

Early Mormon Troubles in Mexico

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Karl Young

The tales of hardship and privation endured by the first Mormon colonists who went to Mexico read like those of frontiersmen everywhere. They spell out most painfully hunger, scant clothing, wretched dwellings (scarcely adequate for beasts), disease without medicine, sickness without doctors, labor unremitting, none of the amenities of civilization. Even the simplest elements of living were sometimes almost nonexistent. Thus Annie Richardson Johnson tells how when her polygamist father took his two wives to Mexico, where Annie was born in 1889, they were so poor that her “two mothers had only three dresses between them, and each borrowed the extra dress while she washed the one she had been wearing.” And she remembers “how the whole neighborhood circulated a bacon rind for greasing bread pans.”¹

Fortunately, the colonists in Chihuahua during those last fifteen years of the nineteenth century were resilient enough to be able to make jokes about their hardships. Annie’s brother, Edmund W. Richardson, who had made out many a meal on pigweed or redroot greens, remembered hearing a man ask how Joe James, who had four wives with many children each, could feed so many hungry mouths. James replied that he fed them all dried peaches for breakfast, gave them a drink of water for dinner, and let the peaches swell for supper. Edmund said that he liked the plan, adopted it, and whenever anyone asked how his family was, he simply replied, “Oh we live like the Joe James folks.”²

Oftentimes the work of daily life was performed under miserable circumstances. Edmund remembers watching his father mix mud with his feet for an adobe house for Grandpa Adams when he had to break ice to get the water to mix it. The child Edmund had to help by washing the wood molds in ice water. He probably performed this work barefooted, as he can not remember having a pair of shoes until he was fourteen. His father built a flour mill in 1891–92, and Edmund had to carry food cooked at home two and a half miles to the mill for lunch for his father and the other workmen. Sometimes his mother and Aunt Becky would help carry it, and their shoes were so badly worn that he often saw tracks of blood on the snow and hard ground.³

To go back to the beginning, one must see the tedium and toil of the trip down to Mexico from Utah. A. L. Pierce recalls that it took his parents three months to go from Richfield in central Utah to Colonia Diaz about

sixty-five miles south of the Mexican border. They had to make floats and rafts to ferry their families over the big rivers, and they were always in danger of arrest, as his father was fleeing the marshals, who were trying to enforce the laws against polygamy. Despite the anxieties occasioned by the necessity of dodging the officers, Pierce had to stop frequently to find jobs in order to get enough cash to be able to buy supplies.⁴

After the frustrations of passing through customs at Palomas, the immigrants who arrived at Colonia Diaz had to lay up the adobes for their homes like the natives about them. But they did not know how to build dirt roofs that would shed the water, and after rain storms, the sodden roofs would drip water for hours together onto the dirt floors below.

Yet such things can be borne and were borne without much complaint. The sharper thorns of adverse circumstance were such as Levi M. Savage records in his diary about a Colonia Diaz mother, who entered in her journal the note that she had contracted whooping cough a month before the child she was carrying was to be born.⁵ The baby was delivered on July 15 in the midst of a torrential rain. The roof leaked, and buckets, pans, tubs, every sort of available container that would hold water was set up over her to keep her dry. She was weak and coughed a lot, but was proud of her newborn son. But the baby evidently was afflicted with whooping cough at birth and lived only three weeks. The young mother did not feel that she could bury her baby in the foreign cemetery among strangers. Yet the Mormons did not have a cemetery of their own. Therefore in the evening, when village people were indoors, a wagon drove into her yard. Two men sat on the spring seat with shovels and a pile of hay in the back, as if they were prepared to drive away from the settlement to work. The baby's casket, wrapped in quilts so that it looked like a roll of bedding, was brought out of the house and stowed near the hay on the wagon bed. Then the men drove off to hide the infant in a lonely grave, without a headboard or even a stone to mark the spot.

