JOHN BENNION

Filling the Great Basin: Community and Environmental Practice

Magpies and Lambs

Outside the window of my sister's ranch house, magpies are squawking. They're after the dog food, so I open the door and eight of them fly away. Acquisitive, they will eat all the food, bags of it, while the dog and the cat will eat enough and no more.

My sister and her husband are traveling, so I'm doing the chores—watering the garden, feeding the lambs, chickens, and steers, checking on the cattle. I'm also working on this essay, a discussion of my Mormon ancestors' desire to fill the desert with animals and people, obeying what they considered a divine injunction to make the desert "blossom as the rose." This was a difficult proposition because a distinguishing characteristic of this area is its aridness; the Great Basin lies in the rain shadow of the Sierra Nevada. Roses take considerable water to flourish.

My sister inherited the Greenjacket Ranch from our parents, Colin and Sergene, who inherited it from my father's father, Glynn, who inherited it from his father, Israel, who built this house on his land in the southern end of Rush Valley, Utah, on the eastern edge of the basin and range province of the western United States. Across the creek from where I sit is a cluster of cedars where a Goshute, Chief Greenjacket, and his small band wintered. They lived for generations on this land without remaking it in the image of wetter lands. A couple of miles up the canyon lies the stone foundation of a cabin built by my great-great-grandfather, John, for his two lesser wives, Esther

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Ann and Mary, so they could watch over his herds. If it hadn't been for Greenjacket, those two women would not have survived their first winter here. I measure the lines of tension between these and other points of settlement across this end of the valley, a web of my family's history.

The lambs have free access to a lawn and a 10-acre field of alfalfa but are as acquisitive as the magpies; they have a taste for chard. Yesterday, acting as a committee of six, they pushed the gate over and crowded inside the plastic-covered greenhouse, munching away. After I kicked them out, they thrust their noses into holes in the plastic and pushed, greedy for the forbidden taste, until their heads and bodies were back inside. Cows and sheep will eat themselves to death. Deer, on the other hand, have the same four-compartment, ruminant stomachs but will not kill themselves by gorging.

What order of animal are we, the men and women in the tribe of Bennion, and what should I do with my inheritance from my predecessors in this dry land?

Redeeming the Desert

My great-great-grandfather, John Bennion, lived in Wales until, as a young man, he was called before the magistrate for poaching. One Sunday, truant from church, he had wandered across the neighboring estate with his friends, and their dog took one of the local lord's rabbits. Rather than face the magistrate, John ran away to Liverpool. Later he converted to Mormonism and planned to sail to America, where he hoped to become more prosperous than his day-laboring and tenant-farming progenitors. His first effort to board a ship was thwarted, apparently because only married men were allowed passage, so he returned to Wales, married a neighbor woman, Esther Wainwright, and sailed. In 1847, he left lush Nauvoo for the Rocky Mountains. He took Esther, his brother and father, a gray mare, two cows, two heifers, seven sheep, and all the seeds he could carry.

During the trek west, he lost the two cows and six of the sheep as he trailed through a difficult and foreign landscape. His father also died during this arduous journey. Brigham Young named these pioneers the Camp of Israel, but unlike the ancient people, they didn't have to wander in the wilderness for 40 years, just a few months. Regardless, John complained that "traveling through this wilderness is toilsome and wearisome" (H. Bennion 32). He chafed against being part of a large and cumbersome company and worried about scarce feed and water for his animals. But the "most disagreeable of all" was

that "the dust arising from so many teams almost at times suffocated man and beast." Still he and Esther persevered in moving westward.

Finally, on October 5, 1847, 106 years before the day I was born, their company entered the valley of the Great Salt Lake. As a youth, I was taught that their new home was barren, growing only sagebrush, and that it took faith to begin farming and miracles to make the desert blossom. However, this was not the landscape John perceived. He wrote his sister-in-law that a "large and beautiful valley [has been] provided for us about 20 miles wide and 60 long" (H. Bennion 33). While he observed snow on the tops of the mountains, he said that in the valley, they were blessed with "a moderate and pleasant atmosphere, rich soil, and beautiful streams bursting from the mountains." God had provided these resources to enable growth of the Mormons; nothing could impede them. "Every man has as much land set off to him as he wants or can cultivate." John explored nearby valleys and imagined his people spreading across the width and length of the Great Basin. That first winter, without enough time to grow crops and reluctant to kill valuable livestock, he took food from the land, "Indian fashion," and lived on "meat, roots and herbs and such things as the country affords." Esther caught fish, and John went to the canyons for "mutton or mountain sheep" (H. Bennion 36). This was a temporary measure: the Mormons had come in such numbers that they couldn't live solely off the land, as various tribes of Utes had done before them. They needed to farm crops and raise livestock, methods of living they had practiced in other lands.

John, Esther, and their fellow pioneers believed that the wilderness needed to be transformed to be useful. Human labor, divinely inspired and directed, would make the valleys of the West fruitful. For the pioneers, plowing was an act of replenishment. Irrigation, which John's ancestors never had to worry about in Wales, was the same, an act of replenishing the ground: "We have to do our raining in the summer months ourselves by using streams that come gushing from the mountains to run over the land. We have little or no rain in summer in this country" (H. Bennion 36).

In July 1851, John wrote his relatives, the "[f]ertility of the soil surpasses anything I have before witnessed. You would hardly credit it if I were to tell you the crops that were raised last year" (35). In Wales, he had helped his father work land that had been farmed for around 4,000 years, but no one had performed large-scale cultivation of the soil in their new home. Farming in this arid place took skill. He wrote, "In some cases there were great failures. This was like a new world for farming and some try one way and some another. Some had hundreds of bushels of grain to sell after harvest and some had none" (35). He

believed that, given freedom to expand, men find their own level, as with the biblical parable of the talents.

