

Coming to Zion: Saga of the Gathering

By William G. Hartley

More than 80,000 converts came from Europe between 1840 and 1900 in what one historian called “the largest and most successful group immigration in United States history.”¹ In addition, other thousands in this century have come on their own from all over the world to make their homes among the Saints.

During the 19th century, “gathering” to Zion was the second step after conversion. The phrase comes from a revelation given shortly after the Church was organized in 1830 to New York members:

“Ye are called to bring to pass the gathering of mine elect; for mine elect hear my voice. . . .

“Wherefore the decree hath gone forth from the Father that they shall be gathered in unto one place upon the face of this land.” (D&C 29:7-8.)

At Kirtland five years later, Joseph Smith received from Moses “the keys of the gathering of Israel from the four parts of the earth.” (D&C 110:11.)

Converts first gathered from the United States and Canada, following Church headquarters successively from Ohio to Missouri to Illinois. To Nauvoo in 1840 came the first overseas converts from the newly opened mission field in England, and six years later nearly 4,000 British immigrants were part of the Latter-day Saint exodus from Illinois. Once relocated in the far west, the Church encouraged and assisted large-scale immigration.

The gathering had two major purposes. First, Zion needed to be built up. Repeatedly persecuted and driven, the Church needed a strong, permanent base with a strong population to occupy the territory and make it economically self-sufficient. Also, the pure in heart needed a place of refuge from



Illustration by Howard Post



persecution and sin. "Zion," however, could not be equated with an easy life. As a contemporary hymn taught:

"Think not when you gather to Zion,
Your troubles and trials are through,
That nothing but comfort and pleasure
Are waiting in Zion for you:
No, no, 'tis designed as a furnace,
All substance, all textures to try,
To burn all the 'wood, hay, and stubble,'
The gold from the dross purify."
(*Hymns*, no. 21)

By 1847, a decade after missionaries first preached the gospel in England, 250 branches and 30,000 members functioned there, more members than there were in the Salt Lake Valley. Within another decade thousands of converts joined the Church throughout Europe, particularly in Scandinavia after 1850, and the spirit of gathering also touched Utah Saints to assist those who desired to come.

Of central importance was the Perpetual Emigration Fund, sometimes called the "Poor Fund." Established at first to help Nauvoo exiles move to Utah, it became a revolving fund raised in Utah and Europe by donations of money and goods to finance part or all of the immigrants' journey. "We expect," wrote Brigham Young in 1849, "that all who are benefited by its [Fund] operations will be willing to reimburse that amount as soon as they are able."² Such repayments would fund the next immigrants.

Due to fund limitations, leaders usually selected those on whose behalf Utah relatives had made donations, converts with needed skills, or converts of ten years or more. Peak usage of P.E.F. funds and equipment came in the mid-1850s when one out of every three immigrants was fully subsidized by the Church. Although the loan monies were exhausted by 1857, the P.E.F. Company continued to provide purchasing and organizational benefits until it was dissolved by Congress in 1887.

Thousands found other means to finance their migrations. Many received help from relatives and friends. Anders Eliason, a well-to-do Swedish landowner, helped send 100 immigrants. Others made the journey to Zion in two laps, stopping along the way to earn money. Also, Utah settlements and European branches raised special immigration funds; Utah contributed \$70,000 in 1868. Despite Church programs and donations, however, many Saints had to wait—sometimes 15 to 25 years—before finding means to gather to Zion.

U.S. historian H. H. Bancroft stresses the difficulty of reaching pre-railroad Utah: "Excepting perhaps some parts of Soudan," he wrote, "there were . . . few places in the world more difficult to reach than the valley of the Great Salt Lake."³ For immigrants, the journey across ocean, plains, and mountains totaled 5,000 miles. But thanks to

Church organizational skills and resources, most immigrants avoided many hardships and mistakes that usually plagued inexperienced travelers.

