

OUR SORROWS THEY'VE SEEN:
THE TENNESSEE MORMON MASSACRE

by

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I dedicated this to my Mama, Elder Beth Linam, whose ministry journey inspired my love of religious history in the first place.

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Finally, I must recognize the reason I became interested in Mormon history in the first place. I was raised in the Community of Christ, formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. My Sunday school lessons in church history have now blossomed into this thesis, and I will forever be grateful for the love and lessons that I learned in the tiny Huxford congregation. Growing up in a church that shares the Mormon past, my favorite hymn was “Redeemer of Israel,” one of the oldest hymns of the Church. The title of this thesis is derived from the third verse of that song.

“How long we have wandered,
As strangers in sin,
And cried in the desert for Thee!
Our foes have rejoiced
When our sorrows they’ve seen,
But Israel will shortly be free!”

ABSTRACT

The Tennessee Mormon Massacre, or the Cane Creek Massacre, occurred on August 10, 1884, in Lewis County, Tennessee. A masked mob attacked the James Conder farm during a Sunday worship service and murdered four members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, including two missionaries. The leader of the mob died in the violence as well. Several historians have explored the events of the massacre and have connected it to the national anti-polygamy movement of the 1880s. However, no one has approached it from the local level. This thesis introduces the Lewis County Circuit Court records to the literature and reexamines the sources that other scholars of the massacre have used. It reveals several points of local tension that were present before the Mormons arrived and demonstrates community relationships that have previously been left unexplored.

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CHAPTER I

THE STUDY OF A MASSACRE

On August 10, 1884, a masked mob murdered four members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on a farm in Lewis County, Tennessee. Mormon massacres are events that many people associate with the years before the Civil War, whether the Mormons were the persecuted or the persecutors. In many cases, Mormons suffered from violent attacks. Haun's Mill in Missouri and Nauvoo in Illinois were tragic sites for the early Church. In 1844, a mob attacked and assassinated Joseph Smith, Jr., the Church's founder and prophet, in a jail in Carthage, Illinois. Though the Mormons sought to separate themselves from their persecutors by moving to the Utah territory, violence followed them across the prairies and desert. In 1857, the United States government declared war on the Church, which had gained control over the Utah territory. On the other hand, sometimes the Mormons were the assailants. As part of the Utah War, Mormon men attacked a band of settlers bound for California from Arkansas, killing 120 in what has become known as the Mountain Meadows Massacre. In the public's memory, however, the post-war period is more associated with legal than physical battles over Mormonism. States and the federal government sought to marginalize Mormons by prosecuting them for polygamy, and the violent episodes of the pre-war period became rare.¹ In Lewis County, Tennessee, though, anti-Mormon fervor did not play out through the courts, but through violence and bloodshed.

¹ For more about 19th century violence and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints before the Civil War, see Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); Leonard Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985); Thomas

Historians have given the August 10 massacre in Lewis County several names, including the Tennessee Mormon Massacre or the Cane Creek Massacre. While the next chapter will explore the massacre in more detail, the basic story is as follows. Methodist preacher David Hinson led a mob of masked vigilantes to the Conder farm where they attacked a Mormon service, killing Elder John Gibbs, Elder William Berry, and church members J.R. Hudson and Martin Conder.² David Hinson also died that day in the melee, and the mother of Hudson and Conder sustained injuries that left her with a permanent limp. Though widely covered at the time, history has largely forgotten the story of what happened to four Mormon missionaries in rural Tennessee. In fact, there has been little interest in it or memory of the event outside of Tennessee or Utah. Some of this can, perhaps, be explained by a general lack of interest in Mormon history outside of Brigham Young University until the second half of the twentieth century. Even then, Mormon historians have had bigger stories to tell than a seemingly isolated incident of violence in an area known for its violent incidents.

Marshall Wingfield was the first person to revive interest in the massacre beyond the lifetimes of the people involved in it. He published an article in the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* in 1958 giving an account of the massacre and the events leading up to it and what occurred after. Wingfield relies almost exclusively on Tennessee

M. Spencer, ed., *The Missouri Mormon Experience* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010); Ronald W. Walker and et. al., *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Will Bagley, *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002).

² Because J.R. Hudson's grave spells his surname as Hutson, most histories of the massacre have spelled his name thusly. However, the gravestone was not placed until the 1940s. All sources contemporary to Hudson's lifetime and his father's lifetime spell the family name as Hudson, and so that is how his name will be recorded here.

newspaper reports, especially from the *Nashville Banner* and the *Daily American*, since these were readily available to him locally in Tennessee where he resided. He argues that widespread rumors of the elders' involvement in polygamy caused the massacre. He notes that of the four hundred Mormons resident in Tennessee, fifty of them lived in Lewis County. This population became the target of local Protestant preachers. Protestants began circulating anti-Mormon tracts, and Wingfield blames the fabricated article "A Red Hot Address," published in March 1884 in Utah, for most of the fervor against the Mormons that developed by August.³ He also notes that after the massacre one anti-Mormon letter from Lewis County reported that the Mormons had been subjects of scandal and ill-repute in the neighborhood. Indeed, John Gibbs had apparently coerced one female convert into having improper relations after he had a revelation from God instructing her to, and locals claimed to have caught him molesting another young girl on a public road. Wingfield notes that even though Gibbs was not a polygamist, this was not the first time young Mormon men had been the subjects of such rumors.⁴

Scholars first put the story of the massacre in its context of southern violence against Mormons and fleshed the tale out with more primary sources in 1968 in William Hatch's *There is No Law... : A History of Mormon Civil Relations in the Southern States, 1865-1905*.⁵ Though heavily biased against southerners, Hatch's work is notable for

³ "A Red Hot Address," *Salt Lake City Tribune*, March 9, 1884. For the full text, see Appendix A.

⁴ Marshall Wingfield, "Tennessee's Mormon Massacre," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 17 (Mar. 1958).

⁵ William Whitridge Hatch, *There Is No Law... : A History of Mormon Civil Relations in the Southern States, 1865-1905* (New York: Vantage Press, 1968).

several reasons. First, he was the first scholar to have access to the John H. Gibbs journal, passed down through Gibbs's family and later donated to the archives at Brigham Young University. Hatch addresses two major points. First, he notes that Cane Creek was not the first incidence of mob violence perpetrated by Protestant ministers. In fact, he demonstrates that local ministers led or at least endorsed numerous attacks against Mormons throughout the South.

Hatch also stresses the southerners' fear of polygamy as the main catalyst for their violent actions. Rumors swirled outwards suggesting that the Mormon missionaries were recruiting women for their supposed harems in Utah. Newspaper editors suggested that the Mormon church was focusing its efforts in rural areas because the people there were too ignorant to recognize the moral threat of polygamy. The wildest and most scandalous of rumors involved the missionaries baptizing women converts in the nude. He observes that once the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints acceded to national demands and eliminated polygamy from its official doctrines, mob violence against Mormons in the South all but ceased. Polygamy was the firebrand of the southern minister, and without it he could no longer excite his congregation to take action.⁶

In "Myth, Mormonism, and Murder in the South," Gene Sessions introduces the idea that scholars should study the massacre in the context of the larger problem of southern violence.⁷ He cites other murders and the journals of several Mormon missionaries assigned to the South who wrote about the constant threats of violence they

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gene A. Sessions, "Myth, Murder, and Mormonism in the South," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 75 (Spring 1976): 212-225.

received. Sessions points out that between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the twentieth century, southerners murdered five Mormon missionaries and three southern Mormon church members, and dozens more were the subjects of beatings, tar-and-feathering, and other violent harassment. He reports that outside of the South, “Although the polygamist Mormon Church was nationally very unpopular and encountered much harassment, there were no murders and few acts of violence committed upon the persons of the many young elders serving their terms of missionary service.”⁸

Sessions suggests that the specter of polygamy was just one part of the perceived threat of Mormonism. After all, polygamy concerned all Americans, not just southerners, and so a response to polygamy cannot by itself account for the South’s more violent reaction. Sessions forwards the idea that southerners felt threatened because Mormon missionaries were outsiders teaching collectivism as opposed to the fierce individualism engendered in southern culture. Southerners also observed that many Mormon converts tended to move to Utah, disrupting their family ties and even challenging familial hierarchy when a son or wife converted, something many southerners considered blasphemous. Sessions argues that these layers of subversion led to the Mormons’ being met by the same hostility as African Americans, Native Americans, and other minority groups in the South, despite being members of the white race.⁹

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Patrick Q. Mason is the most recent scholar to explore the Cane Creek Massacre and anti-Mormonism in the South more generally. In *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South*, Mason explores the Cane Creek Massacre and other murders of Mormon elders in greater detail than other scholars have attempted before.¹⁰ His conclusions agree to a great extent with Sessions's, but he also believes that scholars should give Wingfield's argument about the fear of polygamy more credit. After all, the national campaigners against polygamy had recently been successful in passing the Edmunds Act in 1882, so the issue was fresh on the minds of all Americans, not just Southerners.¹¹ Mason argues that Mormon elders challenged the idea of southern honor, which identified husbands as the protectors and controllers over their families, by preaching to women and encouraging their conversion without the permission of their husbands. Mormonism also presented a different version of femininity and patriarchy, which served only to create more fear and resentment among southerners. Indeed, Americans in general responded with outrage to Mormonism's challenge to the common definition of a family structure. Victorians were embracing companionate marriages while Mormons seemed to be harkening back to a more Old Testament definition of marriage. Most Americans considered their actions uncivilized, not religious. In fact, Mason suggests that southerners viewed Mormon missionaries through the same lens as African-American males-- in the end, they were both threats to the white Protestant

¹⁰ Patrick Q. Mason, *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹¹ The Edmunds Act of 1882 was intended to strengthen earlier anti-polygamy legislation. It made polygamy a felony and strengthened anti-polygamy enforcement by including definitions of unlawful cohabitation. This made it possible for prosecutors to pursue cases in the absence of written documentation of marriages.

family.

Mason's greatest contribution to the literature, however, is the idea that southerners were still trying to find their place in the American narrative after the Civil War. In analyzing the southern attacks on Mormons, he proposes that anti-Mormonism was different from other attacks against religious outsiders because by attacking Mormons, southerners were participating in a nationwide dialogue of anti-Mormonism. In this one instance, southerners were willing to drop their insistence on states rights and limited federal powers in favor of federal legislation against the practice of polygamy. Coupled with the Spanish American War, Mason argues that southern contributions to anti-polygamy further healed the gaps that the Civil War left in the nation. By pursuing violence against Mormons, they were championing a national ideal of protecting Americans against the evils of polygamy. Anti-Mormonism, he concludes, was patriotic.¹²

Historians have long characterized the South as an extraordinarily violent place. There is, admittedly, some truth in this. One cannot deny the brutality of slavery, the birth of the Ku Klux Klan, and the long and bloody struggle for African American civil rights. African Americans have not been the only targets of violence in the South. The land clearance brought about by the Trail of Tears was meant to hand over Indian lands in the South to white settlers. A culture of honor firmly rooted in the culture of the Southern elite led to dueling and vendettas. Many communities also felt that justice was something that should not wait for the slow process of the courts. Vigilantism and lynching were in many cases seen as acceptable forms of social justice. And, of course, one cannot forget

¹² Ibid.

that the South fired the first shots of the Civil War against Fort Sumter. The Lewis County massacre falls somewhere in between all of this. In the 1880s the South was still disjointed from the rest of the country. According to the historians who have studied the massacre, there were several factors at play when anti-Mormonism turned to murder on August 10, 1884.

To understand southern violence, one must first understand the call to honor that was deeply ingrained in southern culture, even after the Civil War when antebellum society collapsed. Men frequently instigated violence when they felt that another person had impugned their honor in some way. Honor has been the subject of numerous studies, dating back to 1941 when Wilbur J. Cash noted that “the thing which elsewhere accounted for [the southerner’s] violence—was nothing more or less than his conviction...that nothing living could cross him and get away with it.”¹³ Even that early in the study of honor, Cash understood the layers of pride and the individuality at the heart of a man’s honor.

The standard bearer for work on honor in the South is Bertram Wyatt-Brown. In *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, he explains that honor was highly reflective of community values.¹⁴ As a social construct, honor was arbitrary, unlike integrity, virtue, or righteousness, which could be possessed by anyone regardless of community opinion. Rather, a man’s peers considered him to be honorable if he recognized the expectations of his community, not the law, and acted in accordance with

¹³ Wilbur J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1941), 44.

¹⁴ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

those local values. The culture defined southern white males by their honor, which also depended on the behavior of their dependents, especially the women of their family.

Since honor lay at the very core of a man's identity, defending that honor was paramount. If another man impugned his honor, the southern male was required by honor to answer the challenge or seek restitution. Not to face the transgressor was to risk the label of coward, even if confrontation led to violence and even death. While slight offenses did not require any bloodshed to restore honor, when the offense involved a woman things could become very heated very quickly. Southern culture placed southern women on a pedestal, and any challenge to her virtue reflected directly on the honor of her husband, father, brothers, and even sons.¹⁵ After the 1884 massacre, several newspapers reported the rumor in Lewis County that the Mormon missionaries, especially John Gibbs, had been having improper relations with young women. In such a case the community could excuse the vigilantes because their actions were to defend the honor of all local men. The community perhaps did not approve of the methods, but defending the purity of womanhood was sacred enough that even a massacre could be forgiven if enough people believed there was a cause for it.