Brigham Young and other leaders taught that righteousness was linked to labor and prosperity. In 1873, Brother Brigham preached:

> Let the people be holy, and the earth under their feet will be holy . . . the soil of the earth will bring forth in its strength, and the fruits thereof will be meat for man. The more purity that exists, the less the strife; the more kind we are to our animals, the more will peace increase, and the savage nature of the brute creation vanish away. (*Journal of Discourses* 1: 203)

Brother Brigham, as his people called him, preached that the land and animals were holy, but that human righteousness would transform both. The evidence of the pioneers' kindness would be bountiful production. If the people were disobedient, the condition of the land would regress to desert, just as it had with the original Israelites. Brother Brigham said the Lord could "cause the water of every stream in this valley to sink deep into the bowels of the earth . . . and the clouds would gather no more moisture, and no more rain would fall on the earth" (JD 16: 113). This would cause the trees and gardens to "become dust. And be blown into some other country, and the rocks would be left bare, as they are in some of the eastern lands." Here, Brigham Young referred to the belief that Palestine and other Middle Eastern lands became barren as a consequence of God's displeasure. This and others of his sermons are double-edged proclamations. Pioneers would know from their increase in prosperity that they were righteous, but they were to exercise restraint with the use of the resources. Within this paradigm, my ancestor and other Mormon pioneers sought dominion over the land and animals and over the indigenous peoples inhabiting the area. John followed the scriptural injunction to "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28, King James Version).

I have read these scriptural imperatives as stages of a unified act; in this formula, being fruitful and multiplying requires subduing, and enables a benevolent dominion. If I think about the formula the Goshutes used for a thousand years, it seems that living out their lives didn't require the earth to be subdued. They ate rodents, antelope, grasshoppers, a medley of 80 different species of roots, tubers, nuts, and bulbs. Dominion has generally implied force—plowing desert or prairie sod, cutting down forests, harvesting fish and animals en

masse, draining the nutrients from soil without obligation of returning them; subduing, in the absence of the recognition and fulfillment of those obligations, can be contradictory to replenishment. This apparent contradiction, however, didn't exist for John; for him, replenishing meant replacing what was native with what was useful—the wild plant with the pliant crop, the buffalo with the cow, the wolf with the domesticated dog.

Do the math: one cow becomes two, then four, eight, 16, and so forth. The progression for sheep is faster—one, three, nine, 27. Potential limits to John's herds were the health of the rangeland and the price he could get for the lambs and calves, which fell to almost nothing when there were tens of thousands more animals in the valleys of Utah Territory than people could use. Still, John and other herd owners let them breed. I have felt this same desire in my blood. While I was in my 30s, I had a small herd of cattle, and I loved watching them graze, turning raw material of the earth into muscle and fat, and give birth to calves that would also grow. I understand the desire for abundant recompense for the hardship of pioneering in an arid land.

Because early pioneers, Mormon or not, judged western forage by the bounty of the lands they had just left, they had little reason to suspect that the native grasses would be destroyed by two years of overgrazing. Also, John's main concern at first was survival, not whether he might damage the land God had given him. As the forage became depleted in western Salt Lake Valley, John wrote, "[T]he drouth and grasshoppers together have caused a scarcity of pasturage near home so that many persons are driving their stock to new pasture in other vallies for the winter" (Rodgers 119). However, the West seemed inexhaustible and this scarcity didn't disturb his faith in the formula he believed God had given him: fill the land and God will replenish.

John's natural propensity to gather resources and make himself like an English lord worked against discretion. In "A Pioneer Cattle Venture of the Bennion Family," my grandfather Glynn estimated that "by 1855, the cow herd had grown so large—as had other herds in Salt Lake Valley—that the range was becoming noticeably overgrazed" (G. Bennion 318). Some church members saw the danger. On January 14, 1857, an editorialist to the *Deseret News* wrote, "Economy dictates the keeping only such and so many animals as each individual can profitably manage and provide for without depending upon the great uncertainty of winter range. On some ranges cattle are already dying of starvation" (Astroth and Frischknecht 41). Orson Hyde, a Mormon leader, decried the destruction of the range. In 1865, he preached,

> There is no profit in this, neither is it pleasing in the sight of God our Heavenly Father that we should continue a course of life like unto this. . . . I do say, that a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of things that he possesses, nor upon the vast amount he extends his jurisdiction over, but it consists in a little well cared for, and everything in order. (Kay and Brown 262)

Sermons like this provided doctrinal support for restraint and careful stewardship, but the desire to succeed in this new land worked against discretion.

As the grazing diminished, John sought new rangeland. In a letter to his first wife's parents, he wrote:

> About one year ago [in 1863] I with a few others took a few days journey in a South West direction beyond the settlements in search of better grasing country soon after I moved my sheep cattle & horses out there, I am now well satisfied that it was a move in the right direction, our live stock wintered well, by getting their own living, I now have a flock of 1150 sheep about 70 of cattle and about 20 head of horses. (Rodgers 136)

This new grazing land was in Rush Valley, and he sent his two younger wives—my ancestor Esther Ann Birch (the name "Ann" was added by Brigham Young on her marriage to John to distinguish her from his first wife) and Mary Turpin—to provide a home for the herders. Their first winter in Rush Valley, Esther Ann and Mary lived in dugouts, more trenches than proper homes, and each gave birth to a son. Seeing their plight and knowing how deep the snow would get in the mouth of the canyon where they were trying to settle, Goshute Chief Greenjacket brought them into his homes lower on the flat for the winter.

