

Pools of Living Water

No Longer a Thirsty Land?

Bruce C. Hafen

I like to go home. So I like living in St. George, Utah, now, after living elsewhere for half a century. This once-parched corner of the earth is soaked with rich Church history.

In earlier times, not everyone was thrilled to come here. J. Golden Kimball's St. George stories suggest that he believed the Brethren sent him here as some kind of punishment. On one of many occasions, J. Golden was assigned to a summer stake conference in St. George with one of the senior Brethren. After two long, hot days of wall-to-wall meetings, they finished the Sunday afternoon general session. They and most of the ward and stake leaders were fasting until all of their meetings were finished. The two visitors held one final meeting designed to motivate the stake leaders to increase their subscriptions to the *Improvement Era*, the Church's magazine. Elder Kimball knew he could do this one of two ways: either he could give a pep talk about the *Era* for an hour, or he could offer them the chance to go home early and eat. So Elder Kimball stood up and said, "All you men that will take the *Era* if we will let you go home, raise your right hand? There was not a single man who did not raise his hand and subscribed and paid \$2.00 cash for the *Era*."¹

May I share one other story told about a local family whose children found it hard to be very energetic in the Dixie heat. Reportedly, the sheriff came to the family home one day and told the father that his teenage son was growing marijuana in the family vegetable garden. The father replied, "Now, sheriff, don't be too hard on the boy. It's the first thing he's taken an interest in."

I'm glad to reflect today on some of the founding stories of the St. George region. Stories about pioneers and pilgrims often involve classic themes about outcasts searching for a promised land in the face of great hardships.

The Dixie founders faced unusually daunting tasks, yet they produced unusually rich fruit.

Of course, as Leonard Arrington once said, “The remembered desolation of the Great Basin before the arrival of the Mormons became more formidable with each subsequent telling.”² Still, in a scouting report to Brigham Young, Parley P. Pratt wrote that the St. George area had several abrupt promontories “showing no signs of water or fertility; . . . a wide expanse of chaotic matter presented itself,” consisting of “huge hills, sandy deserts, cheerless, grassless plains, perpendicular rocks, loose barren clay, dissolving beds of sandstone . . . lying in inconceivable confusion; in short, a country in ruins dissolved by the pelting of storms of the ages and turned inside out, upside down, by terrible convulsions of some former age.”³ In the context of this discouraging scene, historian Larry Logue wrote, “No Utah community of any size [was] settled . . . under more faith-trying hardships than the town of St. George.”⁴

In 1861, Brigham Young announced in the Salt Lake Tabernacle the names of three hundred men and their families whom he called to settle St. George. Even though most of these people were already weather-beaten veterans of the demanding first settlements in northern Utah, they “were unprepared for the starkness”⁵ of what waited for them three hundred miles to the south. “Soil” seems like too generous a word for Dixie’s red dirt. The settlers could grow only half as much grain per capita as elsewhere in Utah, on farms half as big and ten times harder to water—not only because of weak soil and little water, but also because the Utah miracle of irrigation didn’t work well when desert cloudbursts frequently washed out sandy dams and ditches. No wonder a young man would have to take such a keen interest in marijuana to get it to grow in the red dirt. And no wonder that when he was called to Dixie, Robert Gardner said, “I looked and spit, took off my hat and scratched [my head] and said, all right, [I’ll go].”⁶

Also in the early 1860s, Brigham Young sent my own Hafen ancestors here, along with the other settlers of Santa Clara, after they had just arrived from Switzerland—perhaps the greenest, best watered, and tidiest country in all the world. Having recently returned from living for a few years in Germany, I cannot imagine a greater contrast in physical environments than comparing the barren Dixie chaos to those lush and tidy Swiss hillsides. If I ever make a movie about my great-grandfather Hafen’s life story, I plan to show those Swiss settlers standing on a verdant green hill north of Zürich, with Heidi and her goats grazing contentedly in the background. The Swiss immigrants will begin singing, “O Babylon, O Babylon, we bid thee farewell.” Then I’ll have them keep singing in the same pose as the background abruptly changes to show skinny mesquite bushes clinging to red alkaline



Southwestern Utah desert landscape.

dirt, with scary lizards and a baked cow skull on the ground. Their song will continue, “We’re going to the mountains of Ephraim to dwell.”

One new Swiss immigrant to Utah asked incredulously upon seeing his dry, stark new surroundings, “Is *this* Zion?” Perhaps he’d have been comforted by Brigham Young’s answer to his question: “It is the shortsightedness of men which causes their disappointment when they arrive here. . . . They [expect] to find Zion [here] in its glory, whereas their own doctrine should teach them that they are coming here to *make Zion*. . . . The people can make Zion; they can make a heaven within themselves.”⁷ Making Zion is an internal matter of the heart.