The adobe hut with its leaky roof may have contributed to the death of the child, but enterprising people can always improve their living quarters, and it did not take long for the Mormons to get better walls up and slanted roofs over them. Food, however, was another matter, especially for the people who settled in the mountain colonies. There the growing season was short, not nearly long enough for some of the crops that might flourish at lower elevations, and what field crops did mature were in constant danger of ruin by hailstorms or by untimely frosts. Sometimes there was no wheat flour in the whole community. "I remember times between harvests when it was almost impossible to get a sack of flour at any price, and corn was almost as scarce," says Stanley Martineau.⁶ Such must have been the times to which Arwell L. Pierce referred when he said that for a whole year

his family had no white flour in the house for bread. They were even reduced to buying yellow corn, which was harder and less expensive than white corn. It was good food for burros and would fatten hogs, but it made wretched bread, and you couldn't make good gravy out of it at all. His mother made vinegar gravy. To a gruel of corn meal she would add vinegar and molasses until she had a mixture that made corn meal mush a little more palatable than when served straight.

Some families had milk with their corn bread, but Nelle Hatch remembers when times were so hard at their Strawberry Ranch, twenty-five miles up in the mountains above Colonia Juarez, that in order to save milk, the family would eat bread and milk with a fork.⁷ And Nelle's sister, Blanche Hurst, remarked that she could still see that old round iron kettle with the cornmeal mush bubbling in it, which was all that they had for supper. Parents had to tell stubborn children, sick of the same old thing for supper every night, to eat it or go without.

Like pioneer folk everywhere, all members of the family worked hard. The Spilsbury girls hoed corn all day long in the Tinaja Wash just like a family of boys. And their father charmed them at noon with his skill in roasting fat, milky ears of corn on a bed of coals from a burned-down pile of dry oak limbs. He had a long stick for a poker to turn the ears, and he fed the smallest children first. Sometimes he served store crackers and sardines, but his roasting ears with mother's homemade butter were always the best.

Corn was not only a staple in the kitchen and in the feed bins out at the barn, but brought comfort to the family's rest at night. Everyone slept on shuck ticks at first. The ticks were made out of factory or floursacks sewed together. They had a slit in the middle so that you could put your hand in and stir up the shucks. Every fall the girls took the ticks out behind the house and emptied the mashed down, ground up, powdered shucks to burn while they washed the ticks and aired them, then filled them with fresh, clean, crunchy, sweet-smelling shucks. Many a tub had to be filled with gleaming ears of shucked corn before there were enough shucks to fill one tick. For from experience the girls knew that every tick would have to be crammed and stuffed until it stood four or five feet high before they lugged it into the house and put it on the bed. And with the mattresses filled so full and standing so high, each child was sure she would roll off and break her neck during one of the first few nights. But no one ever did. A person couldn't blink an eye without rattling the shucks, but somehow they induced wonderful deep sleep, at least in the younger members of the family.⁸

As in most frontier communities medical care was the business of practical nurses with home remedies. Sometimes doctors were available, but usually a person wondered what was the matter with a doctor who chose the area to practice in. Sick people usually depended upon a few resolute

souls like Maud T. Bentley. For practically ten years, she says, she was a nurse in Colonia Juarez, and she went from one end of the town to the other doctoring Anglos and Mexicans alike.⁹ She treated people prostrate with pneumonia or weakened with dysentery, and she furnished all of her medicines free. When epidemics came, she was up night after night, but she confesses candidly that she thought if she helped other people out, perhaps the Lord would spare her own children. Yet Roland, her eight-year-old, died of the flu after suffering convulsions for thirty-six hours straight.

Highly contagious diseases ravaged the communities. Smallpox, scarlet fever, and typhoid were common. John Jacob Walser made a revealing entry in his journal on November 30, 1890. . . “on arriving at home (Colonia Juarez) we found the smallpox in town. . . My whole family, eighteen in number, were compelled to live together for the time being in a room fourteen by sixteen feet and a tent ten by twelve. But I hurried with the other house as quickly as possible.”¹⁰

Sometimes more ominous situations were recorded, as when, many years later, Lem Spilsbury was working as a scout for the Punitive Expedition headed by General Pershing. “One day,” said Lem, “a Mexican came into camp with a pair of government shoes on, and when Patton (the later famous General Patton of W.W. II) saw them, he said, ‘Lem, ask him where he got those shoes.’ Then Patton continued, ‘Ask him where he lives.’”