Despite her sacrifices in the Salt Lake and Rush Valleys and elsewhere, Esther Ann supported the colonization of the Great Basin. She believed that one of her life's missions was to aid the pioneering effort through her poetry, which is a form many nineteenth-century Mormon women used to further the ideological work of building communities. Among Esther Ann's 45 extant poems are poems that shore up faith, build fellowship, comfort the bereaved, and bear witness of God's love and His approval of their sacrifices. For example, she wrote a poem, "To Mary," trying to convince her sister wife to think positively about their trials in Rush Valley. The first stanza describes their children, "Bright as the summer flowers," playing about the doorway of

the cabin eventually built for them. She writes, "though we may sigh for the social life. . . . We have found many pleasures in duty's path" ("To Mary"). She admits discouragement but only to move past it: "Sometimes we feel we are banished, Mary," looking toward the east "With longing, wistful eye." They sometimes felt "shut out / From friends and kindred dear." But this is momentary because "Our duty calls us here." Words that could represent bitterness about her lot —"banished," "longing," and "duty"—have been translated into the service of the family dream. She translates potential anger or discouragement into terms that build community.

It feels ironic to me that her support of her husband's dream enabled the herds to keep growing, despite the damage done through putting many more animals on the mountains and flats than the native plants could support. In Rush Valley, western wheatgrass was the main species of grass at the time, but there was also bluebunch wheatgrass, Sandberg bluegrass, thickspike wheatgrass, Indian ricegrass, bottlebrush squirreltail, and Great Basin wildrye. In addition to these, forbs were also abundant: Utah sweetvetch, longleaf phlox, hoary phlox, low fleabane, desert globemallow, groundsel, hawksbeard, false dandelion, and others (Astroth and Frischknecht 4). These grasses were so thick that one Bennion, in an interview done through the Works Projects Administration, observed that many settlers refused to cut hay as insurance against a bad winter because they thought the range would never run out (Astroth and Frischknecht 41). However, just as had happened around Salt Lake City, the land around Mormon villages was overgrazed as animals spread across the Great Basin, and this ring of ruined land spread outward in each valley (41). My grandfather Glynn writes that the grassland, which had developed for centuries, lasted until about 1875, when the "range was so badly depleted that cows were calving only every other year" (G. Bennion 319). John, like most settlers of the West, was guilty of wanting more from the land than it could give. Glynn again: "They had no idea what the carrying capacity of desert ranges might be, nor gave any thought to the harm that might be done to such dry ranges when repeated cropping was permitted during the short season of green growth in the spring" (316).

According to Stephen Trimble in *The Sagebrush Ocean: A Natural History of the Great Basin,* desert plants are survivors: they are dormant much of the dry season; they have deep roots and few leaves, and those few they have are covered with hairs or wax to reduce transpiration, many of which open their pores to carbon dioxide in the night, avoiding further evaporation of moisture (24). Even with these measures, low precipitation (with most of it falling in the winter, when

plants can't use it), extreme swings of temperatures, and rapid evaporation rates narrows the window of propagation (19). Their success depends on producing many seeds. These seeds have hard casings that enable them to survive the dry season, sprouting only when water is available, often late in the summer. Still it only took a few years for overgrazing to interrupt this cycle (24).

After the perennial polyculture of grass and forbs was destroyed in Rush Valley, John had to look elsewhere for forage. In "Grazing in Utah: A Historical Perspective," Charles S. Peterson describes the flood of cattle leaving the Great Basin and flowing into eastern Utah (306). John moved his 2,000 head of cattle a hundred miles east to Castle Valley in the San Rafael Swell. My great-grandfather Israel was 15 when his father chose him and another teenaged boy to manage this herd. Three years later John died, and the two young men emerged with only 1,700 animals, despite the fact that they had branded 700 calves a year. Unable to envision a way of managing that herd successfully, Israel's older brothers decided the family should sell the cattle. One Bennion descendant summed up the general situation:

> Rush valley was all a beautiful meadow of grass when we came here with stock in 1860; but in less than 15 years she was all et out, and we had to move to Castle Valley. There you have the history of western grazing in a nutshell. If the range be considered the principal part of the grazers' capital stock, then we grazers have just about finished consuming our capital. (Astroth and Frischknecht 42)

It could be that the problem was ranching itself; many environmentalists, if given the choice, would eradicate all cattle from the West. However, it can also be seen as a problem of scope, that the grassland might have continued if John and others had limited the numbers of their animals. But for complex reasons, they didn't restrain their acquisitive impulse, and the inheritance of the second generation of Bennions in Utah was a landscape without the resources it once had.

A Diminished Landscape

While his father had ranged from the Old World to the New, farming and running livestock in Wales, Nauvoo, the Salt Lake Valley, southern Rush Valley, and southeastern Nevada, my great-grandfather Israel restricted his agricultural endeavors to the area near Vernon, Utah, where I grew up. He never moved his residence farther than eight miles from that center. The open range was destroyed and most

of the arable land had been claimed by the previous generation, so his scope was much smaller by necessity. Also, I wonder if part of the reason he stayed put was that he had become tired of moving as a child and then as a young man. He observed what ranging did to women and children. He and his mother had often lived in primitive conditions away from settled communities. This practice was difficult enough for adults, but it was especially damaging for young people. As a youth Israel was perennially on the verge of starvation, which probably stunted his growth, and he also spent months that gathered into years alone with herds of sheep or cattle. In his journal Israel declared, "[S]heepherding has proven a curse to the youth of Zion. It is simply an exchange of souls for money; and our towns and villages are drained of their strength" (I. Bennion *Journals* 1 Dec. 1894). His experience with loneliness made him long for a stable community.

His desire to make the desert blossom as an English rose, an aspiration that Israel inherited from his father, involved not just plowing the land and breeding livestock, but establishing Zion, the community of the Saints on earth. Both men served as leaders, and Israel's journal is full of descriptions of his efforts to unify his town. This follows what Brigham Young taught, that people should bind themselves to other members of their community socially, economically, and spiritually. In *Mormon Country*, Wallace Stegner writes that Mormons used a pattern of "group living, completely at variance with the normal history of the West. The American Dream as historians define it did not fit these whiskered zealots. Theirs was a group dream, not an individual one; a dream of Millennium, not of quick fortune" (63). According to Stegner, first came "an idea—the idea of the Heavenly City, the New Jerusalem. . . . The Mormons, being a practical people, a building people, a planning and organizing people, put the idea into adobe and wood and stone" (25). Every village was a "prototype of the divinely-ordered city" (23). This practice demonstrated "the advantages of orderly town building over the hit-and-miss squatting that characterized the usual western settlement" (28).

