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No Place for Zion: Deseret Ranch and the Mainstreaming of Mormonism, 1950-1985

“I would rather pass through all the misery and sorrow, the troubles and trials of the Saints, than to have the religion of Christ become popular with the world.” -Brigham Young, 1865¹

“The day is long since past when informed people think of us as a strange group in the tops of the Rocky Mountains in America . . . We are coming of age as a church and as a people.” - Joseph Fielding Smith, 1971²

In 1952, twelve cattle ranchers from the Humboldt Stake of the LDS Church in Wells and Elko, Nevada were “called” by apostle Henry Moyle to leave their homes and move over 2,000 miles to central Florida. Two years earlier, the Church had purchased over 135,000 acres and 11,000 head of cattle just outside Orlando, and Moyle believed these experienced cattle farmers would prove a vital asset to the burgeoning ranch. As Moris Justensen, one of the twelve men summoned for his expertise, later recalled, “we were told to sell everything we owned and ‘burn our bridges behind us.’” The men and their families arrived in St. Cloud, Florida on July 7, 1952 and began working on the ranch shortly thereafter.³

Justensen’s comment signifies a larger trend in Mormon history. Just as these twelve men were called to start a new life, so too was the Church entering a new epoch. In 1950, the Mormon Church had approximately 1.1 million members. During the next twenty years, its membership almost tripled, reaching nearly 3 million by 1970. Not only did membership skyrocket, but new members were also more geographically diverse. In a movement that Mormon scholar Douglas D. Alder refers as the “scattering of the gathering,” a large number of Saints settled outside the

¹ Brigham Young, “Duties of the Saints—Obedience to Counsel, Etc.,” in *Journal of Discourses by President Brigham Young, His Two Counselors, The Twelve Apostles, and Others*, ed. G.D. Watt, E.L. Sloan, and D.W. Evans, Volume XI (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1867), 109.

² Joseph Fielding Smith, “To the Saints in Great Britain,” *Ensign* 1 (September 1971): <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1971/09/to-the-saints-in-great-britain?lang=eng>.

³ Morris Justensen, quoted in Alvin C. Warnick, John K. Loosli, and Meredith Genho, “Sixty Year History of the Deseret Ranches of Florida” (Unpublished booklet, St. Cloud Florida, 2010), 51.

Mormon “culture region” for the first time in the Church’s history. Geographic expansion gave rise to an ecclesiastical organizational structure that created standardized Church buildings in almost every corner of the United States by the end of the twentieth century.⁴

As the Church expanded, Mormons’ popular image was revolutionized. Saints were achieving newfound prominence within virtually every professional circle, from government service to professional sports. A 1955 *New York Times Magazine* article noted that the Mormons had far exceeded Joseph Smith’s hope that they would become “a mighty people in the midst of the Rocky Mountains.” The Saints were now “respected citizens,” the article maintained, “even, in some cases, holders of high public office...” In his 1960 address in Salt Lake City, then Senator John F. Kennedy claimed to speak on behalf of all Americans “in expressing our gratitude to the Mormon people—for their pioneer spirit, their devotion to culture and learning, their example of industry and self-reliance.” While the Church still had its detractors, no longer were Mormons seen as a national “problem” to be solved. Rather, they were a group popularly hailed for their commitment to hard work and pure living.⁵

⁴ Douglas D. Alder, “The German-Speaking Immigration to Utah, 1850-1950” (Master’s thesis, University of Utah, 1950), 115. The Mormon culture region, also known as the “Mormon Corridor” or the “Book of Mormon belt,” refers to areas of Western North America that were settled between 1850 and around 1890 by the LDS Church. Beginning in Utah, the region extends northward through western Wyoming and eastern Idaho to Yellowstone National Park. It goes south to San Bernardino, California on the west and through Mesa, Arizona on the east, extending south to the U.S.-Mexico Border. For more on the institution of “standards” in architectural types and floor plans to create homogenous stakes and wards during this period, see Martha Sonntag Bradley, “The Cloning of Mormon Architecture,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14 (Spring 1981): 20-31. To be sure, most American Mormons continued to live in the traditional Mormon areas of Utah, southern Idaho, western Wyoming, eastern Nevada, northern Arizona and eastern New Mexico. However, as Alder explains, this was the first time a significant number of Saints permanently moved away from the region (as opposed to temporary mission trips).

⁵ John F. Kennedy, “Speech of Senator John F. Kennedy, Salt Lake City, Utah, Mormon Tabernacle,” September 23, 1960, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=74176>; Rebecca Franklin, “Mighty People in the Rockies,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 3, 1955, 17; William G. Harley, “The Church Grows in Strength,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, September 1999, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1999/09/the-church-grows-in-strength?lang=eng>; For a similar example, see Seymour Freedgood, “Mormonism: Rich, Vital, and Unique,” *Fortune* 69 (April 1964): 136. The “Mormon problem” was a common phrase used in the nineteenth century to describe this religious group who did not conform to societal norms.

Consequently, this was a period in the Church's history defined by growth and optimism. As historian Matthew Bowman argues, the 1950s marked the first time Church leaders felt as if "the world was to be embraced rather than feared." While sociologists and historians alike have attempted to explain the Church's postwar expansion and subsequent "mainstreaming" of Mormonism, they have neglected to explain how this process developed on a local level. By exclusively focusing on "key figures" like Mormon politicians, celebrities, and Church leaders, these scholars fail to show how the Church's engagement with the world influenced the vast majority of Saints. Moreover, by focusing on Mormons' public perception during "news-making 'Mormon moments'" like the Church's campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment or the 1978 revelation that opened priesthood ordination to black males, they fail to demonstrate how Mormons' cultural assimilation was often a gradual process. While these "Mormon moments" shaped the Church's popular image, it was every day relations between Deseret's residents and their neighbors, for example, that largely integrated Mormon ranchers into their local community.⁶

Deseret's leaders quickly found that they could not simply transplant the Church's western welfare farm model into a new milieu. They faced novel agricultural, economic, and social challenges that forced them to constantly redefine the ranch's capacity. What started as a glorified welfare farm in 1950, Deseret became one of the largest and most profitable cattle ranches in the nation by 1980. As Deseret became a successful enterprise, ranchers managed to integrate themselves into the local community by emphasizing their patriotism, adopting a universal moral language, and downplaying their history of persecution. Deseret's managers worked with Church leaders to facilitate this integration by opening the ranch to outsiders. They

⁶ J.B. Haws, *The Mormon Image in the American Mind: Fifty Years of Public Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4, 9.

created a visitors' center and hosted community gatherings that incorporated non-Church members into Mormon traditions. The evolution of Deseret thus demonstrates how sustained integrationist efforts on both a national and local level contributed to Mormon ranchers' assimilation into the cultural mainstream.⁷

Agricultural Theology and the Church Welfare Plan

To understand Deseret's development, it is necessary to first analyze Mormons' theological understanding of agricultural stewardship. At the root of Mormons' attitude towards farming is Mormonism's conception of work. Mormon religious literature is rife with admonitions against idleness, going so far as to consider it a sign of unbelief. In the book of Alma, for example, those who do not belong to the Church are marked by their tendency to "indulge themselves in . . . idleness," a vice that is placed on the same level as "thieving, robbing, committing whoredoms, and murdering." Hard work, on the other hand, is deemed a "blessing from God."⁸