Though not as strong as Wyatt-Brown's work, Kenneth Greenberg's *Honor and Slavery* offers another caveat to the definition of honor.¹⁶ He suggests that honor was part of an important equation that allowed southern men to define themselves by what slaves were not. Slaves could not express or defend their honor because they were powerless.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Kenneth Greenberg, *Honor & Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Women, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, the Proslavery Argument Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Since southern males held the power in society, they therefore had honor. Gift giving is central to Greenberg's argument since in a society where white males controlled all the power, only they could give gifts. And gifts could include the gift of life or death. He also writes that southerners despised professional gamblers because they were outsiders and because they made a career of skipping out on their debts, a horrendous faux pas in the honor-based society.¹⁷

Though slavery was twenty years in the past by the time the Mormon missionaries died on Cane Creek, this sense of power differentiation was still present in southern culture. The public constantly criticized Mormon missionaries for concentrating their efforts on the poor, especially when their proselytizing led to immigrations to the West. The outcry grew louder when stories about young people leaving their parents to join the Church reached the public ear. In recruiting from the more vulnerable parts of southern society, the Mormon missionaries ripped apart the social fabric and challenged the levels of patriarchal power that men took care to strictly enforce. The missionary, like the gambler, was an outsider who did not feel compelled to recognize the system of honor, and so he was considered dangerous.

At the same time Greenberg was looking at honor, two psychologists "confirmed" with the scientific method what historians had been arguing for years. In *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South*, Richard E. Nesbitt and Dov Cohen attempt to explain why southerners have traditionally been quick to resort to violence.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Richard E. Nesbitt and Dov Cohen, *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996).

Their study dismisses the ideas that the hot southern summers or high levels of poverty and racial tensions contributed to higher than normal numbers of violent incidents.

Rather, they favor this culture of honor that holds men to the ideal of being strong and not backing down when insulted. In the end, they conclude that honor is “a singular cause of male violence—a perpetrator’s sense of threat to one of his most valued possessions, namely, his reputation for strength and toughness.”¹⁹ Again, when Mormon missionaries threatened the authority of local men, those men felt that their honor sustained an injury, and so they lashed out in violence to repair the perceived damage.

In recent years Bertram Wyatt-Brown has revisited the question of southern honor in a series of essays, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1880s*.²⁰ In essays on honor and grace, or religion, Wyatt-Brown addresses the tension between the Christian ideal of meekness and the honor code that demanded toughness and retribution. Southern men were expected to be good Christians, and Christianity requires turning the other cheek to offenses. Belief in Christ also extended grace and salvation to all believers, regardless of sex, gender, class, or race. Such an equalizing force would, of course, seem contrary to the social structures upon which southern men built their culture of honor.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., xv.

²⁰ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1880s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

²¹ Ibid., 83-176.

Wyatt-Brown is not the first scholar to recognize this clash of cultures. In *Subduing Satan*, Ted Ownby discusses how the burly man of the rural South could humble himself to become the meek child of God projected by the gentle Christianity fashionable among the Victorians.²² Ownby sees a reconciliation in the fact that church could also provide fellowship. Men were free to be manly men while still feeling the spirit and answering the altar call in church. To further reconcile these contradictions, Wyatt-Brown turns to a thesis introduced in Christine Heyrman's *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*.²³ Heyrman points out that the South was not always the Bible Belt. Rather, it was once the bulwark of elite Anglicans and rowdy, seasonally religious backwoodsmen. In order to win over the South, evangelicals had to change the way they went about their work. Slavery had to be accommodated, and preachers had to be careful not to challenge the authority of the southern husband and father in his own home.²⁴ Returning back to honor, Wyatt-Brown writes that southerners continued this pattern of modification to also fit honor within their own brand of Christianity. Honor became tied to Christian patriarchy, and Christ became "the Ruler of Honor, Pride, and Race."²⁵ Mormonism was not so bendable as the earlier evangelists, and with evangelical churches already so established in the South, evangelical preachers were often only too

²² Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

²³ Christine Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture*, 104.

happy to support the locals who took it upon themselves to rid the area of the men from Utah.

In the last section of the collection, Wyatt-Brown extends his earlier discussions of honor into the postbellum era. Dueling fell out of favor, but lynching was still part of the honor code. The South's loss of the Civil War damaged the honor culture. The end of slavery and the newfound freedoms of African Americans had shaken the power structures upon which honor stood. Wyatt-Brown argues that the Ku Klux Klan was born from the rage southerners felt when confronted with the changes that their defeat wrought. The sheer number of lynchings of African Americans points to the bitterness that loss created and the new emphasis on white supremacy as the justification of honor. Honor required a strict social hierarchy to demonstrate the strength of the white southern male, and these men maintained this hierarchy in the postwar South through violence.²⁶

Of course, the South did not have a monopoly on violence, as scholars have admitted, but there was something unique about it. In *Origins of the New South*, C. Vann Woodward found that in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the number of lynchings across the country decreased.²⁷ They decreased in the South as well, but at a much slower rate. Woodward noted that lynching "was becoming an increasingly Southern and racial phenomenon."²⁸ Likewise, Edward Ayers did not mince his words when he wrote that the New South was "a notoriously violent place." Indeed, he found

²⁶ Ibid., 177-295.

²⁷ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971).

²⁸ Ibid., 351-352.

that the number of murders in the South were “the highest in the country” and even ranked among the highest in the world.²⁹

Richard Maxwell Brown’s 1975 *Strain of Violence* examines violence and vigilantism in America as a whole, though many of its examples come from the South.³⁰ Brown notes that all Americans, from all backgrounds, have a propensity to engage in violence. He finds that “the patriot, the humanitarian, the nationalist, the pioneer, the landholder, the farmer, and the laborer (and the capitalist) have used violence as a means to a higher end.”³¹ But he also recognizes that Americans have utilized violence, and especially vigilantism, to maintain the status quo and to enforce social conservatism’s ideal of the upper, middle, and lower class.³² Though George Rable’s *But There Was No Peace* focuses primarily on southern violence against African Americans, he pushes the theme of Reconstruction violence past the typical end of 1872 and shows how white southerners continued to organize their violence to push out the outsiders, in this case the Republicans, long after the official demise of the Ku Klux Klan.³³

Lynching goes hand in hand with the story of violence in the South between the Civil War and World War II. While most books about lynching focus heavily on African

²⁹ Edward L. Ayers, *Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 155.

³⁰ Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ George C. Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1984).

Americans, since most violence was focused on them, there are common causes that instigate lynch law regardless of the race of the victim. By searching for these causes, one can see how these same tensions would have inspired the mob that attacked the Conder farm. After all, a power struggle between local evangelicals and the newcomer Mormon missionaries was at the heart of the conflict.

In *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930*, W. Fitzhugh Brundage looks for patterns in the 546 documented lynchings in Georgia and Virginia over the course of fifty years.³⁴ Importantly, Brundage casts off previously given causes for lynching, which ranged from the psychological to the falling price of cotton. He shows that though African Americans died by lynching much more often than any other race, white men could be subject to lynch law, especially in the case of murder, though their lynchings were often more dignified affairs. Like Wyatt-Brown, Brundage recognizes the culture of honor at work in sparking the lynch mobs, since lynchings often occurred when a power struggle occurred between the white landowner and the sharecropper. While newspapers trumpeted the call to protect southern womanhood from licentious black men, he finds that very few men faced lynching for sexual crimes. Brundage finds the motives for lynching in the old plantation methods of labor control in which masters used brutality to reinforce power structures.³⁵

³⁴ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Published two years later, Tolnay and Beck's *A Festival of Violence* employs computer models to identify patterns in the thousands of lynchings across the South.³⁶ While they disproved some earlier assumptions about the causes of lynching and supported others with their findings, ultimately the Brundage argument held fast: lynchings occurred primarily in agricultural communities, especially in the Cotton Belt, when black workers threatened white jobs or white power. Racial tension once more boils down to a power struggle.

Most recently, Michael Pfeifer's *Rough Justice* interprets lynching as part of a national problem, and not just as an issue that was uniquely southern or about race.³⁷ By looking at lynching beyond the South, he is able to demonstrate the power behind Brundage, Tolnay, and Beck's assessments. Lynching was a response to political and cultural changes. It was a backlash against shifts in power and was used to maintain the status quo. Pfeifer's work brings the element of the justice system back into the lynching discussion and notes that members of rural communities across the nation "were rooted in a rural cultural perspective unsympathetic to the deliberative nature of due process law and to the legal reforms promoted by a rising middle class... of city-dwellers. The net effect was a... cultural war waged between rough-justice and due process camps."³⁸ After the Cane Creek massacre, most of the non-Mormon calls for justice came from Nashville where city-dwelling citizens who frowned upon such extralegal violence. If the Mormons

³⁶ Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

³⁷ Michael Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1847-1947* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

were engaged in illegal activities, then that was a matter for the courts. No one tried to unmask the mob, however, because in rural Tennessee, especially among people with anti-Mormon sentiments, such mob violence was a more effective means to the end than depending on a slow moving justice system.

While historians now look back and see how deeply the concept of honor was ingrained in the southern conscience and helped incite violence, the nationwide push against polygamy is another important layer to the Cane Creek story. The massacre at the Conder Farm is part of a wider story of a fervent anti-Mormonism in the country as a whole. And while the Mormons were outsiders and their doctrines were offensive and they had an unsavory political history, polygamy was the baggage they carried wherever they went. The American middle class and American mainstream evangelicals, in particular, viewed polygamy as a barbarian abomination. Many Victorian era Americans believed that America was on the path of forward progress, and polygamy was a step back that threatened progress.

In *The Viper on the Hearth*, Terryl Givens addresses anti-Mormonism in popular culture in the nineteenth century.³⁹ He is quick to point out that while Americans have long idealized religious tolerance, they have very rarely practiced it. Indeed, religious bigotry has lain hidden behind more secular terms such as ethnic intolerance or patriotism. After all, in a country that has trumpeted its acceptance of all religions since its founding, it is easier to claim that attacks on certain religious groups happen because those people are somehow un-American. To that end, Givens explains, anti-Mormon

³⁹ Terryl Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

literature strove to remove all references to religion in their anti-Mormon imagery. If the American public could be convinced that Mormonism was not a religion, then Americans would not feel any qualms about limiting the freedoms that Mormons enjoyed under the Constitution.

Even when orthodox denominations admitted that Mormonism was a religion, they claimed that Mormons were heretics. Mormons believed in many of the same things as Christian denominations. They recognized the importance of a personal relationship with God, the Virgin Birth of the divine Son of God, and the veracity of the miracles of the Bible. But in the face of Mormons' beliefs about modern day, divine revelations and the concept of celestial marriage, orthodox denominations simply could not recognize their legitimacy. Givens astutely observes, "Heresy is what is new."⁴⁰

The crusaders against polygamy, and the Mormon Church more generally, were quite successful in their slander campaign. Printing and distribution became cheaper and easier as a part of a wider communications revolution, but ease of printing also meant that people could now distribute whatever information they wished. Anti-Mormon diatribes filled tracts, newspapers, magazines, and books. Sensationalist novels purported to give insider glances into the lives of polygamists. In the hands of penny press journalists, Mormonism ceased to be a religion; instead, it was transformed into an ethnicity that entrapped women, held them hostage, and subjected them to the sexual whims of the Mormon leaders. Mormonism became a specter in the writers' hands, a monster even, that grew at a phenomenal pace, even drawing converts from Europe. The wilder dime

⁴⁰ Ibid., 79.

novels even accused Mormons of blood sacrifices.⁴¹ Regardless of how many of these examples reached rural Lewis County, the mass proliferation of these anti-Mormon texts would have insured that the people of Lewis County already had opinions about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints long before any missionaries ever arrived.

Sarah Barringer Gordon's *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth Century America* builds on Givens's examples of anti-polygamy and anti-Mormon literature but demonstrates how these depictions ultimately swayed the courts and Congress to join the anti-polygamist side.⁴² By targeting the Church as a whole, including its political and economic practices in Utah, anti-polygamists were able to convince many Americans, and especially judges and politicians, that all the activities of the Church served the purpose of maintaining the practice of keeping multiple wives.

Gordon begins her tale of polygamy in the national political spotlight by discussing the 1862 Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act. The purpose of the act was to outlaw polygamy in Utah and to overturn the Utah territorial legislature's incorporation of the Latter-day Saints Church. She calls this action a second disestablishment because it introduced to the territories what had long been established in the states. After the American Revolution, one of the new government's first tasks was to disentangle church and state. The 1862 Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act's goal was to do the same thing for the territories, but especially for Utah. However, the act was ultimately unenforceable since Church members controlled the courts in Utah. Also, local probate courts in Utah had

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

criminal jurisdiction, negating any federal attempts to force prosecution. Congress corrected this oversight in 1874, which soon brought *Reynolds v. United States* to the Supreme Court. George Reynolds, convicted of bigamy, had his conviction upheld by the Court, which established that the First Amendment did not protect any right to practice plural marriage. Mormons continued to practice plural marriage, however, and as the 1880s arrived the national campaign against polygamy became increasingly heated as activists pushed for more laws and more prosecutions.⁴³

In spite of the whirlpool of hostility, the Mormon Church continued to send its young men out as missionaries. The building of Zion could not wait for the acceptance of the rest of the country. So, Mormon missionaries journeyed to the South where they navigated the complexities of honor, violence, and anti-polygamy the best they could. Unfortunately for the missionaries and their converts at Cane Creek, on August 10, 1884, their navigation efforts failed to protect them.

⁴³ Ibid.

CHAPTER II: Murder at Cane Creek

When John Henry Gibbs was a boy in Wales, he probably never imagined the extraordinary path his life would take. Born in 1853 to a family with six children, his life changed dramatically when, along with the rest of his family, he decided to be baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on August 28, 1862. In 1866, the family emigrated, leaving Wales forever to cross the Atlantic and then the United States to the Utah territory. Once in Utah, Gibbs's life took the normal path for a young Mormon man. In 1874 he married Louisa Obray in the Salt Lake Endowment House and settled in her hometown of Paradise, Utah, to teach school. They had three children, a son and two daughters. As expected of all practicing Mormon men, Gibbs received his ordination as an elder and accepted his calling as a missionary to the Southern States Mission in February 1883. The Paradise Brass Band gave him a hero's farewell at the train station. Leaving behind his wife and three children, his destination was Tennessee, and his prospects were bright.¹

The South, however, was not an easy assignment. After the trouble the Church had in Missouri in the 1840s, the Mormons approached the South with kid gloves. Few southerners welcomed Mormon evangelization, and like many Americans they were highly suspicious of the missionaries from Utah who the locals whispered were seeking more wives for the practice of polygamy. After the Civil War, the Church increased its efforts in the South. The Mormons were most successful in the area surrounding

¹ Biographical Information, John H. Gibbs Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.