Liverpool, England, served as departure point for Latter-day Saint British and European immigrants (75 percent of whom traveled as families—unlike general European immigration). There, Church agents chartered ships, in whole or part, for the long Atlantic voyage and purchased tinware, wagon cover and tent materials, and other necessary provisions. Once aboard ship, the immigrant companies, ranging in size from a dozen to 800 souls, were organized into wards. Eight hundred emigrants aboard the *William Tapscott* in 1862, for example, were divided into 19 wards. Often, nationality wards were formed: the *Nevada* in 1872 had one British and six Scandinavian wards. The 700 Saints aboard the *S.S. Wisconsin* in 1877 spoke eight languages among them.⁴ Supervising the Latter-day Saint companies were presiding elders, experienced travelers who were typically missionaries returning to Utah.

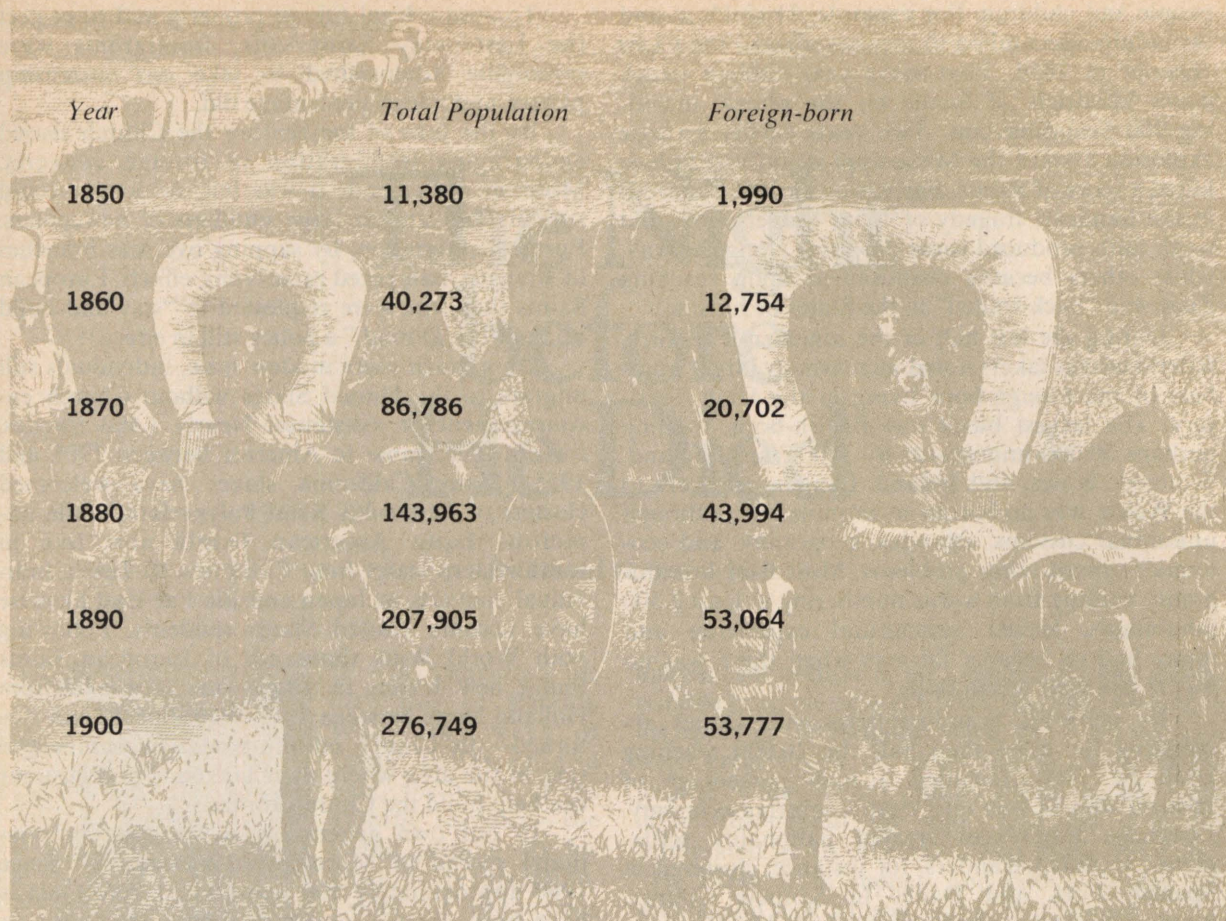
The Saints employed their time sewing together tent and wagon covers, teaching schools for children and adults—English classes were popular for continental Saints—and hearing lectures on such subjects as astronomy and agricultural improvements. Although most voyages produced a marriage or two, aboard the *William Tapscott* in 1849 there were 19: five English, one Swiss, and 13 Scandinavian.

