On the Fringes of Society:

The Relationship between Mormon settlers and Utah’s Native American tribes in relation to the Mountain Meadows Massacre

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History 400
September 11th is best known in the United States history for the attack on the World Trade centers. However, almost 150 years prior to the modern day September 11th attacks, another horrific event taints our history. This event, occurring on the 11th of September 1857, shares many characteristics with that in 2001. Both tragedies involved the deaths of innocents, at the hands of cultures marginalized by our society, and both attacks leave many unanswered questions. In the fall of 1857 over 120 unarmed, and innocent emigrants, traveling from Arkansas, through southern Utah, in the hopes of discovering the hope and prosperity offered in California, were brutally murdered. Deemed the Mountain Meadows Massacre, after the location of the tragedy, this event has intrigued, confused, and angered historians and civilians alike for over a century.

The details of the event are hazy, leaving much open to speculation and interpretation by those who choose to take an interest. However, one thing has been agreed upon. The horrific massacre at Mountain Meadows was carried out by some coalition of male members of the Church of Latter-day Saints (LDS), and male members of the local Southern Paiute tribe of Native Americans. Historiography on the massacre is plentiful, but despite countless years of studying the evidence we still do not know exactly what happened. Despite the ambiguity of the exact events, we can attempt to tease out the facts, particularly surrounding how members of the Mormon Church and of the various Native American tribes in the area came together during this massacre.

In 1847, the leader of the Mormon Church, Brigham Young, began seeking a place to create a separate culture of American people, based upon the Mormon faith.\(^1\) Many members of the church moved westward, attempting to avoid persecution by the American public and

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particularly the American government. The Mormon people settled in many places, such as Missouri, looking for a new home. However, Missouri was just one place where they faced hate and competition from the locals, and were eventually dispelled by the U.S. government. After countless, and useless, ventures to new states in attempts to establish a solid following of LDS members, Utah offered the ideal place for a new sector of American society. With its temperate climate the state offered the Mormon people the health and safety they needed. However, the Utah valley in particular was densely populated with people, the home of various semi-permanent groups of Native Americans. Due to the nature of the landscape in the valley, and the surrounding hills, water was scarce, and the Mormons and Native Americans often frequented the same water sources. Thus, partially just due to landscape, members of these two groups of marginalized American people met, made friends, fought, and eventually massacred 120 innocent people.

The Mormon Church has long been scrutinized and ostracized by various groups of the American public. Though the Mormon religion is a form of Christianity, it is a quintessential American form, born on American soil. Similarly, Native American peoples are also quintessentially American. They were the original inhabitants of the continental United States, living off of this sacred land, creating their livelihoods, until they were pushed aside by

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2 Farmer, 27.
3 Farmer, 42.
4 Farmer, 27.
5 Farmer, 50.
6 For the purposes of my research, and my thesis, the term “Native American” will refer to a variety of peoples and tribes, unless otherwise specified. I am fully aware of the nature of this term, and I acknowledge that by using it I have ignored the countless tribes, dialects, cultures and values of these people. However, considering the perspective and thought given to the Native American people in the mid 19th century, we can assume that to most Americans at the time, various cultural differences between the tribes were not important. Thus, in order to examine the marginalization, and transformation, of the Mormon and Native American groups during the time period surrounding the massacre, it is most useful to use the term as broadly as possible.
European settlers eager to use the land that the Native Americans had long held sacred. Because of a unique series of events and motivations, sectors of these two cultures of people came together in 1857 to sow tragedy into the landscape of southern Utah.

The relationship between the Mormons and the Native Americans, particularly as the Mormons moved west into Utah, was one wrought with tension. Though the United States government had persecuted each of these groups for various reasons, their reactions to this prosecution were vastly different. Both groups offer a valuable perspective to American culture of the 19th century, giving us, as historians, rare insight into the cultural history of the time. The Mountain Meadows Massacre was one moment in time that offers us an especially specific and candid view of the relationship between these two marginalized groups of people. Before and after the massacre the Mormon’s and various Native American tribes had tumultuous relations, at times appearing to the American public as allies, and yet fighting for the same resources. Despite the conflict of their relationship, as the Mormon Church members were continuously identified, and compared with, the Native American people of Utah after the massacre, the Mormon Church became agents in their own marginalization, further becoming branded as it was a culture of savage, violent, and un-American people.

The following paper will analyze the ways in which the Mountain Meadows Massacre defined the Mormon culture as outside of mainstream America. By examining the interaction between the Mormon church in Utah, and the local tribes, as seen through popular press articles, it is possible to gain insight into how the Mormons became considered a threat to the greater United States. This paper will address the events of the massacre, and the characteristics of both the Mormons and the local Native American tribes, that are important when considering the
greater question of their relationship as two marginalized groups. I will then examine who was seen as the perpetrator of the massacre by the popular press, and how this effected the marginalization of the Mormon culture. Lastly, I will discuss the Mormon culture as identified with descriptions and images corresponding with the Native Americans, such as savage and violent, and how these images and popular press depictions of Mormons regarding the massacre, characterized these people as un-American.

What Really Happened?

On the 22nd of July 1857, Mormons throughout Utah began traveling toward the head of Big Cottonwood Canyon, the setting of their annual holiday on the 24th of July. This celebration happened to occur almost immediately after President Buchanan decided to send an army to Utah, fearing a rebellion originating with the Mormons in Utah. The day of festivities continued, as members of the Church community celebrated the last ten years in the Utah territory. As the day was winding down, leader Brigham Young broke the news that a government army was heading towards Utah to suppress an insurrection. It was upon this stage of tension and fear that the Fancher party, traveling from Arkansas to California, ventured into Southern Utah. This party was made up of two groups, primarily comprised of five extended families, which eventually converged and became the victims at Mountain Meadows.

The travelers reached the area near the Mountain Meadows and decided to camp there. The area offered an open space, with limited cover, in which they could create a temporary

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7 Due to the lack of available source material, and to the nature of the topic as primarily concerned with the Mormon perspective, the Massacre as discussed from the perspective of the Native Americans involved will not be discussed as thoroughly.


settlement. Somewhere before their decision to camp at this location, the group had met a Mormon patriarch, Jacob Hamblin, who advised them to camp at the meadows. Whether or not he was involved in planning and executing the massacre, we will never know. Though Hamblin’s tip may have been part of the reason the Fancher party decided to camp at this location, one of their leaders also had experience in the area, and could have influenced the group decision.\textsuperscript{10} Regardless of the reason the emigrants decided that the Mountain Meadows was a good place to camp, they walked into their deaths.