Chattanooga, Tennessee, and northern Georgia, but tensions there caused many newly baptized Mormons to flee to Utah and Colorado in the late 1870s. In spite of the tribulation, the mission president, B.H. Roberts, persisted in his endeavors, and East Tennessee produced several hundred Mormon converts.

Conversion to Mormonism came with a high price in the South, and many converts continued to leave the region for the promised peace in the Utah Territory. Mormonism attracted much suspicion among southerners, especially because of the practice of polygamy. Violence against Mormons was not unheard of, especially in the postbellum South. Only four years before Elder Gibbs accepted his assignment to Tennessee, Elder Joseph Standing had met his death at the hands of a mob in Varnell, Georgia, in 1879. Standing had achieved some success throughout North Georgia, baptizing a number of converts who then left their homes to make their way to Utah. *The Atlanta Constitution*, however, spurned the Mormons and claimed that the Mormon missionaries were great deceivers who sought out and preyed upon the poor and uneducated.² After several weeks of mobs terrorizing Standing's converts, on July 21, 1879, a mob of a dozen men attacked Standing and his fellow missionary Ruder Clawson as they set out from Varnell to Rome, Georgia. While the mob spared Clawson, they shot and killed Standing. Though witnesses testified for the prosecution, the court acquitted named members of the mob of the charges of murder and riot, reflecting a general attitude of hostility toward Mormons in the South.³

² "In Brigham's Bosom," *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 7, 1879.

³ Ken Driggs, "'There Is No Law in Georgia for Mormons': The Joseph Standing Murder Case of 1879," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 73 (Winter 1989): 745-72.

It was from this sort of tension that Mormon converts were escaping by leaving behind everything they knew to pursue their new faith in the desert. This high rate of emigration only increased tensions with non-Mormons, who spread rumors alleging that the Mormons were breaking up families.⁴ This was of grave concern to southerners. The southern family was at the core of southern life, and a threat to the family was a threat to honor. Southerners were notoriously quick to forgive a man who claimed to have killed in the name of defending his family and his honor.

John Gibbs began his missionary work with an assignment to Hickman County on March 3, 1883. After proving himself a capable missionary, near the end of Elder Gibbs's service to the Church, B.H. Roberts assigned him to the small Mormon community in Lewis County. It would be a difficult assignment within a challenging region. Lewis County's most significant claim to historical notoriety at that time could be linked to its name. Travelling from New Orleans to Washington, D.C., Meriwether Lewis stopped at Grinder's Stand, an inn located on the Natchez Trace just outside of present day Hohenwald, to spend the evening of October 10, 1809. In the early hours of October 11, the proprietress, Priscilla Grinder, claimed to have heard gunshots from the direction of Lewis's quarters. The next morning Lewis's servants found him still alive but mortally wounded with multiple gunshot wounds and missing part of his skull. On hearing the news, President Thomas Jefferson believed the famed explorer had committed suicide, but his family insisted that Lewis was murdered. Historians still debate the facts of his

⁴ *Nashville Banner*, August 13, 1884.

death. Regardless of the facts, Lewis was buried nearby and when the state created the county, state officials named it in his honor.⁵

Writing after the Cane Creek massacre, the *Nashville Banner* described the county as “one of the poorest for agricultural purposes in the state, the soil being very thin and rolling, and there being neither railroad nor river communication...The traveler may ride through hills and valley for hours and not meet a human being...Very little business is done in the county and there is not an important town within its limits.”⁶ The same article reported that out of the four hundred Mormons then living in Tennessee, fifty of them could be found in Lewis County, due in large part to a “Mr. Church” who had left Tennessee for Utah some years before and returned converted with a zeal to bring his neighbors and friends into the fold.⁷ While “Mr. Church” may have been a powerful witness of the faith, Elders Joseph Argyle, Edward Stevenson, and Martin Garn followed him and founded a branch near the head of Cane Creek several years before Gibbs arrived. Cane Creek was a settlement of 20 to 30 houses, most of which reportedly belonged to Mormon families. Without steady guidance or support from the conference, the branch only contained 31 members at the start of 1883.⁸

⁵ For more about the debate surrounding Lewis’s death, see John D.W. Guice, James J. Holmberg, and Jay H. Buckley, *By His Own Hand?: The Mysterious Death of Meriwether Lewis* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006).

⁶ *Nashville Banner*, August 13, 1884.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Deseret Evening News*, August 27, 1884.

Gibbs first visited Lewis County in late 1883. His record books note that forty-four people from Lewis and Hickman counties joined the church and were baptized between September 1883 and May 1884: He baptized thirty-six out of the forty-four between February and May 1884.⁹ After a short visit to the Chattanooga area, Gibbs returned to Lewis County, armed with the new title of President of the North West Tennessee Conference.

When Gibbs arrived on Sunday, May 4, 1884, he was expecting a newly hewn log chapel overflowing with fellow church members, many of whom he had personally baptized. What he found, however, was a pile of ash and rubble and a note. The note read:

“This is the last time that we will notify you that we will not have any more Mormans preaching in hickman perry and lewis...we are the shilow men and we are going to have it stopped as we will take some or all of your lives...if you dont leave at this order we will use there hickory switches freely...the book speeks of faulty teaching and you are them you are low down scrapings of the devil and we are going to stop it if we will have to cause wore.”¹⁰

Gibbs was not surprised when he found the wreckage. After all, he recorded in his journal that locals had warned him the night before of rising tensions in the area, and they feared

⁹ “Account of Baptisms by Elder John H. Gibbs,” John H. Gibbs Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.

¹⁰ “Notice,” unsigned and undated [May 4, 1884, Cane Creek, TN], John H. Gibbs Collection; original spelling and punctuation preserved.

that they would blossom into outright hostility.¹¹ But the heavy threats did not deter Gibbs, and he commenced his sermon once a crowd gathered beside the smoldering remains. Even when members of the crowd threatened him with guns and pistols, he continued to preach. Gibbs even managed a baptismal service in nearby Cane Creek. He later wrote home to his wife, Louisa, about the incident, praising God for transforming an act of arson into an opportunity to welcome eight new souls into the church.¹²

Of course, threats and tension were nothing new to Gibbs, or indeed Mormons nationwide, in 1884. Mormon missionaries had to always be prepared for their potential martyrdom. In January of that year, Gibbs received an unsigned, threatening note that he later ascribed to a man named F.T. Smith who, Gibbs recorded, claimed “he could shoot down a Mormon Elder as quick as he would a squirrel.” The note warned that if Gibbs did not immediately leave the area, he could expect to be hung or shot and left for the buzzards to find.¹³ After the burning of the church in early May, later in the month another warning came from a local postmaster who warned that a mob was forming to drive all Mormons from the area by the first of June. Local missionaries became the focus of the more dire threats, and anti-Mormon vigilantes warned that they would hunt down any missionaries remaining in the area after June. The warnings stated that the missionaries would be tarred, feathered, and then killed.¹⁴

¹¹ John H. Gibbs, Journal, 1884.

¹² “An Interesting Experience,” *Deseret Evening News*, May 21, 1884, reprint of letter from John Gibbs to Louisa Gibbs, May 14, 1884, in Gibbs Collection.

¹³ “Notice,” unsigned and undated, John H. Gibbs Collection.

¹⁴ John H. Gibbs Journal, January-May 1884.

Meanwhile, a newspaper article that originated in the *Salt Lake City Tribune*, a Utah anti-Mormon publication, further enflamed local and nationwide anti-Mormon sentiment. Entitled “A Red Hot Address,” the paper submitted the article under the signature of Tobias Tobey who claimed it to be a stenographic record of a speech by the Mormon Bishop West, in the small town of Juab, Utah, on March 9, 1884. The “address” is a diatribe against non-Mormons and a call for the Mormon Church to arm itself and fight back against non-Mormon “Gentiles,” the “enemies of Zion.” It lambasted the Utah territorial governor, Eli Murray, who opposed the Mormon Church and warned that “his head will be placed upon the walls of our city and his entrails scattered throughout the street of Zion, that every Gentile adventurer may behold and take a care that we are left to pursue our road to Paradise unmolested.”¹⁵ The publication of the address caused hysteria among non-Mormons in Utah, who still recalled the Mountain Meadows massacre of 1857 in which local Mormons killed almost 120 members of a wagon train during the Utah War.¹⁶

The Mormon Church, horrified by the claims, quickly denied any plots to attack anyone. On March 18, 1884, George Teasdale of Nephi, Juab County, Utah, wrote to the *Salt Lake City Tribune* and declared the address to be “a gross fabrication.” He reported that Juab was just a small railroad town with a local branch of the Mormon church under

¹⁵ For the full text, see Appendix A. “A Red Hot Address,” *Salt Lake City Tribune*, March 9, 1884.

¹⁶ For more on the Mountain Meadows massacre and the Utah War, see Ronald W. Walker and et. al., *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Will Bagley, *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002).

the direction of Elder James Wilson, who was not a bishop. He went on to state that church services did not meet because they were cancelled due to heavy rain on the Sunday referenced in the article, that there was no one by the name of “Bishop West” within the entire Mormon church, and that no one in Juab County had ever heard of “Tobias Tobey.” The *Tribune* apologized for the error but added “there was not a thing in that bogus sermon which has not been taught in Tabernacle harangues.”¹⁷ The fabricated address delivered the sting it intended, and even a full retraction could not undo the damage, for it had already spread across the country.

In a later letter, Elder William Jones reported that a local minister, identified as “Parson Vandever,” had circulated the “Red Hot Address” around Lewis County. Jones wrote that people who had read the address constantly confronted him and that Vandever “worked up prejudice against us in that section by giving it wide publicity, and by his pretended credence to the falsehood, causing great excitement.”¹⁸ This was not the only encounter Vandever had with the Mormons. An undated entry in John Gibbs’s mission journal reported that he had a tense encounter along a road with a hostile Baptist preacher, Vandever, and a Methodist preacher named Henson. Gibbs exchanged pleasantries and Vandever informed him that he had no use for him and that he should keep moving down the road. Henson remained silent and refused to acknowledge Gibbs.¹⁹ Jones reported that he and Gibbs had attempted a peace with Vandever and that

¹⁷ George Teasdale, “Letter to the Editor,” *Salt Lake City Tribune*, March 18, 1884.

¹⁸ “The Tennessee Tragedy,” *Deseret Evening News*, September 13, 1884.

¹⁹ “Dialogue between a Mormon Preacher and two Reverend [sic] Divines, named respectively, Vandever & Henson of the Baptist and Methodist faith,” undated, John H. Gibbs Journal. Sources agree

they had shown him a refutation of the address, but to no avail.²⁰ As summer came to Lewis County and the Mormon elders continued to preach and baptize, tensions continued to simmer among the locals.

In the midst of the impending crisis, Gibbs was called away at the beginning of June to join a speaking tour of several Southern cities with Elder Jones. Gibbs recorded the dismal failure of the tour in his letters to Louisa, noting that his lectures had become spectacles with large audiences of women who wanted him “to answer a thousand and one questions on Polygamy.”²¹ The tour came as the nation as a whole was engaged in a heated discussion about the possibility of legal and judicial actions against polygamy, and the tour did nothing to dispel southern fears. Urban southerners did not care for Gibbs’s gospel, and they ignored the fact that Gibbs himself was not a polygamist.²² Polygamy and the law were their chief concerns, and nothing Gibbs could say would dispel that. Feeling defeated, he expressed a desire to return to his North West Tennessee Conference, as the news that he was receiving from there disturbed him. He wrote to Louisa that no baptisms had occurred and that the elders in the area had received numerous threats. He was glad and yet troubled as he set out to return to Lewis County from his last speaking engagement in Mississippi. He ended his last letter to his wife with

that this “Henson” and David Hinson, later killed at Cane Creek, are one and the same.

²⁰ “The Tennessee Tragedy.”

²¹ Letter from John Gibbs to Louisa Gibbs, August 1884, Gibbs Collection.

²² John Gibbs was only a young elder at the time of his death and would not have been able to support a family larger than the one he had with Louisa O Bray Gibbs. While his journals and letters reveal that he supported the doctrine of plural marriage, he never participated in it himself. In fact, most Mormon men did not have plural wives because they did not have the money to support them. Taking more than one wife was a mark that a man was not only economically stable, but upwardly mobile in the hierarchy of the Church.

an empty assurance: “We cannot tell what lies in the future, so all I can say is let tomorrow take care of it self, and we will await the final decision of the future developments.”²³

On August 5, 1884, Elders William Berry and Henry Thompson of Utah arrived in Cane Creek and, perceiving no immediate hostility in the area, planned a church service for Sunday, August 10 at the farm of James Conder.²⁴ On August 9, they spent the night at the home of Thomas Garrett, a non-Mormon who was sympathetic to the Mormon plight. Berry and Thompson hoped to build on Gibbs' efforts in the area, and Elders Gibbs and Jones joined them that evening. On Sunday morning, Gibbs, Thompson, and Berry began the mile-long walk to the Conder farm, while Jones stayed behind to read some sermons. They all agreed that he would follow shortly.

