

City of Rocks

Historic Resources Study



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HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE CITY OF ROCKS REGION (continued)

Growth of a Stable Community

The common bond? They were all church members and they were all poor.
[249]

Originally part of the Oakley Ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), by 1887 the Albion, Elba, and Almo communities supported a sufficient Mormon population to be established as independent wards within the Box Elder Stake. [250] By 1890, 40 of the 55 families in the Almo vicinity belonged to the Mormon Church. From this nucleus of LDS members grew a stable, homogeneous community, led by Raft River pioneers and Mormon elders Thomas King, Myron B. Durfee, Henry R. Cahoon, Charles Ward, James Lewis, and others. [251]

The religious homogeneity reported by the church chronicler is supported in census records: the 1880 tally of the Almo enumeration district [252] shows concentrated settlement of Scandinavian and English immigrants, most recently from Utah. This settlement accords with larger Mormon demographic trends. In 1850, the vast majority of converts to the Mormon faith were from the American Midwest and Northeast. By 1880, fully half of those Mormons not born in Utah listed Scandinavia or the British Isles/Canada as their place of birth. These later emigrants initiated a dispersal from the core Mormon communities along the Wasatch Front to a Mormon domain that ultimately encompassed all of Utah and much of northern Arizona and southern Idaho. [253]

In Almo, Elba, and Albion in 1880, the numerous children were "at school," the women "at home," and the men most often identified themselves as stockmen, farmers, or (curiously) as emigrants. The agricultural orientation was to be expected; the formal occupation of "emigrant" may suggest nothing more than residents' recent arrival or may underscore their assumed responsibility to expand the range of Mormon influence.

Albion, Almo, Elba, and Moulton (Junction Valley) census enumerations for 1900, 1910, and 1920 show little change in the pattern established in 1880. Utah and Idaho continued as the dominant birthplace of parents and grandparents, with ethnic ties linked most closely to England and Scandinavia. Farming and ranching remained the dominant economic activities, and the birthrate remained high. By 1920, the vast majority of minors listed Idaho as their place of birth, indicating that a stable community with few transient members had been established. Local tradition verifies the census: "pretty much they married their own folk here. . . . Course some of them married away and left but not too many." [254]

By the turn of the century, Almo boasted a school, a post office (with mail every Thursday), and a store. Charles Heath and John Eames had formed a drama company and brass band (both of which traveled to surrounding towns). A Stake Welfare Farm met the needs of the newly arrived, the temporarily impoverished, and the widowed and orphaned. The three saloons "and other undesirable" remnants of the free-range cattle era had been "controlled" through creation of the Village Control Organization, composed entirely of church leaders. The Almo Water Company, established in 1889, controlled the domestic and irrigation water supply from Almo Creek: "each man who wanted water bought shares in the Company and was given water accordingly." [255]

In 1920, the town supported 260 "souls," the majority of whom were described as farmers and stock raisers. The town contained "the finest meeting house in the Raft River Stake" (a brick replacement of the log meeting house constructed in 1880), a modern schoolhouse, Tracy and Eames General Mercantile, a hotel, a barber shop, "a small road-side inn," and a number of "fine brick residences." [256]

This was a Mormon town, platted on 40 acres of Myron B. Durfee's homestead, centered around the school and the ward house, showing a strong reliance upon brick construction (distinctive from the Gentiles and symbol of Mormons' resolve to stay and to prosper), and upon community organizations. Church records and patent files for those who homesteaded adjacent land within the City of Rocks suggest that the town was also designed around the Mormon principles of communal settlement: Mormons throughout the West consistently established primary homes in community centers, using adjacent land for cultivation but not for habitation. Wallace Stegner writes in *Mormon Country* that

The people had always provided a good time for themselves... Square dances, quadrilles, polkas, Virginia Reel two steps and waltzes were enjoyed... People came from all the surrounding communities to enjoy the fun. Young and old were included. The babies would be put to sleep on the benches while the oldsters danced far into the night.... Relief Society 17th of March socials were also great events. This was an all day celebration... The school was dismissed about 2:00 or 2:30 and the children came for their feast. Then they had a children's dance. Those were never to be forgotten good times.

[Elbert Durfee, "Remembrances of Almo Community," n.p., n.d., on file at City of Rocks National Reserve.]

