

“THEY HAVE SLAIN MY CHILDREN”:
THE RESCUE OF THE ORPHANS OF MOUNTAIN MEADOWS

BY WILL BAGLEY
For *Wild West*

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In the fall of 1857, a party of emigrants from Arkansas camped in southern Utah Territory at Mountain Meadows, a lush alpine oasis on the Spanish Trail where wagon trains rested before crossing the Mojave Desert. The party was made up of about a dozen large, prosperous families and their hiredhands, driving about 18 wagons and several hundred cattle to Southern California. Of its 135 to 140 members, almost 100 were women and children.

As the travelers brewed coffee not long after dawn on Monday, September 7, a volley of gunfire suddenly tore into them from nearby ravines and hilltops, immediately killing or wounding about a quarter of the able-bodied men. The survivors quickly pulled their scattered wagons into a corral and leveled their lethal long rifles at their hidden, painted attackers, stopping a brief frontal assault in its tracks. The Arkansans quickly built a wagon fort and dug a pit at its center to protect the women and children. Cut off from water and under continual gunfire, the emigrants fended off their assailants for five long, hellish days.

Finally, on Friday, September 11, hope appeared in the form of a white flag. The emigrants let the emissary, a Mormon from the nearby settlement of Cedar City, into their fort, and then the local Indian agent, John D. Lee, entered the camp. Lee told them the Indians had gone, and if the Arkansans would lay down their arms, he and his men would escort them to safety. The desperate emigrants, Deputy U.S. Marshal William Rogers reported two years later, trusted Lee's honor and agreed to his unusual terms. They separated into three groups – the wounded and youngest children, who led the way in two wagons; the women and older children, who walked behind; and then the men, each escorted by an armed member of the Nauvoo Legion, the local militia. The surviving men cheered their rescuers when they fell in with their escort.

Lee led his charges three-quarters of a mile from the campground to a southern branch of the California Trail. As the odd parade approached the rim of the Great Basin, a single shot rang out, followed by an order: "Do your duty!" The escorts turned and shot down the men, painted "Indians" jumped out of oak brush and cut down the women and children, and Lee directed the murder of the wounded.

Within five minutes, the most brutal act of religious terrorism in America history was over – and it would not be surpassed until a bright September morning exactly 144 years later, as airplanes filled with passengers were flown into the Pentagon and New York City's World Trade Center.

So ended the Mountain Meadows Massacre – but the story of this mass murder and its twisted legacy had only begun. Although "white men did most of the killing," as participant Nephi Johnson later admitted, Utah Indian Superintendent Brigham Young informed Washington that "Capt. Fancher & Co. fell victims to the Indians' wrath" and blamed the emigrants for "indiscriminately shooting and poisoning them" – essentially, Young argued, they got what they deserved. Young made no effort to investigate the crime or identify the perpetrators. The murderer – many of whom stripped for battle and donned war paint to look like Indians – took a blood oath to blame the slaughter on the local Paiutes (see "Warriors and Chiefs" in this issue), and since they thought they had killed everyone old enough to tell the emigrants' side of the story, who could contradict them?

The killers, however, made a mistake: They spared 17 of the children, believing they would be too young to be credible witnesses. Mormon doctrine made shedding innocent blood an unforgivable sin, and anyone under the age of 8 was by definition "innocent blood." Lee later claimed he was ordered to spare only children "who were so young they could not talk." The Mormons actually killed at least half a dozen children 8 years old or younger, but in an atrocity notably lacking in mercy, that belief in not shedding innocent blood saved the lives of 10 girls and seven boys between infancy and age 6.

Yet their youth did not prevent the orphans from leaving behind some of the most compelling accounts of what actually happened on that black Friday. "The scenes and incidents of the massacre were so terrible that they were indelibly stamped on my mind, notwithstanding I was so young at the time," Nancy Huff Cates recalled in 1875. The tale of how a hard-bitten crew of colorful frontiersmen rescued these sad orphans is one of the great, untold stories of the American West.