An hour before the service was to start, Jones set out. Not far from the Conder farm, a band of heavily armed, masked men accosted him. The men took Jones off the road, beat him, and questioned him as to the location of Elder Gibbs. When the mob discovered that Gibbs was at that moment about to lead the service at the Conder home, the mob left Jones under the guard of a man who, upon hearing over twenty gunshots in the distance, allowed him to flee. In his report of the incident, Jones wrote that his guard told him that “these mobbers intended murder, they were the meanest in the county, and were old guerillas who had ‘killed their dozen men.’” As he accompanied Jones back to the road, the guard insisted that he had been pressed into the gang and had gone along to

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ William Shanks Berry Journal, August 5-8, 1884, Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, UT.

try to prevent any harm to the Mormons. He also gave Jones directions to Shady Grove, the nearest branch of the Church in neighboring Hickman County. Jones admitted in his report that the guard's actions had saved his life.²⁵

Down the road at the Conder farm, however, the mob was not merciful. Elders Gibbs, Berry, and Thompson stood outside the house, singing hymns while a crowd gathered around them in the clearing in the late summer sunshine to hear the Sunday message. As Elder Gibbs picked up his Bible to check a verse, approximately one dozen masked men stepped out of the surrounding forest and attacked James Conder, the owner of the farm. The gathering church members rushed toward the limited safety of the house, pushing the elders with them. Conder called across the clearing toward the apple orchard for his son and stepson, Martin Conder and J.R. Hudson, to protect the elders. The young men ran to the house for their guns, entering the back door just as the leader of the mob, Methodist preacher David Hinson, burst through the front door. After struggling with Martin over a shotgun, Hinson took possession of the gun and immediately shot Elder Gibbs, who died instantly. Meanwhile, amid the confusion, Elder Berry prevented the shooting of Elder Thompson, who was able to flee. As Thompson fled, he turned to see two men shoot Berry. Inside the house, an attacker shot Martin Conder. When David Hinson turned to leave the house, J.R. Hudson descended from the loft where he had gone to get his gun, skirmished with two assailants, and managed to break free long enough to shoot Hinson dead. Hudson was then shot and died about an hour later. As the mob retreated, they fired at Elder Gibbs's body to be sure he was dead and accidentally hit Malinda Conder in the hip with buckshot. Grabbing the body of their leader, the mob

²⁵ "The Tennessee Tragedy."

returned to the woods from which they had appeared only minutes before leaving behind them four dead Mormons: Elders Berry and Gibbs, and J.R. Hudson and Martin Conder. In addition to losing her two sons, Malinda Conder carried a more physical memory of that day as she walked with a limp for the rest of her life.²⁶

Elder Thompson hid in the woods for two days after the massacre. After fleeing from the Conder farm, he was unsure of whom he could trust and was fearful of being seen, since he was not sure who might wish to finish the job the masked vigilantes had started. Thomas Garrett, at whose house the Mormon elders had spent the night of August 9, heard that Thompson was safe but in hiding. He arranged to pick him up in his buggy and take him to safety. Meanwhile, after travelling through the night, Elder Jones arrived in Shady Grove on Monday morning. There he found the mission secretary, Elder J. Golden Kimball. Having only heard the gunshots, Jones knew no details about what had occurred at the Conder farm. He waited with Kimball through the night, hoping that their fellow elders would join them. On Tuesday morning, Jones and Kimball set out for Lewis County to try to find their missing friends. Within ten miles they met Thomas Garrett and Elder Thompson on the road and learned the fates of the other elders.²⁷

²⁶ This account is derived from the *Nashville Banner* and *Daily American*, as well as the *Hickman Pioneer* and the *Deseret Evening News*. These accounts all differ, some placing the action inside the home, and others outside the home. Both the *Nashville Banner* and the *Daily American* report that the mobbers crushed Martin Conder's skull, but others say that he was shot. See also: Patrick Q. Mason, *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 38-40; John Nicholson, *The Tennessee Massacre and Its Causes; or, The Utah Conspiracy* (Grantsville, UT: Archive Publishers, 2000); B.H. Roberts, "The Tennessee Massacre," *Contributor* (Oct. 1884): 16-23; Marshall Wingfield, "Tennessee's Mormon Massacre," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 17 (Mar. 1958): 19-36.

²⁷ Roberts, "The Tennessee Massacre," 20.

The Mormon Church did not learn about the massacre until Jones and Thompson had reached safety, and the later reports by Jones and Thompson after their escape provided the Church with their most accurate information. Upon reaching Hickman County, Thompson sent a telegram to B.H. Roberts in Chattanooga, relaying the truth of the event. Roberts passed what he knew along to President John Morgan in Salt Lake City.²⁸ News of the killings finally appeared in Utah newspapers on August 12. Meanwhile, rumors about the massacre spiraled outward. The *Nashville Banner* reported the massacre on August 12 after a Colonel William M. Johnson returned to Nashville from Centerville in Hickman County. He relayed what information he had, gathered from John DePriest, the mail rider between Centerville and Ivy Mills, Lewis County.²⁹ Word of the violence reached a wider audience on August 13, when a story appeared about it in the *New York Times*.³⁰ Reports varied on the number of attackers, the numbers killed and wounded, and even the names of those killed. The wildest rumors had the entire branch listed among the dead. *The Nashville Banner*, days after the massacre, reported that another elder's body had been found in the forest near the Conder home.³¹

In the midst of the chaos, Elder Willis E. Robison, who was serving in the church in Dickson County to the north, learned about the massacre and felt that it was his duty to investigate. Posing as a common laborer headed to work in Wayne County, south of

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

²⁹ "Murder of Mormons," *Nashville Banner*, August 12, 1884.

³⁰ "General Telegraph News," *New York Times*, August 13, 1884.

³¹ *Nashville Banner*, August 15, 1884.

Lewis County, Robison headed south on foot on Wednesday, August 13. He stayed the night in Gillem, where he reported overhearing the locals opining that the Mormons had only gotten what they deserved. The next morning he boarded a train for Centerville in Hickman County. Well aware of the rumors about Mormons' strange underwear, Robison decided to remove his temple garments in case any suspicious people stopped and searched him.³² He then set out for Lewis County along a railroad track. After several harrowing encounters with locals and picking his way along paths in the dark, Robison finally arrived at Cane Creek and the Condor farm. After finally convincing the family of who he was, he was allowed in and learned the complete story of what had happened from James and Malinda Conder. His report later helped the Mormons piece together what had occurred there on August 10.³³

Once they learned the facts of what had happened, the Latter-day Saints faced the task of deciding what to do about the bodies of the slain elders. The Church decided that they should be given martyrs' funerals in Utah, and B. H. Roberts had the task of retrieving the bodies from vigilante-protected Cane Creek. But first, he and Jones and Kimball decided to seek help in obtaining safe passage to remove the bodies of the elders from Lewis County. Travelling to Nashville, they sought an audience with the governor, William Bate, to try to gain his support. While waiting to meet the governor, B.H.

³² Many anti-Mormons mockingly called them "magic underwear." Modern Latter-day Saints still wear these simple white undergarments under their outer clothing at all times once they have been through the Endowment ceremony, which allows them to enter the Church temples. The temple garment and its markings serve as a reminder of the covenants of the ceremony and a commitment to the tenets of the Church.

³³ Willis E. Robison, "An Unpublished Letter on the Tennessee Massacre," *Improvement Era*, 1898.

Roberts granted an interview to the *Nashville Banner* in which he defended the Church, corrected some of the rumors about the dead elders, and appealed to the people of Tennessee to refrain from further violence. In the end, they failed to meet with the governor since he was out of town campaigning for reelection.³⁴ However, they did meet with the adjutant-general, who warned them that “nothing could be done until it was known that the officials in Lewis County refused to act.”³⁵ They were given a letter to present to the sheriff of Lewis County, John Carroll, requiring his assistance in the elders’ efforts to remove the bodies.

In the end, Roberts took matters into his own hands and devised his own scheme to retrieve the bodies. To avoid recognition by the locals, he disguised himself, shaving his beard and dressing like an unwashed hobo. Accompanied by three other men and two wagons, he left Nashville on August 16, stopping in Columbia to retrieve two caskets. With the help of Thomas Garrett, the same man at whose home the Mormon elders had spent their last night and who had delivered Elder Thompson to safety, Roberts and his accomplices succeeded in reaching the Conder farm and retrieving Gibbs’s and Berry’s bodies. Roberts later wrote that it pained him to not reveal himself to the grief stricken and bewildered witnesses of the massacre, especially the Conders who had lost their sons. But, it was too dangerous. After digging them up from the yard of the farm, Roberts placed Gibbs and Berry in metal caskets, drove them to Mount Pleasant, and then shipped them by rail through Nashville to Salt Lake City. Elder Willis Robison accompanied the

³⁴ “The Mormon Murders,” *Nashville Banner*, August 14, 1884.

³⁵ Roberts, “The Tennessee Massacre,” 22.

bodies.³⁶ The Church held services throughout Utah in honor of the elders, and both bodies returned to their respective hometowns for burial. John Gibbs's body arrived in Logan, Utah, on a midnight train on August 22. A large crowd, including the Paradise Brass Band, was waiting at the station. With the band in the lead, the whole town carried lanterns and escorted Gibbs's body the last twelve miles to Paradise.³⁷

No one was ever prosecuted for the murders of John Gibbs, William Berry, Martin Conder, and J.R. Hudson. Even the Mormon Church held little hope that the state would pursue justice in the case. As early as August 13, the *Deseret Evening News* stated, "No arrests have been made.' So says the dispatch." The writer went on to admit, "It is quite likely that none will be made, or any rate, that the cowardly murderers will escape punishment at the hands of the law."³⁸

But the case was not so cut and dry in the early days after the massacre. Opinion was divided. While some people believed that extralegal violence was permissible with the proper provocation, there were many citizens who believed that the state could not condone such vigilante violence. The *Nashville Daily American* urged swift and thorough investigations. It admitted that prejudice against Mormonism was rampant, but argued that justice should still be served, for "butchery of this savage character for any cause cannot be tolerated in a civilized country."³⁹ The *Nashville Banner* agreed, reporting that

³⁶ Ibid., 22-23.

³⁷ Biographical Information, John H. Gibbs Collection.

³⁸ "More About the Murders in Tennessee," *Deseret Evening News*, August 13, 1884.

³⁹ "The Lewis County Butchery," *Daily American*, August 13, 1884.

Mormon newspapers in Salt Lake City “[grow] furious over the murder of elders in Tennessee and very foolishly endeavor to place the responsibility upon the Christian ministry of this state.” The best way to overcome such criticisms, the paper concluded, is to show that Tennessee had no mercy for such lawbreakers.⁴⁰

While the details are not clear, Governor William Bate’s reelection tour must have brought him back through Centreville in Hickman County on his way back to Nashville. On August 18, the *Nashville Banner* reported that the governor had returned to Nashville, and when asked about the Mormon massacre, he stated that “he had heard more talk of it in Nashville than in Centreville.”⁴¹ Citizens of the area told him that the mob had gone to the Conder farm in order to warn the Mormon elders to leave the county, but things had gotten out of hand and escalated in spite of their wishes. The governor had also heard reports that accused the Mormon elders of the “seduction of women and the separation of families.”⁴²

After seeing the bodies safely aboard a train headed west out of Nashville, B.H. Roberts once again made his presence known and sought an audience with the governor. This time, he was prepared to argue for justice. On August 20 he submitted an account of the murders to the governor’s office and requested that the state offer a reward for the capture of the perpetrators. The governor would not sanction it without a notary public’s

⁴⁰ *Nashville Banner*, August 15, 1884.

⁴¹ “The Mormon Murders,” *Nashville Banner*, August 18, 1884.

⁴² *Ibid.*

signature.⁴³ The next day they returned with their petition authorized by a notary public. The *Nashville Banner* predicted it would be approved by the governor, though the general feeling was that “when a community is in sympathy with the spirit which actuated a mob, it is not usually disposed to exert itself to discover and punish the actors in such a tragedy, although it may express its disapproval of the crime committed.”⁴⁴ In the end, Bate offered a \$1000 reward for the capture and successful prosecution of any member of the mob, though no one in the press, at least, had any hope of that happening. As the *New York Times* pointed out, the mob kept their faces covered and its members were keeping their own counsel. Even if local officials were so inclined, capturing them would take “extraordinary efforts.”⁴⁵ And no one was overly eager to engage in any such efforts for a Mormon.

Meanwhile, Lewis County did not cool off after the massacre. The vigilantes were not done with their attacks on their Mormon neighbors. Notices appeared throughout the county, and even in neighboring Hickman, Maury, and Wilson County, ordering the evacuation of all Mormons. Accompanied by the picture of a coffin, the notice read: “Mormons, leave! Members of the Latter Day Saints are notified to leave this county, and 30 days are given for you all to go. An indignant and outraged people have said it and go you shall. If any are found in this county after 30 days, you will go like the others. Go

⁴³ “Elder Roberts,” *Nashville Banner*, August 20, 1884.

⁴⁴ *Nashville Banner*, August 21, 1884.

⁴⁵ “The Tennessee Mormon Slayers,” *New York Times*, September 8, 1884.

peaceably if you will, but you must.”⁴⁶ When the threat of prosecution never produced arrests, the anti-Mormon vigilantes became bolder in their persecutions. Drawn by the promise of the \$1000 reward, an Evansville, Indiana, detective barely escaped from Lewis County with his life after he ran into the vigilantes he aimed to capture. They almost lynched him before he promised that he would leave Tennessee and pursue the matter no longer.⁴⁷

As the 30 day deadline approached, the country watched nervously as tales of “masked men, armed with revolvers and wearing robes decorated with a red cross, skull and cross-bones were seen riding near the Mormon settlement” in Wilson County, and a white banner with a red cross in a circle appeared along the road near Cane Creek.⁴⁸ Most Mormons decided to heed the warnings and made arrangements to leave. By the time a second notice appeared giving them until October 1 to evacuate, newspapers reported that local Mormons and even Mormon sympathizers, including the Conders and Thomas Garrett, had sold their businesses and farms. Families leaving the area could apply for “safe conduct patrol passes” to show to vigilantes that they were obeying the mandate. Almost 25 people left Lewis County, most of them headed west to other Mormon settlements.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ “A Badly Scared Detective,” *Daily American*, September 3, 1884; “Not Cheerful for Detectives,” *New York Times*, September 3, 1884.