As the Fancher party prepared for a peaceful rest at the Mountain Meadows, they were quickly disillusioned. Whether out of hostility towards the U.S. government, or personal fears and anger against incoming settlers, on September 7\textsuperscript{th}, an unknown group began a concealed, and violent, attack on the emigrants. This unexpected siege lasted four days, killing at least a few members of the emigrant party, and seriously tiring their defenses. After four days of intense assault, two local, Mormon militiamen, John D. Lee and William Bateman, entered the wagon train, offering safety and solace to the wary and hurt travelers. These men convinced the Fancher party that their attackers were local Native American people, and offered them help and protection if the party surrendered their weapons. As the trusting party was disarmed, the militiamen segregated the group into men and women and children, and then proceeded to march them into an open area of the meadow. With the help of arriving Mormon and Native American militia, they killed all but the youngest of the party.\textsuperscript{11}

Though the Mormon leaders of the surrounding area quickly spread the story that the Native Americans had done the killing, the debate over who the true perpetrators were ran rampant as

\textsuperscript{10} Novak, 157.

\textsuperscript{11} Novak, 157-58.
soon as news reached “civilized” America. Despite years of attempted sleuthing done by the American government and brave and curious citizens following the massacre, the evidence has been difficult to substantiate, and as a result, only one person was every prosecuted for the events at Mountain Meadows. John D. Lee, one of the original militiamen, was executed, twenty years after the crime, in March of 1877. Though this partial justice was eventually served, it took two trials for the guilty verdict to be handed down, further instigating debate surrounding the events of the Mountain Meadows Massacre.

Not only was the American public already skeptical of the Mormon culture and leaders, but also the evidence surrounding the massacre was touchy and inconsistent, leaving even more room for debate. According to some historians, the most powerful Mormon leaders at the time, including Lee (one of the men who had supposedly approached the Fancher party), met with members of the Paiute Tribe, convincing them to help the Mormons kill the non-Mormon, American travelers.\(^\text{12}\) It seems that the relationship that the Mormon people had already established with the local Paiute people influenced their involvement with the Mormons in the massacre. Though the Native Americans were implicated early on, evidence surrounding their direct involvement is inconsistent, particularly considering that the local Paiute tribe would have used bows and arrows as weapons, and little evidence of their use has been uncovered at the crime scene.\(^\text{13}\) Regardless of the degree to which the Native Americans of the area were involved in the massacre, the Paiute tribe, as well as the general Native American culture, was pinpointed as the source of this horrible act of violence. The American public was not discerning regarding the tribal affiliation of the Native Americans involved in this atrocity, further stigmatizing the


\(^{13}\) Novak, 174.
group as a whole. Similarly, the implication of the Mormon leaders in this event, beginning as early as the late 1850’s, pushed the Mormon culture further outside of the boundary of contemporary American society as they were continually associated with the stigmatized Native Americans.

We may never know whom the true perpetrators of the massacre were, but blame has been placed on countless individuals, and the Mormon Church has been forced to accept their part in the killings. Major James Henry Carleton, of the United States army, led the first official journey examining the site of the massacre in May of 1859. At this point he buried the bones of the victims and erected a monument reading: “VENGEANCE IS MINE: I WILL REPAY SAITH THE LORD. HERE 120 MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN, WERE MASSACRED IN COLD BLOOD, IN SEPT., 1857. THEY WERE FROM ARKANSAS.”\(^\text{14}\) This monument is no impartial, unbiased assessment of the events. It clearly places blame on the perpetrators, and puts any thoughts of the emigrants instigating the massacre to rest. When this plaque was erected in 1858 the discussion of the guilt of the Mormons had been continuous for two years. This plaque uses direct language removing blame from the emigrants, further marginalizing the perpetrators, Mormon or Native American.

*The Mormon Church*

Before his linkage in the popular press, Mormon theology had been closely tied to the Native American peoples. While the theology behind the LDS Church is not the most important aspect of the equation when considering the marginalization of the group surrounding the Mountain Meadows Massacre, it is important enough that it cannot be ignored. The LDS church was founded around 1823 when the young prophet, Joseph Smith, began to see the heavenly

\(^{14}\) Walker, Turley and Leonard, 5.
spirit, and through the guidance of this spirit found golden plates, which contained the book of Mormon. The basic foundation of the church then, the Book of Mormon, is based upon the visions and translations made by Joseph Smith in the early 19th century. The story begins before the birth of Christ when the family of Lehi left Jerusalem. As they found valuable fortunes in the New World, the six sons of Lehi began to fight, resulting in the thousand years war. These six sons became divided into good and evil, the Nephi and the Lamanites. The plates that Smith found and translated were the history of the descendants of Nephi, the good side of the quarrel. The evil and triumphant clan, the Lamanites, won the war, but not without a price. They fell from the faith, displeasing God, and were cursed with dark skin. Through the help of their saviors, the Mormon missionaries, they could be redeemed, and returned to the faith with the return of light skin.  

The Book of Mormon follows this story, ending that the Native peoples of the United States were the descendents of the Lamanites. In Joseph Smith’s new religion, the Native American people became explicitly tied to the Mormon Church, forming a relationship that would come to help the Mormons in the West, but hurt their relationships with mainstream American society. The basis of the Mormon religion then, is a contradiction of good and bad surrounding the faith and fate of the Native Americans. The Native Americans were evil because they had been wicked in defeating the Lehi Nelphi clan, and yet, with the help of the Mormon missionaries, they had the potential to be saved, and to then save the rest of the world. This complex theology surrounding the Native Americans role as good and evil offers a unique perspective into the relationship of these two groups throughout the western frontier.  


\[16\] Novak, 174.
relationships between these cultures was often economic, a bond forged out of necessity for resources in the harsh world of the American West, it is also apparent that the Mormon leaders, in particular, had a duty to attempt to “save” the Native Americans with which they came in contact.