The first news of the worst massacre in the history of the Oregon and California trails appeared in the Los Angeles Star on October 3, 1857. Several children, it reported, "were picked up on the ground, and were being conveyed to San Bernardino." A week later, that newspaper said the Indians saved 15 "infant children" and sold them to the Mormons at Cedar City. By the end of the year, word of the murders had reached the families of the victims in northwest Arkansas, where an angry citizen asked if the government would send enough

men to Utah "to hang all the scoundrels and thieves at once, and give them the same play they give our women and children?"

William C. Mitchell's married daughter, Nancy Dunlap, had been with the so-called Fancher party, as had a married son, Charles, and an unmarried son, Joel. Mitchell wrote to Senator W.K. Sebastian, chairman of the Committee on Indian Affairs, expressing his hope that an infant grandson had survived. He asked Sebastian to investigate: "I must have satisfaction for the inhuman manner in which they have slain my children," he wrote, "together with two brothers-in-law and seventeen of their children." Many of the murdered emigrants came from powerful Arkansas families. In February 1858, the "deeply aggrieved" people of Carroll County in northwest Arkansas petitioned Congress to appropriate funds to reclaim and return the children saved from the massacre.

Utah was still in a virtual state of rebellion, however, and not long after the massacre Mormon guerrillas had burned Army supply trains on the way to the territory. The government could do nothing much until June 1858, after Brigham Young's hoped-for alliance with the Indians collapsed and the "Mormon Revolt" fizzled. Young grudgingly accepted a blanket pardon for treason and allowed the new governor and federal judges into the territory. That same month the U.S. Army established the nation's largest military station at Camp Floyd, 40 miles from Salt Lake City. Alfred Cumming replaced Young as governor, and Jacob Forney took over as Indian superintendent. One of their first priorities was to locate the Mountain Meadows orphans and "use every effort to get possession" of them, as Washington had first ordered Forney to do back in March.

Jacob Hamblin, the president of the Mormon Southern Indian Mission, met with Brigham Young in June and told Young "everything" about the murders, including that whites were involved. Young told him, "Don't say anything about it," and Hamblin loyally continued to blame the massacre on the Indians. Hamblin told Forney that 15 of the survivors were living near his ranch with white families. With considerable effort, Hamblin claimed, the children had been "recovered, bought and otherwise, from the Indians." Forney hoped to go south in a month to recover the children, but he put off the job for almost a year, although he did tell Hamblin to collect the children.

In early August, Young sent orders to Isaac Haight and William Dame, religious leaders in southern Utah (and the same men who had given the direct orders to massacre the Arkansans). He told them to have Hamblin "gather up those children that were saved from the Indian Masacre [sic]." Forney also sent orders to Hamblin, "All the children must be secured, at any cost or sacrifice, whether among whites or Indians." He instructed Hamblin to take the children into his

family. "You will be well compensated for all the trouble you and Mrs. Hamblin will have," Forney promised.

Hamblin had found 15 of the orphans by December 1858, but he was "satisfied that there were seventeen of them saved from the massacre," he wrote. He claimed two children had been taken east by the Paiutes, a story apparently concocted to extort government money to pay imaginary ransoms to the Indians. In late January 1859, Forney reported to Washington that he had recovered 17 children (when in fact he had seen none of them), and in March he finally headed south on this errand. Meanwhile, Congress had appropriated \$10,000 to locate the survivors of Mountain Meadows and transport them back to Arkansas.

Not long after setting out, Forney learned that \$30,000 worth of property and presumably some cash had been distributed among Mormon church officials at Cedar City within a few days of the massacre. He reported that he hoped to recover at least some of the stolen property. He stopped 40 miles south of Salt Lake City to testify before the grand jury that the fearless Judge John Cradlebaugh was holding in Provo. Forney had aligned himself with the federal officials led by Governor Cumming who had aligned themselves – and sometimes lined their pockets – with Brigham Young's interests. Forney and Cumming were timid men, and as heavy drinkers both were easily intimidated. Events soon showed that neither of them had the courage to ensure justice was done for the victims of the massacre, let alone the gumption to stand up to a powerhouse like Brigham Young, "the Lion of the Lord." Despite detailed, credible evidence that whites and not Indians had committed the massacre, Forney hired Mormons to escort him on his trip to southern Utah.