⁴⁸ “Not Cheerful for Detectives,” *New York Times*, September 3, 1884.

⁴⁹ “Mormon Converts Alarmed,” *New York Times*, September 29, 1884; “Mormons Immigrating,” *Daily American*, October 3, 1884; “Forcing the Mormons Out,” *New York Times*, September 29, 1884.

Two months after the massacre, prosecutors assembled a grand jury in Hickman County with Judge Thomas P. Bateman presiding. Bateman urged the members of the jury to remember that both the U.S. and Tennessee constitutions granted the freedom of religion to all men, not just Christians. He condemned mob violence but acknowledged that the court's proceedings were likely useless as the mob's actions had the support of "a part of the clergy, a portion of the press and a large number of the people."⁵⁰

Nevertheless, Bateman's words gave some hope to the Mormons in Utah. One Mormon paper lauded him, stating, "The brave and manly words of Judge Bateman ring out clearly and distinctly as the chime of church bells on the frosty air of a winter's morning."⁵¹ Bateman's instincts proved true, however. In spite of his words, neither local or state officials ever pursued the case, launched a serious investigation, or made a single arrest.

Despite this judicial inaction, the state of Tennessee was not done with the Mormon matter. Before the massacre at Cane Creek, Tennessee had not followed the national trend of the past decade of passing anti-Mormon legislation. While Tennesseans resorted to vigilantism and violence as an outlet for their intolerance, other parts of the country used the law to make their opinions known. After the massacre, newspapers made it clear that most Tennesseans would support such legal measures. Reverend William Strickland spoke for many when he asserted that Mormonism had been a cancer in Tennessee for fifty years and blamed it for defiling Christian homes. He went on to

⁵⁰ "The Mormons," *Hickman Pioneer*, October 24, 1884; "The Mormon Murders," *Nashville Banner*, October 25, 1884.

⁵¹ "Judge Bateman's Charge," *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star*, December 22, 1884.

urge legislators to “administer heroic treatment and amputate it.”⁵² The very next year, in 1885, the Tennessee Assembly made clear its opinion on polygamy, and by proxy the presence of Mormonism within the state. The proposed bill was entitled: “To define and suppress the teaching of polygamy.” The bill made it unlawful for anyone to “teach others the doctrine or principles of polygamy,” or to encourage anyone to “embrace or adopt polygamy.” According to the bill, the state could force anyone in Tennessee wishing to practice polygamy to emigrate, and those who did not emigrate could be sentenced to two years in prison and a \$500 fine. The bill passed the state Senate 25-2 and the House 69-2.⁵³ Two years later a stricter bill appeared before the Assembly. It proposed raising the maximum jail sentence to eight years and imposed a ban on literature promoting polygamy. Though this bill impinged on the freedom of religion and the freedom of speech, it was the threat to the freedom of the press that the legislators could not stomach, and the bill did not pass.⁵⁴

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, under intense legal pressure from the federal government and states around the country, ultimately abandoned its doctrine of polygamy in 1890. Anti-polygamy legislation, something that incited such fiery passions just a few years earlier, was left to simmer, only occasionally returning to a

⁵² “Mormonism,” *Daily American*, August 25, 1884.

⁵³ An Act to Define and Punish the Crime of Teaching Polygamous Doctrines and Principles, and of Persuading Persons to Embrace the Same, *Acts of the State of Tennessee*, ch. 151, Forty-Fourth General Assembly, 262-263; To Define and Suppress the Teaching of Polygamy, Senate Bill No. 65, *Senate Journal of the Forth-Forth General Assembly of the State of Tennessee*, 137, 358-359.

⁵⁴ To Prohibit the Teaching of Polygamous Doctrines in this State, Senate Bill No. 23, *Senate Journal of the Forty-Fifth General Assembly of the State of Tennessee*, 115, 168; “Mormons in Tennessee,” *New York Times*, January 12, 1887.

boiling point when polygamist cults have drawn the attention of outsiders.⁵⁵ Mormonism was still not popular, but it did not hold the same perceived threat that it once did. As time went on and memory faded, many Tennesseans forgot about Cane Creek and the massacre that occurred there. Memories lasted longer in Lewis County, however. Almost fifty years later, in 1931, a Nashville journalist went to Lewis County in search of residents who recalled the event and to gauge contemporary anti-Mormon sentiment. He found that anti-Mormonism was alive and well. Locals felt that the event had left a stain on the community, and they blamed the Mormons, not the vigilantes. Interviewees, in fact, were eager to tell the story, and the reporter noted that younger members of the community would “listen with bated breath to the tale of the death blow which their ancestors dealt to polygamy on Cane Creek.”⁵⁶

Even after fifty years, Lewis County defended its own from the judgment of the outside world. As more years passed, Lewis County residents may not have forgotten the massacre, but they ceased to speak of it. In 1995, the Lewis County Historical Society published a work of local history and public memory that claimed to give a complete guide to all things that had happened in Lewis County since its founding. The Society

⁵⁵ Anti-polygamy laws have been brought back into the national spotlight most recently with the trial of Warren Jeffs, the former leader of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or FLDS church. In this instance Jeffs was given a life sentence for sexually assaulting under-age girls as part of his practice of “celestial marriage.” (See “Texas: Polygamist Leader Gets Life Sentence,” *New York Times*, August 10, 2011.) In the past, however, the FLDS church has been targeted directly for practicing polygamy, leading to the largest mass polygamist arrest in the Short Creek raid in 1953 (See Martha Sonntag Bradley, *Kidnapped from That Land: The Government Raids on the Short Creek Polygamists* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993).). The debate over polygamy has also entered the popular culture through reality shows such as *Sister Wives*, which debuted in 2010 and follows the lives of a man and his four wives.

⁵⁶ Jill Knight Garrett, *Historical Sketches of Hickman County*, 74-77.

remembers the death of Meriwether Lewis as the county's one moment in the spotlight of history. There is no mention of what happened on Cane Creek in the summer of 1884.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Lewis County Historical Society, *Lewis County, Tennessee: Est. 1843*, Paducah, KY: Turner Publishing Company, 1995.

CHAPTER III: The Making of a Massacre

Eleven days after the Cane Creek massacre, the Nashville *Weekly American* continued to relate details of the event, rumors included. While the first local account to surface matched up well with the story told to the press by the Mormons, another version soon appeared. On August 21, the *Weekly American* carried an anonymous article bluntly titled “An Anti-Mormon Account.” Claiming to give a true account of what had really happened in Lewis County, the author expressed regret over the violence but laid the blame squarely at the feet of the dead Mormons. The author of the article offered a new account of the massacre, from a Mrs. Al Webb, asserting that this was the “most plausible story.” Mrs. Webb reported that the mob came to arrest James Conder, who called for his sons. As Conder and his sons ran toward the house, members of the mob rushed forward as well. Martin Conder scabbled with one of the men over a gun, and the vigilante “begged him” to surrender and cease fighting. Mrs. Webb insisted that David Hinson shot Conder to defend his comrades, and that the group shot Elders Berry and Gibbs when they attacked Hinson. J.R. Hudson then descended from the loft, shot Hinson, and then someone shot and killed him as well.¹

After using Mrs. Webb's account to clear the mob of any real blame in instigating the violence, the anonymous author then explained why the mob formed in the first place. Again, it was the Mormons' fault, and John H. Gibbs was specifically to blame. The author pointed out that the Mormons had proselytized only the illiterate and the ignorant

¹ “An Anti-Mormon Account,” *The Weekly American*, August 21, 1884.

poor, which apparently made Cane Creek ideal. Noted previously, this was a common accusation leveled at Mormon missionaries. The accusations against Gibbs, however, were more serious. Mrs. Webb told the author that Gibbs had first arrived in the area two years before and that he was “well educated, a fine-looking man, with some very winning ways.” He had “claimed to be sent direct by God” and was “always advocating polygamy.” Locals accused Gibbs of convincing one young woman to sleep with him because God had revealed that she should before her baptism, and rumors indicated him to have fondled another girl’s breasts on a public road. The author concluded,

“These and other outrageous reports led to all this trouble in a country heretofore peaceful and quiet and noted for its law-abiding people, among whom there has not been a single murder since 1861. No attempt is here made to vindicate the Hinson party, but the facts as given should go in mitigation of its action, and we now submit this matter to the reading public, expressing a heartfelt sorrow at the death of the gallant and brave Dave Hinson.”²

There are several problems with this report besides the fact that it differs greatly from the original version a non-Mormon member of the public reported on August 12 and the Church’s official report. First, the author is clear in his bias—this is definitely an anti-Mormon account. He spends a lot of time shifting blame away from the mob, relying on widely held assumptions and rumors about the proselytizing and promiscuity of Mormon missionaries. The report also brings several questions to mind, which this chapter will attempt to answer. First, who was Mrs. Al Webb? Second, was there any truth to the

² Ibid.

rumors about the Mormons' behavior? Finally, was Lewis County really such a peaceful place where violence on this level was entirely out of character?

The part that draws immediate suspicion is the testimony of "Mrs. Al Webb." Compilers had to piece together the other eyewitness accounts to form a coherent picture of what happened because the massacre occurred so quickly and because so many people were involved. Mrs. Webb's version gives a nearly blow-by-blow account. One must also question her apologetic language toward the mob. While it is possible that she attended the Conder farm service out of mere curiosity, no other account supports this. The other accounts suggest that the morning was peaceful and the assembly consisted of like-minded believers before the vigilantes arrived, not the sort of proselytizing exhibition preaching service that had been known to happen elsewhere.

A search of the 1880 Tennessee census for Lewis and the surrounding counties raises questions about "Mrs. Al Webb's" very existence. According to the Lewis County 1880 census, there were two families named Webb in the same census district as Cane Creek, but none of the men's names can be easily shortened to Al.³ The same goes for the censuses dating back to 1850, limiting the possibility that she was a widow.⁴ In neighboring Hickman County, the 1880 census shows that two Albert Webbs and an Alph Webb did live there, all three of whom were old enough to have been married to a Mrs. Al Webb, but they were all either mulatto or black.⁵ Given the racial situation at the time in the South, the presence of a mulatto or black woman at a massacre seems highly

³ United States. Census Office. Tenth Census of Population, 1880.

⁴ United States. Census Office. Seventh Census of Population, 1850.

⁵ Tenth Census, 1880.

unlikely, especially when that woman apparently spoke to anti-Mormons and they considered her to be a reliable source. Therefore, the identity and even the existence of Mrs. Al Webb remains a mystery.

Dealing with rumors was a major part of a southern Mormon missionary's life. As mentioned in the previous chapter, when Elder Gibbs spoke in cities throughout the South, he was constantly called upon to address questions about polygamy. Americans had a hard time believing that a man taking plural wives could in any way be fulfilling a religious calling, something God ordained. Rather, they viewed it as salacious and greedy. What man needed more than one wife? Victorian ideals of family life had no room for the sort of marriages the Old Testament depicted or the sort practiced in "uncivilized" parts of the world. Again, in the South, the strict sense of southern honor and manhood compounded the Victorian ideal of family and marriage. In a society where the behavior and actions of the women affected a man's honor, men had to closely guard women.

Numerous accounts indicate that women enjoyed attending Mormon meetings, mostly due to their curiosity about polygamy. Most of the women who attended these meetings had no intention of ever joining the Church. They were there for the entertainment value, if not to mock the proceedings. But southerners did hear of cases where young women and even settled wives had abandoned their husbands to convert to Mormonism, flee to Utah, and enter into a plural marriage. Anti-Mormon activists could always point out one of the most notorious cases, that of Parley Pratt, one of the early leaders of the Latter-day Saints. In 1855, Pratt entered into his twelfth celestial marriage with Eleanor McLean, a woman who converted to Mormonism and left her abusive

husband, taking her children with her. Her husband, Hector McLean, pressed charges against Pratt, accusing him of aiding Eleanor in the kidnapping of his children. As Pratt was travelling through Oklahoma, authorities arrested him but the judge found him not guilty. After his release, Pratt continued on to Arkansas with McLean in pursuit. On May 13, 1857, Hector McLean murdered him.⁶ Women's attendance at Mormon meetings and their interest in Mormonism felt threatening to southern men. If their women followed in the footsteps of Eleanor McLean, then their honor would take a major blow. Southern men felt a responsibility to remove the temptation and so they treated the Mormon missionary like a sinister figure whose presence the men could not tolerate.

Anti-Mormon agitators did not need it, but there is no documentary proof before the massacre that supports the claims against Elder Gibbs. He did support polygamy, but there is no evidence that he sought wives in Tennessee. Though he was supposedly carousing with young women, his letters to Louisa made it clear that while he preached about and defended the doctrine of polygamy in towns and cities across Mississippi and Tennessee, she was the only wife he wanted or needed. Additionally, the evidence shows that Gibbs did not baptize many young women at all. He equally converted men and women, and while he did baptize many young people, they were usually baptized at the same time as a parent.⁷ Even if Gibbs had been interesting in pursuing the young women of Cane Creek, he would have had a limited amount of time to do that between

⁶ Will Bagley, *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 70; Terryl L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow, *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁷ John Gibbs, Journal, 1884.

converting dozens of people and avoiding the increasing hostility of the anti-Mormon factions in the area.