The Mormon church had been attempting to form a society by recruiting new members but because the American public was probably largely aware of the nature of the Mormon theology, it is no surprise that any sort of positive relationship observed between the Mormon and Native American cultures was perceived as threatening to the general American public. If the Mormons could save the Native Americans, the rest of the U.S. culture, as non-believers (gentiles), would naturally be at risk. Similarly, there was apparently a fear within the American culture that the Mormon leaders in the west had explained the difference between general Americans and the Mormons to the Native American leaders.\(^\text{17}\) If this distinction had been made, the Mormon leaders would have certainly tried to stress how they were the saviors and beneficiaries of the Native Americans, while the rest of the United States was the enemy. Due to the nature of the history of the Mormon faith, these two groups were natural allies. Yet, by emphasizing the helpful nature of themselves to the Native Americans, the Mormon Church was further marginalizing both groups.

*Native Americans on the Frontier*

Between 1804 and 1848 the United States expanded from the Mississippi to the Pacific Ocean, through the Louisiana Purchase and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo forcing western Native American tribes into contact with Whites.\(^\text{18}\) With the acquisition of new land, came

\(^{17}\) Furniss, 162.

thousands of westward bound settlers, including the Mormons. Wagon trains destroyed land and water holes, and frightened buffalo, events that created tension between settlers and various tribes.\textsuperscript{19} The Native Americans these settlers encountered had long since held a feared position in the narrative of American history. Christopher Columbus’ first description of the cannibalistic tribes of the Caribbean created the image of the savage Indian as a group who ate other humans and lived uncivilized, and since then, negative images of this group have flourished in American culture.\textsuperscript{20} The lack of understanding given to the Native Americans as the United States spanned westward reinforced this idea of the savage Indian, as settlers and Native Americans continually came into contact.

The Utah Basin was a wasteland, void of easily accessible water; however it was often a necessary path traveled by settlers, putting Whites in contact with the Native Americans. Though it was undesirably dry, it was the perfect settling place for the Mormon people because it was not a place that any other “American” group would desire. Though the Mormon’s may not have had to compete for the land with any other American citizens, the Southern Paiute Tribe (a small subset of the larger Ute Tribe), made their home in the area east of the Sierras. When the first wave of the Mormons moved to the Utah basin in 1847, they may have thought that they were settling on untouched lands, but they were, in fact, only the latest in the stream of people disrupting the lives of the Ute and Paiute people.\textsuperscript{21} The Paiute people were the ancestors of the Anasazi people, and though they were considered to be a thieving and barbaric people by

\textsuperscript{19} Nichols, 129.


\textsuperscript{21} Ned Blackhawk, \textit{Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 244.
American travelers, they had simply learned to survive on the lean land of the desert, making their livelihood through agriculture.\textsuperscript{22} They were farmers when possible, choosing to stay away from the nomadic life in order to avoid confrontation with larger tribes.\textsuperscript{23}

Within the Utah territory, there was frequent infighting between related or neighboring tribes. Historian Ned Blackhawk differentiates between great tribes and lesser tribes. Distinguishing between the two, he writes that, “great tribes had horses, diplomats, and resources; lesser ones did not. So, while virtually all the Indians within this new national appendage spoke related Shoshone dialects, with some maintaining common territories and economies, important distinctions remained.”\textsuperscript{24} Similarly, Blackhawk emphasizes that the infighting within the Shoshone speaking tribes often involved larger, equestrian tribes, defeating agricultural or migratory tribes like the Paiutes because they did not have the ability to protect themselves. Thus, the Paiute people in particular found comfortable allies within the Mormon settlers because they needed the protection from the U.S. but also from bigger, more dominant tribes. However, as the Mormon’s took them under their wing, trying in their own turn, to control the Paiute people, this reciprocal relationship also became one of conflict.\textsuperscript{25}

Though the Mormons and the Paiute Tribe found a relatively peaceful alliance, both fearing the U.S. government and needing protection, the general relationship between the Mormons and Native Americans was not one of pure peace. The Mormons began as peaceful friends, but then quickly became formidable, and forceful, foes. They began to see the Native

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Blackhawk, 227.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Robert H. Keller and Michael F. Turek, \textit{American Indians and National Parks} (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1998), 67.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Blackhawk, 226.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Blackhawk, 231.
\end{itemize}
Americans as a tool to use against the government; they could be an ally and a weapon all in one. This difficult ally versus foe relationship between the two groups complicated their interactions. As historian Berkhofer emphasizes at the very beginning of his narrative:

Since the original inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere neither called themselves by a single term nor understood themselves as a collectivity, the idea and the image of the Indian must be a White conception. Native Americans were and are real, but the Indian was a White invention . . . By classifying all these many peoples as Indians, Whites categorized the variety of cultures and societies as a single entity for the purpose of description and analysis . . . neglecting or playing down the social and cultural diversity of Native Americans.

The Mormon people wanted to make the various Utah tribes one united group of people, in part due to the placement of the Native Americans within the theology of the Mormon Church. Prominent Mountain Meadows Massacre historian Will Bagley emphasizes the difficulty of this relationship, observing that “for all the enlightened talk of the Saints, the tribes could see the devastating results as white encroachment on their land and food sources pushed them to the brink of starvation.”

Though the Paiute and Mormon peoples had a relatively successful relationship, the Mormons continual lack of sensitivity and creation of more conflict, made it one of strife and peace.

In fact these two groups were engaged in a contradictory and complicated relationship. Though there was an apparent alliance between the Mormons and the Paiute Tribe in particular, by mid 1850 church leader Brigham Young realized that the various groups of Native Americans might not be willing to enter into the Mormon faith and culture, and he seemed to want them.

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27 Berkhofer Jr., 3.

28 Bagley, 27-29.
displaced. The Church settlement destroyed the livelihoods of the Native Americans through disease, use and loss of the vegetation, and overuse of water, yet the two groups seemed to find an unlikely alliance. After the Mountain Meadows Massacre, the alliance between these two groups became even more apparent. As the conflict between them was overshadowed due to the gravity and violence of the massacre, any previous association between the two groups became even more positive. The Mormon people became more like the Native Americans as they were further marginalized by the remainder of the American public as a violent and savage, unrestrained and disgusting, people.

