

**History Of Vegas Mission Is Told**

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**H**ISTORY IS replete with its stories of romance, adventure and achievement. It is the account of these accomplishments against heavy odds, in the face of constant perils and ever recurrent danger that makes history live, that makes man conscious of the race and the stock from which he came, and in such cases gives him faith, desire, and fortitude to go on himself and carry on the work against any odds that may present themselves.

Nor is the history of southern Nevada any exception to this rule. Although probably not generally known, the history of Las Vegas and vicinity is as rich in the lore of romance, adventure and achievement as any of the numerous old frontiers that have stretched between the east to the west.

The small patch of meadows (now in southern Nevada) known by the Spanish name of Las Vegas, situated on the old Spanish Trail between the Great Salt Lake valley and southern California, first became known to the leaders of the Mormon Church in the fall of 1847.

As a result of the benefit derived from the water supply situated in the heart of the desert the place at this time became well known as a station for rest and recuperation on the trek between the centers of civilization.

**PARTLY BECAUSE** of a desire to settle the intermountain region and partly from the desire to convert the Indians of the region to the Mormon faith the leaders of the church determined on taking advantage of the enviable location of the springs of clear sweet water for the establishment of a mission.

With these objectives in mind a group of thirty men was set apart in April of 1855 for the purpose of developing the section in the vicinity of Las Vegas. The party arrived at the Meadows on June 14, 1855.

On arrival the party immediately began their labors, a part of them laying off the fort, some laying out farms, and others digging the ditches for the diversion of the water. The farming land was laid off into fifteen five-acre lots, making two and a half acres for each of the settlers. An account written to the Deseret News of the arrival of the party and their findings here so adequately tells the story that it is here copied in its entirety:

“Las Vegas, June 24, 1855.

“We all arrived at this place on the 15th inst., safe and sound, after making a dry drive of 52 miles in 32 hours, from Muddy to this place.

“We found Las Vegas to be a nice patch of grass about half a mile wide and two or three miles long, situated at the foot of a bench 40 or 50 feet high. The val-

ley faces east, and a pretty clear stream of water, about the size of a common millrace, comes from two springs about four miles west of our location.

"**THE WATER** of the springs is very clear; they are from 20 to 30 feet in diameter, and at the depth of two feet the white sand bubbles all over as though it was the bottom, but upon wading in there is no foundation there, and it has been sounded to the depth of 60 feet, without finding bottom; and a person cannot sink to the arm pits, on account of the strong upward rush of the water.

"Our prospects for timber are not very flattering, though there is plenty of firewood near here, but the weather is so hot and the wood so thorny that we do not expect to be very lavish with it—the scrubby mesquite being the only chance.

"A few days ago I went on an exploring trip to the Colorado, in company with Brother Allen and others, to look for the promised steamboat and other fine things. We found the river and the steam, but no boat, nor anything on the river to make one of.

"The nearest point of the Colorado is about 28 miles from here, and is completely hemmed in by sandhills and deep canyons without grass or wood of any description. At the place where we first reached it, it was about 400 yards wide at an elbow where it turned from the southwest to a south-southeast direction.

"**WE STRUCK** the river again in two other places, 10 and 15 miles below, but it was imbedded in deep canyons. The current runs remarkably smooth for such rough, rocky canyons, and with the exception of one place it was not impracticable for navigation.

"We could not extend our explorations to any great extent, on account of there being no grass for our animals, and the weather being so extremely hot that men could not live long away from water.

"In coming home some of our company gave out through the extreme heat and thirst, it being 31 miles over burning sand and rocks without water. The heat was so great that the water in our canteens would be scalding hot. We were five days out, and never were men more rejoiced to get into port than we were; and for my part, I have thought Las Vegas was a little heaven ever since.

"We found about 50 (Piedes) on the Colorado, in a perfect state of nudity, except for breechcluts; the men and women all dressed alike. They had raised a little wheat on a sandbank; it was all ripe and harvested. They were very friendly.

"**OUR FORT** is laid on a rise of ground close by the creek; size about 150 feet square, with garden lots of one-quarter of an acre each; they are now pretty much planted. Our farm lots contain two and a half acres each. Farming land is not very plentiful here.

as most of the soil is either too sandy or has too much saleratus.

“Our stock is doing finely, and we are all in good health except Brother Ira S. Miles, who intends to return with this company.”—

(Deseret News 5:158.)

**SHORTLY AFTER** the arrival of the party all of the Indian

chiefs of the vicinity were assembled and agreement was made with them for permission to use the land. Frequent murders among the Indians perpetrated by emigrants had aroused the antagonism and hatred of the Indians, but in the council mutual agreements were made for peace with emigrants as well as between the settlers and Indians.