When the Mexican gave Lem his answer, Patton said, “Let’s go down and search his house.” But the Mexican interrupted Lem and said, “You better not go down there.” Nevertheless, they went, and when the car pulled up in front of the hovel, Patton waited where he sat and sent Lem into the house. “As soon as I entered the house,” said Lem, “I knew what the Mexican had meant. I went back to the car and said, ‘Pat, you can go in there if you want to, but I’ve seen all I care to see—five Mexican women, all lying in that one room with smallpox.’ Patton replied, ‘Well, that will do for me too!’”¹¹

Typhoid fever also swept the villages. Maud Bentley says that at one time she and her brother Loren were just two of sixty cases in Colonia Juarez alone. Loren, she says, pulled the covers up to his chin and just lay there. But she insisted on getting up. Sometimes it would take her an hour to dress, but she made it. “They told me I had walking typhoid,” she says, “because I wouldn’t stay in bed.” And later, when she was a married woman with four small children, her husband suffered so violently from an attack of typhoid and was so weakened by the siege that he was sent off to a friend in California to recuperate and left Maud with her small family to face the opening year of the Revolution, 1911, alone.¹²

With polygamy so far behind the Mormons now, the straits into which one family could be forced with paralyzing suddenness by unchecked

disease in 1896 may seem somewhat ludicrous today, but it was no laughing matter to Joseph Albert Farnsworth's father at that time. Mr. Farnsworth was supposed to go out to El Paso for a conference on church matters, but he was obliged to send a message explaining that he could not make the appointment as he had twenty children down in bed, all sick with the measles. It took a valiant man to be a polygamist.¹³

If, in those same early days in Mexico, you were stricken with a raging toothache, you rode in a buggy over to Lester B. Farnsworth, who pulled teeth for everybody and set broken limbs without charge. Sometimes you did not have to go to him. He pulled a tooth for Bishop Marion Wilson's wife every time he went by her house. Hoping for better health, the poor lady wanted to have all her teeth out, but she could not stand to have more than one pulled at a time. Nobody could have been kinder and more sympathetic than Brother Farnsworth, and he obligingly deferred to the good lady's preference to die inch by inch rather than all once if it would please her better.¹⁴

Occasionally sickness called for desperate remedies. When Alma P. Spilsbury's children reached school age, he moved the family down from the mountain ranch to Colonia Juarez where the children could have opportunities of education. But he himself had to be away from home a good part of the time, freighting or hauling lumber. During one of his absences Mrs. Spilsbury's infant son, Monroe, became critically ill in the middle of the night. She called her small son Lem out of bed to see if he thought he could get across the river on a horse and bring some medicine for the baby. Lem ran out to the barn and bridled up a big strong pinto, which he rode out through the blackness directly into the swift stream. The water was high, and the current took them far down, but the pinto was a regular water dog, and Lem clung to his mane and made the trip over and back. The medicine was an aid in saving the baby that night, though he did not survive many days beyond.¹⁵

Such were a few of the troubles faced by the Mormon colonists in their early years in Mexico. But there were more serious ones. Even today, as one drives between Colonia Juarez and Casas Grandes, one may see, padding along the edge of the smooth asphalt, a figure or two that make a driver hit the brake pedal for a closer look. One sees half-naked thighs, uncombed hair hanging loosely about the shoulders, a dirty band of cloth around the forehead, and defiant eyes that challenge one's own—Indians from remote mountain villages, and their culture extends much farther into the past than their presence would indicate. They are not much removed from the stone age. If in 1964 they are still wild as hawks, what might they have been in 1885? The old journals give you the answers, and you can see fear between the leaves. Teresa Leavitt Richardson recorded the events of one trip in 1886.¹⁶

Six families were traveling together on their way to Mexico. As they passed Fort Apache in Arizona, they caught rumors of Indians on the warpath through the deserts ahead. Yet they pushed on slowly, driving a small herd of cattle before them. At dusk they made camp, fed their horses, set their cattle to grazing, and prepared supper over the open fires. As they paused before eating, to kneel in family prayers, a strange dog came out of the gathering darkness, sniffed around them, and then ran off again into the gloom.