While national papers were full of condemnations of polygamy, Tennesseans were more concerned about the problems they saw with Mormonism on a local and personal level. The public roundly condemned polygamy, but it was not the most immediate issue in Tennessee—after all, it was mostly confined to Utah. What did concern the people of Tennessee, however, were the growth of the Mormon Church and the tendency of converts to emigrate. Initially, the people of Hickman and Lewis Counties were merely curious about the legendary Mormon Church. A massacre did not occur the moment a Mormon missionary set foot in the area. Indeed, several years passed before the summer of 1884 when the hostilities escalated rather quickly. While missionaries had first visited the area in the late 1870s, in March 1882, B. H. Roberts could be found working in the Shady Grove, Hickman County area as well as in Jones Valley. The author of one report stated that it was “an interesting discourse” from the elder who had recently arrived in Tennessee. His talk was on “The principles of Christianity as believed and taught by the Latter-day Saints.”⁸

Perhaps aware of his Mormon audience, or just the general interest in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the area, the editor of the *Hickman Pioneer* occasionally included neutral articles about the Church in his paper. A February 1882 edition reported the building of a new Mormon temple in Manti, Utah. This was the fifth temple the Church had built, and the third one in Utah. The article reported in amazement

⁸ “Jones Valley,” *Hickman Pioneer*, March 10, 1882. The *Hickman Pioneer* was published in Centreville in neighboring Hickman County. In 1884 it was the nearest newspaper to Cane Creek since the earliest newspaper in Lewis County did not appear for another decade.

that one of the towers would stand at 179 feet and that the exterior was to be limestone. Built on a hill, the author described the structure as “looming.” The author noted: “It was President Young’s intention when he ordered the erection of this temple that it should be the grandest and most imposing structure erected on the American continent.”⁹ In the same edition, the editor listed the books for sale at the newspaper office. The *Book of Mormon* could be purchased for one dollar.¹⁰ In November 1883, the paper included a brief blurb on the construction of the Salt Lake City temple. It described the walls, which were ten feet thick and made of solid granite, and noted that though the building would require another six years to finish, it had already cost the Church \$4,500,000.¹¹

Eventually, though, the emigration of converts caused concern among the citizens of Hickman and Lewis County. In the years leading up to the incident on Cane Creek, the *Hickman Pioneer* did not engage with the national debate on polygamy in Utah, but it did notice when people who had lived in Lewis and Hickman Counties all of their lives suddenly decided to sell everything and move west. The paper first notes this at the end of March 1882, not long after B.H. Roberts had begun preaching in Hickman County. A note from Totty’s Bend reported that M.F. Totty and G.W. Holderfield had left for Colorado with the Mormons. The author derisively noted, “Colorado is a cold country, but they say if they freeze Elder Morgan can raise them from the dead.”¹² The next year a

⁹ “The Mormon Temple,” *Hickman Pioneer*, February 2, 1882.

¹⁰ “Books! Books!” *Hickman Pioneer*, February 2, 1882.

¹¹ *Hickman Pioneer*, November 16, 1883.

¹² “Totty’s Bend,” *Hickman Pioneer*, March 31, 1882.

report from Shady Grove noted that several citizens were now discussing a move to Salt Lake City.¹³

In March 1884, just as tensions were flaring in Lewis County, the *Hickman Pioneer* published an article written by a man who had relocated from Georgia to Colorado with the Latter-day Saints had written. The paper regularly carried a brief news column that reported on the happenings of Lewis County. Therefore, the people who would later be involved or somehow connected with the massacre would have had access to this letter. The letter drew the attention of the editors of the paper because it mentioned a J.H. Totty, a former resident of Hickman County. The anonymous man and Totty had not found the paradise they had expected in Colorado. In fact, he reported that Totty was leading a revolt of southerners against the Mormons controlling their community. The author noted that the Mormons had swayed him and others with promises of great religious fulfillment, but upon reaching Colorado and being exposed to more Mormons he felt that “you would not think it the same religion. Blasphemy is shockingly common, and Sabbath-breaking is the rule.” The land was apparently poor, and the growing season very short, and so food was not plentiful.

The disillusioned convert’s letter also tapped into an old fear people had of the Mormon Church when he revealed that the Church was “selling” the collective votes of its members in exchange for power within their inhabited counties. Such political intrigues by the Church were sure to bring back memories of Joseph Smith’s actions, especially when he attempted to run for president. The author felt that when the Church demanded he vote a certain way, it was akin to being a slave, and so he left the Church.

¹³ “Shady Grove,” *Hickman Pioneer*, April 13, 1883.

He went on to report that there was limited polygamy in his community, but that “none of the Southerners have taken up with that abomination. Tell the folks at home that we haven’t got that low.”¹⁴

The other popular rumor with which the Mormon missionaries had to contend was that they were preying on the ignorant and the poor. In tirades against the Mormon missionaries, the authors usually considered Cane Creek to be just this sort of backward place full of ignorant, gullible people. However, there is no evidence for this. The 1870 and 1880 censuses indicate that James and Malinda Conder could both read and write, and while the notation on the 1880 census is unclear, J.R. Hudson, listed as John Conder, could at least read and was attending school in 1870. Many of their neighbors were literate, as well. In fact, Elizabeth Garrett, a local school teacher, was one of their nearest neighbors.¹⁵ They may not have been people of the world, but contemporary reports that called them ignorant seem to be an overstatement.

Further proof that Cane Creek was not entirely isolated comes from a column submitted to the *Hickman Pioneer* in August 1882. A M.A. Cotham described her travels with her cousins to Cincinnati. While there she visited the Zoological Garden, attended plays, and numerous social engagements including a croquet party. Cotham reported that nothing had occurred on Cane Creek between her departure and her return.¹⁶ Life may not have been as exciting in Cane Creek as it was in Cincinnati, but Cotham’s report further fights the stereotype of Lewis County’s isolation and ignorance. Isolated may be

¹⁴ “Among the Mormons in Colorado,” *Hickman Pioneer*, March 7, 1884.

¹⁵ Tenth Census, 1880.

¹⁶ M. A. Cotham, “Cane Creek,” *Hickman Pioneer*, August 9, 1882.

true, but its citizens were not ignorant of the outside world. Censuses show that while illiteracy rates were what can be expected in a rural farming community in the 19th century South, many of the Conders' contemporaries were literate. John Gibbs may have preached to the poor, but the evidence shows that many of the people of Lewis County were, if not well educated, at least able to read the *Hickman Pioneer*.

Without having a local newspaper, the second best way to determine whether or not Lewis County was a particularly violent place is to look at the circuit court records. Unfortunately, even they have limited details. The minutes only record the bare minimum of what happened, and in the majority of cases they only mention the name of the accused, the charge against him, his bondsmen, and the punishment if he was found guilty. The minutes rarely list witnesses except in extraordinary cases and if the witnesses ignored their subpoena. Cross-examinations are unheard of-- even in what one can infer was the most exciting case of the year. In some cases of assault, the name of the person assaulted is even left out of the record. Also not all violent acts and crimes made it to the courtroom. Again, the Cane Creek massacre never went to trial.

But, while difficult to decipher and lacking in details, the circuit court records are not useless. In fact, they are very helpful in filling in some of the gaps in the story of what else was happening in Lewis County at the time of the massacre. When combined with the census records, they can establish relationships and suggest possible tensions that were present in the community without the addition of the Mormons' missionary work. The court records give a sense of context that has otherwise been missing from accounts of the massacre. Those accounts make the massacre appear to have been out of character. While it was certainly the most violent event to have occurred in the county in

memory, the patterns of criminal activity in the county show that the massacre was within the realm of possibility.

The Mormon worship service that the masked mob attacked on August 10, 1884, was not the first worship service in Lewis County to experience a disruption. Between 1879 and 1884, sixteen men faced the charge of disturbing public worship. Though most of these cases were dropped, the sheer number of instances reflects a trend of religious strife in the area. Since the court cases again fall short of describing anything beyond the charge, it is impossible to know why these men disturbed church services or even which services they disturbed. Perhaps they did not agree with the convictions of the congregation members. Various sects in the South often engaged in competitive hostilities and violence. Maybe they were just irreligious and bored. Perhaps they were drunk. Regardless of their motives, the fact that men interrupted over one dozen worship services across six years does help to explain how the people of Lewis County could allow the masked mob to get away with what they did to the Mormons. When the court began proceedings against disturbers of public worship, the prosecutors in the area did push for convictions. Though the community brought these instances to the attention of the law, the law had other concerns. These cases did not lead to murder, however.¹⁷ The community reserved that level of violence for their most unpopular members: Mormons. And if the court system would not grant justice for a more mainstream sect or denomination, then the community was not surprised when the courts did not pursue the matter of the Cane Creek massacre. If the court did not have the time or energy to spare for other Christian groups then it certainly did not have time for Mormons.

¹⁷ Lewis County Circuit Court records, 1879-1884.

The Anti-Mormon article in the *Weekly American* noted that before Elder Gibbs came to Cane Creek, Lewis County had been a peaceful place. In fact, the author pointed out that there had not been a murder since 1861.¹⁸ If, indeed, a murder had not occurred in the county since before the Civil War, then it was for no lack of trying. Between 1879 and 1884, thirteen cases of assault came before the circuit court. One case in particular stands out because of the details included in the minutes. On January 15, 1883, the county court indicted Henry Brady, a boss on the Nashville and Florence Railroad, for mayhem. He allegedly “with force and arms feloniously, unlawfully and maliciously did maim Bruce Hunt by there (the railroad) and then branding him on the arm with a heated iron, to the evil example of all others in like cases offending contrary to the statute.”¹⁹ In the end, the attorney general delayed the case and eventually dropped the charges like many other cases in Lewis County.²⁰ Another example of that was the case of Ephraim Kelley who the court accused of a malicious stabbing, but the attorney general once more dropped the case.²¹

The other major problems facing the keepers of the peace in Lewis County were gaming, obscenity, profanity, and the carrying of weapons. Burglary and theft were less of a problem, though they occasionally occurred. It seems that the sheriff of the county spent most of his time dealing with illegal gaming, accusations of profanity and lewdness, and men carrying weapons. While none of these crimes were necessarily

¹⁸ “An Anti-Mormon Account,” *The Weekly American*, August 21, 1884.

¹⁹ Indictments, Lewis County Circuit Court, February 15, 1883.

²⁰ *State of Tennessee v. Henry Brady*, Lewis County Circuit Court, October 8, 1883.

²¹ *State of Tennessee v. Ephraim Kelley*, Lewis County Circuit Court, June 12, 1882.

violent, they do challenge any notion that Lewis County was somehow immune to the problems facing other rural areas until the Mormons arrived.

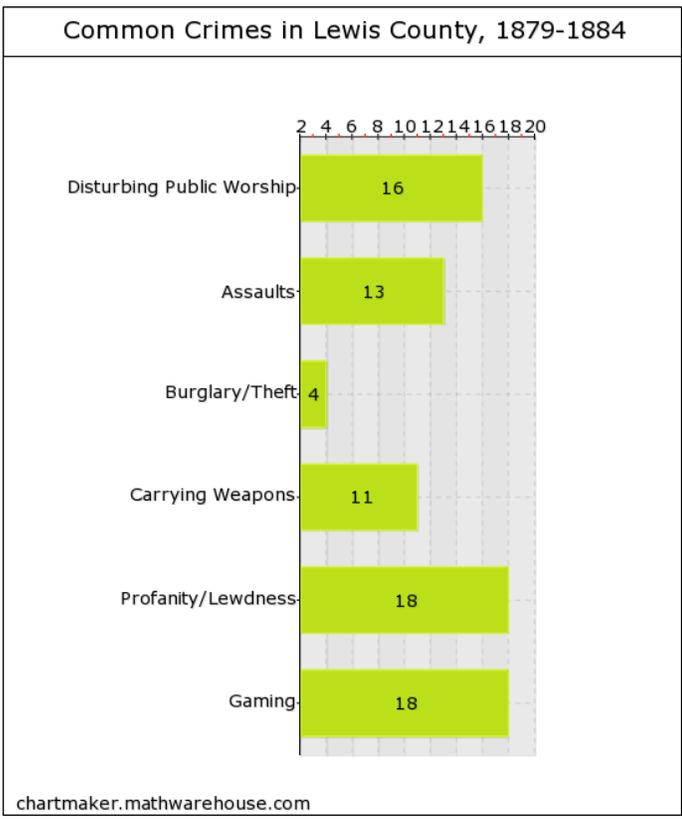


Figure 1: Common Crimes in Lewis County, 1879-1884

A few cases do stand out in the record because they in some way connect to the Mormon massacre. One name that appears in this tale several times is that of a Parson Vandever. John Gibbs had several run-ins with this man. Elder Jones later wrote that Vandever had been the one to circulate “A Red Hot Address,” the fabricated Mormon harangue published in Salt Lake City against non-Mormons that fueled the fire of many anti-Mormon sympathizers in Tennessee. He met the man personally on a public road in

Lewis County. Vandever was in the company of David Hinson, the only identifiable member of the mob that was at least ten strong. Gibbs attempted to speak to the two men, and Vandever informed him that he could “go right along that road” because “your presence annoys me.”²²

On January 26, 1880, Vandever found himself on the wrong side of the law. Listed as John H. Vandivier in the Lewis County Circuit Court records, his charge was disturbing public worship.²³ The judge was the same Thomas P. Bateman who later spoke to the grand jury concerning the potential for a trial after the massacre. Unfortunately, the notes on the case are brief, and since Lewis County did not have a newspaper of its own, such a common misdemeanor as disturbing public worship services did not make the news outside of the area. Vandever was released on a \$250 bond and Bateman gave him orders to not leave the county without permission of the court. He was due back in court on the fourth Monday in May. His bondsmen were a J. H. Moore and J. W. M. Fain.²⁴ The name Fain will be important to this story later.