At Nephi, Forney met up with two remarkable frontiersmen: Colonel William Rogers and Captain James Lynch. Rogers, affectionately known as "Uncle Billy" in both California and Carson Valley, was already a Western legend in 1858 when he moved to Salt Lake City, opened the California House (a hotel "fitted up in superior style") and quickly won a legion of friends. Two years later, British explorer Richard Burton found Colonel Rogers running the Pony Express station at Ruby Valley, trading furs and managing a government Indian farm for the Western Shoshones. Rogers was already a veteran of many "adventures among the whites and reds," Burton said, and had "many a hairbreadth escape to relate." But nothing he did in his long, colorful career was as dangerous as his mission to Mountain Meadows.

Uncle Billy joined Forney at Nephi as an assistant. At the same time, Captain Lynch was leading a party of between 25 and 40 men south from Camp Floyd, where he had worked for the commissary department, to the area that would become Arizona (possibly to prospect there), when he too met Forney at Nephi.

Born in Ireland, Lynch had been orphaned not long after his parents immigrated to Brooklyn, and he had drifted to New Orleans, where he enlisted in the frontier army. Lynch had served under Zachary Taylor and Robert E. Lee in the Mexican War and was cited three times for bravery. (Lynch's captain title, however, was honorary, not military.) After his discharge, he joined the Utah Expedition as a civilian, but years later he recalled he resigned in disgust at "the continual failure of the soldiers to rescue the orphaned children."

Forney told Lynch he was "doubtful" about the Mormons he had hired to escort him to Mountain Meadows. When Lynch reached Beaver in late March, he found the Mormons had indeed abandoned Forney, warning that if he pressed on "the people down there would make an eunuch of him." Forney asked for help, and Lynch placed his whole party at his command, but he expressed concern that Forney had hired Mormons in the first place, "the very confederates of these monsters, who had so wantonly murdered unoffending emigrants, to ferret out the guilty parties." It would not be the last doubt Lynch would have about the nervous Indian superintendent.

Forney's party tried to get information as they trekked south, reaching Cedar City on April 16. "But no one professed to have any knowledge of the massacre," Rogers recalled, "except that they had heard it was done by the Indians." Jacob Hamblin sent Ira Hatch, a talented Indian interpreter who had probably killed at least one of the Arkansans himself, to guide the men to the scene of the massacre.

"Words cannot describe the horrible picture which was here presented to us," James Lynch wrote a few months after the mid-April visit to the massacre site. What he and the others saw in this beautiful alpine valley would haunt them to their graves: "Human skeletons, disjointed bones, ghastly skulls and the hair of women were scattered in frightful profusion over a distance of two miles." The men found three mounds, evidence of "the careless attempt that had been made to bury the unfortunate victims." In a ravine by the side of the road, "a large number of leg and arm bones, and also skulls, could be seen sticking above the surface, as if they had been buried there," Rogers reported. They spent several hours burying a few of the exposed remains. "When I first passed through the place," Rogers later wrote, "I could walk for near a mile on bones, and skulls laying grinning at you, and women and children's hair in bunches as big as a bushel." The bones of children were lying by those of grown persons, "as if parent and child had met death at the same instant and with the same stroke." Lynch could not forget seeing the remains of those innocent victims of "avarice, fanaticism and cruelty," adding, "I have witnessed many harrowing sights on the fields of battle, but never did my heart thrill with such horrible emotions."

The day after visiting Mountain Meadows, Forney and his escort reached the Mormon settlement at Santa Clara, where they found 13 of the surviving children in the custody of Hamblin, who was just beginning his legendary career as a frontiersman and Indian interpreter for explorers such as John Wesley Powell. In his recollections, Lynch claimed he and a few men might have been sent ahead in disguise to find the children and determine what kind of reception awaited Forney. Fifty years later, Lynch remembered that Hamblin claimed some of the children were being held captive by the Indians. "Produce them or we will kill you," Lynch recalled saying while pistols and rifles were pointed at Hamblin's head. "He surrendered." (It's a wonderful story, but none of the contemporary reports – including that by Lynch – tell it.) After Forney arrived, the men spent three days at Santa Clara while clothing was made for the children.