⁷ Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (New York: Random House, 2012), 186; "Church Group Shifts Stock to Florida Land," *The Deseret News* (Salt Lake City, UT), November 21, 1950, 8. In recent years, interest in Mormonism has increased with the rise of Mormons like Harry Reid, Mitt Romney, and Glen Beck. Television shows like Comedy Central's *South Park* and HBO's *Big Love* and the Tony-award winning musical *The Book Of Mormon* (2011) have contributed to what many call a "Mormon Moment." For more on the transformation of Mormon's public image in the media since World War II, see Dennis Leo Lythgoe, "The Changing Image of Mormonism in Periodical Literature" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Utah, 1969); Chiung Hwang Chen and Ethan Yorganson, "Those Amazing Mormons': The Media's Construction of Latter-day Saints as a Model Minority," *Dialogue* 32, no. 2 (summer 1999): 107-128; Jan Shipps, *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Richard O. Cowan, "Mormonism in National Periodicals" (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1961); J.B. Haws, *The Mormon Image in the American Mind: Fifty Years of Public Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); *Mormons and Popular Culture: The Global Influence of an American Phenomenon*, ed. J. Michael Hunter (Santa Barbara, Denver, Oxford: Praeger, 2013); and Christine Hutchinson-Jones, "Reviling and Revering the Mormons: Defining American Values, 1890-2008" (PhD Dissertation, Boston University, 2011). For the best sociological perspective of this transition see Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

⁸ Alma 1:32, The Book of Mormon. For more examples of Mormon scriptural admonitions against idleness, see Alma 60:22, Alma 38:12, 1 Nephi 12:23, Alma 24:18, Alma 47:36, and Mosiah 11:6.

Mormons' commitment to work is largely derived from their belief that they are "co-creators" with God and thus called to "do the work he has left undone" here on Earth. According to Church doctrine, Mormons are not merely stewards of God's resources; they are called to "work in conjunction with God on the continuing creation of a living earth." Seen from this perspective, work is not a chore; it is a chance to "transform the treasures of the earth" for their own good. Tasked with assuming the mantle of the Creator, Mormons therefore understand hard work to be a religious duty.⁹

Specifically, Mormons believe they have been called to partner with God in "redeeming the earth" and restoring its paradisiacal status. According to Parley Pratt, an apostle during Joseph Smith's and later Brigham Young's presidency, the earth will undergo a physical transformation prior to the "Second Coming," whereby "a careful and wise system of agriculture will be rapidly developed and extended over the face of the whole earth." During this period, the world will come to resemble the Garden of Eden. As Pratt explains, "its mountains will be levelled [sic], its valleys exalted and its swamps and sickly places will be drained and become healthy, while its burning deserts and its frigid polar regions will be redeemed and become temperate and fruitful." This narrative has had a profound effect on the Saints' perception of land use. According to historian Donald Dyal, Church authorities have historically used the agrarian redemption narrative, particularly the idea that Mormons have an essential role in bringing God's plan to fruition, to "motivate and channel energies into agrarian and beautification works."¹⁰

⁹J. Richard Clarke, "The Value of Work," General Conference, April 1982, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1982/04/the-value-of-work?lang=eng>; Howard W. Hunter, "Prepare for Honorable Employment," *Ensign* 5 (Nov. 1975): 122-24; SL10315: Toward a Mormon Theological Justification for Environmental Activism," *Sunstone Magazine*, January 1, 2010, <https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/sl10315-toward-a-mormon-theological-justification-for-environmental-activism/>.

¹⁰ Donald Dyal, "Mormon Pursuit of the Agrarian Ideal," *Agricultural History* 63, no. 4 (Autumn 1989): 27-29; Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Technology* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret News, Printers and Publishers,

In addition to this theological imperative, agriculture has historically helped bind the Mormon community together. During much of the nineteenth century, Saints lived a tenuous, isolated existence and were thus particularly reliant on subsistence farming for their survival. Farmers' ability to provide for the community allowed Saints to live independently of hostile neighbors. In turn, Mormons' self-sufficiency marked their social distinctiveness. Because they did not need to import food, the Saints were able to largely isolate themselves from the outside world. The importance of farming in facilitating this group solidarity prompted President Joseph F. Smith to claim that "there is no labor on earth more essential to the well being of a community or more honorable than the labor which is necessary to produce food from mother earth."¹¹

In this way, farming became a critical component of Mormons' mission to establish Zion as both a present and future reality. Their ability to be agriculturally self-sufficient established independence, while simultaneously paving the way for Christ's Second Coming. Though agricultural success became less pertinent at the dawn of the twentieth century as mining, and railroads, and the resulting market economy revolutionized Utah, the agricultural depression of the 1920s and Great Depression of the 1930s brought these imperatives back into sharp focus. In a period defined by destitution and uncertainty, Church leaders largely relied on these agricultural ideals to show them a way out and a way forward.

The Great Depression proved particularly devastating in Utah. In 1932, unemployment reached an astounding 35.9 percent, the fourth highest rate in the country. Not only were

1915), 126. For a similar sentiment expressed in an earlier period, see Charles Derry, "Restoration of the Earth," *Millennial Star* 13 (October 15, 1851): 310-312. For scriptural examples of the restoration in the last days see Ephesians 4:28, Doctrines and Covenants 59:2, Revelations 13:14, Revelations 22:12, Proverbs 6:6-8, 1 Thessalonians 4:11, and 2 Thessalonians 3:10-15.

¹¹ Joseph F. Smith, quoted in *Sixty-Eighth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret News Publishing Company, 1898), 70; Joseph F. Smith, quoted in *Sixty-Ninth Semi-Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Company, 1898), 23. For more on the Saints' isolated early existence see Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*.

individuals affected, the Mormon Church also experienced severe economic hardships. Expenditures from tithes dropped from \$4 million in 1927 to \$2.4 million in 1933. A side-by-side comparison of the Church's financial statements from 1928 and 1934 reveals that budgets for stake and ward activities, education, temple construction, charities, and missionary work were cut nearly in half during this period.¹²

Despite the Church's dire situation, Mormon leaders vehemently opposed President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies. Because Mormons had developed an insular community in the nineteenth-century to protect themselves from governmental persecution, Church leaders were thus incensed by notion that members might turn to the government in their time of need instead of turning inwards towards the Church for assistance. Additionally, Church leaders worried that Saints who received government assistance would succumb to a "dole mentality," and expect something from the government with no expectation of ever paying it back. This sentiment posed a direct affront to the Saints' call for industriousness and self-sufficiency. For those reasons, the Church crafted their own "Welfare Plan" under which able-members would not be "put under the embarrassment of accepting something for nothing."¹³

Under the newly-devised Welfare Plan, President Harold B. Lee encouraged all stakes to institute farm and industrial projects for the benefit of needy Saints. He urged every able-bodied

¹² University of Utah School of Business, "Measures of Economic Changes in Utah, 1847–1947," quoted in *Church History of the Fulness of Times Student Manual*, (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2003), 509; *Church History of the Fulness of Times Student Manual*, 509; *Ninety-Eighth Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1928), 4-5; *One Hundred Fourth Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1934), 4-5. To be sure, the Church had a welfare system in place even before the Depression. During the 1920s the Presiding Bishopric and the Relief Society General Board were active in finding employment, maintaining a storehouse, and generally helping needy members. It could even be argued that the Law of Consecration, whereby Saints voluntarily dedicated their time, talents, and material wealth to the building up of Zion in the nineteenth-century was itself a welfare plan. However, the post-Depression iteration enacted a distinctly comprehensive and successful program.

