

Encounter

Horace Greeley Interrogates Brigham Young

By Peter Carlson

WHEN HORACE GREELEY STEPPED OFF A STAGECOACH in Salt Lake City on a sunny July day in 1859, he carried an umbrella and wore a white suit, a white overcoat and a white hat. It was an odd outfit for a hot day in the desert, but it was Greeley's trademark attire, just as the white suit would later become the trademark of Mark Twain and Colonel Sanders, the fried chicken baron. They all enjoyed being noticed.

These days, Greeley is chiefly remembered for popularizing the expression "Go west, young man," but in 1859, he was America's most famous journalist, the crusading editor of the *New York Tribune*, a newspaper that circulated across the country and was frequently

used to wallpaper the cabins of Western pioneers. That summer, Greeley, 48, took his own advice and traveled from New York to San Francisco, writing dispatches for the *Tribune* along the way.

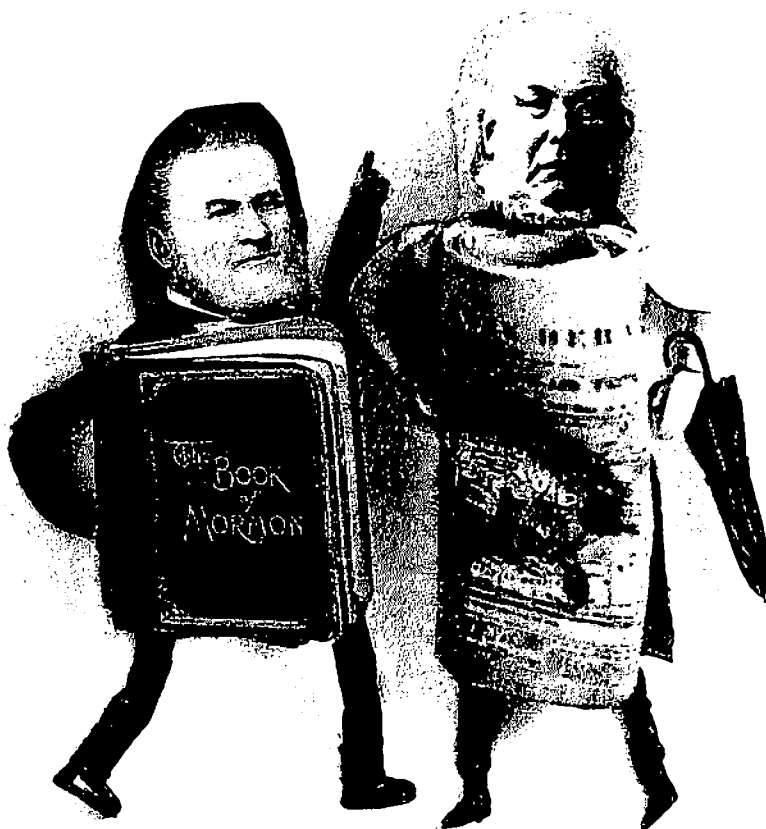
The trip was rough. In Colorado, a group of Cheyenne buffalo hunters

galloped past the stagecoach, spooking the mules that pulled it and causing a crash that left Greeley bleeding from his face, arms and legs. He spent two weeks recovering in Denver, where he was asked to make a speech in the barroom of a gambling hall and responded with a spirited anti-drinking, anti-gambling oration. Then he headed to Salt Lake City to meet Brigham Young, president of the Mormon Church and one of the most controversial men in America.

After a mob murdered Mormon founder Joseph Smith in Illinois in 1844, Young led the much-persecuted flock of faithful who called themselves Latter-Day Saints to the Territory of Utah, which he ruled as an autocratic theocracy. In 1857, Mormon militias clashed with federal troops and, in an incident known as the Mountain Meadows Massacre, killed 120 non-Mormons who were traveling through Utah en route to California.

But what really shocked Americans was Young's revelation that God had instructed the Latter-Day Saints to practice polygamy.

