

The Haun's Mill Massacre

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It may be that the events which took place here on 30 October 1838 are beyond our understanding. There are times when imagination is challenged beyond its capacity to respond, even when we stand on the ground of the events themselves. Here at Haun's Mill nature has conspired to hide from us the past we would recreate. We do not know where most of the houses or tents stood. We must be tentative on the site of the mill and blacksmith shop. We hardly dare guess at the location of the well which became a mass grave. It is almost as if nature thought to blot out the obscenity of this massacre.

The earth's wounds are long healed, but we know history is not to be found in the remains of old log cabins or the stone foundations of a mill even when we can uncover them. Rather history is to be found in the memory of mankind. Part of our remembrance of the Haun's Mill Massacre is simple to reconstruct, but part of it is as complex as humanity itself. And our remembering is infused with pain.

Jacob Haun's mill was one of several scattered along Shoal Creek. For about a year it had been the home of fifteen to twenty families of the Saints, and other Church members in the area used it for grinding their grain. It had also become a stopping place for those migrating to Caldwell County from Kirtland. Although few Saints had settled in Livingstone County or Carroll County to the east, and although the mill was inside Caldwell County, it was close to the borders and threatened to become a center for the Mormon population that might spill over into gentile territory.

Tension had built in Livingstone during October and the county militia had been called out. Two companies especially were active in trying to turn back migrants from Kirtland and in patrolling the borders adjoining Caldwell County. The battle of Crooked River, fought 25 October, raised fears among the Saints in eastern Caldwell County, and several families gathered to Haun's Mill for protection. The group considered but decided against going to Far West at that time. The Saints at Haun's Mill had had no previous difficulties with the gentiles and reached an agreement on 28 October with the militia group led by Captain Nehemiah Comstock, stationed near Mooresville and Utica, to preserve the peace. The Mormons then removed their pickets but reestablished them after learning of another militia company operating about fourteen miles directly east of the mill. Under the leadership of Captain David Evans, the Saints devised the plan

of using the blacksmith shop as a fort, feeling that they could hold off any group likely to attack them. They had not considered the possibility of having to face a vastly superior force.

It is not clear why the gentile militia decided to attack Haun's Mill at this particular time. Daviess County men had been talking to those from Livingstone, describing real or fancied Mormon injustices perpetrated against them. The "Extermination Order" issued by Governor Boggs on 27 October was now widely known and the state militia was beginning to move against Far West. These factors may have been decisive. Under the leadership of Colonel Thomas Jennings, the several companies of Livingstone militia were formed into a battalion. The decision to attack the settlement was made 29 October at Woolsey's farm about ten miles northeast of Haun's Mill. Jennings and his force of about 200 men left after noon on 30 October and rode south to within several miles of the mill. There they dismounted, marched across the open prairie to the woods just north of the mill, and filtered through the trees.

Captain Evans had withdrawn the pickets that had been stationed in the woods the previous day, but was apparently planning to set them out again that evening. The attack came about 4:00 p.m. without warning. Some of the Saints at first thought the approaching men were reinforcements from Far West. With the opening volley of shots, the hamlet was thrown into confusion. Evans waved his hat and shouted for "quarter." He was not heard, but it is doubtful if peace would have been given anyway. The women and children scattered, and some of the men ran for the woods and safety. Those who got to the blacksmith shop found it to be a trap; they were fired upon through the large cracks between the logs and were so crowded inside that they were easily hit. When they tried to flee from the building, they were again fired upon and only a few, most of them wounded, managed to get to the woods where they hid until night.

Seventeen Saints¹, all men and boys, died that day or in the following weeks. One woman was injured, and some men were hacked to death by corn knives after they had been wounded. Thomas McBride, a seventy-eight-year-old man, was wounded, then shot with his own rifle as he surrendered, and finally hacked by his murderer. Ten-year-old Sardius Smith was deliberately killed as he tried to hide, and nine-year-old Charles Merri-ck suffered with his wounds for five weeks before he died. The Missourians had three men wounded who were taken away in wagons stolen from the Saints. Jennings' men stayed for less than two hours and then returned to Livingstone County.

The Saints slowly gathered themselves together during the night, tended to the wounded as best they could, and wept for the dead. The following day the bodies were slid into a partially dug well and lightly covered with

dirt. Later that day Comstock's men returned to bury the dead and warn the remaining Mormons that they must leave the state immediately. After the surrender of Far West and Adam-ondi-Ahman, Comstock's company was assigned to Haun's Mill and remained there until the Saints migrated to Illinois.

Those are the things we can know. But what we can never be certain of, perhaps, is why it all happened. What kind of men were these? What forces moved in their souls causing them to commit such outrage upon other humans? The answers we have sometimes given are clear in their attribution of innocence and guilt. But perhaps we have condemned too easily. At any rate, it is easier to assign guilt than to account for the "Whys" of history.