¹³ *Church History of the Fulness of Times Student Manual*, 509-510.

man, woman, and child to volunteer on their stake's farm, while needy Church members exchanged their labor for foodstuffs. Still, these needy members were encouraged to work “as much as they can and to take as little as they can.” Church members were also required to meet with their local bishop before they were eligible to receive compensation. At these meetings, the bishop would determine each person’s allotment based on his or her individual need. “We do not care for our people as a dole,” noted Bishop L.J. Payne of the Los Angeles Bishop’s storehouse. “Our needy work . . . for the Church and consequently earn their upkeep.” In that way, welfare farms sought to counteract the “dole mentality,” as destitute Church members purportedly maintained their dignity and ambition by working hard for modest rations.¹⁴

The Church’s ambition and subsequent success in taking many members off the government dole put it in the national spotlight. In subsequent decades, newspapers and magazines from around the country praised the “sturdy independence of thought” and “level-headed determination” that defined the Church’s Welfare Plan. Admiration could even be found across party lines. President Roosevelt “endorsed the program as one of real helpfulness” and said he hoped it would “inspire other people to something of a like nature.” Conservative publications also lauded the Welfare Plan but emphasized its mission to instill positive values in needy Church members. “Among the Mormons it is an emphasis on self reliance,” reported Susan L. M. Huck for *American Opinion*. “Self reliant people are proud and independent,” she continued, “not weaklings and whiners.” Regardless of one’s religious background or party

¹⁴ Paul Harvey, “Mormon Welfare System Depends Upon Working,” *Observer-Reporter* (Washington, PA), June 13, 1968, 4; Robert Ruark, “Mormons Stockpile Vast Supply of Food, Goods,” *Herald-Journal* (Logan, UT), November 24, 1949, 4; Bishop L. J. Payne quoted in George L. Beronius, “Mormon Project Cares for Needy: Church Maintains Unique Welfare Group,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 1950, A2.

affiliation, then, it seems many Americans could agree with one man's statement: "I sure as hell wish we could run the Federal Government with one-fifth of the Mormon's efficiency."¹⁵

Journalists seem to have been especially intrigued by welfare farms, the lifeblood of the Mormon Welfare Services Center. In particular, newspapers from around the country focused on the egalitarian spirit inherent in these farms. Such praiseworthy articles are particularly compelling given that the Church had historically come under attack for its nineteenth-century collectivists programs that stifled individual ambition and precluded social hierarchies. By the early twentieth-century, however, Mormons had largely abandoned this utopian vision. Under intense pressure from the national government to abandon their "theocratic kingdom," Utah's economy "seculariz[ed]" at the turn of the century to the extent that the national government exerted greater influence than the Church on the development of the local Mormon economy.¹⁶

What seemed intriguing to outsiders, then, was the fact that well-to-do Mormons would still devote several hours a month to preform strenuous labor for someone else's benefit. The *Los Angeles Times* marveled over the fact that one could find "doctors, dentists aircraft engineers, chemists, teachers, policemen and firemen," all working on a Southern California dairy farm on any given Saturday afternoon. The only explanation for such selflessness, the article continues, is Mormons' dedication to their Church. Thus while driven by the same spirit as their forebears to help fellow Mormons and promote group solidarity, Church leaders created a new model that most non-Mormons deemed not only acceptable, but praiseworthy. Class divisions could be erased as lawyers, college presidents, and housewives "work[ed] side-by-side, hoeing long rows

¹⁵ "Trail Magazine Lauds Church Welfare Plan," *The Deseret News*, December 10, 1955, 9; "Church Security Program Indorsed by President Roosevelt," *The Deseret News*, June 9, 1936, 1; Susan L.M. Huck, "Good Work: How Mormons Solve the Welfare Program," *American Opinion*, April 1975, 17; Robert Ruark, "Mormons Stockpile Vast Supply of Food, Goods," 4.

¹⁶ Arrington, 410.

of sugar beets, making peanut butter or processing tuna,” as long as this was a temporary arrangement. Come Monday, non-Mormons could breathe a sigh of relief as volunteers left the farm and returned to their day jobs in the broader American economy.¹⁷

Henry Moyle and the Creation of Deseret Ranch

The campaign to expand the Church’s agricultural landholdings beyond these western welfare farms came from Henry D. Moyle, a prominent Utah attorney and member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. In addition to being a well-accomplished lawyer, Moyle had developed an expansive business profile. At various times in his early career he was involved in a number of farming, railroad, trucking, oil, insurance, and finance businesses. “There’s a great deal of wildcatter in Henry Moyle’s makeup,” recalls Robert N. Sears who worked closely with Moyle in Salt Lake City. “A wildcatter never knows if he’s going to strike oil or not. it’s a big gamble, and he’s either broke when he gets through or he has a lot of money.” Moyle’s gambling paid off, by the time he became an apostle in 1947, he had amassed a fortune worth well over a million dollars.¹⁸

Moyle was also heavily invested in the Welfare Program. On a fundamental level, he supported the Program because he was loyal to the Church. In Moyle’s recollection, President Heber C. Grant never asked him if he had been “converted to this great principle of the Church taking care of its own.” Rather, he told Moyle that he had been “called to the work” and

¹⁷ Gustive O. Larson, “Federal Government Efforts to ‘Americanize’ Utah Before Admission to Statehood,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 10, no. 2 (Winter 1970): 219, 231; Arrington, 410; Charles Hillinger, “Mormon Church Dairy Manned by Volunteers: Corona Farm is Unique Example of Work Support Contributed to Welfare Plan,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 15, 1962, 12. Paul Harvey, “Giving Outright Makes Idlers Out of Workers,” *Ocala Star-Banner* (Ocala, FL), November 28, 1985 17A. See, also, “Wall Street Paper Tells of Church Welfare Activities of California Stakes Described in Coast Edition” *The Deseret News*, October 16, 1943, 6. For a discussion of national hostility directed at Mormons’ collectivist economic programs, see Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*, 353-412.

¹⁸ Robert N. Sears, quoted in Richard D. Poll, *Working the Divine Miracle: The Life of Apostle Henry D. Moyle* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1999), 97. See, also, Prince and Wright, *David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah Press, 2005), 207.

expected him to “go forth and do those things which were necessary to build up this plan among our people.” On a personal level, Moyle’s experience in the oil business taught him that there was a “very fine line between success and failure.” Acutely aware of this tenuous line, Moyle saw the need for a program that would assist Church members without discouraging their ambition. For Moyle, this last point was critical. Like those who designed the Welfare Plan, Moyle emphasized the need to help Saints “who are fighting desperately the despair that comes from enforced idleness.”¹⁹

Throughout his life, Moyle remained deeply involved in several facets of the Welfare Program. He spent a portion of his early career organizing the Cooperative Security Corporation as a non-profit, tax-exempt business entity to hold Church real estate and welfare properties. He was particularly interested in developing large tracts of land that could be operated on a multi-stake or regional basis. His most successful projects included a 3,000-acre dry farm in northern Utah and a 2,800 acre farm in the Sacramento Valley. By the time he retired as Chairman of the Welfare Committee, the Church was operating welfare farms on 90,000 acres of land.²⁰

Additionally, Moyle used his legal expertise to protect the church’s interest in welfare properties. Because welfare officials often miscalculated the Church’s storage capacity and members’ needs, they sold surplus inventory on the open market. This disturbed Mormons and non-Mormons alike who argued that the Church should not be involved in the private sector. While Moyle never directly responded to this critique, his attitude towards the Church’s interests

¹⁹ Henry D. Moyle, “Necessity and Value of the Welfare Plan,” October 1947, <http://scriptures.byu.edu/gettalk.php?ID=302>; Henry D. Moyle, “Anniversary of Church Welfare,” April 1956, <http://scriptures.byu.edu/gettalk.php?ID=825>.