Of the many stories told by those who settled this region, one account captures what is for me a key insight. My friend Lowell Wood told me this story from the life of his great grandparents William and Elizabeth Wood. In 1867, Brigham Young called the Woods to help settle an extension of the Dixie Cotton Mission ninety miles southwest from St. George along the Muddy River in Moapa Valley, Nevada. Historian L. A. Fleming wrote that no colonization in any area of North America presented greater difficulties than those faced by the settlers on the Muddy.⁸ To accept this mission call, the Woods sold their profitable butcher shop and their comfortable home in Salt Lake City.



The grave of Susetta Bosshard Hafen, born in Switzerland and died in Santa Clara, Utah.

Conditions in the Muddy settlement were much like those in nearby Dixie. As one descendant of that group put it, “Those people were so poor, they couldn’t even pay . . . attention.”⁹ After five years of frustrating effort, William’s family lost everything trying to settle the Muddy. The settlement closed in 1872, partly due to the quirky demands of Nevada tax laws on people who thought they lived in Utah—but that’s another story. Many of them moved just up the road to Orderville, east of St. George. The Woods returned penniless and exhausted to Salt Lake City, where they began living in a dugout with a dirt floor and a sod roof.

One day William and Elizabeth stood looking at the beautiful home they had sold to accept their mission call. William asked, “How would you like such a house now as our old home?” Elizabeth replied, “I would rather [live in a] dug-out

with [our] mission filled than [live] in that fine house with [our] mission unfulfilled.”¹⁰ Why would Elizabeth feel that way? Her answer says not simply that she was glad she survived the hardships, but also that she honestly believed she was a different and better person because of the way they had learned and grown by facing their hardships together. Like the survivors of the Martin and Willie handcart experiences, they came to know God in their extremities. And the price they paid to know him was “a privilege to pay.”¹¹

I can understand Elizabeth’s discovery better by comparing it with the experience of the Aborigines in Australia’s Northern Territory (NT). This is a vast expanse of hot, dry bush so isolated and environmentally harsh that you or I wouldn’t last more than a few days if we found ourselves there without both instructions and supplies. While visiting the NT as part of a mission tour in the Australia Adelaide Mission a few years ago, I learned that a few Aborigines in this and other barren parts of Australia still live off the land in their traditional, deeply religious ways. Anthropologists believe

these people have been living according to this ancient pattern for an estimated forty thousand years—which would make the Aborigines the oldest continuously surviving culture on the earth today. I find it striking that the human culture with the greatest longevity would be located in one of this planet's most hostile physical environments. Something about that connection between hardship and thriving echoes the hardiness of Dixie's people.

The comparison between southwestern Utah and Australia's Northern Territory became complete for me the day we saw Ayers Rock, known to the Aborigines as Uluru. One of Australia's two or three most celebrated landmarks, Uluru is a huge red rock, a thousand feet in height with a circumference of five miles. It sits like a massive Sphinx all by itself on a flat desert plain that stretches out for hundreds of miles. In a comparison of eerie closeness, the red color and sandy texture of Uluru look exactly as if someone had carved it from the Vermillion Cliffs above St. George or Ivins. Maybe the Australians should have called it the Really Big Dixie Sugar Loaf.

Shortly before Marie and I left Sydney a few years ago, a great cloud-burst poured upon the Northern Territory for several days. The rain was so intense for so long that something quite miraculous occurred—as Uluru absorbed all of that rainwater, its red sandstone color changed to a rich, deep purple. An alert photographer captured this amazing dance by Mother Nature, and the photo was published on the front page of a major newspaper. The night before we left Australia, a friend brought us a framed enlargement of this photograph, which shows water gushing down the now-purple rock's crevices and pooling in the foreground in that red dirt that looks so much like St. George's soil. On the frame below the photograph, our friend had inscribed these words from a scripture that for him describes the influence of heaven on Australia, an influence symbolized by the dramatic change the rain brought to Uluru: "And in the barren deserts there shall come forth pools of living water; and the parched ground shall no longer be a thirsty land" (D&C 133:29). (See photographs on the cover of this issue.)

