

Wilford Woodruff, Sportsman

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James B. Allen and Herbert H. Frost

Latter-day Saints are well acquainted with Wilford Woodruff as a missionary, apostle, and as President of the Church. Seldom are they aware of another side of his nature: the avid sportsman. In a letter in an important letterbook recently donated to the Church Archives, however, Wilford Woodruff writes of his long interest in hunting, fishing, and the great outdoors. While the letter says little about Church history as such, it reveals much about the interests and personality of President Woodruff.

Dated 24 August 1892, the letter was written while the eighty-five year old President of the Church was on a ten-day camping trip near the headwaters of the Weber River in the Uintah Mountains. Just the fact that he would take such a trip and at that age says something about his energetic nature. We find the details of the venture recorded in President Woodruff's journal beginning with the entry for Thursday, 18 August, when, in company with George Q. Cannon and his wife, President Woodruff and his wife Emma took the Utah Central Railroad to Park City, then drove in a carriage to a camp belonging to the Clayton brothers, traveling some sixty-five miles that day.

The next day was an enjoyable one for President Woodruff as he went out into the hills. Among other things he went fishing and caught six trout and also saw several game birds. By Saturday, however, he was somewhat weary, so he stayed in camp while the others went hunting grouse.

As the camping trip included a Sunday, 21 August, we can observe how the President of the Church spent his Sabbath in the mountains: He had the group come into his tent for a sacrament meeting, where he presided, and President George Q. Cannon administered the sacrament. Then President Woodruff addressed his friends, giving them a history of his joining the Church and subsequent travels. He was followed by President Cannon.

During the next few days President Woodruff spent time in camp while other members of the group went fishing or hunting, or traveled to nearby places. He also traveled to some nearby camps, but his health was poor and on 27 August he recorded "I had a bad night. Altitude too high for my breathing." The following day he left for home, arriving the next night.

Throughout the camping trip President Woodruff showed a great deal of interest in the fish and game in the area, and on several occasions recorded in his diary what had been caught or observed during the day. On 24 August, for example, he noted that the Clayton brothers caught

thirty-five trout; and on 25 August, he mentioned that he saw several black squirrels in the trees near the camp, writing "I did not know that there was a Black squirrel in the Territory." Most probably what he saw was a dark variety of the common red squirrel, for these vary widely on color and some become almost black. The black squirrel, as such, does not exist in this area. It was in this relaxing mountain setting that Wilford Woodruff composed the letter printed below on Wednesday, 24 October. After he returned home he had the letter typed and sent to *Forest and Stream* magazine, where it was published in the 22 September 1892 issue, with slight editing. The letter copied here is taken from his letterbook with footnotes added by Professors Allen and Frost.

In Camp, Head Waters Weber River,
Utah Territory, August 24th, 1892.

EDITOR FOREST AND STREAM:

I persue "Forest and Stream" with much interest: it cer [sic] contains a great amount of valuable information.

I was born on the 1st day of March 1807, at Avon, Hartford County, Conn., on the banks of a trout brook which had turned the wheels of a flour mill and a saw mill owned by my grandfather and father, for many years. As soon as I was old enough to carry a fish-rod I commenced catching trout, which I have continued to do, from time to time, for nearly 80 years.

Several years of my life were spent in Ashland, Oswego Co., New York, on the east border of Lake Ontario. While there I assisted, one morning in catching 500 salmon, very few of which were under 20 pounds, whole a few weighed 40 pounds.¹ My first experience in fishing with a fly for trout and salmon was in England and Scotland in 1845; but I met with little success there.²