The missionaries had arrived at Las Vegas with the expectation of planting and harvesting crops for means of subsistence during the following year. With this object in mind the ground was prepared and the seed planted as soon as possible. It was only then that the group could consider exploring for timber with which to build. Several attempts were made before timber in sufficient quantity was found in accessible locations. Another quotation from the Desert News will adequately explain the problem faced by these early settlers:

“ . . . at length came to a canyon some 10 miles north of the California road, and found 80 or 90 trees, varying from six inches to two and a half feet through; some of them were good trees, but most of them were not first rate.

Our guide informed us that was all the timber in the country; we told him that we wanted to go further and see some more timber, but he said it was a great way off, and there was no water near at hand.

“AFTER LOOKING at the shape of the mountains, and judging for ourselves, we found the nearest point for the next timber was to

start home, and at some convenient season start again, and make for the snow-capped mountains in the northwest of the valley, probably a distance of 50 miles.

"After arriving at the Las Vegas we found the distance to the timber to be over 20 miles, 15 miles of hard road—gravel and rocks—and the rest sand. Good feed at the timber, and enough water to water the teams. . ."—(Deseret News 5:232.)

On September 11, 1855, one of the members of the colony wrote as follows:

"We are all in the enjoyment of health, reasonable strength, and the good spirit, which comforts us all in our privations and laborious duties; everything that we lay our hands to seems to prosper.

"**OUR CROPS** in general look well and bid fair to come to maturity before frost. We have some fine melon patches; the melons are just beginning to get ripe.

"Our fort, 150 feet square, is now progressing rapidly; the walls are of adobes and are to be 14 feet high, two feet thick at the bottom and one at the top. Houses are going up and we will soon begin to live quite comfortably.

"Our explorations have assured of plenty of desert and Indians."—(Deseret News 5:246.)

The principal objective in establishing the mission—that of conversion of the Indians—was as successful as could have been expected. The Indians of the neighborhood readily responded to the kind and just treatment accorded by the missionaries, and listened intently to the teaching of the settlers. In accordance with the teaching many were baptized and became members of the church. A state of good will and friendship prevailed between the Indians and the colonists for the greater part. The Indians, however, like the whites, were required to live off of the land. Inasmuch as they were not quite so well prepared for this they did not live nearly so well. As a result they came more and more to look to the missionaries for their living. They were willing to work for their food and would often work hard for as little as two small squashes for the day's labor. These conditions could not last, however, as the whites found it a hard struggle to find sufficient farming land good enough to support themselves. Consequently the Indians were often hungry and resorted to petty thieving and depredations in order to satisfy the demands of their bodies. The chiefs of the various groups sympathized with the whites and did their best to curb the tendency among their followers, but they were finally forced to admit their inability to control the members of their tribes. The members of the mission were exhorted by leaders to treat the Indians kindly and justly because of their ignorance and the fact

that they knew no better. The methods of dealing with the Indians forms an interesting chapter in the history of Las Vegas, but would be too lengthy for treatment here. The whites, however, did much plowing and planting for the Indians in trying to get them to adopt the arts of civilization.

AT FREQUENT intervals during the sojourn of the mission at Las Vegas members of the original thirty were released to return to their homes while others were received from headquarters for the purpose of carrying on the work.

As time from other labors permitted members of the mission were dispatched to the mountains to get timber and to look for mineral. Lead ore and gas were found in considerable quantities at various places and in August of 1856 a party was sent from Salt Lake City for the purpose of securing some of the metal.

The mines were situated so far from any source of supplies and water, and the market was too far removed, for practical transport of the lead for smelting, and the mountain Indians were so hostile that in all but a few hundred pounds of lead were taken out, and as early in 1857 the mines were abandoned, the miners and many of the missionaries returning to Salt Lake City.

With the departure of this party the Latter-day Saint mission in Las Vegas was practically broken up, although a few of the missionaries stayed on into the year 1858, when nearly all of the distant settlements were abandoned on account of the Johnston army troubles. The few missionaries that were left out were so scattered that the small groups found it quite impossible to pursue the agricultural arts, preach to the Indians and at the same time withstand the thieving disposition of the natives. So on September 26, 1858, the Las Vegas mission was dropped for the time being."