²⁰ Poll, 90-97.

is exhibited by his later assertion that “God has commanded us to take care of the poor . . . and that is what we are going to do, even though we are in competition.”²¹

Taken together, Moyle’s entrepreneurial spirit and his determination to create larger, more efficient landholdings help explain his desire to purchase tracts outside the West. Moyle’s commitment to taking care of the poor even if it meant engaging in “competition” suggests that he was more concerned with promoting the Church’s agenda than adhering to people’s expectations about its place in society. In turn, he ran Church operations much like he would a business, constantly figuring out ways to achieve maximum returns on Church investments. Shortly after World War II, Moyle saw an opportunity to invest in farmland in the southeastern United States. While visiting Georgia on Church business in 1947, he discussed the possibility of developing a large tract in Florida with Heber Meeks, then president of the South States Mission. “When you are released,” Moyle told Meeks, “I’ll have a job for you.” This job was the first step towards the creation of Deseret Ranch.²²

Early in 1948, Meeks began looking for land in Florida. The two men settled on the Peavy-Wilson tract, a 57,000 acre strip of land just seventy-two miles southeast of Orlando. Meeks and Moyle originally pitched the project to Deseret Livestock Company, the largest land-owning ranch in Utah. However, the board of directors said they were more interested in selling land than expanding. Additionally, they did not think the venture was appropriate for their company, given that Florida was thousands of miles away from Utah, and ranching there presented a number of agricultural challenges they were not equipped to handle.²³

²¹ Henry D. Moyle, quoted in Poll, 91. See also Henry D. Moyle, “Feed My Sheep,” April 1948, <http://scriptures.byu.edu/gettalk.php?ID=320>.

²² Henry D. Moyle, quoted in Warnick, Loosli, and Genho, *Sixty Year History of the Deseret Ranches of Florida*, 13.

²³ Poll, 134. While Deseret Livestock Company was purchased by the Mormon Church in 1983, it operated under the ownership of prominent Mormon pioneer families (the Moyle’s being one) in 1950.

Seemingly undeterred, Moyle turned his attention to the Church. Here, he managed to convince President David McKay that the project was both a wise monetary and spiritual investment. On the one hand, Moyle saw the ranch as an extension of the Welfare Program. He would later tell a reporter that the Church purchased this land so Mormons would have a place where “distressed families” could go and “largely take care of themselves.” On the other hand, Moyle believed the ranch would be extremely profitable. Not only would it provide immediate income for the rapidly-expanding Church, but unlike tithe money, the land would also serve as a long-term appreciating asset.²⁴

That Moyle would immediately turn to the Church after being denied by Deseret Livestock Company exhibits his propensity to conflate the interests of the Church and those of individual Church members. As he saw it, Saints were stewards of God’s land, entrusted with His resources to build the Kingdom of Zion. It thus made little difference to him whether the land was owned by individual Mormons or the Church, as their avowed interests were one and the same. In that way, Moyle’s plan blurred the traditional line between for-profit and charitable enterprises. Because Deseret did not properly conform to either category, non-Mormons were left wondering about the purpose of the Church’s ranch.

Moreover, Moyle's dual-vision for the ranch as both a potential extension of the Welfare Plan and a profitable business venture reflects his unwillingness to separate the Church’s temporal and spiritual agendas. To Moyle, it little mattered whether the land was being used to meet peoples’ immediate material needs or whether its returns were invested in proselytizing campaigns, so long as the land was being used to promote the Church’s interests. As early as the pioneer period, Church leaders taught that “there is no difference in spiritual and temporal

²⁴ Poll, 134; Henry D. Moyle, quoted in Poll, 135-136.

labors.” Consequently, Moyle did not see any need to confine the ranch to either purpose. Because religious and economic matters were “incapable of dissociation,” Moyle maintained a dual-focus that further confounded many Church outsiders.²⁵

Trying Times: Deseret’s Inception and the Conceptual Reimagination of Zion

Once the First Presidency issued its formal approval, Moyle moved ahead with negotiations. On January 26, 1950, the Church purchased 52,141 acres from the Peavy Wilson Lumber Company in Holopaw, Florida. Soon thereafter, the Church purchased 36,000 acres from Consolidated Naval Stores of Chicago and 43,000 acres from Carrolton Ranch of Osceola County. In October, 51,000 acres were added, and one year later, the Church purchased an additional 5,000 acres located next to the St. Johns River from J.J. Duda and Sons. These purchases nearly quadrupled the size of the ranch, expanding a mere 52,000 acres to 200,000 acres in just under two years.²⁶

Orlando Livestock Company, as the ranch was first called, operated as a private corporation chartered under Florida law. Henry Moyle served as President, Joseph L. Wirthlin as Vice President, and Herber Meeks as secretary and treasurer. While all of the company’s officials were prominent Church members, Moyle went to great lengths to minimize the Church’s role in the creation and operation of the company. In 1952, for example, he told a reporter for the *Miami Daily News* that the Orlando Livestock Company was “strictly a business venture.” On another occasion, Moyle said the only connection between the Mormon Church and

²⁵ Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1959), 208. “Chapter 3: Living the Gospel,” *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, 1997, <https://www.lds.org/manual/teachings-brigham-young/chapter-3?lang=eng>. As Brigham Young articulated, “We cannot talk about spiritual things without connecting with them temporal things, neither can we talk about temporal things without connecting spiritual things with them. They are inseparably connected . . . If we do not live for this, we do not live to be one with Christ.” “Love for the Things of God—The Temporal Nature of the Kingdom—The Proper Use of Grain—The Love of God Should Rule in Every Heart, Etc.,” *Journal of Discourses*, 10, 329.

²⁶ Warnick, Loosli, and Genho, 14.

the ranch was that “I am a Mormon and I am president of the company.” Moyle was keenly aware of the need to craft a favorable public image of the fledgling ranch, and while he made little distinction between Church and individual operations, he recognized that this was a critical distinction for many people. For that reason, he was willing to downplay the Church’s involvement to assuage critics who might otherwise use this connection to draw unwanted attention to the ranch.²⁷

While Moyle could later boast that the ranchers “reclaim[ed] land which was relatively worthless when we acquired it,” converting palmetto swampland into fertile soil proved more difficult than ranchers had initially imagined. Due to the soil’s low pH value, one to two tons of lime per acre had to be added before new grass could be planted. Ranchers purchased three trucks, a DC 8 caterpillar tractor, a DC 4 tractor, a double disc plow and stumper, and two wheeled wagons to haul the lime a minimum of twenty miles from the railroad siding in Melbourne out into the fields. Two men would then stand in a wagon and distribute the new grass cuttings by hand. Such a laborious process meant the men were only able to clear twenty-five acres a day, a small parcel considering the ranch’s enormity.²⁸

In the area of cattle breeding and management, ranchers soon found that Florida’s heat, humidity, insects, and heavy rainfall required a much different type of cattle than they raised out West. In November 1952, the Church purchased 7,000 “scrub cows” from a man named “Whiskey” John Partin of Kissimmee, Florida. Combining them with an additional 4,000 head

²⁷ Henry Moyle, quoted in Poll, 137. Moyle’s strategy was somewhat compromised by J. Reuben Clark, then second counselor in the First Presidency. When Clark met with a group of local business leaders in 1952, he told them that “the ranch was a church project in which we have the tithes of the church invested.” According to Elder Moyle’s diary, Clark’s statement “came as a shock to me and Bishop Wirthlin. We had no other alternative than to make the best of it.” This tension would continue in the decades to come. As Deseret’s leaders continually reimagined the ranch’s purpose, they did so in light of potential critics.