According to Stegner, the settlers were commanded by their leaders to "retain and increase the group consciousness by common labor and common living" (Stegner 30). Being united was central, which was the theme of much of the poetry written by Esther Ann Bennion and many other Mormon women. Brigham Young preached, "A city of one hundred thousand or a million of people could be united into a perfect family, and they would work together as beautifully as the different parts of the carding machine work together" (JD 16:170). If they were cooperative, they would establish the Kingdom of God on earth. He knew that this melding of diverse people would be

difficult; many of the converts came from mines in northern England and Wales, and had lived in the dark, in poverty, and without good education. He expounded,

> We take the poorest we can find on earth . . . to make ladies and gentlemen of them. We are trying to educate them, to school their children, and to so train them that they may be able to gather around them the comforts of life, that they may pass their lives as the human family should do—that their days, weeks, and months may be pleasant to them. (JD 14:103)

Israel still believed the myth of prosperity and divine destiny, but poor fields and pastures, straitened resources, forced him to draw back. Whether or not he would have been as acquisitive as his father in different circumstances, Israel was forced to recognize that moderation and creativity were essential to survival. An outwardly gentle man, he ironically found himself constantly in conflict with his neighbors over land and water. And with an average of two cubic feet per second of stream flow for 1,100 acres in an arid, high plateau (John Wesley Powel wrote that one cubic foot of water per second could irrigate 100 acres), the people of his Mormon village had to farm on faith, and thus conflict came often.

His primary mode of conservatism was to reduce the scope of his aspirations. In 1894, he wrote that before undertaking any project or business, he would determine, first, whether it would interfere with his Church duties, and "[s]econd, [would] it interfere with the mental, moral or physical growth of myself or family? Including habits of cleanliness and order" (I. Bennion *Journals* 25 Feb. 1894). He went on to give himself a rule for the size of his herd: "The number of stock kept should correspond with the extent of shelter and the amount of feed. . . . Where practicable, pasturage is cheaper than feeding. . . . Pasturing too closely is not good for next year's crop" (25 Feb. 1894).

Making do, he learned how to be a good steward, observing what worked and what didn't. In May 1895, he wrote that he and his neighbors wasted water by "neglecting to properly prepare our ground" (*Journals* 21 May 1895). He also tried to replenish the topsoil: "Two years ago I began making use, in a small way, of the muddy spring water to fertilize my land: I now intend to utilize it in that way on a larger scale and to advocate the plan to my neighbors, as I am fully persuaded there's thousands of dollars per year in it for Vernon" (*Journals* 1 March 1895). He also made brush and sod dams in old gulches and used the muddy water to begin filling the eroded ditch back in. This improvement seems less significant when I realize that

the benefit to the lowland depended on erosion along the streambed, caused by overgrazing and by straightening the creek that had once meandered across six miles of prairie to Vernon. He burned sagebrush in dry years and held cows off during growing season. Astroth and Frischknecht report that after Israel followed this practice for a few years, the "whole burnt area would return to bluestem and bunchgrass" (42). He decided one watering was enough for grain, writing that this method would make fewer expenses and greater profits. He also wrote, "Better preparation of the soil, and attention to the times and seasons, are needed" (*Journals* 2 July 1895). He also tried to get the Vernon people to move closer to the source of water.

In 1895, he wrote, "I think, where people settle away out on the 'sinks' of a creek, drying up the water in long, gravelly, creek beds, the state should condemn their operations, pay them for their claims, and make room for more enterprising homeseekers" (*Journals* 22 June 1895). He and his associate James Skidmore established a community much closer to the source of water at the mouth of Bennion creek. This time the draw was not only the promise of increased irrigation water, but also a new idea—dry farming on the bench land below the mountains. Naming their new town Benmore, they and other settlers built homes, plowed fields, planted orchards, and deep-plowed extensive land for dry farming. At the town's peak, there were 187 residents and Israel donated water and trees for a park (Beard 28–30). Israel wrote:

> My motives are about thus: I want this waste place of Zion redeemed; I want the poor Saints provided with homes; I want living here made tolerable *now*; (not 10 yrs hence) these certain steps in advancement must come to fruition, or, we—slide back. (When on slippery ground keep a going, till you reach a resting place) These steps to take are: School, post office, Ward [congregation] organization. These,—or down we go; these,—and we win. (*Journals* 23–24 April 1915)

His father might have written this, except for the tone, which seems more desperate. Israel didn't have his father's confidence in unlimited resources. Still, as many other Mormon settlers had done before, Israel predicted that if inhabitants shared according to righteous principles that God would bless them by increasing the flow of the streams.

However, the streams didn't increase, and the deep plowing required by dry farming finished off the perennial forbs and grasses on the benches and enabled erosion. Israel chose to sacrifice what seemed weak grassland for the promise of bountiful grain, and consequently, his idea for a righteous community failed with the crops. Like his father, Israel's big plans were thwarted by naïve implementation, the exigencies of nature, and even a certain loveable haplessness.

By the end of World War I, the town had collapsed. Israel wrote out his discouragement in his journal:

> This has been a hard year for Benmore. Most Utah towns have something to sell, at war prices; and therefore have money. We have been hit by drouth; and besides, for various reasons, (mine, building) no crops have been raised this year. Thus we have bought, at war prices. The remedy is to sell, not buy. The result: nearly all Benmore people moved to city or mining camp, for work, for the winter. (*Journals* 11 January 1918)

While dry farming was unsustainable because the area had much less than the required 20 inches of rain per year, ultimately World War I was the proximate force that undid his hope to create a community based on faith and cooperation: "In the stress of war, and the unsatisfactory peace that followed, Benmore disintegrated. One family after another moved away. The crops were not good, help was scarce, the work couldn't be done; and all the while the easier life, shorter hours of labor, and bigger pay of the city, was an irresistible lure" (*Journals* 1 January 1919). Where the dry farms had been, halogeton, Russian thistle, and cheat grass, all exotic and aggressive species, moved in, making it even more difficult for the land to return to a state of perennial polyculture.