The Mormon village is like a medieval village, a collection of farm houses in the midst of the cultivable land. It is a symbol of the group consciousness and the group planning that enabled the Saints to settle and break a country so barren. . . . In the period of settlement, and to a large extent still [1942], farmers did not live on their land.... The medieval town surrounded by its fields was a practical and sound pattern of settlement. A man could not by himself build and keep in repair a dam, miles of ditch, and all the laborious extras of irrigation farming. This was a country that could be broken only by the united efforts of all. [257]

Patent files and oral histories clearly establish that City of Rocks residents left their claims during the winter months to escape the snow and to secure schooling and wage labor. This pattern also held, at least through the 1910s, for inhabitants of Almo and Elba — "many" of whom moved to Burley and Albion for the winter "to take advantage of the social, and educational facilities at these places." When the family stayed behind, those teenage children attending high school often boarded in Burley or Oakley. [258] Yet City of Rocks residents may also have resided outside what is now the reserve during the summer months, traveling daily to the rough cabins to work their fields and tend their stock, and returning to more permanent homes within the confines of their Mormon village. This settlement pattern differed significantly from that of the Gentile community, was at odds with the requirements of homestead legislation, and would have had a marked impact on the built environment. GLO agents reported that Stella Holley's homestead cabin was essentially uninhabitable and that she appeared to live "in town," traveling to her claim during the summer months to tend to her three-acre garden and to her limited stock. Local residents indicate that Eugene Durfee's claim within the reserve was used for summer pasture for his milk cows and that only the children lived there, while their parents remained at the family home in Almo, traveling to the claim only as needed. This pattern of habitation assured that the Mormon village "formed a center," and a stage for cooperative land use and social and religious interaction.

In contrast to Almo and the northern City of Rocks claims, church historian Andrew Jensen described the southern City of Rocks and Junction Valley communities (within the Moulton Ward) as lacking a village "to form a center. . . . All the inhabitants live in a scattered condition on their respective farms." [259]

"At Home"

From 1880 to 1910, census takers correctly defined women in the vicinity of City of Rocks as employed "at home." Not until 1920 is their official occupation denigrated to "none", an astonishing title for women charged with being "self-sustaining in all . . . things . . . in our entertainment, in our food processing, in our sewing." [260] Annie Durfee Cahoon moved to Almo as a bride in 1879 and had seven children by 1894. Her tasks included

washing on the board, ironing with irons heated on the wood stove, making soap, killing and taking care of all their own meat, the vegetable garden and

the fruit trees, packing water and heating it on the stove — no electricity — besides cooking and cleaning and sewing and the other things mother has to do to look after a little family. [261]

Rhea Toyn of neighboring Grouse Creek remembers weaving carpets to cover the floors, making candles, mending shoes, and tanning leather. Women also served as midwives and nurses in a place where childbirth and disease were frequent, doctors scarce, medicine primitive, and roads slow. [262]

Minors were also at home. Census records for Almo, Elba, Albion, and Moulton (1900, 1910) consistently identify sons, over the age of 12, as "farm laborers" rather than as students; daughters' schooling was similarly brief. By 1920, the census reveal that children stayed in school until the age of 16 or 17; these schools, however, closed for up to two weeks so that children could help with the harvest. [263]

Clifton Rooker, born in Albion in 1906, remembered that "money [was] always a problem [and] it was natural and necessary that everyone had to work as soon as they were able and could find a job that would make money." Clifton and his brother Harold gathered wool tufts left by bands of sheep as they were trailed under fences: "Some years we would gather impressive amounts which was [sic] then sold to a man with wool to market." In a process repeated by Plains children throughout the West, Clifton and Harold also gathered the tails of the ground squirrels that destroyed area crops. Once trapped, the tails were cured on area fences, and redeemed by the county at "some fraction of a cent." The summer of 1921, when Clifton was 13, he took a job on a neighboring farm. Here, for \$1 per day plus room and board, he milked the six or seven cows; fed the hogs, cows, horses, and chickens; cleaned the barn and stables; hoed and thinned the beets; irrigated the various crops; and moved and raked the hay. [264]

The economic contribution of women and children to their homes and communities was strengthened by the dearth of cash within the local economy: "we hardly knew what a dollar was, really." [265] The products of their labor — eggs, butter, cheese, handiworks, soap, candles — and the crops that they helped to harvest, sustained the family.