At the time of the early settlement of Utah Territory, the mountains and canyons were thickly inhabited with the elk, deer, antelope, panther, mountain lion, wild cat, and grizzly, cinnamon and brown bear; some of which were of immense size.³ These animals are still found in our mountains, and are frequently killed. I never shot a bear, although I have seen quite a number of grizzly and cinnamon bears after they were killed. In one instance a very large grizzly, with two large cubs, passed within 30 yards of me while I was concealed in the brush. I was, at the time, holding in my hands, a muzzle-loading gun, and the manner she treated her cubs, while apparently trying to wean them, plainly indicated the wisdom of my letting her pass unmolested, and assured me if I should fail to kill her the first shot, she would attack and kill me. Hardly half a mile after passing she came upon a camp, some of the men fired at her several times but she got away, with her cubs. I have killed deer and antelope but never elk although upon one occasion a band of more than 200 came within 300 yards of me, and were headed towards me, but were frightened off in another direction by a man without a gun who came running to see me shoot an elk a companion hunter, however, shot and killed one of them. We think deer are increasing in our region.⁴ A good many elk and sheep are still in our mountains, but difficult to get at. Deer, antelope,

and elk are quite plentiful north of us, in the Snake River country, now Idaho, and moose are taken occasionally. Some six years ago I met a young man up there who shot 16 elk and 2 moose out of one band, and he said he might have killed more, but to do so would only have been to waste them.

Now concerning the trout of Utah, I will say that Utah, Bear, Panguitch and Fish Lakes, as well as other lakes, rivers and streams abound with the largest and finest trout when we first reached the Territory, but as the country has become settled they have steadily decreased; still our waters supply quite an amount of trout at the present time. Some years ago, one warm day in June, I helped to make a haul at the mouth of Provo River, the trout⁵ having gathered about the river mouth for cooled water, the fishermen had made several hauls during the day, out in the lake, and took some 500 pounds of fish and when the net was drawn, the draft was judged to be about 4000 pounds. A great number of the trout weighed 40 pounds each, on the scales. As it was night, and having a great amount of dead fish on hand to be saved, after taking out several hundred pounds of the largest fish, the rest were turned into the lake alive. I saw one trout caught in Utah Lake, by net, which weighed 18 pounds.⁶

Trout and salmon have been successfully hatched here, under the supervision of Hon. A. P. Rockwood, who is now dead; the eggs having been supplied by the late Fish Commissioner, Seth Green. The fry were put into Utah Lake and the tributaries of Bear Lake. Mr. A. M. Musser, our local Fish Commissioner, about three years ago, put into Utah Lake, 1,000,000 shad fry, and I am happy to say that this effort to stock Utah Lake with shad bids fair to be a success.⁷ Although this fish are as yet protected by law, some of them, on one occasion, found their way to the market and weighed two and a half pounds. I assisted Mr. Rockwood, several years before, to put in our River Jordan 4000 shad fry, but the venture was not a success.

About 12 years ago I visited Bear River valley and fished 4 hours in a creek leading into Bear River, with a rod and reel, and caught 20 trout, four of them weighed a little over 4 pounds each. Upon this occasion I hooked and brought to sight, one trout, I think, of 10 pounds weight; but on account of the perpendicular height of the bank I could not land him.

Concerning wild fowl: for years our lakes, ponds and streams were alive with pelican, geese and ducks; and chickens⁸ and sage hens were numerous in the hills; but as the country is being settled, our feathered game, too, correspondingly diminishes. Chickens are now mostly confined to the distant hills and canyons. During the last few days we have killed 30 chickens near our camp. One of our company started a flock and shot 9 times on the wing, dropping 9 birds, and the 10th shot brought down 2, the balance of the charge striking the side of a rock, glance and hit a young man as he was mounting into the saddle. Seven shot lodged in the man and eleven in the horse the man was hit in the throat, sholder, back of head, and right knee. Nothing serious, however, resulted from the accident.⁹

Respectfully,

Wilford Woodruff [signed]
P. O. Box B, Salt Lake City Utah.

Dr. Allen is assistant Church historian and professor of history at Brigham Young University. Dr. Frost is professor of zoology at Brigham Young University.

1. This was probably the native Atlantic Salmon, which is now extinct in the Lake Ontario Basin. C. L. Hubbs and K. F. Lagler, *Fishes of the Great Lakes Region*, Bulletin No. 26 of the Cranbrook Institute of Science, July 1949, p. 37.