²⁸ Poll, 136; Warnick, Loosli, and Genho, 15.

purchased from the original land owners and other small herds in the area, the ranch now owned 11,000 of these “scrub cows.” Like most Florida cattle at the time, each animal only weighed 400 to 500 pounds, and conception rates hovered around a modest 25 percent. As one rancher described, “when you see an animal dart out of the swamps that looks like a Nevada Jack Rabbit, that is a cow.” Moreover, ranchers had a difficult time keeping track of their herds. Due to a lack of proper fencing, cattle ran freely in the pine and cypress swamps. Consequently, roundups were an elaborate process whereby the cattle crew spent an entire week camped out in the woods, gathering small groups of cattle and taking them back to the pasture one at a time.²⁹

Moreover, ranchers had a difficult time finding other profitable agricultural activities. In the first few years, they experimented with grapefruit, watermelon, cucumbers, corn and other specialty crops. However, these crops proved commercially unsuccessful, so farming was eventually confined to produce that was directly used in ranch operations. Ranch leaders also invested tremendous capital into a timber operation, even enlisting the help of a Mormon lumber expert from Oregon to guide them. Yet this too proved unsuccessful, and Moyle himself had to step in to shut the operation down. Consequently, the ranch operated like a welfare farm during this period, as the little meat, dairy, and produce ranchers managed to produce kept them and their families alive. By 1954, prospects seemed so bleak that Moyle felt he had two options: sell the ranch or severely cut back on operations until ranchers found a way to make the ranch profitable. While his cynicism was short-lived, Moyle’s despair reflects the ranch’s tenuous existence in these early years. Due to failed investments, financial losses had increased to about

²⁹ David Hawkins, quoted in Warnick, Loosli, and Genho, 14, 53.

\$50,000 per year. A lot of time, energy, and money had to be invested into the ranch before it became the profitable enterprise Moyle initially envisioned.³⁰

Ranchers coped with these difficulties by likening themselves to the first generation of Mormon frontiersmen. Marcia J. Peterson, whose father Henry Jorgensen was appointed manager of Orlando Livestock Company on February 19, 1952, recalled that it was “quite like pioneering in those days.” She pointed in particular to the proliferation of wild animals as well as the ranch’s lack of telephones and paved roads as a vestige of Mormons’ austere past. Similarly, Henry Moyle saw his efforts as a continuation of family’s pioneering legacy. He once showed a map of Florida to Arch Madsen, then president the Church’s media and broadcasting company, saying, “My grandfather came west to make the soil fertile by putting water on it. I went to Florida to make the land fertile by taking the water off.” Struggling to tame the wilderness, prominent Church authorities were essentially directing these Mormon families in a collective subsistence farming project.³¹

Ranchers’ sense that they were reliving the Saints’ pioneer experience had profound theological significance. In the nineteenth century, Mormons separated themselves politically, economically, and socially from the rest of the world. Their geographic and cultural isolation helped establish Saints’ understanding of themselves as God’s chosen people. As historian Jan Shipps argues, Mormons’ identity “depends on their perception of their specialness, and that specialness, in turn, depends on their being separated in some way from that part of the population which is not special.” As they expanded outside of the western United States for the

³⁰ Poll, 138.

³¹ Poll, 137.

first time, Mormons had to create ways to maintain their “specialness” irrespective of geographical boundaries.³²

By connecting themselves to their pioneer heritage, ranchers suggested that they too were obeying God’s command “to bring forth Zion.” This conception reflects a radical reimagining of Zion from a physical location to a symbolic ideal. In the nineteenth century, Mormons understood Zion as the “New Jerusalem” wherein God’s chosen people would gather together to prepare for the Second Coming. At Deseret, ranchers seemingly understood Zion less as a geographic location, a literal kingdom, than as an aspiration. For them, “bringing forth Zion” was synonymous with expanding the Church’s influence. Ranchers were not gathering together to await Christ’s Second Coming. Rather, they were making inroads for the Church’s future. This new understanding reflects ranchers’ desire to consider themselves members of the Mormon collective while being thousands of miles away from its geographical center. However, unmoored from a geographic Zion, they lost the physical “glue” that connected them to a broader Mormon congregation. In the coming years, it seems no amount of conceptual reimagining could ever recapture that same level of social cohesiveness.³³

The Ranch Takes Root

As ranchers were learning to embrace their new home, they were not always met with a warm welcome. In a 1950 interview with a Miami reporter, Henry Moyle assured anxious Floridians that the Church’s purchase did not mark the beginning of a “Mormon migration” into the area. Henry C. Jorgensen, the ranch’s second manager, recalled similar reactions on the part

³² Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 116.

³³ Jan Shipps, “The Scattering of the Gathered and the Gathering of the Scattered: The Mormon Diaspora in the Mid-Twentieth Century,” https://library.dixie.edu/special_collections/Juanita_Brooks_lectures/old/The%20Scattering1.htm.

of local ranchers and townspeople who were concerned about a group of Mormons moving into their community. In an attempt to forge communal bonds, Jorgensen hosted a steak barbecue at the ranch in 1952. He invited local ranchers, town officials, and the ranch's board members, many of whom traveled from Salt Lake City to be there. The barbecue was so successful that it turned into an annual event, complete with country singers and an amateur rodeo contest. As the ranch expanded, people would travel over 150 miles to attend the event, prompting one Mormon rancher to note that this was a "good way to acquaint the people with the Church."³⁴

Internally, ranchers structured their communal activities around religious gatherings. Attending worship services was an immediate priority, and ranchers found a small Mormon branch fifteen miles away in Melbourne, Florida. However, soon after the initial influx of families from Nevada arrived in 1952, ranch leaders decided that they needed their own space. Because the ranch did not have a chapel, they began holding meetings in an old warehouse by the front office. That warehouse became a community center, housing anything from Church services to ice cream parties to movie viewings. However, in 1956, ranch leaders decided to build a formal chapel. However, when they submitted their blueprint to Church President David O. McKay, he deemed the proposed plan inadequate. McKay had something much larger and more grandiose in mind than what the ranchers had drawn up.³⁵

One of McKay's top priorities as Church President was building Mormon chapels and temples both in the United States and abroad. In fact, just three weeks after becoming President in 1951, McKay told reporters that "the focus of the Mormon Church today is upon building." Church officials hoped these new, pristine buildings would improve Mormons' public image. As

³⁴ Poll, 140; Warnick, Loosli, and Genho 50.

³⁵ Warnick, Loosli, and Genho, 46; "President McKay Dedicates New Ellsworth Chapel," *The Deseret News*, December 7, 1957, 4.