Israel saw the problem of living in the West not as an economic problem but as a spiritual one. I think it was systemic: he and his neighbors had reached and surpassed the absolute ceiling of water availability. Still Israel thought the solution was an increase in righteousness. In 1896, Israel commented on a conflict over water: "I feel that at the bottom of this, as well as many of our difficulties, is too great love for the things of this world. . . . A dollar is allowed precedence of the love and fellowship of our brother" (*Journals* 11 May 1896). The opposition he sets up is particular to him and other religious people—the things of this world versus the things of heaven—but it may be worthwhile to look at his idea that money motive drives out other considerations. He also wrote,

> We are educated to think that another's loss is our gain. The idea of gain to both is, in our philosophy, adverse to all law and reason. We are in need of a higher education, a broader philanthropy, a deeper philosophy, a charitable, brotherly, Christianity; "each man seeking the

> interest of his neighbor;" "preferring another, in honor, before ourselves." This would tend to bring about harmony in matters pertaining to irrigation and also in a number of other directions. (*Journals* 16 May 1896)

Later that year, he wrote more about the economic impact of greed, observing that current tensions in the country caused by recession and political conflict (between the "capitalists" and the "masses") warrant careful consideration: "It is a time to learn and practice wisdom, self-restraint, prudence; accord, to all, freedom of opinion; pay courteous attention to opponents; respect ideas, and men, that are worthy of respect; bear injury, patiently; subdue passion, cultivate charity, while seeing truth, and shunning evil, yet love all men" (26 Oct. 1896). He spent his life hoping for a Zion community, something he never achieved to his own satisfaction.

From my ancestors I learn about scope in the West, where water is a limit to population growth. I also begin to hope, maybe in contradiction to much of Israel's experience, that communities who respect their members and reverence the land they live on may find ways to thrive in the arid west. As I consider how to expand on Israel's philosophical statements about economics and community in his journal, I turn to another Victorian, John Ruskin, who was born 40 years earlier. Their ideals of practical economics, moderation, and balance are similar. Ruskin provides intellectual support for my own project—building an environmental and economic ethic that uses as a foundation the Mormon theology of cooperation among inhabitants of a geographical area. Throughout the lectures gathered in *Unto This Last*, Ruskin argues against the predominant economic theory that saw managers and workers as being naturally at odds. Instead, a community should pursue a "system of frank communication and of helpful labour," rather than one of "secrecy and of enmity." Happiness and wealth are "diminished in proportion to the degree in which jealousy and concealment became their social and economical principles" (76–77). Good economics is good humanity, the recognition that all people have a right to necessities such as food, clothing, and habitation. He blames political economists for suggesting that the affections of people for their neighbors in a community are "accidental and disturbing elements in human nature" and that "avarice and the desire of progress are constant elements." Such economists wanted to disregard communal emotions and to consider each human being as "a covetous machine," one whose eyes focus on nothing but the accumulation of wealth (127). The result in today's generation is a mixed culture in Utah and probably in our nation, those motivated by either environmental

idealism or the practical love of land which has been cared for by generations of farmers and ranchers, and some, many of whom have tremendous power, who know more about gambling with potential wealth than they do about the proper ordering of a house, garden, or field. Respect for the land that gives them life is an area where environmentalists and agriculturists could discover commonality.

Ruskin asserts that a system that only allows faith in antagonistic interest is not a good system; however, one which includes "such affection as one man *owes* to another," will more generally promote "right relations" (130). A system that treats individuals as parts of a soulless machine will not succeed, nor will one that focuses on the accumulation of wealth in the hands of individuals (144).

In many ways, Wendell Berry is John Ruskin's intellectual grandchild. In *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*, Berry recognizes the difficulty of fashioning a community that participates in natural culture and resists acquisitiveness: "sustainable use of renewable resources depends on the existence of settled, small local economies and communities capable of preserving the local knowledge necessary for good farming and forestry" (29). Local ownership, he claims, does away with the extraction and profit mentality. As Israel did, Berry believes that proportion is important, the right size of fields for each farmer, the right number of farmers and animals for a certain landscape. Conceiving agricultural operations in local terms fosters these balanced proportions. He writes: "If we could think locally, we would take far better care of things than we do now. The right local questions and answers will be the right global ones. The Amish question, 'What will this do to our community?' tends toward the right answers for the world" (20).

A community-based land ethic recognizes that the desire for property must be limited by "natural constraints on human attention and responsibility." Such an ethic "quickly becomes abusive when used to justify large accumulations of 'real estate'. . . . A nation will destroy its land and therefore itself if it does not foster in every possible way the sort of thrifty, prosperous, permanent rural households and communities that have the desire, the skills, and the means to care properly for the land they are using" (4). Unfortunately, the pattern of our current economy is a financial system without a community. Berry suggests our system is "unnatural, undemocratic, sacrilegious, and ephemeral." He compares it to a fire, writing, "We must see the error of our effort to live by fire, by burning the world in order to live in it. . . . Fire destroys what nourishes it and so in fact imposes severe limits on any growth associated with it" (13). He quotes Edward Abbey as calling this the "ideology of the cancer cell" (96).

It's obvious that any gathering of humans, like the sheep I tend for my sister, can have an ideology of consumption. However, my ancestor Israel, Ruskin, Berry, and others give hope that a culture based on balance, moderation, and community could develop in the shadow of the predominant self-consuming ideology of people joined only by their lust for acquisition. However, there are also more proximate models of moderation than my Mormon ancestors, the Native Americans who aided my great-great-grandmother.