One learns more about Vandever’s case in the same court session. A Rebeca [sic] Chenault had received summons to be a witness for the prosecution in the case against Vandever. The court had issued her subpoena in October 1879. Chenault refused to

²² “Dialogue between a Mormon Preacher and two Reverend [sic] Divines, named respectively, Vandever & Henson of the Baptist and Methodist faith,” undated, John H. Gibbs Journal.

²³ This John H. Vandivier must be the same Parson Vandever mentioned in the Mormons’ papers. The 1880 census only shows two adult males named Vandever in Lewis or any surrounding counties. One is John, 54, and the other was named Allen, 35. According to the 1850 census, Allen was John’s son. Since Allen shows up later to serve as bondsman in a case connected to John’s, it seems more likely that John is the same Parson Vandever who created trouble for the Mormons. If indeed it was Allen, then subsequent events will show that he was no stranger to religious strife, either.

²⁴ State of Tennessee v. John H. Vandivier, Lewis County Circuit Court, January 26, 1880.

answer the summons and the court held her in contempt. The judge gave the attorney general permission to assure her presence in the next court session, and Bateman set her bond at \$250 to assure that she appeared at the courthouse in Newburg, Lewis County, on the fourth Monday in May.²⁵

The court delayed Vandever's court date once more in May. He was ordered to return to court on the fourth Monday of September.²⁶ When he came into court on September 27, his case was once more pushed back until the next session. If Vandever disturbed the public worship in October 1879 when Rebeca Chenault's subpoena was issued, then it had now been over a year since the case started. In January 1881, Vandever was back in the court in Newberg. His bondsmen were still A. Carroll and J. W. M. Fain.²⁷ This is noteworthy because it connects his case to another that first appeared in the court in September 1880. This time the prosecutor charged Frank Fain with disturbing public worship services. The court instructed him to return in January like Vandever, and Fain's bondsmen were J. W. M. Fain, the same as Vandever's, and an A. W. Vandiver.²⁸

In a search of the 1880 Lewis County census, one learns that Franklin Fain was the son of John Fain, a local lawyer. Frank Fain was 17 years old in 1880 and had taken on enough responsibility on the family farm that he was listed as a "farmer" and not just

²⁵ State of Tennessee v. Rebeca Chenault, Lewis County Circuit Court, January 26, 1880.

²⁶ The State of Tennessee v. J. H. Vandivier, Lewis County Circuit Court, May 24, 1880.

²⁷ Ibid., January 24, 1881.

²⁸ The State of Tennessee v. Frank Fain, Lewis County Circuit Court, September 28, 1880.

as a laborer or as “at home.”²⁹ His father was 47 at the time, and according to the 1870 census, this John Fain was the J. W. M. Fain who served as bondsman for Vandever. The Fains lived in Hickman County on a farm worth \$300 in 1870.³⁰ Ten years later when the family lived in Lewis County the family still lived on a farm, and the census taker identified John Fain as a lawyer.³¹ The entire family could read and write, and John Fain’s father, Charles Fain, had been a schoolteacher.³² This was not a poor, uneducated family whose son was expected to be a rabble-rouser. Clearly, the family knew Vandever and were perhaps members of his Baptist congregation. To complicate the case even more, the 1880 census reveals that the only J. H. Vandever in Lewis County, Tennessee, and indeed the only J. Vandever, Vandever, or Vandiver in the whole of Tennessee was a 52 year old physician who lived at home with his wife and adult daughter and who had the money to employ a female servant and to provide housing for her and for her four year old son.³³

In any case, Vandever’s trial continued to drag on through 1881 and into 1882. In October 1881 the court delayed his trial once more, and the clerk made a note to send an attachment to the sheriff of Lawrence County to bring William Chenault into the court to

²⁹ Tenth Census, 1880.

³⁰ United States. Census Office. Ninth Census of Population, 1870.

³¹ Tenth Census, 1880.

³² United States. Census Office. Eighth Census of Population, 1860.

³³ Tenth Census, 1880.

testify.³⁴ In the same court session, Judge Bateman allowed Vandever to serve as bondsman for Ed Cockrell who faced an assault and battery charge.³⁵ In the end, on February 14, 1882, the attorney general requested that Vandever's case be stricken from the docket.³⁶ No more was said about the Chenaults, and Vandever's name did not appear again in the Lewis County court records.

When David Hinson stormed onto the Conder farm with his mob of masked men, he was not the first Hinson to disturb public worship. While no contemporary records outside of those members of the Mormon Church wrote identified Hinson as a minister, his community at least remembered him favorably, in spite of the manner of his death. Hinson was 40 years old in 1884 and the articles that followed his death described him as a "well-known citizen and distinguished for his daring courage and good marksmanship. He was a jovial man, and liked by all who knew him. He leaves a wife (formerly Miss Curry, of Perry county) and three children, an aged father and mother, and one brother and two sisters; all nice, clever people, highly respected by all who know them."³⁷ The comment about his bravery is likely due to his Confederate service in the 3rd Tennessee, the same regiment in which James Conder fought.³⁸

³⁴ State of Tennessee v. John Vandiver, Lewis County Circuit Court, October 10, 1881.

³⁵ State of Tennessee v. Ed Cockrell, Lewis County Circuit Court, October 11, 1881.

³⁶ State of Tennessee v. John Vandiver, Lewis County Circuit Court, February 14, 1882.

³⁷ "Terrible Tragedy," *Hickman Pioneer*, August 15, 1884.

³⁸ National Park Service, *U.S. Civil War Soldiers, 1861-1865* (Provo, UT: Ancestry Operations Inc, 2007).

Hinson's young cousins, however, had a few run-ins with the law in Lewis County. On June 12, 1882, Westley Hinson entered the docket on the charge of disturbing the public worship. Whit, Amos, and George Skelton faced the same charge. In all four cases, the attorney general decided he no longer wished to prosecute the defendants.³⁹ Later that year on October 10, 1882, George Hinson continued the family tradition with his own disturbing public worship charge. Again, the attorney general decided not to pursue the case.⁴⁰ Given the numerous times that disturbing the public worship was not prosecuted in Lewis County, one can easily imagine how bold and self-assured the mob felt when they went to the Conder farm. After all, if things had not ended as they did, they could have very well been caught and then not prosecuted at all.

Another important case that happened in the years leading up to the massacre involved the sheriff of Lewis County, John Carroll. Other historians of the massacre have largely overlooked Carroll. When accounts mention the sheriff it is just to say that he would not or could not help to bring the vigilantes to justice. He may not have pursued justice in this case, but it would have affected him. While the written record cannot reveal his feelings on the matter, it can reveal his connections. Before Malinda Conder became the wife of James Conder or John Riley Hudson, Sr., she was Malinda Carroll. Malinda Conder was Sheriff John Carroll's sister as they were both the children of Andrew and Nancy Ann Carroll. Andrew had died by 1850, leaving John as the head of the family. He

³⁹ State of Tennessee v. Westley Hinson, Lewis County Circuit Court, June 12, 1882; State of Tennessee v. Whit Skelton, *Ibid.*; State of Tennessee v. Amos Skelton, *Ibid.*; and State of Tennessee v. George Skelton, *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ State of Tennessee v. George Hinson, Lewis County Circuit Court, October 10, 1882.

was 18 in 1850, and Malinda was 17.⁴¹ Therefore, Malinda's two dead sons, J.R. Hudson and Martin Conder, were the nephews of the sheriff of the county. Furthermore, while Carroll was never baptized into the Church, he allowed Mormon worship services to be held at his home in the Palestine community.⁴²

Life as the sheriff of Lewis County seems to have been a precarious position with little reward. Like most men of his age in the county, Carroll had answered the call of the Confederacy by serving in one of the regiments formed out of Lewis and the surrounding middle Tennessee counties, the 48th (Voorhies') Infantry Regiment.⁴³ Serving since the 1870s, Carroll dutifully appeared at each court session, opening the court and presenting the grand jury to the justice of the peace, Judge Bateman. It is possible that he had trouble with the citizens of his county before, but none of his troubles reached the written record until he became tied up in two cases starting in 1882.

On June 13, 1882, Jim and Bill Grinder, William (Billy) C. Dabbs, and John Haley were indicted for helping prisoners escape. At the same time, Dock Dodson, Andrew Skelton, Riley Duncan, and a man named Hensley were indicted for breaking out of jail. John Carroll appeared as a witness.⁴⁴ In October, with James Conder on the jury, the court found Andrew Skelton guilty of escaping from jail and fined him five cents and court fees. Riley Duncan did not appear in court, and the rest of the men were ordered

⁴¹ United States. Census Office. *Seventh Census of Population, 1850.*

⁴² John H. Gibbs, *Journal*, 1884.

⁴³ National Park Service, *U.S. Civil War Soldiers, 1861-1865* (Provo, UT: Ancestry Operations Inc, 2007).

⁴⁴ Indictments, Lewis County Circuit Court, June 13, 1882.

back to court in the next session.⁴⁵ It appears that these men and John Carroll had an entanglement during this period as they were soon dragging Carroll himself into court with them.

February 14, 1883, was an exciting day in the Lewis County circuit court. The jury found the Grinders, W. C. Dabbs, and John Haley guilty of helping prisoners to escape and ordered them to pay \$25 to the court and to serve 90 days in jail. The very same day, the grand jury indicted John Carroll for drunkenness in office and aiding in the escape of prisoners. The witnesses to both charges were none other than the Grinders, W. C. Dabbs, and John Haley. Houston Christian also faced indictment for aiding prisoners to escape.⁴⁶

The next day the attorney general indicted a man named Sam Carroll for escaping. The court required John Carroll, Rube Mathis, and W. C. Dabbs to be witnesses. Given the overlapping cases, there is no doubt that the clerk and all involved must have been confused on how to proceed. The minutes include multiple redactions, but they finally note: "It appears to the satisfaction of the court the offense of an escape has been committed by John Carroll, Houston Christian, and Sam Carroll and that no one will appear and prosecute. It is therefore consigned to the court that M. H. Meeks, attorney general, be permitted to prosecute *officio*."⁴⁷ Their accusers did not appear to pursue the

⁴⁵ State of Tennessee vs. Andrew Skelton, Lewis County Circuit Court, October 10, 1882; State of Tennessee vs. William Grinder, J. M. Grinder, William C. Dabbs, and J. W. Haley, *Ibid*.

⁴⁶ State of Tennessee vs. William Grinder, et. al., Lewis County Circuit Court, February 14, 1883; Presentments, *Ibid*.

⁴⁷ Indictments, Lewis County Circuit Court, February 15, 1883; State of Tennessee vs. John Carroll, Sheriff, *Ibid*.

case, but the evidence was strong enough that the state would continue with the case anyway.

Sam Carroll seems to have been the source of John Carroll's charge of helping a prisoner to escape, but Sam is difficult to find in the record. The Carrolls living with John Carroll in 1880 were the only Carrolls in Lewis County. The sheriff and his two sons John Frank and William Andrew were the only men in the family. The nearest Samuel Carroll lived in Hardin County, and there is no reason to connect this man to the Lewis County delinquent.⁴⁸ It is possible, however, that Sam Carroll was not only related to Sheriff Carroll, but that he was the sheriff's son. William Andrew Carroll, born in 1863, appears in every census up until the 1920 census. In 1910, his mother, Mary, lived with him after his father died.⁴⁹ William Carroll is missing from the 1920 census, but Mary and William's wife Nancy were still alive and in the same household. But, in this census, the head of the household went by the name "Sam," and, like William, he was born in 1863. The census taker listed Mary Carroll as Sam Carroll's mother.⁵⁰ In 1930, Sam Carroll is missing from Lewis County, but William A. Carroll was a widower living in his son's household.⁵¹ While it is odd that a boy named William came to be known as "Sam," this is more believable than Mary Carroll acquiring a new son at the age of 79.⁵²

⁴⁸ Tenth Census, 1880.

⁴⁹ United States. Census Office. Thirteenth Census of Population, 1910.

⁵⁰ Ibid. Fourteenth Census of Population, 1920.

⁵¹ Ibid. Fifteenth Census of Population, 1930.

⁵² If Sam Carroll was in fact William Andrew Carroll, the court clerk would not have hesitated to use a nickname rather than his full legal name. In the Lewis County Circuit Court records, the clerk

However strange his nickname was, William Andrew Carroll must have been Sam Carroll. If John Carroll was Sam Carroll's father, then it is easy to see why the sheriff would risk his position in the county to help the young man escape.

As for the rest of the men, the Grinders were brothers, but otherwise they have no other known connection to the massacre at Cane Creek.⁵³ Two of the men's connections stand out more vividly, however. Rube Mathis was the most closely related to the massacre. In 1880, Mathis was James Conder's nearest neighbor. He was 39 years old at the taking of the census and was a farmer with a wife and three children under the age of eight.⁵⁴ Mathis did not have an easy existence as a farmer in Lewis County. On May 23, 1881, the court accused him of gaming, one of the most commonly prosecuted crimes in Lewis County. He brought I. T. Garrett, his and James Conder's neighbor, with him as his bondsman.⁵⁵ On February 16, 1882, the court found him guilty, but he could not pay the fines and court fees. Though the law could have sent him to the workhouse, Lewis County did not have a workhouse and so Judge Bateman was lenient and ordered that the remainder of Mathis's fines, up to the amount that would send him to the workhouse, be excused.⁵⁶ On the other end of the social spectrum, W. C. Dabbs was the county clerk, as shown in the court records and in the 1880 census. A resident of the Palestine community

regularly abbreviated names, and if more people knew him as Sam, then the clerk would have felt justified in calling him Sam in the record.

⁵³ Seventh Census, 1850.

⁵⁴ Tenth Census, 1880.

⁵⁵ State of Tennessee v. Rube Mathis, Lewis County Circuit Court, May 23, 1881.