Paul H. Dunn, coordinator of Mormon ecclesiastical affairs in the South Pacific described, new chapels “enhanced” his work by giving the Church an air of respectability. “I had entree to people you don't normally have entree to,” Dunn continued. Another missionary similarly described how the new buildings “differentiated us from being a cult to being a substantial religious organization, one that people would respect and listen to.”³⁶

President McKay hoped Deseret’s new chapel would similarly improve the ranch’s reputation across central Florida. When he came to Deseret in December of 1957 to dedicate the building, McKay deemed the chapel “an indication of the faith the Church leaders have in the potential growth of that area.” “It is seldom these days that a church will spring up in the wilderness and expect its people to come,” he continued. “But we have faith in Florida and faith in this area and we plan for the future.” He went on to say that he hoped the chapel would serve as a “community center” for the entire region and that it would encourage more people to build in that area. McKay intended the chapel to serve as a space for non-Mormons to familiarize themselves with the Church and socialize with its members. Not only had ranchers stepped outside of the geographic boundaries of the Mormon community by moving to Florida, then, but McKay was now proposing that they open the one building that marked their religious distinctiveness to outsiders. While he certainly did not intend to promote Christian universalism, McKay’s statements still marked a radical departure from the Church’s history of isolationism. Henry Jorgensen’s barbecue was therefore not an anomaly. Rather, his outreach was part of a larger shift in Mormon thinking that was operating at both a local and national level.³⁷

³⁶ David O. McKay, quoted in Prince and Wright, *David O. McKay*, 202; Paul H. Dunn, quoted in Prince and Wright, *David O. McKay*, 207; Henry D. Moyle, Jr., quoted in Prince and Wright, *David O. McKay*, 209.

³⁷ “President McKay Dedicates New Ellsworth Chapel,” *The Deseret News*, December 7, 1957, 4. Sterling McMurrin, a Mormon educator who served as U.S. Commissioner of Education in the administration of John F. Kennedy once noted of McKay, “I am very sure that the most important thing that [the biographers and historians]

Reversal of Fortunes: Desert's Success Under Leo Ellsworth

While his suggestions were radical, McKay's faith in the ranch's growth was not unwarranted. By the time he delivered that address in 1957, the ranch had made a dramatic turnaround thanks to its new manager, Leo Ellsworth. Ellsworth was a large-scale farmer from Queens Creek, Arizona, and prior to his tenure at the ranch, he had also served as an advisor to Zion's Security Bank in Salt Lake City. Because of his farming success and business acumen, the Church asked Ellsworth to evaluate several Church properties and welfare projects. In early 1954, J. Reuben Clark, Jr., then second counselor to President David O. McKay, asked Ellsworth to conduct an evaluation of Deseret Ranch. Upon observing a two-week, twelve-man cattle round-up, Ellsworth noted, "If you figure the cost of gathering these cattle, including men, horses, food, etc., it would be more than the value of the calves. This will not work. We will have to make some changes." Just a few months later, Clark asked Ellsworth to go down and manage the ranch.³⁸

Ellsworth knew what it took to run a successful cattle operation. In the late 1920s, he and two of his brothers started a farm development operation in central Arizona. Over the next thirty years, they converted 20,000 acres of arid desert land into fertile farmland. Ellsworth brought this same commitment to the Florida ranch. Within two weeks, he had fired ten of the twelve original ranchers and reduced the cattle crew from twenty-one to three. Some Board members criticized Ellsworth's management tactics, but he seemed more concerned with turning a profit

will write about your large impact on your people is that it was during the period of your presidency and under the inspiration of your ideal and will that the Church overcame that measure of provincialism that was an inevitable quality of its early years and achieved sure grounds for the universality, inclusiveness, world mindedness, and ecumenical quality that must be its ultimate character." Following his death at the age of ninety-six, *Time* maintained that McKay "was perhaps the first Mormon president to treat non-Mormons as generously as members of his own faith," quoted in Gregory Prince and William Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism*, 106.

³⁸ Ellsworth, quoted in Warnick, Loosli, and Genho, 54.

than making popular decisions. Wishing Board members would share in this sentiment, Ellsworth told President Moyle that if the Board would just leave him alone, he could make “more money than they can spend.”³⁹

Ellsworth rebuilt the ranch from the ground up. By 1965, he had planted 170,000 acres of improved grasses and restocked the ranch with 20,000 brood cows. Ellsworth also created “mini ranches” to maximize ranchers’ efficiency. On each parcel of land, a foreman and two cowboys were solely responsible for 8,000 head. In 1959, Ellsworth explained to a newspaper reporter that “No matter how big we get, we’ll never be more than 8,000 big. We find we can care for our cattle better and keep better track of them this way . . . and we can do it with far fewer men than would be required if we didn’t split up.” Over the course of a decade, Ellsworth took a ranch that was struggling to survive and turned it into one of the most successful cow-calf operations in the world. As one of the ranchers observed, “Leo was the only man with the vision to develop and manage such a large tract of waste land.”⁴⁰

Ellsworth and his fellow ranchers were delighted by their success. In particular, they prided themselves on the fact that they successfully completed a “they-said-it-couldnt-be-done project.” “People told us we couldn’t make the flat woods pay as cattle land,” offered Ellsworth. “We think we’ve proved we can.” Henry Moyle was similarly excited about Ellsworth’s success. “We are revolutionizing livestock operations in the Florida area,” Moyle boasted to a reporter for the *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*. “They told us we couldn’t grow clover, but we have 60,000 acres in cultivated pastures.”⁴¹

³⁹Ellsworth, quoted in Warnick, Loosli, and Genho, 57.

⁴⁰Dan Brown, “Cattle Gamble Pays Off,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, December 13, 1959, 67.

⁴¹Brown, “Cattle Gamble Pays Off,” 67; “Mormons on the Move Again—In Business,” *Daytona Beach Morning Journal* (Daytona Beach, FL), June 28, 1959, 7A.

Even Church outsiders were quick to point out that ranchers' achievement was "most noteworthy." Here again, Mormons' pioneer past was often referenced, but outsiders seemed more concerned with the way that trying period cultivated strong character traits than the way it was an integral part of Mormons' religious vision. Consequently, praise for ranchers' success often mirrored praise for the Church's Welfare Plan. Emphasis was placed on Mormons' work ethic and mental fortitude in a way that largely divorced those values from their theological context. A 1963 article that appeared in the *Lakeland Ledger*, for example, describes how ranchers' work ethic reflects their belief that "the Lord helps those who help themselves." However, this adage is conspicuously absent from Mormon scriptures and teachings. Ranchers' work ethic was instead grounded in Mormons' desire to be self-sufficient and their belief that they are co-creators with God and thus called to "transform the treasures of the earth." By glossing over, or in this case even misappropriating the source of ranchers' work ethic, journalists obscured Mormons' theological distinctiveness. They instead focused on universally appealing virtues that made Mormons seem relatable but exemplary, not peculiar and guarded.⁴²

While most articles lauded ranchers' accomplishments, Deseret was certainly not without its critics. Specifically, many outsiders queried how "a church can serve both God and mammon." Mormons contended that "business acumen" and greed were not one in the same. The Church was accumulating material resources not for its own eminence, but to be used in "the service of God." To substantiate this claim, Church leaders disclosed an unprecedented amount

⁴² Clarke, "The Value of Hard Work;" "The Mormon Ranch in Florida," *Lakeland Ledger* (Lakeland, Florida), August 7, 1963, 4. Douglas Basset directly challenges this adage in his 2000 speech "Faces of Worldly Pride in the Book of Mormon." According to Basset: "For while some would have us believe that the Lord helps those who help themselves, Jacob seems to say that the Lord helps those who help others. This places wealth and education in a different light. We are placing ourselves in a better position to gain the Lord's approval when we use wealth and education to serve others. In this way a person does not use these as weapons to separate himself from others in a vain attempt to rise above the rest, but as tools to serve and lift his fellowman." <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2000/10/faces-of-worldly-pride-in-the-book-of-mormon?lang=eng>.