A Barter Economy

From 1881 until the last year of record in 1904, members of the Elba Ward proffered butter, cheese, wheat, hay, script, oats, potatoes, bacon, and dimensional lumber to the church as their annual "fast offerings." Although cash tithes increased over the years, they remained a

I graduated from the 8th grade in the new [Almo primary] school... I took the eighth grade twice because I didn't want to stay home. The folks did not want to let me go away from home and there was no high school in Almo. . . [In 1918] I coaxed [Dad] to let me go to high school at Oakley. He wasn't thrilled about it but he did let me go. Grace Thompson and I rented a room and batched together. We paid \$4 a month rent.

[Life Story of Bertha T. Kimber, n.d.,
City of Rocks National Reserve.]

significant minority of all contributions. [266] Children eagerly entered the general mercantile clutching surplus eggs rather than pennies, trading them for "a bit of candy." [267] Adults traded potatoes or grain at the same mercantile, for those staples they could not grow themselves. Sheepmen, "passing through," carrying cash, and in need of both potatoes and flour, provided the merchant with the requisite legal tender. [268]

The barter system broke down at tax time, in years of poor harvest, and when making large purchases of equipment, stock, or land. Men then left their ranches and their homes in search of markets for their products or in search of wage employment. [269]

Moonlighting

With the exception of the few and requisite storekeepers, butchers, and blacksmiths who inhabited Raft River and Goose Creek communities, the vast majority of men (and widowed women) identified themselves as ranchers or farmers — a response not only to the available resources but also to the Mormon philosophy that "a poor man's best mine is in a potato patch." [270] However, this agricultural emphasis disguises the extent to which City of Rocks residents "worked what work [they] could." [271]

Men appear to have relied most consistently on mining and on freighting as a source of wage labor. In 1848, a Mormon battalion returning to Salt Lake City from the Mexican War, discovered mica (often an indicator of more valuable gold deposits) along the banks of Goose Creek; subsequent travelers prospected the area but no major strikes were made. Circa 1889, the Vipont brothers located the Vipont silver mine in northern Utah. The mine produced sporadically, under eastern capital, from 1890 until 1923, with a maximum employment of 250 men (1918-1923). During this time the mine "supplied labor for those [Junction Valley residents] who needed work and a market for much of the produce raised." [272]

Mines within the more immediate project area were limited in number and in quality. The Melcher Mine near Elba and the Badger, Alice, Cummorah, and Jennie mines within Connor Canyon and Connor Flat (north of the City of Rocks) suffered from both insufficient ore and a poor transportation network and were thus not significant sources of employment or of revenue. [273]

Mica and silica outcroppings scattered across the City of Rocks attracted only sporadic interest, most notably during World War II, when the federal government subsidized mica production in an effort to meet its wartime supply needs. Despite prospecting within the City of Rocks, there is no evidence that "strategic mica" — hard, clear, flat, and free of mineral inclusions and cracks was found in sufficient quantity to attract outside investment or to warrant substantial excavation. In 1950, only Latah, Adams, and Idaho counties boasted profitable or active mica mines. "Attempts were made to work prospects in other parts of Idaho but

I started to milk cows when I was five years old. I could churn the butter but Dad washed and molded it, wrapped the pounds of butter in a heavy wax paper... The butter was sold to the Tracy Store or sometimes we took it to a store in Elba; about twice a week Dad sold milk to Mr. Lowe from Grape Creek, who came in his wagon to pick up the milk for his cheese factory... We would rush to open the gates for Mr. Lowe. He always gave us a nickel each to open gates... That was the only money we ever had with the exceptions of on the 4th and 24th [Pioneer Day] when we were given .25 cents to spend. We did not feel bad about not having money. We were just thrilled when we did get some...

After Margery was born [1912] Dad said, "Bertha is not going to milk any more cows. She is staying in to help her mother." . . . I never had to go to the corral again. I'd much rather help mother in the house. . . . On ironing days and wash days I had to do my share. I'd rather do most anything than milk those cows.