⁵⁶ Ibid., February 16, 1882.

like John Carroll, the census also reveals that he only had one leg, perhaps a remnant of his war service in the 19th (Biffle's) Cavalry Regiment.⁵⁷

Sam Carroll's original offense is never mentioned in the circuit court records. In the end, John Carroll pled guilty to aiding his son's escape and paid a \$25 fine. The prosecutor dropped the charge against him for drunkenness in office. Sam also pled guilty and paid his \$25 fine.⁵⁸ John Carroll continued to serve as sheriff until at least June 1884, the last circuit court session held at Newberg. When the court opened on October 13, 1884, however, there was a new sheriff in charge. J. W. Christian had replaced Carroll.⁵⁹ Perhaps the men of Lewis County had lost their faith in Carroll over the affair with his son. Perhaps they replaced him after his sister became involved with the Mormons. It is unknown if Carroll was still the sheriff when the massacre occurred, but any power he would have had to seek out his nephews' murderers was soon curtailed. In the chaos that surrounded the massacre, the one man with any power and a personal interest in seeking justice for the dead Mormons was legally powerless.

Again, there will never be a definitive answer to the identities of the men who arrived at the Conder farm on that bright Sunday morning. Their masks have served them well, and time has favored their secrecy. One news story after the massacre reported that

⁵⁷ Tenth Census, 1880; National Park Service, *U.S. Civil War Soldiers, 1861-1865* (Provo, UT: Ancestry Operations Inc, 2007). As a side note, W.C. Dabbs, or Willis Clinton Dabbs, left Lewis County soon after the massacre. No records show his involvement on either side, but he died in Clay County, Texas, in 1885.

⁵⁸ State of Tennessee v. John Carroll, Lewis County Circuit Court, October 9, 1883; State of Tennessee v. Sam Carroll, *Ibid*.

⁵⁹ Lewis County Circuit Court, October 13, 1884; Incidentally, Jones W. Christian also served in the 48th (Voorhies') Infantry Regiment. While John Carroll was a private, Christian started the war as a sergeant and ended as a first lieutenant.

James Conder had told the coroner that he knew the identities of several of the men, but by the next morning he either could not or would not name them.⁶⁰ Fear of further violence seems to have muted him on the topic forever. If the vigilantes revealed their identities to their children and grandchildren, then their descendants have not left a record of their ancestors' deeds. Perhaps they were, as reported in the 1930s, proud of the battle their forefathers had waged against the polygamist Mormons, but that pride did not translate into commemorating the event for future generations to celebrate.⁶¹ Time passed and violent anti-Mormonism lost its appeal in the twentieth century, and so Lewis County tries to forget that part of its history.

To unmask the vigilantes, a scholar would need to know more about David Hinson and the "shilow" men. Elder Gibbs discussed these men who claimed responsibility for burning his church in a letter to his brother. He called them the Ku Klux or the Shiloh band, and he explained that other Civil War veterans had told him that "if it was intended to arouse a man's feelings beyond control, all one had to do was tell him to 'go to Shiloh.' In comparison hell is supposed to be a sweet-scented place compared with Shiloh."⁶²

As discussed previously, David Hinson was a Civil War veteran who had served in the 3rd Tennessee beside James Conder. The 3rd Tennessee included many men from Lewis County. The 48th (Voorhies') Infantry Regiment and 19th (Biffle's) Cavalry

⁶⁰ "Terrible Tragedy," *Hickman Pioneer*, August 15, 1884.

⁶¹ Jill Knight Garrett, *Historical Sketches of Hickman County*, 74-77.

⁶² John H. Gibbs, Journal, 1883.

Regiment also recruited heavily from there as well. While it is entirely possible, and even probable, that some men left the county to join other regiments, these three are representative of the majority of Lewis County's soldiers.

The 3rd Tennessee, the 48th Infantry, and the 19th Cavalry regiments did not see action at Shiloh. That does not automatically preclude all Lewis County men from having fought at Shiloh. After all, it was one of the battles that took place nearest to Lewis County, being only about 45 miles away in Hardin County. Occurring in early April 1862, it was the bloodiest engagement in American history at that point and resulted in over 23,000 casualties, including over 3400 dead.⁶³ It is entirely possible that some Lewis County men found their way onto the Shiloh battlefield. And given the twenty years between the war and the massacre, it is also possible that some Shiloh veterans had moved into Lewis County after the war. Regardless, the word "Shiloh" obviously still meant something to the people in the area in the 1880s. They remembered the brutality and the shock of the carnage of the Hornet's Nest, and they likely would have heard of the horror of Bloody Pond. Connecting the name of the legendary, local battle to a contemporary vigilante group was a powerful message that promised violence if their victims did not meet their demands. The Ku Klux Klan may have officially disbanded at the end of Reconstruction, but it was still alive as a method of social justice and terror in Lewis County in the 1880s.

The purpose of this thesis has been to provide a local context for the Cane Creek Mormon massacre. Earlier works on the massacre have examined some of the other parts

⁶³ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 405-417.

of this story, including its relationship to national politics in the 1880s. But there was a distinct lack of examination of local records in the prior literature. Other historians have used the census to confirm the ages of the known people involved in the massacre, but that is as deep as the local studies have delved. Relying on newspapers, they have primarily been concerned with telling the story of the massacre and tying it into the narrative of southern violence.

The local court records show that Lewis County was not an exceptionally peaceful place, but at the same time, it was not the most violent. Combined with census records and Confederate service records, local court records can fill in the story of a highly understudied county. Of course, the court cases do not document all instances of local violence. Given the number of cases that the attorney general dropped, it is likely that many instances of violence went unreported. This thesis cannot address that. What it can do is reveal some of the local tensions that contributed to the massacre as much as the grand narratives of honor, southern violence, and the national anti-polygamy campaign. After all, the history of Lewis County did not begin with the Mormon missionaries' arrivals.

John Vandever, one of the men known to be hostile to the Mormons in the area, had a history with the court. The Mormons reported that he was a preacher, but this did not preclude him from disturbing other people's worship. And while David Hinson, the one man known to have been a member of the mob, did not have a personal run-in with the law, his cousins had their own days in court for, once again, disturbing the public worship.

The Lewis County circuit court records also reveal another story that is entwined with the massacre. John Carroll, the sheriff of Lewis County and the brother of Malinda Conder, comes alive in these records and ceases to be a mere footnote. Before his family became involved with the Mormons, he found himself entangled in some of the very cases that he was supposed to help bring to justice. At some point in 1882, Carroll's son, Sam, did something illegal, and Carroll, being the sheriff, tried to use his power to shield his son from the long arm of the law. But as sheriff, he had enemies. He had recently stood as witness against several men involved in a prisoner escape case, and when John Carroll provided protection to his son, these men sought their revenge. The case dragged through the court and finally reached a resolution in late 1883. A jury found Carroll and his son to be guilty just as Elder John Gibbs arrived in Lewis County for the first time. After all the trouble with the court, Carroll then welcomed Gibbs into his home, allowing him to hold worship services there. Later in 1884, Carroll's sister's family joined the Mormon Church. As tensions in the area grew, Carroll was in the thick of it, so much so that sometime between June 1884 and October 1884, he lost his job as sheriff.

Just like any other place, Lewis County had its own problems that historians cannot categorize into neat historical patterns. These were living, breathing men and women who lived in an isolated area where everyone knew everyone. The authority figures in the community shared an additional bond of wartime experiences. Historical patterns help to create a world in which rumors about Mormonism were able to inspire such hate and fear and in which the justice system never pursued the vigilantes. The primary sources specific to the massacre and the local records pertaining to Lewis County help to explain why it happened on Cane Creek.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A

“A Red Hot Address,” *Salt Lake City Tribune*, March 15, 1884

It is time, my brothers and sisters, that we ceased this cowardly silence and humble submission to the rulings and machinations of the devil and his fiery imps at the capitol of this God-forsaken Gentile government; and it is time for us to fling their defiance and scurrilous domination back in their faces. We are the elect of Christ, and the day of judgment is at hand, and it's our turn then if it isn't now, which I say it is. When Gabriel sounds his trumpet on that awful day, the Gentile hellhounds will find the Saints of God have got all the front seats reserved and that they can't find standing room for themselves in the gallery. The cause is flourishing in the Juab State of Zion, and many souls are being daily recued from the flames of heathenism. If I had my way not a house would be left standing which sheltered a knavish Gentile. They are eyesores in the sight of the Lord and His vengeance is sure to come. They persecute His Saints and He has commanded them to destroy their persecutors. He has commanded the Saints to rid the earth of the sin-besmudged heretic. He has revealed unto us the foundation of the Gentile Church that it is the devil. (II Nephi ch. 4, verse xx) Hell is filled with the scurrilous Gentiles and the floors of hell are paved with the skulls of apostates. He who kills a Gentile rids the earth of a serpent and adds a star to his own crown. The Saints are gathering together from sea to sea and they will rise in their awful might and fall upon the enemies of Zion. Let the tabernacles resound with joyful voices for the fulfillment of the prophecies of Moroni are at hand. The minions of the devil are set loose in our midst by the crime soaked politicians who rule our land. The shades of the sainted martyr Smith call aloud for vengeance at the hands of his followers. The blood of the Gentile persecutors shall be spilled on their own thresholds to appease the anger of our prophet. Tune the lyre and beat the cymbals for our revenge is now at hand. We will wipe out the scum of the Washington blood suckers and the high priest of the devil who assumes to rule in our very midst shall be cut off with a sharp instrument. The thieving Murray [anti-Mormon governor of the Utah territory] issues order to the Saints of God, and defies every one but the devil, who is his sponsor. His head will be placed upon the walls of our city and his entrails scattered throughout the street of Zion, that every Gentile adventurer may behold and take care that we are left to pursue our road to Paradise unmolested. Our strength is greater than the world believes and our will is powerful and undaunted by heretic menaces. The Lord is our shepherd and we cannot fail. The red man is our firm ally and he thirsts for the blood of the enemy of Zion. We are powerful and unassailable in our mountain home and we will roll the massive boulders of destruction down from the mountain tops upon the heads of the unregenerate. Our secret places are stored with crafty explosives with which we will surely destroy the strongholds of the government of Satan. Our young men are drilling for the conflict, and our wives and daughters are making themselves ready to minister to our wants, and the day is close at hand. Let the Gentile leeches and poltroons beware and win our forbearance, if yet they may. The Lord is sorely angered at our persecutors, and He has said to our counselors in a vision that He will deliver our enemy into our hands as He delivered Laban into the hands of Nephi. He will visit the earth, through us, with a worse destruction than He did in the days of the

flood, and the ungodly will bite the dust with rage, and their blood will flow in the streets of Zion even as much as the waters in the day of Noah. Behold, I declare unto you, all ye Saints who revere the memory of the Prophets, that you must begin to gird up your loins and whet your knives. Let the religious fervor of the Saints who are dead and gone recur to your weaker spirits and fire you with the zeal of the destroying angels. Eli Murray is the Cain of our generation. He hates our people and he works for our destruction that he may win for himself a reputation of valor among the ungodly. He is a damned scoundrel, and a pestiferous leper. He is the polluted scum of corruption. He reeks with ungodliness, and he is rotten with heresy. I command every true disciple of Christ to watch out for this damned Yankee interloper, and ye know that there is protection enough for you in Zion if ye kill the whole Gentile race. Last night, as I lay in my bed thinking over the affairs of the Church, and possessed of a strange restlessness, and praying the while for inspiration from the Most High, that I might see the way more clearly to a sure release of my brethren from bondage, behold a great and glorious light suddenly filled my apartment with a glow brighter than the sun. I was at first afraid, and inclined strongly to leap from my bed and flee. But of a sudden I heard a voice which caused my heart to beat with tumultuous joy, for it was that of Joseph Smith. I gazed at him earnestly, expecting and hanging on the words which should perchance fall from his lips, and I beheld his garments were of a dazzling whiteness, and that his skin was of a dazzling and heavenly whiteness, save the blood-red spots and livid wounds where the bullets of the cursed Gentiles had entered his sainted body, and which were now visible to their eternal damnation, as were the marks of the nails which pierced the hands and feet of Christ. Joseph spoke to me in a voice of wondrous sweetness blended with strains of the direst severity when he spoke of the fate in store for those Saints who neglected what he should now command them. Joseph bade me cast my eyes about and behold the presence in the midst of the Saints of an emissary of the devil. It was the will of the Most High that this man should be removed, and if other emissaries were chosen to fill his place, even as many as were so chosen should be similarly dealt with. If allowed to remain in our midst, the sin would be on our heads, for it was the command of the Most High God of Abraham and Isaac. It lay in our power to be our own rulers, and our cowardice was the cause of sore distress to the departed Saints who had left us a kingdom. Eli H. Murray was possessed of a devil, and had the outward semblance of a man. He should and must be trod upon until his bowels gushed out in the streets. The incarnate fiend lurked invisibly behind his hellish disciple, and was intent upon the destruction of Zion. The time was short, and vigorous and immediate action preemptory. The curses of eternal damnation awaited those who failed in this holy mission. The work must not stop at the destruction of one of these hell-hounds, these Erebus-like pestilences in the folds of the anointed, but must extend even to the farthest corners of the earth, until every heretic out of hell was sent home, and the Latter-day Saints were rulers of the land. Much more the beloved Joseph said to me which I am commanded not to reveal unto you until you prove the sincerity of your faith and love for the prosperity of Zion from what has already been revealed. The direst plagues shall be immediately visited upon you and your children if these divine commands go unheeded. I call upon you who sit there trembling in your seats to beware, and to rise in your strength and win your crown. Let every Saint in Zion be present at the meeting in this building on Sunday next at this hour, and I will

discourse further upon these matters which I have, for wise reasons, kept from you during the day up to this minute. The Lord bless you. Amen.