What happened to Uluru is not unlike what happened to William and Elizabeth Wood. Something about digging essentially with your bare hands until you find pools of living water in a barren desert changes you for the better, especially when your motive for digging is to help and cooperate with your neighbors. With irrigation as with everything else they did, early St. George settlers knew that their very lives depended upon their mutual cooperation. They learned that human interdependence is not a pleasantry but a necessity. As one St. George family used to say, nobody would get rich in Dixie, but nobody would starve either. Maybe those two beliefs reinforced each other. In that sense, irrigation and other community processes like it also bring forth human pools of living water.

The rain upon Uluru prompts a memory of another founding story of Dixie—Lorenzo Snow and the windows of heaven. In 1899 President Snow came to St. George out of sheer compassion over the awful drought that was choking the life out of this parched corner. He was also weighed down by a larger problem—the Church’s very survival was threatened by financial debt. Speaking in the St. George Tabernacle, he felt prompted to promise the local Saints that if they paid their tithing, the windows of heaven would pour out a blessing of rain. In addition, if the people accepted his counsel, he promised that “the shackles of indebtedness [would] be removed” from the Church.¹²

I once had in my office a large painting of a family kneeling together in prayer in their field, thanking God for their harvest. When I looked at that scene, I sometimes thought of the families in St. George in 1899 who again followed the founding principles that had guided their original settlement: obedience, cooperation, and sacrifice. Again they prayed together, planted together, and yielded up both their tithing and their self-interest. And the rain came. The rain poured down continually upon their upturned faces, like the Australian downpour on Uluru. And with the rain, their faith was confirmed. I marvel at the change in human character symbolized by red rocks that become purple.

The red sandstone of Uluru turned purple because it became so saturated with water that it couldn’t hold any more. The stone’s coarse texture literally swelled and changed as it overflowed with its heavenly gift. For me, this swelling change captures what happens when the windows of heaven have poured out such a blessing on us that we don’t have room enough to contain it (see Malachi 3:10). As that happens, heaven embraces and nourishes the earth, and Zion takes root and grows within a person’s heart.

Shortly after Lorenzo Snow’s 1899 visit, my father was born in Santa Clara. Historian Douglas Alder has aptly described the span of my dad’s lifetime—from 1903 to 1964—as a transitional generation between the poverty of the original settlers and the prosperity of the modern residents and tourists who now flock to the area.

For the earliest Dixie pioneers, self-denial had become a way of life, frugality being one of their highest virtues. For example, my Swiss grandfather, John Hafen of Santa Clara, once bought a new suit. He wore the new jacket one Sunday with some old pants, and then he wore the new pants the next Sunday with an old jacket. When asked why, Grandfather said he didn’t want to be seen coming out in it all at once. And when my father, Orval Hafen, was elected to the Utah legislature in 1951, he sought advice from Albert E. Miller, who had represented Dixie in the state capitol years earlier. Offering a little tip about building a good political network, Albert E. told

my dad that while Dad couldn't afford to eat in Salt Lake's better restaurants, he should always go to the lobby of the Hotel Utah to pick his teeth.

Dixie College was founded in 1911, at the beginning of the transitional period, clearly signaling that education would help build the bridge from poverty to prosperity. During his lifetime, my father and other townspeople were involved with two major crises, one in 1933 and the other in 1953, when Dixie College struggled for survival, and the community saved it both times by again exerting their commitment to the principles of obedience, cooperation, and sacrifice. The people of St. George were determined to save their college because they knew that in the long run, education would help save *them*.

My father's own life story, punctuated by his involvement with Dixie College, illustrates how Washington County people in the transitional era discovered and embraced the values discovered years earlier by William and Elizabeth Wood on the Muddy and by the people who followed the counsel of Lorenzo Snow. I won't tell much of my dad's story, but I will share something that shows how he came to feel about St. George's barren desert after living most of his days in a growing love affair with his vision for the area's future.

Orval Hafen really hadn't planned to return to St. George after finishing law school at Berkeley. For him, Phoenix was the city of his future. He came to St. George temporarily, however, at the invitation of Joseph K. Nicholes, then president of Dixie College and president of the St. George Stake. One community project led to another, and despite Orval's years of planning to move on soon, he stayed. Gradually, the heavenly dew that distills upon those who live Dixie's founding principles began to change his internal color from red to purple.