Eyewitnesses gave contradictory reports about the circumstances of the rescued children. "The children when we first saw them were in a most wretched and deplorable condition," James Lynch charged, "with little or no clothing, covered with filth and dirt, they presented a sight heart-rending and miserable in the extreme." U.S. Army Major James Carleton said their captors "kept these little ones barely alive." In contrast, William Rogers reported that all the children had sore eyes but were otherwise well, and Jacob Forney believed the children were well cared for. He found them "happy and contented, except those who were sick" and insisted the orphans were in better condition than most of the children in the settlements in which they lived.

Forney rejected a number of obviously fraudulent claims to repay ransoms allegedly paid to save the children, since it was well known that the children "did not live among the Indians one hour." He received other claims for the children's support and indignantly reported he would not "condescend to become the medium of even transmitting such claims"; however, he later authorized \$2,961.77 to pay for the cost of the children's care.

With the orphans in tow, Forney proceeded to John D. Lee's home in Harmony on April 22, 1859. He had learned that Lee had some of the property of the murdered emigrants in his possession and demanded that he surrender it. On the 23rd, Lee denied he had any of the property and insisted he knew nothing about it except that the Indians took it. "Lee applied some foul and indecent epithets to the emigrants," William Rogers reported. Lee said they slandered the Mormons "and in general terms justified the killing."

Forney's conduct while visiting Lee astounded his escort, who had refused "to share the hospitality of this notorious murderer – this scourge of the desert," Lynch swore. He was outraged that Forney accepted Lee's hospitality, despite the statements of the surviving children, who identified Lee as one of the killers.

Lee agreed to accompany Forney to Cedar City and discuss the matter of the massacre with other Mormon officials, but on the way he rode ahead and disappeared. The leaders in Cedar City proved no more helpful in tracking down the stolen property. Frustrated and outraged, Forney's party picked up three additional survivors and headed north with 16 orphans.

Meanwhile, both the U.S. Army and Federal Judge Cradlebaugh had launched their own investigations of the murders. In mid-April, Brig. Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston, commander of the Department of Utah, ordered one company of dragoons and two of infantry to proceed to Santa Clara to protect travelers on the road to California, investigate reported Indian depredations and provide an escort for the Army paymaster who was on his way to Camp Floyd with a large supply of "spondulicks," as Utah's Valley Tan reported – back pay in gold, worth a rumored half-million dollars. Johnston then ordered the "Santa Clara Expedition " to provide protection for Judge Cradlebaugh, who was on his way to investigate the crime and, if possible, arrest the murderers.

As Forney marched north, Kanosh, chief of the Pahvants, informed him that some Indians had told him there were two more children saved from the massacre than Hamblin had collected. The information was not deemed very reliable, but after meeting the troops from Camp Floyd at Corn Creek, Cradlebaugh swore in William Rogers as a deputy U.S. marshal, and Forney sent him back south to see if he could find any other children.

Rogers soon learned that one child was at a remote settlement named Pocketville. He sent Hamblin to recover the orphan, "a bright-eyed and rosy-cheeked boy, about two years old," who proved to be Joseph Miller, youngest son of Joseph and Matilda Miller. Rogers "inquired diligently" for the second child but learned nothing. Despite a host of legends about a surviving child who remained in southern Utah, all reliable evidence indicates that the federal officials successfully recovered every surviving child.

The orphans and their ages at the time of the massacre included the children of George and Manerva Baker: Mary Elizabeth, 5; Sarah Frances, 3, and William Twitty, 9 months; of Alexander and Eliza Fancher: Christopher "Kit" Carson, 5, and Triphenia D., 22 months; of Joseph and Matilda Miller: John Calvin, 6; Mary, 4, and Joseph, 1; of Jesse and Mary Dunlap: Rebecca J., 6; Louisa, 4, and Sarah Ann, 1; of Lorenzo Dow and Nancy Dunlap: Prudence Angeline, 5, and Georgia Ann, 18 months; of Peter and Saladia Huff: Nancy Saphrona, 4; of Pleasant and Armilda Tackitt: Emberson Milum, 4, and William Henry, 19 months; and of John Milum and Eloah Jones: Felix Marion, 18 months. To his credit, Forney quickly determined that "none of these children have lived among the Indians at

all." He found them "intellectual and good looking" with "not one meanlookingchild among them."