Church meetings kept the spirits up. Sabbath and weeknight meetings frequently attracted non-member passengers and crewmen, resulting in some interesting baptisms in barrels or over the side from platforms.⁵

Until 1854, the ships docked at New Orleans where Latter-day Saint immigration agents helped the travelers book passage on steamboats that took them upriver to St. Louis, Missouri. From there Church wagons transported the foreigners to outfitting points in Iowa and Missouri. After 1854, to avoid river diseases, Latter-day Saint companies from Liverpool docked at Boston, New York, or Philadelphia, where Church agents arranged for railroads to take the immigrants to frontier outfitting points. Following the Civil War, steamships cut the trans-Atlantic crossing time to ten days from five or six weeks for a sailing ship.

At outfitting camps on the plains, the travelers found their teams, purchased by Church agents, ready to receive them and their luggage. Often ten people shared one wagon and one tent. The wagons—the covers of which, like the tents, were sewn of English twilled cotton en route at sea—came supplied with flour, sugar, bacon, dried fruit, and other necessities.

Compared to other plains traffic, Latter-day Saint wagon companies generally were larger than outfits heading for California or Oregon; for many of these inexperienced travelers, plains travel was a



<i>Year</i>	<i>Total Population</i>	<i>Foreign-born</i>
1850	11,380	1,990
1860	40,273	12,754
1870	86,786	20,702
1880	143,963	43,994
1890	207,905	53,064
1900	276,749	53,777

rapid learning experience. For example, one group of Scandinavian Saints tried to use Danish harnesses instead of the recommended American yokes, but "No sooner were these placed on the animals than they, frightened half to death, struck out in a wild run. . . . Crossing ditches and gulches in their frenzy, parts of the wagons were strewn by the way side."⁶

The Church tried to reduce the expense of wagon trains with conveyances such as handcarts; between 1856 and 1860 3,000 Saints came to Utah in ten handcart companies. Then, during the 1860s Church team trains, consisting of mules, wagons, drivers, and supplies requisitioned from wards and stakes, made round trips from Utah to bring the immigrants to Zion during summer months. After Union Pacific tracks reached Ogden in 1869, rail travel replaced Church-sponsored transportation schemes for crossing the plains. To allow immigrant companies to travel together on westbound trains, Latter-day Saint agents at eastern ports reserved train coaches whenever possible.

Finally reaching Salt Lake City by wagon, handcart, team train, or railroad, travel-weary European Saints gladly accepted local aid in establishing new homes. Frequently Presiding Bishop Edward Hunter or President Young personally

greeted newcomers as part of official Church welcoming ceremonies. Valley Saints provided temporary food and shelter while Church leaders offered religious counsel and recommended various settlement possibilities. Friends and relatives helped some immigrants relocate, while others camped in the Salt Lake area for a time, many finding temporary employment on Church public works projects. Bishops, instructed to locate land and jobs in their wards for the new arrivals, provided important assistance as this description in the 1860s demonstrates:

"An emigrant train had just come in, and the bishops had to put six hundred persons in the way of growing their cabbages and building their homes. One bishop said he could take five bricklayers, another two carpenters, a third a tinman, a fourth seven or eight farm-servants, and so on through the whole bunch. In a few minutes I saw that two hundred of these poor emigrants had been placed in the way of earning their daily bread."⁷

The trek across sea, plain, and mountains took faith, beginning with leaving homes, employment, and sometimes unconverted family members behind. Along the way hardly an immigrant company escaped illness or death, particularly among older

people and children. For example, 21 children and two adults succumbed to measles aboard the *Clara Wheeler* in 1854. That same year cholera struck down hundreds of Saints on the plains, including 200 Scandinavians. Two years earlier a tragic explosion aboard the Mississippi steamboat *Saluda* killed a score of Saints. Early snows killed hundreds in the handcart tragedy of 1856. Travel rigors and weak faith produced some dropouts along the way, while others became disillusioned upon reaching Zion, and “back-trailed” to the States or Europe.