**Friends or Enemies?: Mormons and Native Americans**

The relationship between Mormon settlers in Utah, and the various Ute tribes they encountered, was vastly complicated and ever changing. Both cultures were unique, and very different from the general American culture of the 19th century, but when they came together, they found in each other both a valuable ally, and a vicious foe. Understanding this complex relationship before the events of the massacre is important because it allows for a comparison with events after the massacre.

A 2004 article by Sondra Jones examines this ever-changing relationship in the Utah frontier. Her article, entitled “Saints or Sinners? The Evolving Perceptions of Mormon-Indian Relations in Utah Historiography,” provides the perfect foundation to examine this relationship, and then put it in the context of the massacre. Jones begins with the entrance of the Mormon’s into Utah and their attempt to “civilize” the various tribes of the area. She summarizes the historical focus on the conflicting image of this relationship; one side focusing on the benevolent Mormons and the other side instead focusing on the tension that was present from the very
beginning. She highlights the ways in which the Mormons thought that they were superior to the broader American people because they pursued a peaceful Indian policy. At least in the beginning, the Mormons followed a policy designed around feeding, teaching, and civilizing the Native Americans rather than fighting them. Regardless of the less brutal policy enacted by the Mormons towards the Native Americans, the Mormons emphasized their inherent superiority not only to the Native Americans, but also to the rest of the American people.31

This sort of ideology towards the Native Americans helped the Mormons initially form the sort of alliance that would have benefited them in the Mountain Meadows Massacre. However, Jones emphasizes that “peace was essential to Young’s grandiose plan for colonization” and “an extraordinarily benign, symbiotic relationship did exist during the first years of Mormon-Indian contact.”32 Eventually, however, this was “overshadowed by the realities of a deliberate and calculated usurpation of Indian lands, creating a pattern of conquest, exploitation, and oppression that was simply a repetition of white-Indian relations elsewhere in the country.”33 Thus, while the original relationship between the two groups may have been one of peace, as the Mormon’s continued to spread out across Utah territory, the relationship became more and more tense. While a possible alliance leading up to the Mountain Meadows Massacre is entirely possible, the tension between the two groups would have made it equally easy for the Mormons to blame their actions on the Native Americans without betraying fellow Mormons.

In examining the relationship between the Mormon settlers and the various tribes of Utah, it is necessary to understand the dynamic, fluid nature of their interactions. Because Brigham

32 Jones, 34-36.
33 Jones, 34-36.
Young came into Utah intending to treat the Native Americans differently than other White Americans, their initial relationship was better than most. However, as we have seen, this relationship was not perfect, and in the end, many of the Native Americans were left mistreated by the Mormons. History professor R. Warren Metcalf uses a three part process to understand these two groups, beginning by explaining that at first the Mormons feared and respected the Ute tribe’s power and desired an alliance, then the Mormons began to view the Native Americans as competitors for the land, and lastly, once the Mormons were an established group with political and social power, they adopted an attitude that attempted to deprive the tribes of their natural rights.\textsuperscript{34} Though Metcalf begins his article discussing dates long after the Mountain Meadows massacre, this three part discussion of the evolving relationship between these groups is useful even when placing it in the context of the 1840s, as the Mormons first began to move westward. The possibility of an alliance between these two groups, at the time of the massacre, is not farfetched, and is substantiated by historical evidence. The Mormons may have viewed the Natives as savage, primitive, and even dangerous, but they were also potentially useful allies.\textsuperscript{35} By distinguishing themselves from the general United States, the Mormons were able to capitalize on this possible alliance, and use the Native Americans, particularly those of “lesser” tribes like the Paiutes, in the event of a dangerous situation with the U.S. government.

\textit{The Blame Game}

Immediately following the Mountain Meadows Massacre, both the Mormon people of Southern Utah and the local Native American tribes were implicated in the killings. According to modern sources, the massacre occurred on September 11\textsuperscript{th} and as early as October 3\textsuperscript{rd} news of


\textsuperscript{35} Metcalf, 29-31.
the deaths reached California (because that was the direction of travelers). Unfortunately for the perpetrators, the oath of silence supposedly taken by the leaders of the Massacre was not as effective as they had hoped, as word spread quickly across the country. One of the first reports of the Massacre came out of the Los Angeles Star, a newspaper that sympathized with the Mormon attitude. This initial article reported the “rumor” of “ninety-five persons, men and women . . . cruelly massacred on the road” but reported the events with an “unwillingness to credit such a wholesale massacre.”

A week later, on October 10th, this same newspaper ran an article titled “Horrible Massacre of Emigrants.” The “rumored” massacre had now become a true act of horrible violence. This second article blamed the massacre on the emigrants who supposedly had poisoned an ox, which in turn poisoned the local tribe, and thus they deserved the violence, suggesting that the emigrants “gave themselves up to the mercy of the savages.” Though this article blamed the actions on the emigrants, it also stated that the Native Americans of the area had confessed to the crime. Yet is also implicated the Mormons by reporting that that, “a general belief pervades the public mind here that the Indians were instigated to this crime by the ‘Destroying Angels’ of the church.”

Thus, as early as a month after the massacre the public on the western side of the United States knew of the events, and the leaders of the Mormon church were implicated with the “savage” Native Americans. This implication would prove to be one that would push this isolated group of Mormons even further outside of the American public sphere.


The Los Angeles Star was not the only publication to comment on the events of the Massacre within the following months. The Daily Alta California and The Congressional Globe, both published pieces within six months of the incident implicating the Mormon Church with the deaths, and associating them with the “savage” Native Americans. An anonymous correspondent for the Daily Alta California wrote for a November 1st issue of the paper, suggesting the fault of the Mormons due to “some facts connected with the first information given by the Mormons of this slaughter, that convinced me that the murderers were not Indians.” He further placed blame, when he wrote that, “it may be true that Indians took part in the work, but the blame rests on those who led them on.” This author uses three facts to align the violence with the Mormons, the first being that they saved the emigrant children, wanting to teach them the faith, the second that they suppressed the names of perpetrators, and the third that the Native Americans told the white settlers of the crime, while the Mormons kept quiet. The use of “factual” analysis presented a tough argument to the American public reading this paper. With such logical analysis it became more difficult for the blame to be assigned to the Native Americans instead of the Mormons.