In late June 1859, the Salt Lake probate court appointed Jacob Forney guardian of the orphans with the power "to collect and receive all property belonging to the murdered Emigrants." Forney still hoped to recover some of the wealth looted from the Arkansans, but he and his successors failed to reclaim a single nickel stolen from the Fancher party. Forney's craven behavior with John D. Lee disgusted James Lynch, who swore out an affidavit that called the agent a "veritable old granny." Lynch accused Forney of assisting the coverup of the crime by undercutting the authority of federal officials like Judge Cradlebaugh by arousing "a feeling of resistance to his authority among the guilty murderers."

Brigham Young followed the federal investigation closely. In early May, he grouched that Congress had appropriated \$10,000 and appointed two commissioners to return the orphans to their relatives. "What an expensive and round about method for transacting what any company for the States could easily attend to at any time, and with trifling expense," he complained.

General Johnston, however, was taking no chances with the survivors' safety, and he assigned two companies of the 2nd Dragoons to escort the orphans to Fort Leavenworth. As "an act of humanity," the firm of Russell, Majors & Waddell (which would start the Pony Express in the spring) offered the children free transportation in their freight wagons, but Johnston provided more comfortable spring wagons. Forney hired five women to accompany the "unfortunate, fatherless, motherless, and penniless children" and made sure they had at least three changes of clothes, plenty of blankets, and "every appliance" to "make them comfortable and happy."

Forney took two of the survivors, John Calvin Miller and Emberson Milum Tackitt, to Washington, D.C., in December 1859 to provide their "very interesting account of the massacre" to the government. The next day, Brigham Young's Washington agent reported that Forney had given the Mormon version of the massacre and would "be of service." Young immediately responded that if Forney continued to be a "friend of Utah," he would not lose "his reward."

Interestingly, no record of what the two boys told federal officials survives, but even "Old Granny" had seen enough. Forney reported in September 1859 that he began his inquiries hoping to exonerate "all white men from any participation in this tragedy, and saddle the guilt exclusively on the Indians." But it simply wasn't so. "White men were present and directed the Indians," he concluded.

Forney named the "hell-deserving scoundrels who concocted and brought to a successful termination" the mass murder: Stake President Isaac Haight, Bishop Philip Klingensmith, Branch President John D. Lee, Bishop John Higbee and Forney's own trusty guide, Ira Hatch. He gave their names to the attorney general, but nothing was done to bring the murderers to justice before the Civil War broke out – and nothing would be done for a dozen years.

William C. Mitchell, who was an Arkansas state senator, had picked up the other 15 children, who included his granddaughters Prudence Angeline and Georgia Ann Dunlap (but not his infant grandson, who was among the dead), at Fort Leavenworth in late August 1859, and on September 15, friends and relatives gathered at Carrollton, Ark., to welcome the orphans home. According to the *Arkansian*, Mitchell told the crowd the children were "kept secreted by the Mormons" until Forney offered to pay a \$6,000 ransom.

No one who witnessed the return of the children ever forgot it. Mary Baker, whose husband Jack had died at the Meadows, took charge of her three grandchildren. "You would have thought we were heroes," Sarah Frances "Sallie" Baker recalled in 1940. "They had a buggy parade for us." Her grandmother gave each of the children a powerful hug. The children arrived home not long before Confederate guns opened fire at Fort Sumter, and Arkansas witnessed some of the most brutal conflict of the Civil War. Despite the turmoil, all the children found homes with relatives, who raised them as best they could.

According to John D. Lee, Brigham Young said that the government took the children to St. Louis and sent letters to their relatives to come for them. "But their relations wrote back that they did not want them – that they were the children of thieves, outlaws and murderers, and they would not take them, they did not wish anything to do with them, and would not have them around their houses." However unreliable Lee's quote might be, a generation of Mormon historians repeated the slander that most of the children wound up in a St. Louis orphanage.