A Culture That Grows like a Plant

Jared Farmer, in *On Zion's Mount*, describes the people who lived farther east than Rush Valley, on the body of water that came to be called Utah Lake. They were the fish eaters known as the Nune, or "the people." They lived in relative stability, allowing other tribes in drier parts of Utah to come in the spring and harvest fish, especially the June sucker. According to Farmer, two factors destroyed this people: the horse, which allowed Comanche and Ute warriors to prey on them, and the Mormons, who planted gardens and fields hungrily, and who used nets to harvest enough fish that the June sucker was driven toward extinction. Mormons moved in on the Nune and finally slaughtered them, except for a few who escaped eastward.

The indigenous people who inhabited Rush Valley, where my ancestors settled, and in Skull Valley to the west, were Goshutes. They lived in a land that didn't provide abundance, but they survived well without transforming their environment through plowing and building reservoirs. I looked through the materials that teach students about this people's place in Utah history, and most talk about the desolation of the area. The History of Utah's Indian peoples (Utah.gov) says, "The Great Salt Lake Desert is the least favorable portion of the Great Basin for human habitation. . . . The majority of the 10,000 square miles that comprise the Great Salt Lake Desert are a barren salt flat that today is still perceived as having little economic promise" (Defa 73). Carling Malouf writes that the Goshutes "inhabited 10,000 square miles of the most barren, desolate, and useless land in all America, the Great Salt Lake Desert" (Defa 34). The Goshutes successfully lived in this arid landscape for thousands of years, in part because their population was low, one person to 40 square miles of desert. In addition, during most of the year they were mobile, ranging from the valleys to the mountains, within about 20 miles from their more permanent winter dwellings.

They used available materials for dwellings, living in caves or in wickiups built from sagebrush, sometimes around the base of a juniper tree. They made capes from rabbit skins, and these would last a lifetime. They lived on an astonishing variety of foods, including 81 species of plants. They beat grasses for seeds, gathered berries from bushes, dug tubers and roots, and harvested greens. Pine nuts were essential to their diet, and in bad years, they ranged far to harvest them. They also ate insects (including grasshoppers, crickets, and locusts), snakes and lizards, rodents and rabbits, and less frequently, pronghorn, deer, mountain sheep, or even elk or bear (Allen and Warner 163). They varied their diet according to what was available at that time of year, greens in the spring, berries and seeds in summer, roots and tubers in fall. They adapted their needs to what the landscape would give them; their sense of territory was flexible and indefinite (Allen and Warner 162).

Their primary economic and social unit was the extended family, 25–30 people (Allen and Warner 163). This was a practical size for not overtaxing the land. According to Trimble, one of the characteristics of Great Basin vegetation is that it's like a mosaic, communities of plants that have adapted to a specific soil, amount of moisture, elevation, so that a single canyon might support a variety of communities (32–33). To survive on these plants systems, and on the animals that fed on the systems, a community had to be small and mobile.

However, the family groups did get together to harvest some foods that required larger groups. One example is the harvesting of grasshoppers. They gathered to an area where the insects were abundant, dug a pit in the middle of a four-acre area, then created a circle of people, who walked forward, beating the vegetation until they converged, and the pit was full of protein. Howard Egan, early pioneer and agent for both the Pony Express and Wells Fargo, was witness to many of these gatherings. He observed them digging crescent-shaped ditches, which the group covered with long stems of dry grass. They beat the brush and drove crickets toward the ditches. Finally, they burned the grass, killing the crickets that were so plentiful that they filled the ditches. He observed a woman gathering ants by digging into a hill and filling a basket with ants and gravel. She then shook the basket, tipping one edge and winnowing out the ants. He observed rabbit and antelope drives, the gathering of rats, and the harvesting of pine nuts. In each case, he shows clear admiration for the ingenuity and physical ability of the Goshutes.

My uncle told me that his father, my grandfather, found old evidence of fires in the southern end of Rush valley and he believed that these old fires, whether started by Goshutes or lightning, helped preserve grassland and the other traditional systems of vegetation, by burning back larger brush and junipers and making it possible for

grass to grow more abundantly. Their style of life imitated that of the large mammals, buffalo, elk, deer, and others that ranged far and followed the forage up the mountain in summer and back down in fall.

Their life was disrupted by my ancestors and other Mormons. In 1854, Ezra Taft Benson, an ancestor on my mother's side, was given administration of the water shares in Tooele Valley. They and other pioneers in other valleys that were homeland to the Goshutes settled near watercourses, the same places where Goshutes would camp as part of their movement from place to place (Allen and Warner 164). The Anglo invaders also spread their cattle and sheep across the land, destroying the forage for animals, small and large, that the Goshutes had previously harvested. In consequence, the Goshutes started taking animals for their own use. The invading Mormons thought of this as aggressive raiding and fighting ensued. Fighting was inevitable, given the impossibly contradictory worldviews of the two cultures, the one unable to see a transient, hunter-gatherer, subsistence lifestyle as desirable or feasible, the other unable to comprehend private ownership of land and water.

Our contemporary bias against a subsistence lifestyle and our conviction that bounty depends on monocultures of certain crops, which in Utah requires irrigation, is demonstrated in this quote from Indian Superintendent Jacob Forney, who in 1858 visited Utah, "They are without exception, the most miserable looking set of human beings I ever beheld. I gave them some clothing and provisions. They have heretofore subsisted principally on snakes, lizards, roots, etc. I made considerable effort to produce a small quantity of land for them but could not find any with water sufficient to irrigate it" (Allen and Warner 165).

