

Lyman Wight and his Colony: A Brief History

By Lauren A. Langford and Jermy Wight

Texas has always attracted dreamers and schemers, but one man, Lyman Wight, was attracted to Texas not for the love of gold, glory, or adventure, but for the love of God and the desire to find a location where he and his small colony of Saints could dwell in peace.

Lyman Wight, the son of Levi Wight and Sarah Corbin, was born in the township of Fairfield, Herkimer County, New York on May 9, 1796. He honorably served in the War of 1812. In 1823, Lyman Wight married Harriet Benton. They moved in 1826 to Western Reserve, Ohio, where Lyman joined the sect of a Campbellite preacher named Sidney Rigdon. Rigdon's converts, in turn, formed working communes which had interests in farming and mechanics. In 1830, Wight and Rigdon were baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by Oliver Cowdrey and Wight was ordained to the office of high priest by Joseph Smith in Kirtland, Ohio in 1831. Wight and his family, along with others, were directed by Joseph Smith to move to Independence, Jackson County, Missouri, to help establish a Mormon settlement.

The Beginning - Missouri

From the very beginning of most Mormon settlements, tensions between the Saints and gentiles grew for multiple reasons. The Mormons had vastly different religious beliefs than the locals, belonged to a very organized communal way of life, often were more educated, their abolition attitude threatened the peace and security of slave holders, and above all, the Mormons were from Yankee New England stock whereas the Missourians were from Appalachian or southern culture. The Mormons saw Jackson County, Missouri, as their final gathering place, the sacred place to which Christ would come for the second resurrection. If this place were lost to them, then they were to redeem it by force, if necessary. They were persecuted, mob violence erupted, their printing facility was destroyed and they were driven from Jackson County into the neighboring counties. With each move, friction with the locals increased and finally quarrels gave way to shootings, which in turn gave rise to an open conflict, known as the Mormon War of 1837. Meanwhile, Lyman Wight had established a settlement, Adam-ondi-Ahman ("Adam's Consecrated Land"), in Daviess County, Missouri. Almost overnight, the Mormons outnumbered the gentiles in this region. In 1838, Governor Boggs of Missouri ordered the state militia to either exterminate the Mormons or drive them from Missouri. About 18 Mormons were killed in the Haun's Mill massacre. Rather than allow the Mormons to bury their dead, the militia threw the bodies down a well. The Mormon

leaders, including Elder Lyman Wight, surrendered to the militia, were court martialed, and ordered shot, but the sentence was not carried out. Instead six leaders of the Church including Joseph Smith and Lyman Wight were remanded to Sheriff Hadley, Liberty Jail, Liberty, Clay County. There were to be held without bail until the spring session of the circuit court. They languished there for more than four months under the harshest conditions. The case became such an embarrassment to the state that the prisoners were allowed to escape to Illinois. Thus, Governor Boggs accomplished his objective of driving the Saints from Missouri.

Illinois - Nauvoo

In Illinois they built a city, Nauvoo, where they enjoyed peace and prosperity and brought in thousands of converts. Lyman Wight, now an Apostle, was the head of the Black River Lumber Company, also known as the Pine Company of the Church, which the Mormons had formed to acquire lumber for the construction of a temple in Nauvoo. By 1843, once again the Mormons were having trouble with their neighbors and again discussed looking for a new Zion. The Republic of Texas offered an opportunity where Mormons could settle and live in peace. Lucian Woodworth was twice sent to Texas by Joseph Smith to speak with Sam Houston about colonizing an area in Texas. Wight was appointed the head of the Texas project. He and George Miller were to lead the colony to Texas. Joseph Smith, however, was murdered by a mob on June 27, 1844 in Carthage, Illinois. The Church lapsed into confusion. Following the Council's May 6, 1844 directive, Wight led the Black River Lumber Company to Texas. Brigham Young, President of the Quorum of Twelve, became the titular head of the Church; however, Young was not declared President of the Church until December 1848. It was no coincidence that Wight's fellow Mormons had nicknamed him "Wild Ram of the Mountain" for his stubbornness.

Texas - Fort Johnson

On March 25, 1845, Wight and about 150 followers, in four homemade boats, started down the Mississippi River for Texas (Table 1). They began their overland journey near Davenport, Iowa. They suffered Indian problems, disease, and death throughout their journey. On November 10, 1845, the train of eight wagons and 82 cattle crossed the Red River at Preston Bend into Texas after traveling more than 850 miles in 165 days. Their first settlement in Texas was the old Fort Johnson in Grayson County. They stayed there about ten months and, in the spring, moved on south to Austin arriving June 6, 1846.

Austin

At the falls of the Colorado River, the location of today's Mormon Springs, the Colony built their first gristmill. They built the city jail and worked as

carpenters and millers. Unfortunately the spring dried up and the mill, though intact, became inoperative. Wight requested permission from the Adelsverein, or German Society, to establish a colony on Grape Creek, twelve miles east of Fredricksburg. The creek dried up so the group selected a location seven miles nearer Fredricksburg on the Pedernales River. Within six weeks the grist mill was completed and the community housing was under construction.

Zodiac - Fredricksburg

The Mormons, with their gristmill, sawmill and experience in lumbering and construction were a godsend to the German emigrants. It was the Mormons who introduced corn and other varieties of grain to the starving Prussian. The community pride and joy became the grist mill with its huge revolving water wheel and the special French buhrs (grinding stones) made it possible to have ground cornmeal and flour with minimum effort. Today, a replica of the Mormon millwheel stands in downtown Fredricksburg.