Efforts continued well into the 20th century to win some kind of compensation for the survivors of Mountain Meadows, but nothing was ever done. For the 17 orphans, the pain of their loss never went away. "I remember I called all of the women I saw 'Mother,'" Sallie remembered. "I guess I was still hoping to find my own mother, and every time I called a woman 'Mother,' she would break out crying."

None of the Mountain Meadows orphans had bleaker prospects than Sarah Dunlap, who was only 1 year old when a gunshot wound almost severed her arm during the massacre. An eye disease acquired in southern Utah left her

virtually sightless. After returning to Arkansas, she was educated at the school for the blind in Little Rock and settled with her sister Rebecca in Calhoun County.

James Lynch wandered the world as a mining expert, but he never lost touch with the orphans. After retiring, Lynch visited his old charges in Arkansas, who greeted him "as a returned father." The old frontiersman found Sarah Dunlap, now "a cultured lady of 34 years," and he soon "wooed and won" Miss Sarah. The couple were married on December 30, 1893, when the groom was 74. Lynch ran a store in Woodberry, and Sarah taught Sunday school. They eventually moved to Hampton, where Sarah died in 1901. Her ornate gravestone and vault were "proof of the tenderness that James felt for Sarah." For decades the community recalled how Captain Lynch "never tired of telling how he rescued her from the Mormons."

Lynch died about 1910 and was buried next to his wife in an unmarked grave. His fellow Masons conducted his funeral, the Arkansas Gazette recalled, "the likes of which have never again been seen in these parts." The survivors of Mountain Meadows never forgot "the brave, daring and noble Capt. James Lynch," but he rested in the unmarked grave until March 21, 1998, when the Arkansas State Society Children of the American Revolution dedicated a monument to his memory.

SIDEBAR

Although none of them had been over the age of six when their families were murdered, the 17 orphans provided some of the most powerful evidence about what had really happened at Mountain Meadows – and their testimony removed any doubt about Mormon involvement in the massacre. In contrast to the wildly varying stories told by the murderers, the children's recollections were surprisingly consistent. For example, they reported that Mormons had disguised themselves as Indians: The orphans told Capt. John Robinson "they had seen these white men take off disguises and wash the war paint from their faces." Rebecca Dunlap "saw quite a number of white men washing the paint from their faces." Martha Elizabeth Baker recalled, "I distinctly remember the group disguised as Indians. There was not a real Indian in the group, for they went to the creek and washed the paint from their faces." And while he was playing marbles with a young Mormon boy in Salt Lake, "Kit" Carson Fancher said, "My father was killed by Indians; when they washed their faces they were white men."

James Lynch said several orphans retained "a very vivid impression of much connected with the massacre," but only fragments of what they told their rescuers survive. Rebecca Dunlap and Emberson Milum Tackitt recognized the

wives of John D. Lee wearing dresses jewelry that belonged to their mothers, and Tackitt said Lee had his father's oxen. The older children "frequently pointed out carriages and stock that belonged to the train, stating to whom it belonged." One of the most compelling stories was attributed to the boy identified as "John Calvin Sorrow," actually John Calvin Miller, the oldest son of Joseph and Matilda Miller, who had "picked arrows from his mother's body." The boy saw his grandfather, grandmother, aunt, father, and mother murdered. "Clenching his little fists," one of the orphans' nurses recalled, "he would burst into a little passionate speech like this: 'When I get to be a man I'll go to the President of the United States and ask for a regiment of soldiers to go and find John D. Lee. But I don't want to have anybody kill him; I want to shoot him myself, for he killed my father. He shot my father in the back, but I would shoot him in the face.'"

"I shall never forget how he looked," said Judge Cradlebaugh.

Will Bagley, who operates the Prairie Dog Press in Salt Lake City, is the author of *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (see interview in "Reviews" in the December 2003 *Wild West*) and has a second book about the massacre, *Innocent Blood*, in the works. Bagley was also one of the people interviewed for a Mountain Meadows episode – co-produced by Bill Kurtis and Paul Andrew Hutton, and scheduled to air in late December 2004 – of the History Channel's *Investigating History* series. Also recommended for further reading: *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*, by Juanita Brooks.

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