As time rolled on, Orval developed a genuine passion for the people and the environment of this area. I want to illustrate how he came to feel by quoting a passage from his journal. Long before the Tabernacle Choir and the rest of the world discovered Tuacahn in 1995, Orval Hafen owned the land where that spectacular outdoor theatre now sits. He would go there by himself, riding his horse and dreaming up plans for golf courses and retirement communities, all of which seemed outrageously unrealistic to his family and friends. His favorite spot for contemplation was on a high ridge just north of Tuacahn. In a journal passage recorded in about 1960, he describes the first time he saw that view. Note how different his perception is about the same chaotic and hopeless landscape Parley P. Pratt described with such gloom a century earlier:

"I was awe-struck. There before me lay a scene of indescribable beauty: wild, primitive, unspoiled, largely unknown, waiting to be enjoyed, waiting



Orval Hafen overlooking Tuacahn and neighboring Snow Canyon State Park, in about 1962.

to inspire folks and bring them near to their God. [In this place,] it is easy to declare the glory of God, to feel the strength of the hills, to rejoice in the goodness of God, and to sense the order and the planning in the Universe.” Within these “towering red sandstone cliffs,” he desired that “others [might one day] share this beauty and drink of the inspiration that is here.” He thought there might be “places more spectacular, but few could equal [this one] in serenity and peace.”¹³

Could this possibly be the same land of “cheerless, grassless [and] inconceivable confusion” that Parley Pratt had seen in its “terrible convulsions of some former age”? Or does the world just look different when one’s interior color changes, and from somewhere, maybe heaven, pools of living water come forth and the parched ground is no longer a thirsty land? Perhaps when one lives in a place so demanding that its inhabitants must stay close to both the heavens and the earth, toil and sacrifice turn a foreigner into a native. Orval Hafen’s people were indigenous to Switzerland, but he became a *native* of St. George.

Since my father’s death in 1964, Dixie has moved from its transitional era into full-blown opulence. A few years ago, the *Wall Street Journal*

published a story on the explosive growth in St. George, noting that while the Mormon pioneers who settled here came to get away from the world, the world is now coming to them.¹⁴ The tough demands of pioneer times nourished a religious culture that produced thrift and character and stable families. As the Hopi Indians said of their habitat, they needed to live in a difficult place so they wouldn't forget their need for God. But now, some people wonder if the modern evils of luxury and urban blight will descend upon Dixie's people and put their old values at risk. Perhaps that is why, when my mother was in her eighties, she started asking our children at dinner almost every night, "Well, what did you do today that was hard for you?"

Is it possible during a time of prosperity to develop the character formed by a time of poverty? The Dixie founders blessed their posterity with a tamed desert and a comfortable existence by conquering the very oppositions that had so profoundly shaped their character. The irony of that statement reminds me of Winston Churchill's introduction to the last volume of his World War II memoirs: "How the great democracies triumphed, and so were able to resume the follies which had so nearly cost them their life."¹⁵

Brigham Young told the early Utah settlers about the risks of future prosperity: "Should we live in peace year after year, how long would it be before we were glued to the world? Our affections would be so fastened to the things of the world that it would be . . . contrary to our feelings to attend to anything but our own individual concerns to make ourselves rich."¹⁶

How, then, will we teach our children to live outside themselves with cooperation and sacrifice, rather than becoming self-absorbed and "glued to the world"? One very good way to teach the rising generation to build Zion within their hearts is to tell them the founding stories of St. George and other places like it.

Our children need to know those stories. A nationally known storyteller named Carmen Deedy said, "We now not only do not teach the Koran, the Bible, and so forth, but we teach nothing! In this void we have children" who "don't know how to live. . . . They don't know how to die. They don't know how to deal with the old and the aging. They don't know how to deal with their fears. They have no maps! . . . Stories fill that place! . . . Cultural . . . and family stories were what we gave each other to say . . . this is how you [help someone when they fall into trouble]."¹⁷ Bringing local history to life is a crucial way to keep sharing the stories that teach our children how to live. As some of you have heard, the reason history repeats itself is because no one was listening the first time.

Here is one other perspective on how to teach our children. I have rediscovered in the last few months that the temple is the best long-term solution to Brigham Young's concern about the Saints losing their pioneer



Left to right: Richard Hafen, Jonathan Hafen, Guy Hafen, and David Hafen, sharing a favorite story at a family reunion.

values. And the St. George Temple played a key role in the restoration of the ordinances that keep those values alive in today's temple worship.

Three temples were needed to restore the fullness of temple ordinances and blessings—Kirtland, Nauvoo, and St. George. The keys of the temple sealing power were restored in the Kirtland Temple. The first baptisms for the dead and the first endowments and sealings for the living took place in Nauvoo. But the first endowments for the dead in this dispensation took place in the St. George Temple in January 1877.¹⁸ It was also in the St. George Temple that the temple ordinances were first put into written form.