By August of 1859 there was a full account given to the public in Harper’s Weekly. This article went beyond the events to give details of the landscape. The story in the article corroborates the story commonly agreed upon by modern historians that the emigrants were tricked into giving up their weapons, and then brutally murdered. In this discussion of the events the author wrote that the emigrants thought they would be brought to safety by the Mormon

38 Author unknown, “Massacre of Emigrants to California” in The Congressional Globe, March 18, 1858, as found in Innocent Blood, 178.

officers, but were then betrayed. This article also further blames the Mormon leaders in the Massacre, stating that the Native American people were only obeying the command of Brigham Young, and that the Mormon militia fully participated in the violence. Though the events given in this article may not be completely accurate as compared to what historians now know, by framing the Native Americans as truthful, and the Mormon leaders as liars, publicity like this only further stigmatized the Church.

As negative descriptions of the LDS involvement event continued to surface, giving the American people even more reasons to disagree and disapprove of the Mormon faith and people, at least some individuals of the Church responded in order to attempt to salvage the situation. One such example was a letter printed in December of 1859 in the Mormon run and defended newspaper, The Mountaineer. This letter reacted to the accusations against the Mormons, and defended themselves by saying that the emigrants had brought it upon themselves. As accusations and responses continued to fly surrounding the events at Mountain Meadows Massacre, more people were interested in visiting the site and documenting the results of these visits. The anti-Mormon newspaper in the Utah Valley, The Valley Tan, published a statement of one of those visits that documented the discovery of bones at the site, years after the massacre actually occurred. Thus the pro-Mormon and anti-Mormon newspapers in the area were responding to the continued discussion of the events. This particular reader of The Mountaineer was responding to the stigmatization of the Mormons, as the negative associations between the

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Mormons and the Native Americans pushed both groups further outside of the bounds of American society.

As late as 1872, the events of the Massacre were still widely discussed in the popular press. Though most of the publicity occurred in the western United States because of the nature of the travel routes, prominent eastern news sources like *The New York Times* were still running stories corroborating the evidence and growing testimony “showing more positively the guilt of the Mormon leaders.”

Clearly, regardless of any oath of silence taken by the perpetrators of the crime, efforts to hide the events had not been successful. The Church needed to find a way to discredit any further negative accusations or associations with both the events of the massacre and the local Native American people.

In order to try to avoid any further association of the general body of the Mormon Church with the Massacre, the leaders needed to find a scapegoat. Due to the large body of popular press articles pointing to the Mormons as guilty, they turned to one of their own, John. D. Lee. Lee had been a leader of the massacre, but he was by no means the sole perpetrator. Beginning about fifteen years after the massacre occurred, a member of the Mormon Church wrote an article in *The Salt Lake Tribune* accusing his fellow Church members of the massacre, and implicated Lee as the main leader.

By implicating Lee as the leader of the massacre, the leaders of the Mormon Church hoped to take the spotlight off of the Church as a whole, and put the issue to rest. *The San Francisco Daily Bulletin* published a supplement in March of 1877 giving Lee’s last confession before his execution. This would have been a piece of evidence that

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the average American person could have read, and reviewed. In this last confession Lee blamed
the Native Americans, said that he saved the youngest children though others wanted to kill
them, and twisted the truth suggesting that the Paiutes had convinced the Mormons to act with
violence against the emigrants, instead of the other way around.\(^{46}\)

Though Lee was the sole person punished for his actions at the Massacre, he maintained
to the end that it was in fact the fault of the Native Americans, and he did not further implicate
the Mormon Church. Lee kept silent until his death, probably in hopes of removing any further
stigmas against the church, and in an 1877 interview in *The Deseret Evening News*, Brigham
Young again denied knowing anything about the massacre.\(^{47}\) Historian Juanita Brooks
completed the first in depth history of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, focusing on the
role of Lee and Young. Brooks emphasizes that Young may have known that the tensions
leading up to the massacre were growing stronger, but that he probably did not plan or execute
the violence. Brooks recognizes, however, that Young would have had to handle the events
carefully:

Brigham Young lamented the massacre, there can be no question, for it was a
ghastly error from a military as well as from a humanitarian view. He was too
good a general not to know that the repercussions would be immediate and
violent. But at that time the very existence of his ‘kingdom’ was in jeopardy; his
resolution to take a defensive stand against the U.S. must soon be put into
action.\(^{48}\)

\(^{46}\) John D. Lee, “Lee’s Last Confession” in *The San Francisco Daily Bulletin Supplement*, March 24, 1877,
in *Innocent Blood*, 344-349.

\(^{47}\) Author Unknown, “Interview with Brigham Young” in *The Deseret Evening News*, May 12, 1877, in
*Innocent Blood*, 356.

\(^{48}\) Brooks, 144.
Though Young may not have known about the massacre, he would have had to deal with the repercussions, and it is sure that he would have known about the tensions in the southern part of the territory, and encouraged a friendship with the local Native Americans. It is also likely that Young would have played a role in shifting the blame first to the Native Americans, and then to Lee, through this excommunication and his eventual execution. As Brooks’ quote emphasizes, the leaders of the Mormon church needed to place blame somewhere, or risk taking the blame on the leaders or on the entire church entity. Despite Lee’s best effort to take the secret to his grave, and Young’s continued and adamant denial of involvement in the massacre, the events at Mountain Meadows had done permanent damage to the reputation of the LDS Church.

_The Perpetrators Throughout History_

The general public began to suspect that members of the Mormon faith were at least partially responsible for the massacre as early as the late 1850’s. Ever since the first curious citizens began looking for facts, historians have discussed the events and significance of the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Though the story blaming the local Native Americans as the sole responsible party did not convince the public of the Mormon leader’s innocence, it is easy to understand why they were targeted as the initial scapegoats. Native Americans were the most prominent threat on the trail across country because they had been accused of stealing, robbing graves, and murdering women and children. Because the cross-country travelers feared the

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49 Brooks emphasizes that the settlers living in southern Utah, near the meadows, were the most zealous Mormons and the most anxious to defend their livelihoods and their faith against the U.S. For these people it was good strategy to befriend the local tribes in order to preserve the safety of their settlements, 31-32.