THE LAS VEGAS ranch in 1868 was offered for sale. The following is a copy of an advertisement in a St. George (Utah) paper:

"The ranch is 52 miles from the Colorado river. The distance to Callville is 53 miles, the upper settlements on the Muddy 57 miles, Eldorado canyon 55 miles, Mojave City 120 miles, and Hardyville 114 miles. There is excellent sawing timber in the Charleston mountains, about 25 miles distant. The soil is black, rich loam and will produce any kind of vegetables; there is plenty of water to irrigate 400 acres of small grain and range for 300 head of cattle. O. D. Gass, proprietor."

The Las Vegas mission was discontinued because, under the circumstances, it was deemed expedient to reserve and redirect efforts

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## MORMON MISSION

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along channels in which rewards would be greatest always holding in reserve, however, the right to return to take up the work and to push on to new horizons

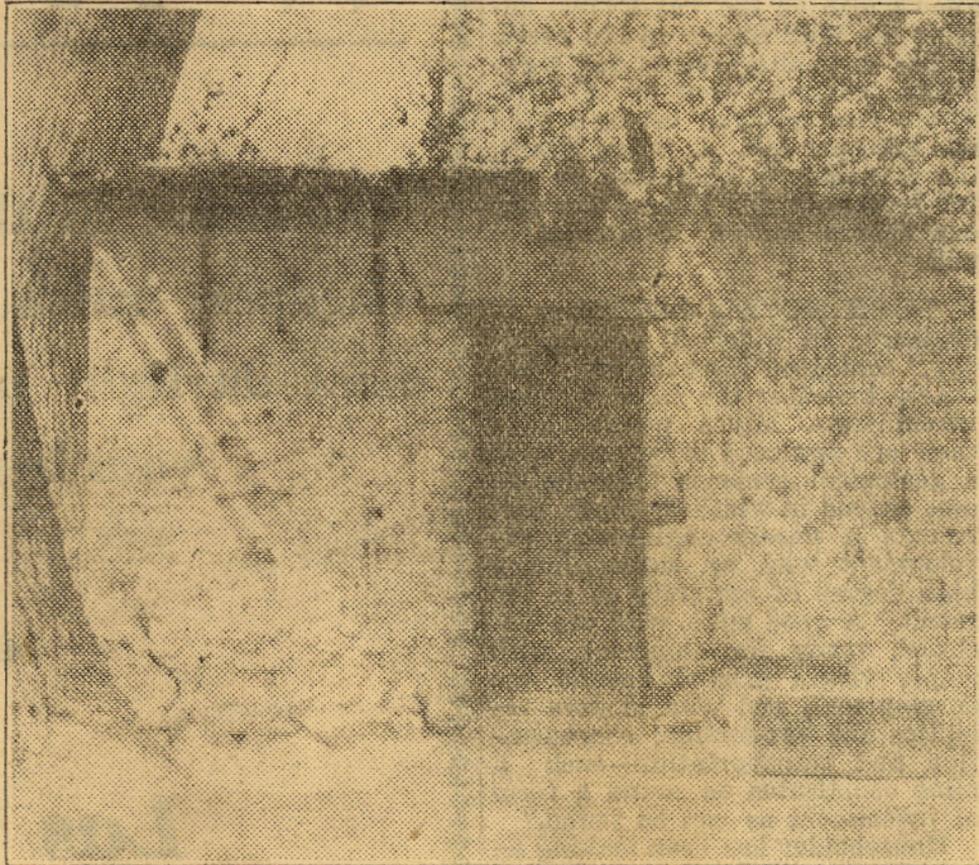
When the Las Vegas mission was reestablished it came as a branch of more firmly established settlements. Originally re-established a branch of the Mesquite ward it later became a branch of the Overton ward. While dependent on these wards it was under the leadership of Newall Leavitt and C. C. Ronnow. In the year 1918 the mission became an independent branch of the church, and in 1922 it was organized as a ward under

the leadership of Ira J. Earl.

After the organization into a ward the growth and development was rapid. Meeting places were changed as facilities become more and more inadequate, from the Levy hall to the Thomas hall in the old Beckley building, and from thence to the present chapel on Sixth and Carson. With the great increase in the population of Las Vegas in the past few years the chapel has, for a long time, been quite inadequate.

We hope the achievement of our present goal will be but the attainment of another horizon which will open up new fields and valleys of achievement with new ideals and goals to be attained.

## Old Las Vegas Mission-Fort



The first structure built by white men in the vicinity that is now Las Vegas, this old adobe structure yet stands, less than two miles from the heart of the City of Las Vegas, and is used as a gravel testing plant for Hoover dam work. In the fall of 1847 the settlers from Salt Lake City first came to the valley, and braved peril and privation to establish themselves in the little oasis that is now Rancho Grande. (Review-Journal Staff Photo).