

Mormons found sanctuary in Mexico in 1880s

By Laura King and Amparo Garcia

On September 21, 1823, in Palmyra, New York, 14-year-old Joseph Smith, Jr., was visited by an angel named Moroni, who told him to retrieve and translate a book written on golden plates hidden close to his home. Given to Moroni by his father, Mormon, the book contained a history of the ancient inhabitants of America and the completion of the gospel. The book established the doctrine of a new faith: the Mormon Church, often referred to as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



The Founder of the Mormon Church, Joseph Smith.

Rendered by Amparo Garcia.

Persecuted for their beliefs in the Book of Mormon and Smith's accounts of Moroni's visits, the Mormons were forced to move from New York, to Ohio, to Nauvoo, Illinois. Smith considered Texas as a future home, but he was murdered on June 27, 1844, by a mob who feared the new church. The gifted leader Brigham Young stepped in and prepared to migrate west, deciding on Utah, on the shores of the Great Salt Lake.

Western writer and historian Wallace Stegner says that "the Mormons were one of the principal forces in the settlement of the West," opening southern Iowa, the Missouri frontier, Nebraska, Wyoming and Utah. Forced to leave quickly, they crossed the Rocky Mountains in the fall, enduring brutal cold, frostbite and death. Between 60,000 and 70,000 Mormons migrated over two decades.

In 1852 under the leadership of Young, the Church announced publicly its acceptance of polygamy. Religious historian Klaus Hansen says by 1860 it became an accepted practice by more than 30 percent of Mormons. In Utah, the Mormons built a community that joined church and state, politics, the economy and society as a whole.

The United States government responded with a series of laws, court tests and political activities designed to destroy the community and force it to join the remainder of the country. The Edmunds-Tucker Act dissolved the church as a legal entity and declared polygamy illegal in 1862.

Brigham Young now began to consider taking the gospel into Mexico, which had passed legislation encouraging foreign immigrants to colonize its northern territory. Young called on Daniel W. Jones and Henry Brizzee to prepare for a trip into Mexico. The missionaries were also instructed to begin translating the scriptures into Spanish.

In the early autumn of 1875, Young sent Jones and five elders on horseback to Mexico. During the 3,000-mile trip, the missionaries stopped frequently in New Mexico and Arizona, preaching the gospel and converting Indians. Jones and his team arrived in Franklin, Texas, (El

Paso) in 1876, crossing through present-day Juárez. They were warmly welcomed by Mexican officials.

Meanwhile, Young urged Jones to find settlement locations as tensions were increasing in Utah. Governor Ochoa agreed to sell land to the Mormons to colonize, and in 1885, Church President John Taylor explored the area. Church officials selected Casas Grandes, a valley in the state of Chihuahua, as the place to begin settlement. On May 15, 1885, the Mormons began their exodus from the United States into Mexico.

The Mormons traveled in wagons, going through Deming and Columbus, New Mexico, and crossing the border at Las Palomas, Chihuahua. Many arrived at Casas Grandes before their land tracts were secured. They lived in wagons and dugouts as their savings dwindled, and they ate pigweed and mush, but the early settlers remained faithful to their convictions.

During the early years in Mexico, many Mormons worked for the railroad, while others farmed. Pay was minimal and food was scarce, and the colonists struggled to care for their often large families. Yet each family faithfully tithed, even when means were short. They survived because they were a united community, sharing all they had.

Historian Lamond Tullis writes that "[Porfirio] Diaz, in particular, was fond of the Mormons, perhaps in part because he considered them proof that his colonization policy was good for the Mexican economy." The Mormons developed nine colonies: six in the state of Chihuahua and three in Sonora.

In 1885, the Mormons established the first two colonies, Diaz and Juárez. Next came Colonia Pacheco in 1887. In 1893, the Church settled Colonia Oaxaca, which survived only until 1905 when a flood destroyed it. Colonia Garcia would be next in 1895, and the last four colonies would be developed in 1900: Chuhuichupa, Dublán, Morelos and San Jose.