Why did St. George end up playing such a pivotal role? Brigham Young felt a keen urgency to finish a temple in Utah because the Saints had been driven out of Nauvoo before he was able to pass the torch of temple work to his successors. The temple was such a high priority that Brigham designated the site for the Salt Lake Temple on July 28, 1847, only four days after entering the valley. The building of the Salt Lake Temple began in 1853, but after nearly twenty years of excruciating labor, the Salt Lake Temple's construction was bogged down in a sea of troubles. Brigham could see that he would never live to see that temple finished. Yet he held sacred, confidential information and authority that he could pass along only in a dedicated



St. George, with the temple in the distance, as it was in 1959.

temple. So in 1871 he asked the people in remote and tiny St. George (population 1,142) to build a temple. Although they lived in extreme poverty, the Dixie Saints (assisted by volunteers from all over Utah Territory) built their temple in six backbreaking years, during which their sacrifice was exceeded only by their spiritual growth. The temple was dedicated in January and April 1877. Only four months later, Brigham Young died, finally able to face Joseph Smith to report that all of the work for the dead was now underway and all of the ordinances were written and secure in the hands of Wilford Woodruff, the St. George Temple president. In the last years of Brigham's and Joseph's lives, both were swamped by persecution, apostasy, legal troubles, and health problems. Yet uppermost in both of their minds was the completion of two temples—Nauvoo for Joseph and St. George for Brigham.

Joseph Smith had taught Brigham and the Twelve that the endowment is an essential ordinance for exaltation.¹⁹ Otherwise they might have decided that the endowment is like a patriarchal blessing—a wonderful source of inspiration and direction, but not a necessary ordinance. Because we don't do patriarchal blessings for the dead, receiving that blessing is usually a once-in-a-lifetime experience. But Church members who live near temples—a group that now includes most of the Church's membership—can have a lifetime of experience in temple worship because they return repeatedly to do endowments for the dead.

Is there a link between pioneer values and endowment-based temple worship? Brigham Young wanted to build the St. George Temple—and therefore all subsequent temples—upon the principles of the United Order. Indeed, he re-established the United Order in several Utah communities just before dedicating the St. George Temple.

In the words of Richard Bennett, “The united order failed [in the mid-1870s] as an economic system. However, the adoption of the endowment for the dead [in the St. George Temple] with its emphasis on obedience, sacrifice, and consecration . . . fulfilled [Brigham Young’s desire] to rebuild a Zion community and reestablish a consecrated people.”²⁰

Performing endowments for the dead makes possible true temple worship for the living. In that pattern of worship, the covenants of the temple continually reinforce the doctrine and the practice of a disciple’s life—a life not glued to the things of this world. Temple-going people seek the very life of sacrifice and cooperation that William and Elizabeth Wood discovered in their mission on the Muddy. So if Latter-day Saints can’t take their children to the Muddy to learn about consecration, they *can* take them to the temple.

By the way, many of the destitute refugees from the failed Muddy settlement moved directly to Orderville, near St. George, when it was established in 1875. The United Order flourished longer in Orderville than it did anywhere else—and why? Because that community was full of disciples who had already proven their willingness to sacrifice in order to build Zion.

Building Zion and establishing a covenant people, as the temple helps us to do, were not just *temporal* goals related to settling the West. They also were and are *spiritual* goals related to the spiritual growth of all the Saints, wherever they are. It was Joseph Smith who first taught Brigham Young and others that “a religion that does not require . . . sacrifice . . . never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation; for, from the first existence of man, the faith necessary unto the enjoyment of life and salvation never could be obtained without the sacrifice of all earthly things.”²¹

As the Lord said in Doctrine and Covenants 97: “All . . . who . . . are willing to observe their covenants by sacrifice . . . are accepted of me. For I . . . will cause them to bring forth as a very fruitful tree which is planted in a goodly land, by a pure stream, that yieldeth much precious fruit.” And in the very next verse, the Lord directs the building of a temple.

I am deeply grateful to the people who came to Dixie and built the tabernacle, the temple, and the communities in and around St. George. They built families whose lives teach us how and why to live. Their stories show how, both physically and spiritually, “in the barren deserts there shall come forth pools of living water; and the parched ground shall no longer be a thirsty land” (D&C 133:29). I want to follow their life pattern.

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5. Logue, *Sermon in the Desert*, 2.

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18. Richard E. Bennett, "'Line upon Line, Precept upon Precept': Reflections on the 1877 Commencement of the Performance of Endowments and Sealings of the Dead," *BYU Studies* 44, no. 3 (2005): 38–77.

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20. Bennett, "'Line upon Line, Precept upon Precept,'" 57.

21. Lecture 6.7, *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 69.