During the last half of the nineteenth century, federal census takers noted increasingly larger numbers of the foreign-born living in the Utah Territory. The largest block was British-born, totaling perhaps 50,000 immigrants by 1900 from England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. Language, except to the Welsh, was no barrier to assimilation; although unfamiliar customs, attitudes, geography, and economics caused other problems. Most British immigrants, coming from towns numbering at least 2,500 inhabitants, lacked agricultural experience and many had to become farmers when there was no way to use their urban skills.⁸

By contrast, Scandinavians—with Danes accounting for more than half the 20,000 reaching Utah by 1900—included a high percentage of farmers who fit well into Utah’s agrarian economy. Language differences created nationality settlements, so that Icelanders, for instance, clustered in Spanish Fork and Danes in Sanpete County. Similar enclaves were established by German, Swiss, Dutch, and French immigrants, 6,000 of whom had settled in Utah by the turn of the century.

In 1870, one of every three Utah residents was foreign-born, a higher percentage than found in any states or territories of the Union. A third of Salt Lake Stake’s 20 bishops in 1876 were foreign-born, while two of the stake presidents had come from England and the other was born in Scotland. From 1874 to 1931 the First Presidency always included at least one member born outside the United States, and over 30 members of the General Authorities are or have been foreign-born.

Nineteenth-century persecutors of the Church resented the annual arrivals of foreign converts. An 1881 *Harper’s* article denounced the Church for consisting of “foreigners and the children of foreigners. . . . It is an institution so absolutely un-American in all its requirements that it would die of its own infamies within twenty years, except for the yearly infusion of fresh serf blood from abroad.”⁹

Yet this so-called “un-American” Church vigorously encouraged the “Americanization” of immigrants. Brigham Young instructed newcomers to first learn to make a living, then, “the next duty, for those who, being Danes, French, and Swiss, cannot speak it now—is to learn English; . . . the language of the [translated] Book of Mormon, the language of these Latter Days.”¹⁰

To ensure legal title to property and to protect the Latter-day Saint vote, immigrants were repeatedly admonished to take out citizenship papers, and a high percentage did.

By the turn of the century the Church ceased encouraging immigration of foreign converts. Mormon settlements, it was felt, no longer could support and absorb large numbers of newcomers. Further, emigration, by sapping overseas branches of strength, hampered proselyting efforts. European Saints therefore were requested to “stay and build up the work abroad,” a policy still in effect.¹¹

On a much more modest scale, individuals still migrate to the United States without Church encouragement or assistance. Nearly 1,400 Swedes, for example, came to America between 1905 and 1955. Many California stakes have welcomed clusters of Latter-day Saint Polynesians, while numerous Latin American Saints now live in southwestern states from California to Texas. Individual converts in Japan and the Far East likewise have become United States residents. Following both World Wars thousands of European Saints found new homes in Utah—one thousand from Holland alone between 1945-1950. But the tide has turned—the Church officers now urge members to stay in the area where their language and customs can help build the Church abroad.

In our own generation an amazing international spread of Mormonism is occurring. Since 1960 approximately 100 non-United States stakes have been created, and stakes now are found on every continent of the world. Such current Church strength, however, is due in no small measure to faithful converts who, since 1840, left homes and families to build up a United States base from which the international Church of today could prosper. □

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¹Maldwyn A. Jones, *American Immigration*, Chicago, 1960, p. 126.

²Andrew Jenson, “Church Emigration,” *Contributor*, 13 (December 1891), p. 82.

³Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Utah*, San Francisco, The History Company, 1889, p. 418.

⁴*Deseret News*, 18 July 1877, p. 1.

⁵Jenson, p. 345.

⁶Jenson, p. 459.

⁷William H. Dixon, *New America*, London, Hurst and Blackett, 1867, 1:252-253.

⁸The best one-volume study of British Latter-day Saint emigration is P.A.M. Taylor, *Expectations Westward: The Mormons and the Emigration of Their British Converts in the Nineteenth Century*, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1966.

⁹William Mulder, *Homeward to Zion: The Mormon Migration from Scandinavia*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1957, p. 275.

¹⁰Dixon, 1:210.

¹¹*Millennial Star*, 69 (23 May 1907), p. 329.