"It looks as if we are going to have company tonight," said Charles Whiting. Then he and Elmer Cardon looked at each other and rose and walked off in the direction taken by the dog. They walked slowly, carefully, peering ahead into the mesquite thicket. And they barely missed stumbling right onto a small band of Indians, who were standing with their heads close together in tense discussion. The two Mormons sank flat to the ground and lay motionless. Then, as they watched, the council broke up and the Indians turned and walked away. They halted once for more talk, but soon continued to walk on and out of sight. Whiting and Cardon returned to their camp, where they found that nobody had touched a morsel of food, all having stood straining to listen for sounds of danger.

The men gathered in the horses and cattle and stood guard over them all night. And still many of the group felt no urge to eat, as fear gripped the camp. Just before dawn the guards heard the distant booming of rifles off in the direction in which the Indians had disappeared. Next day as the party moved on, they learned that Indians had raided an isolated ranch and killed two men during the night. The Mormon group felt sure that the Indians had seen all the members of their own party on their knees appealing for protection to the Great Spirit and had decided that this medicine might be very powerful and that they should not risk an attack. But for a full week the camp was without fires at night, and the wagons and herd were always driven off the road and hidden as carefully as possible.

But sometimes in those early days the crushing blows delivered by Nature made the raps of men seem easy to bear. Settlers in Colonia Diaz got a taste of what could happen when they built their town too close to the river bed. Apostle Teasdale foresaw the danger and dedicated a spot for settlement two miles west of the one on which the people had already begun to locate. His advice was sound, but no one wanted to tear down and commence over again in a land where every improvement, however inconsequential, seemed to be a skirmish won in the fight against hunger and destitution.¹⁷

Then when the spring floods began coming down the river, the whole town remembered the apostle's words. They had to work prodigiously to build a levee to keep the water out of their homes, and many a night's sleep

was broken by the call of the guard who patrolled the town. "Everybody, everybody out with your shovels! Water is running over the levee!" Sully Richardson remembered that so frequently did this call come that the children used to chant the alarm in play because it had created so much excitement in their darkened homes at night when the ominous, rhythmic call had gone echoing down sleeping streets.

The threats to Colonia Diaz became devastating realities in Colonia Oaxaca. This colony had been established in 1892 after an arduous trek over a very rough and rugged mountain on a road, part of which they had been obliged to gouge out themselves. Then they had to dig a long canal and put in a dam, which was soon washed out by a flood. To cap their troubles, they almost lost their land in a battle over titles and payments due. One might think that having survived these trials together, the people would be united and amicable. Instead, they were torn by strife and antagonisms.¹⁸

As months passed, their differences increased, until the Church sent Apostle John W. Taylor and some other authorities down to try to straighten things out. Taylor gave them a stern rebuke and a prophecy. "Now I say unto you unless you repent of your sins and become united, this land will become desolate and unfit for Latter-day Saints to live in and this very house in which we are holding this service will be used as a ranch house and a place for strangers to camp in."

For a few months thereafter things went smoothly. But the discovery of a rich gold deposit in nearby mountains created a market for their crops and plenty of jobs. And within a short time the quarreling and animosity came to life again. The rifts widened between families until the weather delivered them a blow which leveled them all.

Ethel Hawkins Mangum (daughter of Alma Hawkins), who was one of the girls living in Oaxaca at the time, told the story of what happened to Joel H. Martineau.¹⁹ In November of 1905, an unusually heavy snow storm fell in the mountain country about Chuichupa, the area where the headwaters of the Bavispe River rise. The snow lay two feet deep around the colony, but at higher elevations the snowfall was doubled. The storm had been very general, covering the whole drainage basin of the upper Bavispe River. Immediately following the snow storm came a spell of extremely unseasonable warm weather, which soon filled creeks, hollows, dry gullies—every depression to overflowing with melted snow water. Then came a prolonged, heavy rainstorm, a downpour that melted all of the remaining snow and sent canyons full of water rushing into the lowly Bavispe. The swiftly rising stream reached a height forty feet above normal, and this mighty current came swirling down on Colonia Oaxaca.