The native residents used tradition to create ways of living and seeing that allowed them to dwell in balance. Even logical colonizers like John Wesley Powell and the Mormons thought of reclaiming desert for farmland through the use of reservoirs. Others had the same idea about dry farming. Without these changes, the West could not have been settled by the populations who live here now, so we have profited from their philosophy of making the land productive through transforming it. I am a participant in an economy based on excess instead of sufficiency. Wendell Berry writes, "The reason that we are a wealthy nation is not that we have earned so much wealth—you cannot, by any honest means, earn or deserve so much. The reason is simply that we have learned, and become willing to market and use up in our own time the birthright and the livelihood of posterity" (127). Excess has to come from somewhere and it ultimately comes out of the land. We may not find it practical to live exactly as the Nune and

Goshutes did; we can't be as mobile, and it would be an intolerable regression for us to try to live completely off what an arid landscape supplies, but we can find more moderate means of sustaining ourselves.

Several principles could be abstracted from the behavior of the original residents of the Great Basin, most of it consistent with the ideas promoted by Wendell Berry. We could eat locally and seasonally, reducing the need for the use of expensive diesel fuel for transport of food and necessities. One of the largest agricultural products of Utah is beef, and there is a growing demand for grass-fed beef, which would not require shipping calves to the cornfields of the Midwest and shipping meat back to Utah. Similarly, we could clothe ourselves and build our houses from local materials: wool and possibly cotton (which the Mormon pioneers grew in Southern Utah), rammed earth, straw bale housing, surplus materials such as tires. We might consider the ideal size of a community suited for given areas, reducing the need for long transport of all food. We may need to adjust our thinking about how many people the desert can efficiently sustain.

One mechanism of this possible shift to a more moderate attitude toward the Great Basin might come from widening our concept of community to include the nonhuman other, giving respect to those other inhabitants of our ecosystem, the plants and animals that live on the same land. The American Indian tribes had this ethic, possessing a cosmology of kinship with these Others. Mormon cosmology similarly declares that all living entities possess souls, even the earth, which will become the dwelling place for humans and other creatures in the eternities. Mormon scripture says, "And out of the ground made I, the Lord God, to grow every tree, naturally, that is pleasant to the sight of man; and man could behold it. And it became also a living soul. For it was spiritual in the day that I created it" (Moses 3: 9). Theologically, Mormons do not subscribe to the general Christian idea that the physical is to be abhorred, but rather that it should be celebrated. There is in the Mormon belief system a basis for a faith-based and community-based land ethic that could reduce the stress on the delicate and arid landscapes of the eastern Great Basin.

Current Practice at the Greenjacket Ranch

John and Israel's descendants, even those who moved to the city, have inherited their love of the land and of community. My grandfather Glynn and father Colin also inherited from their forebears the same vacillation between acquisitiveness and moderation, isolation and community. My grandfather managed seven farms but lost each

one to natural disaster, human untrustworthiness, or overextension. He was an observer of natural conditions and a student of history, like his father, and he wrote essays about his grandfather John's lack of understanding of the land. But he also wanted to become rich from farming and ranching in an arid land.

Maybe the balance of ambition and restraint shifts every other generation. My father Colin was conservative in his purchase of equipment and sprinkler systems. He taught school for income to support his endeavors on the land he owned. He wasn't particularly environmentally conscious, but he was careful about erosion and didn't overgraze. He became aware that to operate a farm successfully he had to have access to grazing on Federal land, so he worked with governmental institutions, making friends among the employees of the Soil Conservation Service, the Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management.

Few women in the Bennion clan left records of their attitudes, but I believe they supported the pioneering efforts of the men they married. For example, my grandmother Lucile, like Esther Ann before her, supported the ideology of colonization. She painted a series of maps that honored conquering men, pioneers, and settlers. Her paintings include maps of Abraham's wandering toward Canaan, the Viking conquests, Columbus voyages, the exploration of the trappers and mountain men, and others. In her paintings, she embodied the values that men and women bodied forth physically in their pioneering efforts.

My sister Liz Mitchell, in whose house I sit as I write, took over the ranch a decade and a half ago. She and her husband Alan use conservationist methods, but these efforts are more sophisticated than Israel's because of Alan's expertise as a soil scientist and because they have learned from our ancestors' experiences and from the advice of rangeland experts. So in addition to our ancestors' tireless industry, these two have a cohesive ethic for improving the land. Unlike me, they are both conservative politically, feeling that private ownership is the foundation of responsible behavior toward the land. But in an email Alan wrote, he said, "[o]ur philosophy is adaptable and not dogmatic. Following a dogma can get one into trouble."

They have improved water conservation by installing sprinkler lines and by planting crops that will do well in arid conditions. They have built fences and removed junipers, thus improving the grazing and the deer and grouse habitat. Better fencing allows them, in consultation with a Forest Service grazing specialist, to rotate grazing through several allotments on public land, as well as

on their private land. In this, they force their cattle to imitate the movement of large mammals prehistorically, moving on before the vegetation in a given area is destroyed. On the cleared land, they have planted a diversity of grass seed provided by the Wildlife Service: Indian ricegrass, antelope bitterbrush, four-wing salt brush, bluebunch wheatgrass, great basin wildrye, small burnette, penstemon, globe mallow, and some non-native species, including prostrate kochia, Siberian wheatgrass, crested wheatgrass, Russian wildrye, alfalfa, sanfoin, sweetclover. Alan criticizes the traditional belief concerning conservation in the United States—that public and some private land should be allowed to lapse to its natural state, prompting "native" species to return. He claims man has already influenced the land, and so what the land returns to is not necessarily useful either to wildlife or humans. Modern man has outlawed fire, which could clear the land of invasive plant species. Alan explained in an email that the term "'[n]ative' plants is somewhat of a rigid dogma in our opinion. It might be a good idea had not the West been infected with an exotic species in the 1880s called cheatgrass." He and Liz tried growing some native bluebunch wheatgrass for seed, but it had no chance against the annual cheat grass that invaded constantly.