50 Brooks, 220.

51 Novak, 151-153.
Native Americans as a general group, it was easy for the Mormons to try to place the blame for their violence on this already misunderstood, frightening and ostracized group. As our knowledge and understanding of the local peoples has increased, as well as our historical resources, the history surrounding the question of who executed the massacre has become clearer. The Mormon leaders may have exploited this lack of understanding regarding the cultures of the Native Americans in an attempt to place the blame for the massacre on others.

Though Young needed to cover up the horrible atrocity, and Lee was the only one punished for his part in the massacre, nearly all of the men in the surrounding area were implicated in one way or another.\(^{52}\) As investigations continued, “public attention again focused on Mountain Meadows, the subject hounded the LDS church . . . In the public mind Mormon participation in mass murder was a stubborn fact. The tales added credibility to anti-Mormon claims that the church engaged in the systematic assassination of its enemies.”\(^ {53}\) Regardless of whether or not this statement is true, the coverage of the massacre allowed anti-Mormon forces to gather steam, and further pushed the Mormon’s outside of the public American lifestyle, particularly as the credibility of their story faltered. The massacre may have been committed in a time of fear, uncertainty and war, and committed by normally admirable citizens, but they did not behave as their own ideals and religion suggested that they should.\(^{54}\) Because of the ruthless, and unprovoked nature of the crime committed, the Mormon church (its “saints”) was marginalized from the “gentile” American culture, becoming more like the “savages” that were under constant ridicule from the American public.

*Transforming Identities after the Massacre: Two Intertwined Cultures*

\(^{52}\) Will Bagley, *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, XIII.

\(^{53}\) Bagley, 269.

\(^{54}\) Walker, Turley and Leonard, 115.
The common American people were gaining their knowledge of the events of the massacre through the popular press that was circulating after 1857 and in the years following the massacre; popular press still framed the two groups as allies. Two examples of popular media portraying them as allies in regards to the massacre appear in the *Los Angeles Star* and in *Whig and Courier*. It is useful to examine these two articles because one appeared immediately following the event, in October of 1857, and one appeared many years later, in October of 1871. “The Late Horrible Massacre” was run in the *Los Angeles Star* in 1857, and was an account of the events of the massacre as given by two civilian witnesses. This article cites that the two groups were preparing for a battle against the United States and that two groups worked together after the events of the massacre. As the author wrote: “I believe the bodies were left lying naked upon the ground, having been stripped of their clothing by the Indians . . . the wagon was driven by a white man, and beside him there were two or three Indians in it!”55 Based upon this account, these two groups were working together to deal with the bodies of the massacre and to hide the events. At this point, the authors were traveling with a Mormon train, in order to afford themselves safety and a good story, and they wrote regarding the Native Americans were “very friendly, and shook hands with everybody. No expression of hostility to Americans was heard, but that was accounted for on the ground that this was a Mormon train.”56 Whether or not the Native Americans were actually friendly after the events at Mountain Meadows is unimportant, what is valuable is acknowledging that because the Native Americans were in the company of the Mormons, they were friendly to the rest of the Americans in the party.


56 “The Late Horrible Massacre,” 36.
Similarly, the authors wrote that they herd that one of the emigrant’s oxen had died, and they gave it to the Native Americans but that “a Mormon reported that he saw an emigrant go to the carcass and cut it with his knife, and as he did so, would pour some liquid into the cut . . . I asked an Indian . . . if there was any truth in the poisoned meat story; he replied . . . that he did not know . . . he believed that the Mormons had poisoned them.”

Though this Native American seemed to think that the Mormons had a part in the supposed poisoning, the framers of this story clearly write as though the Mormons were protecting the Native Americans from the evil emigrants. Though this is unsubstantiated by all of the historical evidence, it does demonstrate how intertwined these two groups were.

Even years after the massacre, the two groups were still framed as allies. An article that was run in an 1871 issue of *Whig and Courier* not only described these two groups as allies, but also described the Native Americans as a tool at the disposal of the Mormons. The author wrote, “the Indians seem to them to be an instrument ready at their hands to be used against the nation without destroying themselves.”

This article would have appeared in the eastern portion of the United States, as the country was recovering from the brutal Civil War. By going beyond the idea of allies, to place these two groups as two that would work together to form an alliance that could potentially threaten the United States as a nation, would have been a very scary thought to many people at this time. By associating with the Native Americans, the Mormon people had placed themselves on the outside of American culture, as a threat to the nation, instead of as a unique culture of Americans. Similarly, racial rhetoric comparing these two groups, not in

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57 “The Late Horrible Massacre,” 33.

relation to the Massacre, was particularly useful in marginalizing them with “guilt by association.”

A similar sentiment was shown four years later, in an article published in *The Boston Daily Advertiser*. The short article is as follows:

The Associated Press reporter had an interview with Indian chief Beaverite today. He states that Lee secured the Indians to kill the emigrants by an offer of clothing, guns and horses; that Lee commanded during the fight; that the Indians had no animosity against the emigrants; that the story about the emigrants poisoning an ox or springs is all a lie; that Lee is a coward and wants to throw all the blame on the Indians . . .

Apparently, after talking with a Native American chief, the author of this article was under the impression that the Mormon leaders orchestrated the entire plan, and that the Native American people involved were simply innocent bystanders or pawns. Explanations for the massacre like this place the Mormon leaders even further outside of the American notion of nation. The Native American people were a thoroughly ostracized group by mainstream American culture, but post-massacre, with their association with this group, the Mormons became more alike this group of downtrodden and misunderstood people.

*Mormons Portrayed as Savage and Un-American*

Well before the events of the Massacre, the Mormon people were misunderstood, and their sanctity as American people was already debated. In an 1853 description in *The New York Times* of the Mormon’s move from the East to Utah, they were directly compared to Native Americans. The article describes the Paiute tribe that the Mormon’s encountered, and then describes the Mormons writing that “a new tribe and sect – driven from State to State, fleeing . . .

