission," 76.

21 McCarty, "Sandy Town," 89.


23 Corbett, "Settling the Muddy River," 147.


26 McCarty, "Sandy Town," 89.


31 Ibid., 207-8.

32 Corbett, "Settling the Muddy River," 150.

33 Ibid., "History of Muddy Mission," 157; *St. Thomas Historical Records*, n.p.


38 McCarty, "Sandy Town," 77, 169.

40 Clement, "Diary," 1.
41 Journal History of the Church (Salt Lake City: LDS Historical Archives Library, Microfilm, 1929), n.p.
42 Nancy H. Richards, to author, 19 July 1977, Salt Lake City, Utah.
44 Kimball, Reminiscences, 65-75.
46 Ibid.
47 Kimball, Reminiscences, 65, 71.
48 Foote, Autobiography, 205; Alma Rosa Corona, personal contact 1979.
49 McCarty, "Sandy Town," 105, 167-68.
50 Ibid., 169.
51 Foote, Autobiography, 198.
52 McCarty, "Sandy Town," 171.