[Life Story of Bertha T. Kimber, n.d.,
City of Rocks National Reserve.]

met with failure." [274]

Freighting also provided cash. After delivery of produce to market, residents would freight a return load in their otherwise-empty wagons. [275] Clifton Rooker remembered that his family's 40-acre ranch near Albion

never quite produced enough to meet the family needs. As a result, Father usually had to obtain other work to supplement the meager income which came in from the few milk cows that we had. He engaged in freight hauling for a number of years, hauling freight from Declo, the nearest rail point, to the Melcher Mine. [276]

Between June and September of 1889 and 1890 (in the narrow gap between planting and harvest), Frederick Ottley worked for Ed Conant, driving the stage between Kelton and Albion [277]

Men also hired on for construction of the Oakley Dam, a Bureau of Reclamation/Carey Act project (1909-1911) or the Bureau of Reclamation's Minidoka Project at Rupert, working construction, or as "ditch riders." Others took jobs in the sugar-beet factories, or traveled from ranch to ranch, shearing sheep, threshing grain, or putting up hay. Walter Mooso and Lee Nelson ran a winter trap line "in and around the City of Rocks," making a "fair living" selling lynx, bobcat, coyote, wolf, and badger hides. Indeed, Mooso stated that he could make more money in six days of trapping than in an entire summer of dryland farming; his son verified: "if it wasn't for his trapping he would have had one tough time making it." [278] Bertha Taylor Kimber also remembered that her father and Billy Cahoon "trapped animals in the winter to add to the family funds. They trapped many coyotes, muskrats, badgers, skunks, mountain lions and weasels." Others sold deer hides to the Fort Hall Indians who used the leather to make beaded buckskin gloves; Ida Bruesch recalled that "the people depended on that for a good deal of their living." [279]

Rhea Paskett Toyn does not know how she and her husband Archie made ends meet, only that they did "somehow." Others were less successful. As the drought hit in 1920, Cheney Vao Leroy's parents "lost or somehow were unable to keep" their Albion farm and moved to California. [280] In recommending final approval of Thomas Fairchild's marginal claim, forest ranger T. C. Clabby noted, "[The claimant] had no means to work with when he took up the claim and it is plain to see he has not accumulated anything since." [281] When the two-room log house of City of Rocks rancher Merritt A. Osterhout, his wife, and three children, burned in September of 1915, Osterhout

did not have the means to rebuild, and left for the winter, going to Burley Flat, where he expected to be able to earn sufficient [wages] to enable him to rebuild the following spring, but found himself unable to do so, and as his crop of 1915 amounted to only 260 bushels, it was insufficient for the support of himself and family, and made it imperative for him to be absent to earn a living elsewhere and impossible to go back to the land in the spring of 1916. [282]

Assured of Osterhout's "good intentions," the General Land Office granted title to the land in January of 1918. Less than ten years later the land was abandoned. [283]

For western farmers, the Great Depression of 1929 had begun a decade earlier, with the end of World War I, the end of inflated wheat prices, and the end of above-average rainfall. In 1925, instead of collecting grazing fees in advance, Minidoka rangers "took the stockman's [promissory] notes." [284] During the 1930s, the volume of timber taken from the Minidoka National Forest under free-use permit almost doubled, "due very likely to economic conditions causing many families to use wood for fuel in place of coal." [285]

Almo's population dropped from 260 in 1920 to 245 in 1930; this drop was particularly significant given the high birthrate within the Mormon community. [286] The Moulton Ward, encompassing Junction Valley and much of the City of Rocks, fell from approximately 100 inhabitants in 1920 to 64 in 1930.

These numbers continued to decline over the next four decades as range rights and homestead options became more limited for the children of the founding families:

There's no way to provide for these boys. . . . They can't go into the stock business in this country. There's no ground for sale. Everything seems to be tied up . . . Generally a man, most of them had big families. One boy probably could have took over, but what about the rest? [287]

Elba resident Charles Twitchell echoes: "There were six of us boys. Some of us had to move on." [288]

Most of the people still living here were not too much effected by the depression at first, for they had been pretty much self-sustaining. They produced much of their own food and fashioned their clothing themselves. A yearly trip to Ogden for fruit to preserve and needed material not produced here was all they were used to. However when drought struck it was a hardship.

[Elbert Durfee, "Remembrances of Almo Community," n.p., n.d., on file at City of Rocks National Reserve].