Sometime after the community was established, Lyman Wight gave it the name Zodiac. There was no written explanation for this name. Zodiac was composed of well-built houses, perfect fences and tidy dooryards. They had a blacksmith, a turning lathe, a wagon shop, a general store, a shingle mill, a Temple-storehouse, cabinet and furniture shops, and a two story community building that served as a meeting hall, a Temple and a school for the children. The Mormons lived congenially with their German neighbors. The Saints were well respected for their business dealings, for their industry and high values. For the first time there were no persecutions. The 1850 census recorded 160 residents living on 2,217 acres of land with nearly \$26,000 worth of improvements. But once again, hard times hit the brave little group. In 1850, floods destroyed their mills. This was an economic blow to them and the community. As they were recovering from the flood, another flood hit and washed the mill stones away. This seemed like the end of the world. The Saints, nevertheless, were resilient. An exploration party of Stephen Curtis, Meachum Curtis, Ezra A. Chipman, Joseph Goodale and Orange Wight were sent out to find a new location for the colony. They soon reported that they had found a location near Marble Falls on Hamilton Creek.

Hamilton Creek - Mormon Mills

Thus, the group moved on to Hamilton Creek in Burnet County in 1851. Once again, they set up mills and shops. They had lost their grinding buhrs in the flood at Zodiac. They had no money to buy new buhrs so they went to a nearby quarry and obtained stone from which to make replacements. Lyman Wight, however had a vision of where the lost stones were in Zodiac. A group of men took spades and shovels and set out to locate the stones. They found the stones, as Lyman Wight said they would, in the middle of a sandbar deposited by the flood. Now that they had the grinding stones, they

could increase their milling activities, add a sawmill and a lathe with which they manufactured chairs and tables. They also operated a farm. The women made willow baskets for sale. Despite the successes, they were in debt and were plagued by Indian raids. Disease killed at least 23 members of the Colony. By the fall of 1853 the Wight Colony was once again looking for a home. Because they had also become herdsmen, they required about six months to herd their cattle to Bandera. They arrived in Bandera in the spring of 1854.

Bandera - Mountain Valley - Mormon Camp

At first in Bandera, they camped on the north bank of the Medina River across from the town. Eventually they bought lots in town, built a schoolhouse and a furniture factory. Wight performed the first marriage in Bandera County, wedding his son Levi Lamoni Wight and Sophia Leyland. They settled in to raise their children. Jessie Hay, widow of Alexander Hay, was the first woman to receive real property in Bandera. When she died she left an estate of 320 acres of land, lots 15 and 16 in Bandera and 80 head of cattle plus the house and household goods. The Saints, established as taxpayers, decided to expand and incorporate a farm into their enterprise. The best land for this purpose was located downstream on the Medina River, about twelve miles from Bandera City, but still in Bandera County. The farm land was leased and during 1854-5 some of the group moved to the farm site to prepare for the spring planting. About sixteen families moved to Mountain Valley (called Mormon Camp by many) but the pioneers suffered from the Indian depredations. Raiding Comanches stole their horses and mules, burned their crops and drove off the cattle. When Medina Lake was complete in 1912, the lake forever submerged Mountain Valley, the sight of the last organized home of the Lyman Wight Colony.

In March of 1858, Wight announced that he had a vision of God warning him about the coming war between the North and the South. Moreover, God warned him to move back to the North. Wight announced his plans to move, but his plan to go north was met with a great deal of opposition. Even three of his sons refused to go. Those who chose to follow left with Lyman Wight. But only 2 days into the thousand-mile journey, Wight suddenly became ill and died on March 31, 1858, in the camp on the Medio River (today the location of Lackland Air Force Base). Lyman Wight was buried at Zodiac alongside his daughter Rosina Minerva and other Saints including William Eldridge, William Leyland, Sophia Leyland, and many others and the infants who died at Zodiac. Following his death, the expedition fell apart. Many of the faithful affiliated with the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints which had established its headquarters in Independence, Missouri, back in the Zion of Joseph Smith.

Looking back, the Saints were instrumental in the formation of three counties in Texas: Gillespie 1847-8 and then Burnet County in 1851-2, and

finally, Bandera County in 1856. The history of the Lyman Wight Colony is no doubt inseparable from the history of Texas and the United States. The Saints have left a notable mark in opening the west (Table 3) to other pioneers. Finally, the Frontier Times Museum in Bandera, Texas, houses one of the millstones, a hand made chair and other memorabilia from the Colony.

References:

1. Bandera County History Book Committee. History of Bandera County Texas. Curtis Media Corporation. Dallas, Texas. 1986.
2. Bandera County Court House Records.
3. Banks, C. Stanley. The Mormon Migration into Texas, Southwestern Historical Quarterly 49: 4.October, 1945.
4. Barkley, Roy. Ed. Handbook of Texas Online <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/>
5. Hunter, J. Marvin. A Brief History of Bandera County: Covering More Than Eighty Years of Intrepid History. Bandera, Texas. Frontier Times, 1936.
6. Hunter, J. Marvin. 100 Years in Bandera, 1853-1953: A Story of Sturdy Pioneers, Their Struggles and Hardships, and Their Heroic Achievements. Hunter's Printing. Bandera, Texas.1953.
7. Hunter, J. Marvin. The Lyman Wight Colony in Texas, Came to Bandera in 1854. The Bandera Bulletin for the Frontier Museum, Bandera, Texas, Undated.
8. Hunter, J. Marvin. Pioneer History of Bandera County. Hunter's Printing. Bandera, Texas. 1922.
9. Wight, Jermy Benton. The Wild Ram of the Mountain: Lyman Wight. Afton Thrifty Print. Star Valley, Wyoming. 1996.
10. Zelade, Richard. Hill Country. Lone Star Press, Houston, Texas. 1999.

For an in depth account of the Lyman Wight story you may want to read "Lyman Wight, Wild Ram of the Mountain" by Jeremy Wight. Jermy Wight, PO Box 4135, Bedford, WY 83112