of information to outsiders. In regards to Deseret, Joseph Wirthlin told a newspaper reporter that the ranch's proceeds were being used to construct chapels and Church-run schools. Even this seemingly small disclosure was monumental. For a Church that had been notoriously silent about its financial dealings, Wirthlin's statement exhibits increased openness towards outsiders. As the *Milwaukee Sentinel* reported in 1959, "there are indications . . . that as the Mormons are accepted throughout the world as normal and respected citizens rather than oddball practitioners of polygamy, they themselves are becoming less touchy about their affairs." To be sure, the Church kept most of its financial records hidden. However, juxtaposed with Moyle's early statement that the only connection between the Church and the ranch was that "I am a Mormon and I am the president of the company," Wirthlin's statement exhibits increased openness about the Church's affairs.⁴³

Deseret's leaders also defended the Church's business interests by pointing out that the ranch did not receive any government aid. As a church-owned agricultural property, the ranch was both tax-exempt and eligible for government subsidies. However, Deseret had refused subsidies and paid taxes in Orange, Brevard, and Osceola counties since the day it was founded. On the one hand, this allowed the ranch to maintain its autonomy. During the Great Depression, Church leaders were incensed by the fact that the government asked farmers to destroy crops while people were starving to death. In designing their Welfare Plan, Church leaders vowed to take a financial hit before they would deny food to those in need. Consequently, they refused subsidies so they would not be subject to the government's control over agricultural production. On the other hand, ranchers could use the fact that they were self-reliant against critics who felt

⁴³ Dwight Jones "Mormons Build an Empire Despite Early Persecution," *The Milwaukee Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), June 29, 1959, 7.

the Church had an unfair advantage in the private sector. By paying taxes, Deseret's managers could argue that the ranch was on a level playing field with any other commercial enterprise.⁴⁴

Ranchers Become Integral Members of the Community

Under new manager Harvey Dahl, Deseret went from being a profitable cattle farm in the 1960s to an integral part of the local community in the 1970s and 80s. Ellsworth's success garnered attention from local ranchers, politicians, and community leaders who soon realized Deseret's potential to shape the regional landscape. Upon taking command in 1970, Dahl thus found himself in the spotlight. He was appointed President of the Water Users Association of Florida, and he served on the Executive Committee of the Governor's Property Rights Commission. He was active in the St. Johns Water Management Board, and he served as President of the Florida Cattleman's Association. In what became one of his largest contributions to the community, Dahl built an encampment for the Boy Scouts of America. Under Dahl's management, Deseret began hosting week-long "camporees" that accommodated thousands of Boy Scouts and their leaders.⁴⁵

One annual camporee was reserved for LDS Scouts from Church wards around the southeastern United States. An account of the 1980 LDS camporee demonstrates how this event provided a unique opportunity for Church leaders to minister to Mormon youth outside of a traditional Church setting. To organize the encampment, each stake was assigned to a "tribe" named after one of the tribes of Israel. Like the ancient leaders of Israel, young priesthood

⁴⁴ Jeremy Bonner, "State, Church and the Moral Order: The Mormon Response to the New Deal, in Orem, Utah, 1933-40," *Journal of Mormon History* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 96. With the onset of the Great Depression, millions of American farmers, tenants and sharecroppers were left destitute and hundreds of thousands of farms were abandoned. In an effort to increase prices, New Deal policymakers sought to reduce agricultural output by destroying surpluses and taking acreage out of production under the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act.

⁴⁵ Warnick, Loosli, and Genho, 61. In addition to the annual encampment, Deseret also made significant annual financial contributions to the Orlando Scout Council.

bearers went to the “mountaintop,” a small hill, to receive guidance and counsel and make commitments. Four members of the First Quorum of the Seventy, Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin, Elder Robert L. Backman, and his counselors Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone and Elder Rex D. Pinegar, were there to meet the Scouts with a “testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel.”⁴⁶

These meetings also gave Church leaders a chance to promote a potent mix of spiritual and patriotic ideals into young Saints. In an address to a group of Eagle Scouts who attended the camporee, President Ezra Taft Benson of the Quorum of the Twelve warned that “the future of our country will soon rest in your hands, and in the hands of young men like you.” He urged the Scouts to thus embody the Scout Oath, Law, and Motto, as they express the “spiritual ideals” of leadership. Later in the week, President Benson urged every Scout to “follow the example of patriots like George Washington, who decided at an early age to live a moral and productive life.” Scouts also gathered around a campfire as their leaders put on a ceremony celebrating the history of the United States. “Everybody cheered and cheered,” James King, of the Fayetteville Second Ward, noted. “It showed that we are great citizens of a great nation and that it’s up to us to hold it together,” added Randall Lowe, of the Pensacola Second Ward.⁴⁷

Not only were Church leaders reminding young Saints of their Israelite lineage, then, but they were also connecting them to a national heritage. By using words like “spiritual,” “moral,” and “productive,” leaders provided points of connectivity between distinctly Mormon beliefs and time-honored American values. The 1980 Deseret camporee thus demonstrates how the Church’s assimilationist vision was imparted on the next generation of Saints. Scout leaders’ ability to

⁴⁶ Richard M. Romney, “Beneath the Banners of Israel,” *New Era* (May 1981): <https://www.lds.org/new-era/1981/05/beneath-the-banners-of-israel?lang=eng>.

⁴⁷ Romney, “Beneath the Banners of Israel.”

incorporate patriotic ideology into religious instruction provided a way for these young men to engage with their broader communities without having to abandon their Mormon faith.⁴⁸

Despite Deseret's rise to prominence on a state and even national level, ranchers' assimilation did not follow a linear trajectory. Well into Dahl's tenure, some outsiders still harbored suspicions about the Mormon ranch. In 1980, for example, Dahl invited a group to come to look at surplus equipment the ranch was selling. Upon picking them up from the airport, the men asked Dahl if everyone on the ranch was required to wear black outfits. Others believed that ranchers still practiced polygamy. "For years, my wife's mother-in-law was convinced I had at least a couple other wives around somewhere," recalled one rancher. This myth was so prolific that in 1980, one journalist jokingly reassured readers not to worry about ranchers, "only the cows are polygamous."⁴⁹

In addition to these cultural stereotypes, outsiders had misgivings about the "the purpose and profit" of Deseret. To combat these suspicions, Dahl built a visitors' information center in the middle of the ranch. "In the past few years," Dahl maintained, "people have gotten the idea that we control this land and have something going on that we don't want others to know about." He hoped the visitors' center would show curious outsiders that Deseret had nothing to hide.

⁴⁸ Ibid. As early as 1877, Mormon President Wilford Woodruff claimed to have seen the Founding Fathers in a vision and baptized them into the Mormon faith. According to Woodruff: "Those men who laid the foundation of this American government and signed the Declaration of Independence were the best spirits the God of heaven could find on the face of the earth. They were choice spirits, not wicked men. General Washington and all the men that labored for the purpose were inspired of the Lord . . . Everyone of those men that signed the Declaration of Independence, with General Washington, called upon me, as an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, in the Temple at St. George, two consecutive nights, and demanded at my hands that I should go forth and attend to the ordinances of the House of God for them." In that way, reverence for the Founding Fathers (Washington in particular) was not new. However, Woodruff's vision seems to have derived more from an impulse to assert "American providentialism" as a key component of Mormons' theological claims than to promote patriotism. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that Mormons' patriotism reached an apex in the face of Communism abroad and the culture wars at home. *Sixty-Eight Annual Conference Report of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, April, 1898), 89-90.

⁴⁹ David Bailey, "Subtle Attitude Makes Deseret Different," *Florida Today*, January 22, 1980, 1A.