2. On 8 May 1845, Wilford Woodruff recorded in his diary his first experience with fly fishing. He was in England on a mission and on that day went fishing in the River Ribble, near Chatburn. His diary entry, which will be of interest to most sportsmen, follows: "I went to fishing with Father Richard Smithies in the river ribble he is 70 years of age & is considered the greatest fisherman in the country, He fishes with the fly which is the greatest art in fishing ever introduced his fish pole or rod, was about 14 feet long something like cane vary slender & delectate his long fine line made of hair & cat gut was wound around a small brass wheel with a little crank to it fastend to the but end of the pole the line then runs through half a dozen brass rings or ilet held or fastend at a sutible distance along on the rod to the small end of it one the end of the fine fish line is fastend 5 or 6 artifishal flies about 2 feet apart—these are upon a small cut gut—almost as small as a single hair, 25 or 30 feet of the line is unwound from the reel at the but of the rod running through the rings to the point the line is then flung upon the water the same as though it was tied at the end of the rod and the flies with a hook concealed in each swims down the stream the trout instantly take it considering it the natural fly they are hooked as soon as they strike it if they are large trout & run they of their own accord unwind as much line as they want from the reel at the but of the pole or rod the fisherman does not pull the fish out of water on the bank by the pole but warring the fish in the water with the line untill he will not struggle then he draws him up to the shore by the line if he stands on the bank or to him if he stands in the water he then takes a small hand net—with a light pole 5 or 6 feet—puts i under the fish & takes him very deliberately out of the water, Father Smithies cougth 17 trout & two Cheven [i.e. Chevin, a European chub not generally considered good eating] in this way while we were with him, It was the first time I had seen the fly used in my life in the way of fishing, it was delight with it. the rod & line was so light & flung with such skill & dexterity that the trout are beguiled & whare ever they are are generally taken the fisherman has flies different for almost ever month calculated to imitate the flies that float upon the water at the time they fish the flies are made of the feathers of birds some of various colors the trout will often take them before the natural fly I was much gratified with this days fishing, we returned to Chatburn & Sister Parkinson cooked the trout for us which made a good meal we spent the night at Br Parkinson" Wilford Woodruff Diary, 8 May 1845, Wilford Woodruff Collection, Church Archives, Church Historical Department, Salt Lake City, Utah.

3. Most of these animals are still found in these mountains, although the grizzly bear is now considered to be extinct in the state. S. D. Durrant, *Mammals of Utah* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Museum of Natural History, 1952), p. 407.

4. Deer were not, as many believe, plentiful when the Mormon pioneers arrived in the Great Basin. Escalante reported seeing very few deer in 1776. After the pioneers arrived, however, excessive grazing changed the vegetative picture from many types of grasses to a shrubby habitat which is more suitable for deer, hence the increase in the deer population observed by Wilford Woodruff.

5. This refers to the Utah cutthroat trout. This species is now extinct in Utah Lake. Its extinction was brought about by overfishing, adverse conditions in the lake and adjoining spawning streams, and pollution. W. F. Sigler and R. R. Miller, *Fishes of Utah* (Salt Lake City: Utah Sate Department of Fish and Game, 1963), p. 158.

6. At this time licenses were issued to allow commercial fishing in Utah Lake. In 1895, for example, fourteen persons were so licensed and caught 4,000 pounds of trout, 40,000 pounds of bass, 133,324 pounds of carp, and 189,900 pounds of other fish for a total catch of 367, 224 pounds. *Forest and Stream* 46 (29 February 1896):177.

7. Unfortunately, President Woodruff's optimism about the future of the shad was premature. Nine unsuccessful attempts were made to introduce the American Shad into the area between 1871 and 1892. This species was one of eleven unsuccessfully introduced into Utah. Sigler and Miller, *Fishes of Utah*, p. 23.

8. The term "chicken," both in this letter and in the diary, probably refers to the Sharp-tailed Grouse.

9. The young man who was hurt was named Tyler Clayton and, according to the diary, it was his brother who accidentally shot him. This was on 20 August, four days before this letter was written. President Woodruff marveled in his diary that the accident did not maim either man or horse, but the following day Tyler was resting comfortably and by 24 August he could ride over the mountains with his brother.