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encountering the most fearful hardships.”\textsuperscript{61} While this article does not condemn the Mormons, they are likened to a new ‘tribe’ of Native Americans. Thus, even before the events of the Massacre, and before any blame was placed on the Native Americans, or the Mormons, the two groups were compared. Similarly, as the Mormons were threatening the United States, “instead of retreating like cowardly victims of prejudice, Mormons earned a reputation for retaliating with violence by acting like Indians.”\textsuperscript{62} This unified reputation as violent people was further enhanced after the events of the massacre came to light.

By originally blaming the local Native American people, the Mormon Church became indefinitely tied to the violence of the massacre, and subsequently, the entire religion and culture of the Mormon people, were likened to this marginalized group. According to historian Berkhofer, in the American public at the time, the Native Americans were imagined as living lives of “bestial self-fulfillment, directed by instinct, and ignorant of God and Morality.”\textsuperscript{63} While the Native Americans had long been thought of as savage and dangerous, the Mormon people came to be viewed this way after the massacre. One 1873 article discussing the possible threat of the Mormon people calls Brigham Young the “Mormon Chief.”\textsuperscript{64} These were threatening ideas, and before and after the Massacre at Mountain Meadows, these ideas came to encompass the Mormons as well, further marginalizing them as an already isolated culture, by associating with the Native American people.

Originally there was a sentiment among the American people that the Mormons had come to the Meadows to help the emigrants as “whatever wrongs the Mormons thought they had


\textsuperscript{62} Allmendinger, 55.

\textsuperscript{63} Berkhofer, 13.

committed, whatever the scores held against them, surely Christian people would help each other against savages.”\textsuperscript{65} While this may have been the original sentiment, when the true events of the Massacre reached the American public the Mormons changed from the “kind white people” to be viewed more like the “savages.” Historian Shannon Novak quotes a Mormon Church service after the massacre discussing the violence, saying that, “whether it was done by white or red skins, it was right!”\textsuperscript{66} This continual alignment by the Mormon leaders as friends with the Native Americans placed them further to the outside of American culture as the Mormon people were now also committing savage acts.

In two articles in the public press printed after the massacre, the Mormons were further intertwined with the Native Americans. In the first, an article published in 1857 in the \textit{Alta California}, the Mormons are depicted as allies with the Native Americans as they learned Native American languages and married Native American women.\textsuperscript{67} If the Native Americans were thought of as uncivilized peoples, then the relationship between the Mormons and the Native Americans after the massacre was only further negatively stigmatized with articles such as this that blatantly associated the groups through social interactions and even marriage. A similar sort of statement was run in \textit{The Valley Tan}, the non-Mormon publication of Salt Lake City. This statement, by Wm. H. Rogers, ignited controversy as one of the most accurate depictions of events. In his statement, Rogers reported that the Mormons disguised themselves as Native

\textsuperscript{65} Brooks, 70.

\textsuperscript{66} Novak, 37.

Americans in order to further fool the emigrants.\textsuperscript{68} Though this may not have been an uncommon practice on the frontier, when reports like this were surfacing after the massacre, it only further proved the savage and barbaric nature of the act because the Native Americans were considered to be such uncivilized people.

A \textit{New York Times} article of 1858 describes Brigham Young and his Mormon followers in an effort to unearth the intentions of the Mormons in Utah. After the massacre the fear of a war between the Mormons in Utah and the United States was still not impossible, and the fear was still hugely prominent in American society. The author of the article writes, discussing the possibility of threat from these people: “If Brigham Young were as fanatical and ignorant as his wretched people, there would be no room to doubt that a contest would take place, and that it would be as bloody and savage as any of the fierce conflicts . . . with the British troops in India.”\textsuperscript{69} While this article acknowledges that Brigham Young might not be the unruly force that could threaten the U.S., but that the followers of the Mormon faith, who might be more disorganized and not have a strong, related, leader, might be threatening. The rhetoric of this piece, one that does not even mention the Mountain Meadows Massacre, places the Mormons with the Native Americans with the words like ‘bloody and savage.’ These words with negative connotations are distinctly dis-unifying from mainstream America.

Similar to the portrayals of Mormons as un-civilized and savage, they were framed as un-American. After the massacre, as their identities were tied with this horrific bout of violence, and with the unaccepted culture of the Native Americans, the un-American nature of the

\textsuperscript{68} Wm. H. Rogers, “Statement of Wm. H. Rogers” in \textit{The Valley Tan}, February 29\textsuperscript{th}, 1860, in \textit{Innocent Blood}, 215-16.

Mormons became more central to the American public. Understanding the Mormon culture post massacre means understanding how the general American public viewed the un-American nature of the Native American cultures. Historian Berkhofer discusses the imagery surrounding the Native American when he writes that “the primary premise of that imagery is the deficiency of the Indian as compared to the White . . . this means Native Americans must be reformed according to White criteria and their labor, lands, and souls put to ‘higher uses’ in line with white goals.”70 Like the Native American cultures, the Mormons needed to fit in with the general American construction of dutiful, Christian citizens, and they did not, forcing them outside of the realm of American society. Similarly, as White settlers moved westward they encountered the strange Native American cultures and, “the Native American understood as an Indian represented an affront to the cherished values of the vast majority of White Americans.”71 As the Mormon people continued establishing large groups of followers, and attempted to create a separate kingdom in Utah, they also affronted the values of a united American nation. After the massacre, this separate culture of the Mormon Church became even more controversial, and the public press of the time emphasized the outside nature of this group.

One of the very first public press pieces printed on this massacre, in October of 1857, outlined the facts saying that, “one hundred and eighteen Americans, men, women and children, have been cruelly butchered on the nation’s highway, by a band of ruthless savages . . .”72 As we have seen in the primary sources printed immediately following the Massacre, there was information released immediately that designated the Mormons as the perpetrators. With the use

70 Berkhofer, 113.

71 Berkhofer, 136.

of the word “savages” when outlining the facts, the Mormons are aligned with the Native Americans as outside the American norms. Similarly, when the article discusses the massacre as the deaths of 120 “Americans,” this pushes the Mormon perpetrators outside of this potentially unifying designation. With word choices such as this, the Mormons are further designated as un-American and different, just like the Native Americans.