The Mormons kept attractive settlements with large, spacious, red brick homes, beautiful churches and schools. Necessary tools and farm equipment came from the United States. The colonists planted and harvested their own crops to trade with the Mexicans. They built gristmills, tanneries, blacksmith shops, general stores and a successful cannery for their fruit. They did not allow saloons, tobacco shops or jails.

The Mormons managed to transform desert into land with irrigation ditches and plumbing, vegetable gardens, grapevines and fruit trees. Among the colonists were many professionals, including businessmen, doctors, musicians and teachers.

In only 10 years, the Mormons developed their system of education from a one-room ungraded school to an accredited high school. Children had access to academic training in vocational and professional subjects including agriculture, carpentry, business, music, art, drama and science.

In the spring of 1896, Colonia Juárez participated in a Mexican national fair to exhibit their products and justify President Diaz's generous support of their settlements. They displayed pyramids of canned fruits, needlework, and photographs of their businesses, schools and public buildings as well as their orchards, fields and homes. President Diaz sent an ambassador to the colonies who verified the authenticity of the pictures.

Although the colonies were separated geographically, the Mormons remained connected socially and economically as they traded their goods and produce. Their perseverance made

the land flourish, with some Mormons becoming wealthy. They had created communities of unity and safety as well, often leaving doors unlocked and property unattended.

In Mexico, the Mormons lived an almost ideal life based on their beliefs. Although Mexico provided the new settlers with a couple of decades of peace, the settlers would find themselves living in a country at war with itself in the Mexican Revolution.

Francisco "Pancho" Villa made his way north, residing in Casas Grandes in the center of two Mormon colonies. Neither he nor his army ever intruded on the colonies although he considered the United States to be the enemy. In fact, when Villa raided Columbus, New Mexico, in March 1916, he detoured around the colonies, rather than going through them in a more direct route.

When Villa was hiding from Carranza, whom the Americans backed, he traveled over the Sierra Madres, taking with him several Mormon men as aides. Villa did not harm the Mormons and allowed them to return home.

As they pursued Villa, the American forces set up base in Colonia Dublán. Historian Raymond J. Reed notes, "The Mormons, having already proven themselves capable of getting along with and commanding respect of the Mexican army under Villa, now undertook the task of playing host to the American army." The Army even recruited a few Mormon soldiers as scouts.

But soon, the colonists found their efforts to remain neutral increasingly difficult. President Taft ordered all Americans living in Mexico to leave. Junius Romney, President of the Juárez Stake of the Mormon Church, followed suit in July 1912, directing the nearly 5,000 Saints to return to the United States.

The colonies were evacuated, with only two, Colonias Juárez and Dublán, surviving to be reestablished in 1916. These two colonias, about 18 miles apart, still exist. Both remain beautiful. Colonia Juárez stands by itself, while Dublán has merged with Nuevas Casas Grandes. [see maps below.]

Leon Metz tells us that many of those who made the great exodus of 1912 came through El Paso. They lived in tents provided by Fort Bliss or in a lumber shed on Magoffin Avenue. Congress had allotted \$20,000 to aid the refugees.

The Mormon community reestablished its base in Mexico after the 1912 exodus. By 1987, 300,000 Saints were living in Mexico. In February 2000, Mormons dedicated a new temple in Juárez which will serve 25,000 members in Juárez, El Paso and the majority of the state of Chihuahua. El Paso Times writer Guadalupe Silva notes that Juárez has 12,000 Mormons while El Paso has about 7,500.

Mormon temples are holy places in which members in good standing make their covenants to God and conduct their ordinances, including eternal marriages and baptisms for the dead, as opposed to chapels where daily activities and Sunday services are held. Heretofore, El Paso's Mormons had to travel to Mesa, Arizona, or Mexico City to go to a temple.

The small but elaborate marble Juárez center is an example of the new temples the Mormons are building over the world, close to the members they serve. It is only 11,500 square feet in area, compared to the 200,000 square feet of the Salt Lake City temple. Mexico truly has become a home to Mormons who found in it a place of refuge over 100 years ago.

SOURCE: http://www.epcc.edu/nwlibrary/borderlands/19_mormons.htm