Action shots of ranchers adorned the centers' walls, giving visitors an inside look at the ranch's day-to-day activities. Additionally, the visitors' center contained information pamphlets about Deseret's operations and its connection to the Mormon Church. By breaking down the physical barriers that separated Deseret from the rest of central Florida, Dahl invited people to see the ranch for themselves before assessing its operations. More broadly, the visitors' center gave Deseret's residents the ability to create a favorable image of themselves as hard-working, cordial people that were not unlike any other ranchers. In that way, the visitors' center fit within Dahl's plan to break down the social barriers that separated ranchers from their local community.⁵⁰

Deseret's 138th annual Pioneer Day celebration further exhibits ranchers' willingness to include outsiders in their traditions. Within Mormon communities, Pioneer Day is an annual commemoration of the Saints' arrival in the Salt Lake Valley on July 24, 1847. At Deseret, Mormons celebrate Pioneer Day "in a style that is truly that of the Old West—a real rompin', stompin', round 'em up and move 'em out rodeo." In the early 1950s, the first rodeo was held in a cattle pen with Morris Justesen acting as "Explorer leader." The next year a barbecue was added, and Mormons across central Florida came together to prepare hundreds of pounds of beef, pork, beans, cakes, and pies. As the celebration grew, Mormons and non-Mormons alike began coming from across state to take part in the commemoration. In 1985, Deseret's leaders decided to turn the rodeo into a celebration of "all the pioneers who settled this great land." More than a celebration of Brigham Young and the pioneer Saints, the 1985 rodeo was a tribute to "the rugged individual—the American cowboy."⁵¹

⁵⁰ Wyatt Emmerich, "Mormon Leader Dedicates Deseret Center," *Florida Today*, March 11, 1981, 2B; "Florida Cattle Ranch Attracts Many Tourists," *The Deseret News*, March 9, 1972, 4-5.

⁵¹ Brian Bixler, "Step Back in Time to the Days of the Old West," *Florida Today*, July 19, 1985, 15.

Not only did Deseret's leaders open the event to the community, then, but they also changed the very meaning of Pioneer Day to accommodate Church outsiders. In doing so, ranchers asserted that Mormons belonged to a broader American tradition of nineteenth-century pioneering, as they too contributed to the "expansion of civilization against the harsh elements of the Old West." Just forty years earlier, Church President J. Reuben Clark reminded Church members that Pioneer Day was designed to celebrate Saints who triumphed "through all the scorn, the ridicule, the slander, the tarrings and featherings, the whippings, the burnings, the plunderings, the murderings, the ravishings of wives and daughters, that had been their lot." Yet there was no mention of that persecution when ranchers decided to honor all of the men and women who settled the American West. In that way, the 1985 celebration looked forward not backwards; identifying with a broader American tradition was more conducive to the Church's new vision than evoking past transgressions. Persecution, a theme that had been central to Mormons' understanding of themselves and their relation to outsiders, faded from memory a group of Floridians gathered together over hamburgers and apple pie.⁵²

In subsequent decades, Deseret continued becoming largely indistinguishable from other commercial agricultural operations. Whereas Church leaders tapped Henry Moyle, Henry C. Jorgensen, and Leo Ellsworth to manage the ranch because of their experience with Church welfare farms and their prominent place within the Church hierarchy, more recent managers have been selected for their extensive knowledge of animal science and cattle reproduction. Similarly, Deseret went from being entirely composed of Mormon ranchers to fewer than half of its employees belonging to the Church. As one foreman explained, Mormons did not receive

⁵² Brian Bixler, "Step Back in Time to the Days of the Old West," 15; J. Reuben Clark, quoted in Michael De Groote, "Listen to President J. Reuben Clark Jr. Pay Tribute to Mormon Pioneers in Rare Audio File," *Deseret News*, July 23, 2013, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/705385225/J-Reuben-Clark-Jrs-To-Them-of-the-Last-Wagon.html?pg=all>.

preferential treatment in the hiring process. “If a man can’t ride a horse,” he contended, “it doesn't matter what his religion is. We can’t afford to mess around. There’s too much work to do.”⁵³

Beneath these demographic shifts was a changing vision of what Deseret should and could become. While Henry Moyle was optimistic about the ranch’s value, he had no clear plan for its development. In the face of antagonistic outsiders, he hid the Church’s involvement, asserting that the Florida ranch was nothing more than his own personal “business venture.” However, advancements under Leo Ellsworth meant the ranch could no longer hide in obscurity. Ellsworth made Deseret extremely profitable, subsequently drawing the attention of local ranchers and government officials. In time, Deseret became well-known throughout the region, and manager Harvey Dahl used that distinction to integrate Deseret into the larger community. Whereas Moyle deflected attention from the ranch, Dahl invited outsiders to not only visit the ranch but also take part in its religious celebrations.

Such inclusiveness was also operating on a national level. President McKay’s initial approval of the ranch exhibits his support for the Church’s geographic expansion, and his involvement in the creation of Deseret’s chapel reflects his desire to enhance the Church’s reputation. In addition to reaching out to non-Mormons, Church leaders simultaneously grafted the Saints onto a broader American heritage. At the 1980 boy scout camporee, for example, they

⁵³ David Bailey, “Deseret: Its 300,000 Acres Are a World Apart,” *Florida Today*, January 20, 1980, 1A; Linda Cicero, “Deseret Ranch: The Mormon’s Florida Empire,” *The Evening Independent*, February 27, 1980, 9A. For example, Robert D. Lamoreaux, ranch manager from 1981-1985, received a Bachelor of Science degree in Animal Science from Arizona State University in 1964 and a Masters degree in Agricultural Economics at the University of Arizona in 1965. Paul Genho, who served as cattle manager under Lamoreaux, was trained in Animal Science at Brigham Young University, receiving a B.S. in 1968 and a M.S. in 1976. He did one year of graduate work at Texas A&M, where he performed cooperative cattle research projects at the King Ranch at Kingsville Texas. Ferren R. Squires, ranch manger from 1998-2004, received a Master’s degree from Brigham Young University in Agricultural Business in 1983. Erik Jacobsen, who became ranch manager in 2005 received his undergraduate degree form the University of Florida from the Department of Animal Science in 1986.

taught young Saints that being a good Mormon meant being a good citizen. Despite a long history of governmental persecution, they assured Scouts that there was nothing discordant about a patriotic, Mormon worldview.

The turn towards integration required significant theological maneuvering. When the Church created its Welfare Plan, outsiders praised Mormons' commitment to hard work and self-sufficiency. As Deseret became successful, ranchers received similar praise for their mental fortitude and dedication to the ranch. However, outsiders did not connect these traits to specific theological beliefs. Some referenced ranchers' pioneer heritage, but they did so in a way that disregarded Mormons' theological distinctiveness. In time, ranchers would come to adopt a similar strategy. Instead of highlighting their "specialness," Deseret's leaders built bridges upon a more universal language of "rugged individualism" and "morality." This is not to say that they disowned their faith. Rather, they tailored it towards the Church's new vision.

In their biography of President David O. McKay, Gregory Prince and William Robert Wright argue that McKay "transformed a parochial Great Basin organization into a respected worldwide religion." While McKay certainly shaped the Church's agenda during this period, he was not singlehandedly responsible for this transformation. At Deseret, ranchers' day-to-day social interactions with their non-Mormon neighbors played a vital role in garnering respect for the Church and its members. Deseret had its own leaders and agenda that, when combined with the Church's national assimilationist vision, integrated ranchers into the cultural mainstream.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Price and Wright, *David O. McKay*, 1.