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THE SALMON RIVER MISSION

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At the annual conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on April 6, 1855, President Brigham Young called twenty-seven elders of the Church to establish the first settlement of Mormons in what is now Idaho. He charged the men--missionaries more than settlers--

To settle among the Flathead, Bannock or Shoshone Indians, or anywhere that the tribes would receive them, and there teach the Indians the principles of civilization; teach them to cease their savage customs and to live in peace with each other and with the whites; to cease their roving habits and to settle down; also to teach them how to build houses and homes; in fact, to do all they could to better the conditions of these fallen people, and bring them to a better life.

At the same time, missionary and colonizing groups were called to settle in other areas outside the borders of Utah, including western Wyoming, Nevada, and Oklahoma.

The company left the Salt Lake Valley on May 18, with thirteen wagons each drawn by two yolk of cattle; a few cows, some tools, and provisions intended to last them nearly a year. With only general instructions from Church leaders on where they should settle, they selected a valley some 400 miles from Salt Lake City and 200 miles from Fort Hall, the nearest outpost. They arrived June 15, 1855, and named their new home Fort Limhi, after a king in the Book of Mormon. The valley and river--a tributary of the Salmon--eventually took a modified form of the name. Presumably the site was chosen because it was a favorite gathering spot not only for the Bannocks and Shoshoni but also for Nez Perce fishing expeditions in the summer.

The fort itself was in two parts. A timber stockade eighty-eight yards square, rising nine feet above the ground, enclosed twenty-five cabins in rows parallel to the walls. There was a well in the center of the fort, topped by a flagpole. One of the houses had a room large enough for church services, and within two months of the missionaries' arrival a blacksmith shop and a sawmill were added to the fort. Next to the stockade was a stock corral of about the same dimensions, with two-foot-wide walls of adobe seven feet high.

As soon as the necessary structures were completed, the men began farming. A small stream above the fort was dammed and a ditch about 300 yards long was dug to supply one of Idaho's earliest irrigation systems (a later canal in the same system is still in use). Unfortunately, crops were planted too late for the short growing season. So about half the company returned to Utah for supplies and mail. They returned to the fort, with the first women and children in the company as well as needed supplies, on November 19. Two weeks later, a second group was sent south--this time to bring flour north in the spring.

One reason for the shortage of supplies was increasing contact with the Indians. When the company arrived in the valley, George W. Hill (who could speak Shoshoni) had told the Indians why they had come and asked their permission to settle there. The Mormons were politely received and allowed to use timber for building and fish and game for their own food only. Later shipment of smoked salmon to Utah may have caused some tensions. Although a rule was promulgated in November of 1855 that there was to be no direct contact with the Indians who wintered in the valley except by President Smith, a little over a year later more than 100 of the Indians had been baptized and some of the missionaries had married Indian women. The no-contact rule also applied to "mountain men," of whom a number lived in the area between Fort Hall and the Bitterroots of Montana, but there seems to have been no great effort to enforce it. Nonetheless, the mountaineers were somewhat suspicious of the mission; and their suspicions only increased in the fall of 1857 with the pressures of Albert Sidney Johnston's Utah expedition.

Meanwhile, in May of 1857, President Brigham Young and a large group of Church authorities visited the mission. Young was clearly not pleased by the location of the fort, which he thought was much too far from Utah (he recommended a site near present-day Blackfoot) and in unpromising terrain as well. But he was encouraged by the outlook of the missionaries--who had survived two rugged winters--and the work with the Indians, and he promised more aid to the mission. That fall, fifty-eight adults (some of whom including some of the early leaders, had been at the mission before) and a number of children came up from Utah and settled a few miles below the original fort. The increased size of both the colony and the land occupied cannot have pleased the Indians.

Meanwhile, Johnston's troops--sent by President Buchanan to provide a federal presence in Utah Territory--were coming closer to Utah. Church leaders began to call in colonizers and missionaries in outlying settlements and prepared to move south from Salt Lake City. The federal troops, wintering in Wyoming, were short of supplies and stock, and mountain men spread the word that traders would buy stock for them. At the same time Bannock and Shoshoni were becoming increasingly irritated with

Mormon friendship with the Nez Perce who came to the valley. Tensions increased in early 1858, with at least one raid being made on the mission's cattle and some reported thievery of each other's cattle by the two Indian groups.

On the morning of February 25, 1858, the growing and relatively prosperous mission was effectively destroyed. Indians raided the cattle herd, killing two Mormons and wounding five more. The cattle and horses they got away with (most of the fort's herd) were taken to Soda Springs to be sold. Although no further attacks were made, the missionaries sent two messengers to Salt Lake City to tell President Young what had happened and ask for help. The two young men made the harrowing trip in less than eight days, and the Church's response was an advance party of ten who arrived at Fort Limhi on March 21, promising rescue. Two days later, nearly 150 armed militia rode into the fort to accompany the missionaries back to the Salt Lake Valley. On the trip back one of the advance party was killed, but no other harm came to the missionaries. The fort would probably have been abandoned along with other Mormon outposts anyway, but tensions between the Bannock and Shoshoni and the Mormons (probably heightened by Johnston's Army, distrust by mountain men, and equal treatment of the Nez Perce) resulted in the fatal attack.

The only remnants of the Salmon River Mission are an irrigation canal and fragments of the adobe corral, about twenty miles south of Salmon near State Highway 28.

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