It would be foolish and dangerous for us to place the Missourians outside the human race, to account for this massacre as the action of a devil-infested, particularly depraved species. The same man who seconds before had hacked Father McBride to pieces gently told Olive Ames, crouching with her children under a river bank, that she was safe and would not be harmed! We know that all of us are capable of bestiality, but this was not an attack motivated by the lust to kill. It was too selective, too well planned for that.

Undoubtedly economic considerations entered into the Missourian's minds, but Haun's Mill cannot be explained by recounting the animals, wagons, clothes and grain which they took on the day of the massacre and in the months that followed. They did not think to profit much from the land, the homes, or the mill. Nor can we be satisfied that political issues were the primary motivations, especially not for those from Livingstone County. Such explanations fall short, important though they may be, for we must remember that Haun's Mill is connected with larger events and larger causes. Our explanation must deal with similar events in Far West, Adam-ondi-Ahman, Clay County, Jackson County, Kirtland, New York, and, later, Nauvoo.

Those immediate factors of personal ambition and group greed are but the names given to a nameless fear that churned deep inside the attackers. They feared these people who were somehow different, who thought and acted in ways that were not their ways. At some point, each of those who marched against the saints passed from the rational thought that "The Mormons" were also human to the irrational thought that "Mormons" were not truly "people." Their fear had crystallized, leaving them with the capacity to do anything, even kill, to rid themselves of the terror that was silently grinding away on the banks of Shoal Creek that sunny afternoon. The attackers did not think of how they were violating a truce or invading the Saints' own country. They did not want the Saints' goods; they did not

even want their lives. They were beyond such calculations and moved in the great mystery of the myth of “We” against “Them.” At such a point all defensive or humane acts of the “Enemy” seem devilish and insincere. At such a point all things “We” do are right and necessary. So these several hundred Missourians, made up of husbands, fathers, and sons, marched calmly and righteously through the woods to kill those they “had” to kill.

Nor were the Saints free from this mob psychology, which is also personal as well. For some of them fear had also crystallized and their reason had become servant of their emotions. We see it in those Saints who swore secret oaths to follow their leaders even to the “despoiling of the gentiles” for the sake of the kingdom. We see it in the speeches and in the intolerant acts directed toward those within the faith as well as those outside. We see it as the Saints despaired of legal processes and marched to destroy the enemy. We see it in those at Haun’s Mill who believed their righteousness would enable them to hold off any enemy force.

The cause of the Saints’ fear-hate reaction is to be found, in part, in the fact they had been pushed too far for too long. We cannot blame them or absolve them. However, we need to understand the effects of another fact. Both Saints and gentiles believed themselves to be a “chosen people.” To be such a people in our historical conception of ourselves, to feel called to defend a special gospel, is always dangerous. Even without persecution, the Saints believed in their uniqueness and too often flaunted their peculiar relationship with God. When Methodist and Baptist ministers led the opposition, the Saints took this as sign of their own righteousness and evidence of the wickedness of their tormentors. It was neither.

For their part, the gentiles felt their own sure calling to abolish the “delusion of Mormonism and Joe Smith.” The fruit of the tree, when nurtured under tension, was the Haun’s Mill Massacre.

We must look to our myths, even our sacred myths, and beware lest our unconscious acceptance of them becomes the means whereby we betray their highest promises. We who are called to become Saints must never confuse that call with what we presently are. We who are called to learn truth must never forget our own guilt or the innocence of those who are guilty. This is a world in which men will die for their fondest dreams; we should not forget that men will sometimes also kill for those same dreams.

We may not find the rotting timbers here that would mark the outlines of old houses. We may, however, find that which marks us part of humankind. As we consider the events that took place here, we may become more than tolerant. Perhaps we can learn humility.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Two difficulties confront the historian in trying to reconstruct the Haun's Mill Massacre. The first is the usual problem of determining the facts of such items as how many persons were at the mill, how large the attacking force was, and what exactly happened.

A more serious problem surrounds the reasons for the attack. The Saints who wrote at the time were so shocked and so angered at Missouri that they usually wrote of little more than the horrors of the incident. To them no explanation was necessary beyond that of the depravity of the Missourians. The attackers, who apparently wrote little, returned the compliment. Even the judicious account compiled in 1887 by Major Reburn S. Holcombe, writing under the pen name Burr Joyce, is of little help in suggesting reasons for this seemingly senseless act.

The sources mentioned here are certainly not exhaustive. Certain accounts, notably that of Joseph W. Young and Nathan K. Knight, are found in several places, either in full or as extracts. However, these sources do give most of the major nineteenth century statements on the massacre.

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1. A gentile named Walker, not in the militia, was apparently also killed in this attack.