The town had been laid out on a slope gradually rising from the river bank to an elevation of fifty feet or more near the hill. The river bed was

naturally wide, as the channel wound sinuously past large groves of cottonwood, chino, catclaw, sycamore, and black willows. The bottom lands also grew thickets of mesquite, mulberries, and squaw berries. The fruits of these bushes had often supplied the colonists with food when times had been rough in their early days. The first homes on the slope had been built chiefly of the materials at hand, stockades with dirt floors and roofs.

Moroni Martineau had built one such house for a summer home, expecting to cut logs for a more permanent home before winter came. One night this house collapsed on the sleeping family under the stress of unusually heavy rain. Mrs. Hawkins, a neighbor, was awakened by a thin, high call for help, which was repeated. She roused her husband and the two of them hurried to the aid of the Martineaus. The roof with its burden of wet dirt had fallen on them as they slept. Miraculously they had not been brained by falling poles, but all of them were almost smothered with wet mud plastered over their faces and pressing them down.

The Hawkinses worked like demons to rescue the trapped family, straining at the tangle of poles and scraping mud away from them. But they did get them out, and the miserable group spent the remainder of the night huddled in the Hawkins lean-to, where there was scarce room enough to stand.

How the big flood came down the river is the stuff of which nightmares are composed. When the colonists went to bed the water was well within the old channel, but as the rain began to drive, the river rose rapidly. By nine the next morning it was boiling above high water mark. Everybody met on the river bank, visited, gossiped a little while, went home, and then came back for another look. At ten the water was outside its banks and flowing through the yards of the closest houses. Mrs. Hawkins sent Alma to get a team, and she drove with him over to Bettie Echols' place, where the water was lapping at her kitchen door. Bettie had just had a baby three days before. They loaded Bettie and her baby into the wagon with what household furniture they could carry out and moved her to higher ground.

By this time Aunt Ella Haynie's home was almost surrounded by water. Neighbors moved her as quickly as possible in order to be ready for the next family whose house was threatened. The water moved dark and ominous. Before noon those people who had moved first were obliged to move again. As in a nightmare all watched the water rise up the walls of a house, reach the eaves, and pause. Then the roof would begin to tremble, droop on one side, crash, turn over, and float away. Almost all of the houses followed that pattern, one after another. Aunt Pauline Naegle with her tiny, motherless granddaughter clasped in her arms, sat determinedly in her home refusing to leave it. But the water continued to rise all around her house, until finally two men picked her up and carried her out through

a current waist deep. She had to watch her beautiful house crumble in its turn. Days later her piano was excavated from the rubble and mud. Like her lovely flower garden, it was gone. Only a hulk remained.

As the afternoon wore on, people stood, exhausted and stunned, in front of the school house up on the hill, watching that awesome, brown flood roll past, carrying trees, roofs of houses, and barns, floating giddily along. They saw a box with a cat with kittens clinging to it. Now it dipped under, then bobbed up again, with the cats still clinging as it drifted out of sight. Here came a chicken house, and watchers could hear a game little rooster crowing defiance as his house slid on the current down the valley.

Just before darkness fell, someone remembered that there had been no flour among things salvaged from the store. Since the building was still standing, some of the men waded over to it with a little yellow pony and loaded him up, then returned with all each one could carry. They kept on making these trips until the water got so deep that the pony would have had to swim. But they saved enough flour to tide the community over.

No one was lost or seriously injured, though a small Nichols child, who had fallen asleep on a feather bed, was rescued just as the bed was about to float away. The water rose to within a few inches of the school house door, but the building remained intact and provided the homeless with a roof for the night. Everyone had made a bundle of blankets and food, just what could be carried on his back, and settled down to wait, watching to see if he would have to move to safety on still higher ground. People were all too exhausted to try to save furniture now.

Babies cried with hunger. Mothers hunted their children and had trouble keeping tab on restless little ones. Then Hawkins' old cow, Star, lowed in the brush near by. She was a godsend, for Mrs. Hawkins milked her and had a drink for many a hungry infant whose mother could not feed it that night.