There was also a sentiment among the popular press articles released about the Mormons after the massacre that they were a force that had to be controlled by the American government, like the Native Americans. The same anonymous correspondent for the *Daily Alta California* wrote in 1857 that the general American public “are all at a loss to know what is to be done with these people . . . the only remedy seems to be to dissolve the territorial government, declare their laws null and void, send large bodies of soldiers to be stationed at every town and settlement in the Territory, let martial law prevail, then hang or shoot every man that rebels . . .”\(^{73}\) This sort of sentiment is truly similar to the “Indian” policy of the time. The *Los Angeles Star* published an article almost immediately after the massacre calling it “the foulest massacre which has ever been perpetrated on this route, and one which calls loudly for the active interposition of the Government.”\(^{74}\) This public press sentiment, calling the government to take action against the Mormons, further compares the Mormons with the Native Americans, and symbolizes a desire for a “Mormon” policy, in which they were controlled as threats to the American public.

Though the popular press may have called for government action against the Mormon people, American culture of the time dictated the fact that citizens had the right to take the law

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into their own hands, so persecution against the Mormons might have been religious, but it was also something born out of the nature of the time. The *Daily Alta California* published an article saying that “Mormon traitors and Indians” were the perpetrators of the massacre and that “there is a sentiment of extermination, living and intense, growing in the minds of all true Americans, against the traitors who have planted themselves in our territory, and who have instigated the savages of the desert to slaughter and repine.” 75 Similarly, particularly due to the threat of war before the massacre, the Mormons were thought to “make such resistance as they are capable of making.” 76 Regardless of who instigated the retaliation and control against the Mormons after the massacre, the public press obviously emphasized that something needed to happen against this threatening group of outsiders.

Though the stories and commentaries of the massacre by the popular press really showcased the hatred shown towards the Mormons after the event and pushed them further towards the margins of American society, from the conception of the LDS church the leaders capitalized on their outsiderness, using this to construct an identity and draw followers. Both the Mormons and the Native Americans were outside of the norm set by mainstream America, set aside by mysterious cultural choices such as polygamy. 77 Historian Allmendinger compares polygamy in the 1850’s to slavery, writing that, “although the enslavement of blacks was an issue that divided the nation, the enslavement of middle-class women was a notion that enraged all U.S. citizens . . . virtually no-one outside of Utah territory defended Mormon polygamy.” 78


77 Novak, 175-76.

78 Allmendinger, 52.
Thus, in the 1850’s, polygamy was viewed as the most un-American institution could be. This placed the Mormons further outside of generalized U.S. culture. Polygamy was one of the biggest problems that mainstream America had with the Mormon culture, along with their refusal to accept some basics of Christianity (like the trinity), while maintaining they were a Christian religion. Thus both the Mormons and the Native Americans were outside of the boundary of American culture, set aside by abnormal cultural practices. This may have helped the Mormons create a new identity, but after the Massacre, it only caused them to be further aligned with the Native Americans, and further marginalized by the general American public.

News of the massacre did not die down in the years after the Massacre occurred. The Mormons were still portrayed as outsiders, a possible threat to the creation of a successful nation. More than a year after the massacre, in an issue of Tribune that outlined a correspondence of someone in Utah, the Mormons were portrayed as a negative force on the frontier. The author wrote “We met Mormon soldiers every day, who showed us no favors, as they considered us Americans . . .” continuing, “We are now satisfied that the Mormons had hired the Indians to help them fight the Americans.”

Even after the massacre, the Mormons were still causing trouble in Utah, fighting against “Americans.” Articles like this, that place Americans and Mormons on opposite sides of the dividing line between loyal and disloyal members of society, only further marginalized the Utah members of the Mormon Church. Similarly, an account given by Historian Furniss validates this two-sided view. Furniss argues that United States Agents, “. . . accused the Mormons of tampering with the tribes in their region, seeking to entice them from their dutiful allegiance to the country. The charge received wide popular credence

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80 Correspondence of the Missouri Expositor (Jan. 5), “More Trains Destroyed by the Mormons and Indians,” Tribune, January 21, 1858, in Innocent Blood, 162.
and took its place as another Gentile conception of the Saints’ perfidy.” This “saints and Indians” versus “gentiles” discussion was hugely prominent in the popular press. The Mormons and the Native Americans were the others, and this was only further emphasized as the facts of the massacre were slowly uncovered.

Conclusion

With the birth of the Mormon religion, its followers were subject to ridicule by their surrounding White, American neighbors. The leaders of the Church continued to move westward in the hopes of finding a place to rest their faith and create a new kingdom within the United States. As they moved west, they encountered friends and allies within the Native American people of Utah, and recognized this alliance as a potential tool to be used against the United States government in the case of a federal intervention. As the Mormon settlers of Southern Utah continuously encountered westward moving emigrants, tensions in the region increased, and came to a head with the Mountain Meadows Massacre. The exact events of the massacre might not ever be known, but the ways in which the Native Americans and Mormons were grouped together, and accused of the violence, forced those of the Mormon faith further outside the bounds of mainstream American culture.

Though the Mormons had been a threatening force before the massacre, competing with mainstream American in the east for land and resources, after the massacre, the popular press depicted the Mormons and Native Americans as friends, both working to fight against the greater nation of the United States. Though there have been countless studies of the events of the massacre, considering the relationship between the Mormons after the massacre, and their supposed allies, the Paiute tribe, allows for an examination of how the Mormons became further

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81 Furniss, 87.
marginalized by mainstream American culture. The Mormons came to embody terms that had previously labeled only the Native Americans, such as savage, beastly, and un-American.

Post-massacre the Mormons needed to realign themselves with the identity of the American nation. They had to unify their culture with the rest of mainstream America. Though the events of the massacre by no means caused the marginalization of the Mormon Church, the misunderstanding and negative image portrayed post massacre only furthered this stigma. This misunderstanding about the faith and ideology of the LDS Church is still present today. If we examine popular media today, such as Jon Krakauer’s book, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, and the television show *Sister Wives*, we can see how this culture is still misunderstood and marginalized. As our society has evolved, this marginalization has transformed into a spectacle for other aspects of American culture to view, question, and criticize.
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