Naturally, Greeley was eager to meet this "American Moses" and he arranged for an interview at Young's house in Salt Lake City. "He was very plainly dressed in thin summer clothing, and with no air of sanctimony



or fanaticism," Greeley wrote. "In appearance, he is a portly, frank, good-natured, rather thick-set man of fifty-five, seeming to enjoy life, and be in no particular hurry to get to heaven." One of Young's associates was less kind in describing Greeley: The editor "looked as though he had not washed his head since he came off the plains."

Young led Greeley to an upstairs parlor and introduced him to several Mormon elders. Then the two men talked for two hours while Greeley scribbled notes. His account of the meeting was published in the *Tribune* on August 20, 1859, and reprinted around the world. Today, historians consider it the first newspaper Q&A interview ever published.

Like many future interviewers, Greeley started with a softball question: "Am I to regard Mormonism as a new religion, or simply as a new development in Christianity?"

"We hold that there can be no true Christian Church without a priesthood directly commissioned by and in immediate communication with the Son of God," Young replied. "Such a church is the Latter-Day Saints. We know of no other that even pretends to have present and direct revelations of God's will."

Does that mean, Greeley asked, that you regard all other churches as heretical?

"Yes, substantially," Young replied.

Greeley asked a few more theological questions, then brought up the most divisive issue of the age: "What is the position of your church with regard to slavery?"

"We consider it of divine institution," Young replied, "and not to be abolished until the curse pronounced on Ham shall have been removed from his descendants."

"Do your territorial laws uphold slavery?"

"Those laws are printed—you can read them for yourself," Young replied.

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"If slaves are brought here by those who owned them in the States, we do not favor their escape from the service of those owners."

"Am I to infer that Utah, if admitted as a member of the federal union, will be a slave state?"

"No, she will be a free state," Young said. The church leader explained that his objections to slavery were financial, not moral. "Slavery here would prove useless and unprofitable. I regard it as a curse to the masters. I myself hire many laborers and pay them fair wages. I could not afford to own them. I can do better than subject myself to an obligation to feed and clothe their families, to provide and care for them in sickness and health. Utah is not adapted to slave labor."

Greeley asked Young why the Mormons had been persecuted across America: "Can you give me any rational explanation of the aversion and hatred with which your people are generally regarded by those among whom they have lived?"

"No other explanation than is afforded by the crucifixion of Christ and the kindred treatment of God's ministers, prophets and saints of all ages," Young replied.

Greeley did not mention the Mountain Meadows Massacre but he did ask about the quasi-official Mormon vigilante squads known as the "Danites" or "Destroying Angels."

"I know of no such persons or organization," Young responded,

untruthfully. "I hear of them only in the slanders of our enemies."

Of course, Greeley raised the subject of polygamy. "Is the system of your church acceptable to the majority of its women?"

"They could not be more averse to it than I was when it was first revealed to us as the divine will," Young replied. "I think they generally accept it, as I do, as the will of God."

"What is the largest number of wives belonging to any one man?"

"I have fifteen," Young said. "I know of no one who has more. But some of those sealed to me are old ladies whom I regard rather as mothers than wives, but whom I have taken home to cherish and support."

At this point, the interview apparently degenerated into a debate about polygamy and women's rights. "I will not attempt to report our talk on this subject," Greeley wrote, because "I could hardly give it impartially."

But Greeley did report that he told Young that he was appalled that no Mormon man he'd met had even mentioned his wives, and that "no Mormon has ever cited to me his wife's or any woman's opinion on any subject."

To that, Young replied: "If I did not consider myself competent to transact a certain business without taking my wife's or any woman's counsel with regard to it, I think I ought to let that business alone."

That statement, Greeley wrote, was a fair summation of the Mormon attitude toward women.

Back in his hotel, Greeley wrote up the interview, ending his dispatch with a passionate denunciation of polygamy: "Let any such system become established and prevalent," he wrote, "and Woman will soon be confined to the harem, and her appearance in the street with unveiled face will be accounted immodest."