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Scipio A. Kenner and Brigham Young

We wonder about a father that would give his son a name like that - Scipio Africanus Kenner. The elder Mr. Kenner must have taken a particular interest in antiquity to name his child after one of Rome's most popular general/politicians, (generals and politicians were generally the same back then). It seems the custom was not all that uncommon and understandable in light of the fact that the classical world of Greece and Rome were greatly admired in mid 19th century America; architecture, literature, government, education, and American culture in general were in many ways patterned after classical models. His birth was in 1842 in one of the many rugged frontier settlements of rural Missouri.

The first Scipio was Publius Cornelius Scipio who rose to prominence during the Republic while directing Roman forces to victory at the North African battle of Zama. This was the first, and also the final, defeat of Hannibal, perhaps the greatest general of all time. For many years he had terrorized the Italian Peninsula with victory after victory as the Roman State struggled for its very survival. After Zama, Scipio was seen as Rome's savior. Being the most popular man of his time, he was given the honorific title of Africanus by his grateful, fellow Roman citizens.

The Scipio we are concerned with came to Utah in 1860 as a young 18 year old looking for opportunity and adventure in the American West. The frontier was wide open then and seen as a land of endless possibilities by many who lived through those years. Early on he took an interest in one of Brigham Young's daughters. On Sunday evenings it was customary for the girls to entertain their boyfriends in the parlor of the Lion House, one of Brigham's residences. Often there were as many as 10 couples there at any one time. Susa, one of the older daughters described an incident from that 1860 time period:

Our young Scipio A. Kenner was about to enter the front gate as Brigham Young was stepping down from his carriage. This young man was a stranger to him, which immediately got his attention. Being the conscientious father that he was, and perhaps a bit overprotective, and definitely overpowering - the questions came fast and intense. The most powerful man in Utah, the Great Patriarch, Territorial Governor, Indian Agent, and revered Leader of the LDS People could be intimidating to most everyone but especially he was to young Scipio. Apparently the interrogation didn't go as well as it might, or at least it was not to Young's satisfaction, for after a short pause he said: "Are you a Mormon?" "Well," stammered the lad, "slightly." Brigham then burst into what Susa called "his quiet mellow laugh." Often afterwards he referred to Scipio as "Skippio Sinner."

The first settlers arrived in Round Valley, Millard County, in 1850 and the years immediately following. By 1863 there were 25 families with a school having just been built. It was May and President Young and his large party of family, friends, clerks, church officials and others were making their annual visits to the southern settlements. We find them gathered there around the present Scipio public square with the local residents also in attendance. Apparently a survey had just been completed, and the blocks and streets laid out in pretty much their present configuration. As usual, advice and encouragement would have been given to the young settlement and then the question of giving the town a name came under consideration. A Mr. Carman suggested Scipio. President Young turned to Scipio, a member of the traveling party, and after a pause said: "Yes, Scipio, we will name it after you." That was all it took. The name stuck and that small community in northeast Millard County is still called Scipio today.

Some of the information for this story comes from Brigham Young: American Moses by Leonard J. Arrington, University of Illinois Press, 1986