As the darkness wore on, inch by inch the water receded. Across the valley on the opposite side of the wide-swollen river, one could see a pinpoint of light made by a fire where the warehouse keeper had gone for safety with his family. Families finally spread their blankets on the school-house floor, and looked at each other and waited. Then Brother Haynie said, "Now, ladies, when you are ready to go to bed, just say so, and we men will turn our backs to the wall." (He must have meant "faces.")

Morning found the danger gone. The water had dropped down into its channel again and only a muddy, discouraged stream slid by. Where the Hawkins house had stood, even the soil was gone, and sixteen feet of pump pipe stood in the air. Mr. Hawkins' young orchard had completely disappeared, his alfalfa was under yards of sand. The store building had not washed away, but all of the goods were damaged. Nichols' pigs were taken down from the branches of trees where they had lodged and clung all night.

At the time of this flood most of the men of the village were away from home with their teams on the primary occupation of the area, hauling ore from the mountains to Casas Grandes. And those who were not out hauling ore were off on a cattle round-up. When all of these poor fellows returned, they were stunned to find, not homes, but beds of muddy gravel. Their homes, fields, fences, ditches, trees, and berry patches had all been washed away. They could hardly tell where their own hearths had lain. No one had the heart to try to rebuild the town. Indeed, the location was now worthless. Only the schoolhouse and a few isolated buildings were left, and Brother Taylor's prophecy seemed to be fulfilled. The place was now a lonely camping spot for travelers. The colony was no more.

After surviving the devastations of floods, the anguish and privation attendant upon crop failures, the fear and loss of lives from Indian raids, the ravages of disease, and the bone-wearying toil of building homes, schools, churches, businesses, and all the rest that it takes to make self-sufficient communities rise out of the prairie sod, the Mormon settlers at last began to enjoy security, and, one might say, even a good measure of prosperity. But then the ironies of existence fell heavily across their lives once again. For the Mexican revolution, which began to stir in 1910, blasted their peace in 1912 and caused most of the colonists to abandon practically all they possessed as they returned once more to the United States, to begin life anew under the protection of the government which they had fled twenty-seven years before. Many of those refugees, however, drifted back to their homes in Chihuahua, and the hardships of the second decade of the 1900's constitute another story which deserves to be told. The author of this account intends to present that story in a book, *Ordeal in Mexico*.

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1. Memoirs of Annie Richardson Johnson, related to the author, Feb. 1962, Mesa, Ariz.
 2. Memoirs of Edmund W. Richardson, related to the author, Feb. 1962, Thatcher, Ariz.
 3. *Ibid.*
 4. Memoirs of Arwell L. Pierce, related to the author, Feb. 1962, El Paso, Texas.
 5. From the diary of Levi M. Savage as quoted in J. H. Martineau, "History of the Mormon Colonies in Mexico," an unpublished ms. No. 4, p. 31. The story has been retold by the author.
 6. Memoirs of Arwell L. Pierce, related to the author, Feb. 1962, El Paso, Texas.
 7. Private papers of Nelle Spilbury Hatch, Colonia Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico.
- All references to the Spilbury women in this article come from the same collection of papers.

8. Retold from account by Ruby Spilsbury Brown, as recorded by Nelle S. Hatch, *op. cit.*
9. Private papers of Maud Taylor Bentley, El Paso, Texas, pp. 40–41.
10. John Jacob Walser, “Family Record,” a typewritten account, p. 16.
11. Memoirs of Lemuel H. Spilsbury, related to the author, Colonia Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico, March 1962.
12. Maud Taylor Bentley, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–25.
13. Memoirs of Joseph Albert Farnsworth, related to the author, December 1962, Mesa, Ariz.
14. Memoirs of Lester B. Farnsworth, related to the author, December 1962, Mesa, Ariz.
15. Nelle S. Hatch, *op. cit.*
16. Retold from an account by Teresa Leavitt Richardson in J. H. Martineau, *op. cit.* No. 4, pp. 26–27.
17. J.H. Martineau, *op. cit.* No. 4, pp. 65–66.
18. J. H. Martineau, *op. cit.* No. 15, p. 11.
19. J. H. Martineau, *op. cit.* No. 15 pp. 10–20 *passim*.