Unlike many western ranchers who want no part of government intervention except for use of public land, which they assume is their unalienable right, Liz and Alan have learned to work with various official agencies. In 2005, they applied for a grant from the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Utah Partners for Conservation and Development. Liz described their work: "We made a list of range improvements with 24 different practices on 12 different pastures including anchor-chaining and chain-sawing juniper trees, reducing sagebrush by Dixie harrowing, brush-beating, and [spraying] Spike herbicide. To remove greasewood and rabbit brush, we plowed some of the low ground." These cooperative ventures have brought funding from the Mule Deer Association, Sage Grouse Federal Funding, and other government institutions. In the following years, 2006 and 2007, they got the Utah Department of Agriculture Grazing Improvement Program to fund fencing material. They have built a network of sources to help themselves succeed.

Their efforts to increase the value of rangeland reduce the pressure on their irrigated alfalfa and grain fields—expensive in terms of water, diesel, and machinery. Currently, Liz and Alan also sell a few animals as grass-fed beef. As I mentioned above, expanding this practice across the West would be much less expensive in terms of petroleum,

produce fewer greenhouse gases, and slow the depletion of the topsoil in the Midwest. In *The Gift of Good Land*, Berry writes,

> Before industrialization, agriculture depended almost exclusively on solar energy. Solar energy not only grew the plants, as it still does, but also provided the productive power of farms in the form of the work of humans and animals. This energy is derived and made available biologically, and it is recyclable. It is inexhaustible in the topsoil so long as good husbandry keeps the life cycle intact. (130)

My own family eats meat from the ranch. It isn't the delicacy that corn-fed Nebraska or Kansas beef is, but it is palatable and has much less fat.

Liz and Alan also try to grow their own produce. Last year, they purchased a greenhouse made from pvc pipes and plastic, watered through a drip system. They grew tomatoes, broccoli, squash, cantaloupe, watermelon, Brussels sprouts, green beans, potatoes, corn, and carrots. They have a gas generator, but recently, they installed solar panels and have explored using water-generated power.

The Mitchells enjoy their privacy and their way of life, despite their days often being stressful, laborious, and discouraging. While the ranch isn't run as it was run in the time of my ancestors, my sister is interested in the history of both the ranch and the valley. She and her husband believe in community, in moderation, and in connecting to the past. They are not alone in their use of practices that are at once traditional and empirical. Expanding moderate, conservationist habits will make the land healthier, and in response, we westerners will become a happier people, more connected to landscape.

In my own way, I follow Liz and Alan. The suburban property belonging to Karla and me lies on a bench of the Wasatch Mountains, close to the university where I teach writing. Our yard manifests opposing ideals—our love of plant life and our concern for a water-starved environment. We have both bluegrass lawn and drought-resistant bushes and flowers. We use drip lines and soaker hoses to water 60 hybrid tea roses, but we also grow less water-hungry plants: honeysuckle, boxwood, euonymus, willow, maple, honey locust, gingko, lilac, mugo pine, crab apple, barberry, Siberian pea tree, cotoneaster, blue juniper, trumpet vine, silverlace vine, ninebark, forsythia, hostas, vica major, lilies, hydrangea, butterfly bush, oak leaf hydrangea, bridal wreath spirea, Rose of Sharon, shrub rose, mock orange, yew trees, dwarf Norwegian pine, dwarf scotch pine, cut-leaf elderberry, hens and chicks, Mexican feather grass, blue fescue, scotch moss, lavender, sage, chives, California poppies,

sunflowers, alyssum. For food, we grow tomatoes, green lettuce, green beans, sugar peas, carrots, summer squash, spinach, beets, peppermint, spearmint, and basil. We have pear, apricot, and peach trees, as well as Himrod and Concord grapes. We last year canned hundreds of jars of tomato juice, grape juice, pears, and peaches. We have solar panels but also a hot tub, an extravagance that has encouraged the children and grandchildren to visit us more. One of my students, an ardent environmental and political activist, stood on our deck and looked at our yard. "Such a lovely English garden," she said. Her condemnation is moderately accurate.

It's possible that my theme of moderation is a capitulation to the fire economy. However, moderate changes would produce significant benefit: eating grass-fed beef and local produce; improving the perennial polyculture of the rangeland and thus reducing pressure on water, machinery, and petroleum; and shifting where possible to solar and wind production of energy. Berry said, "It may turn out that the most powerful and the most destructive change of modern times has been a change in language: the rise of the image, or metaphor, of the machine." He bemoans the loss of organic metaphors, those derived from "living things; they were biological, pastoral, agricultural, or familial" (113). My students also tell me that this shift is necessary because of population growth; without industrial agriculture, the world will starve.

But perhaps the future is not set, and we can imitate some of the best practices used by previous people, growing gardens and eating seasonally, considering the effects of overpopulation, and allowing our acquisitive or greedy impulses to be tempered. We in Utah and other parts of the West also need to continue the pioneer tradition of inventive thinking.

I leave my sister's house to check on the water for the cattle grazing the Forest Service allotment. From this house, the southern end of Rush Valley spreads north and west, and most of what I see is yellow or gray. The yellow is dead grass, predominantly crested wheat and cheat grass, neither of which is palatable to a cow in August. The gray is sagebrush, which spread from the foothills after my ancestors and others helped destroy the complex culture of grasses and forbs. I ride a four-wheeler to the watering tank for the cattle, passing Liz and Alan's fields and the juniper patch where the Goshutes camped in the winter. The sprinklers are off because, as usual, water is low. Climate change is likely to cause even drier conditions. The future may require us all to become more radical in our practice and thinking. When the temperature rises and water becomes scarce, both my garden and the family ranch will become untenable. Despite this reality, I have faith in communal respect and in the virtues of balance and moderation.

Living in what Mary Austin called a "land of little rain," I hope for a religiously based land ethic that works toward a complex exchange between humans and the land and is based on something other than acquisitiveness, and that evokes responsibility and respect for the plants and animals that grow in the West. The people of Rush Valley, Utah, the United States, and the world will always be forced to make difficult decisions. If we continue to make decisions based on the fire economy, many people will die in the heat. If we make decisions with one eye on local communities and the other on global realities, we may preserve the best elements of our culture, despite the difficulties imposed on us by our acquisitive forebears.

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