Joseph W. Musser: Dissenter or Fearless Crusader for Truth?

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Joseph White Musser's lifeline ran straight and true, marked by landmarks typical of twentieth-century Mormon men. Rites of passage for the Latter-day Saints—baptism, confirmation, priesthood ordination, temple endowment, and a lifetime of church service—defined and shaped his life. He marked time with his Mormon brothers, moving in unison for much of his adult life with the ranks of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But the last quarter of Musser's life saw a radical departure from that physical and spiritual home, for unlike most other believing Mormons he dissented from the church's decision to end the solemnizing of plural marriages. He became one of the most significant of the early twentieth century's Mormon fundamentalists.1

Born into a Latter-day Saint home on March 8, 1872, after his baptism at the age of eight Musser served as secretary in the presidency of his ward primary. At twelve, like most of the young men in his ward, he was ordained to the office of deacon in the Aaronic priesthood by his father, Amos Milton Musser. Musser continued to follow the predictable sequence of priesthood ordination thereafter. In two years his father once again ordained him, this time to the office of teacher, and two years later as a priest. As a young adult Joseph Musser served as the president of his ward's Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association (YMIA), superintendent of the Sunday school, a ward missionary, a member of the stake superintendency of the YMIA, and stake tithing clerk. He was later branch president of the Uintah branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and as an assistant in the Uintah mission office.

On February 16, 1903, the patriarch John M. Murdock placed his hands upon Musser's head to ordain him to the office of high priest. Four years later the members of Granite Stake sustained Musser as an alternate member of their high council. President Joseph F. Smith sim-}

ilarly blessed him, saying, "God bless you Brother Joseph I am glad you are here and that you are in the harness. I hope they will always keep you working."2

Within a very few years Joseph W. Musser's lifeline—his path—veered sharply to the left and deviated from that of mainstream Mormonism to that of religious dissenter. The Granite Stake High Council excommunicated him in 1921 because of his continued belief in the doctrine of plural marriage. Therein, Musser passed from leading the faithful to assuming the position of one challenging the legitimacy of the Latter-day Saint church. In so doing, however, he did not consider himself in opposition to the "gospel," only to a hierarchy in error. Musser argued that in the hierarchy of church/priesthood/gospel the "church is subservient to the Priesthood, any action taken by it against those entering the law [plural marriage] is, null and void. A man or woman cannot properly be cut off from the Church for keeping a law of God, for the Church belongs to God and God cannot act a lie and remain God."3

According to Musser, the president of the church might or might not have been the president of the priesthood. He wrote:

By reason of their seniority in the higher Priesthood calling, Brigham Young, John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff, each in his turn, became President of the Church, but always their Church calling was subordinate to their Priesthood positions. The greater organizes the lesser—the lesser cannot organize the greater. By authority of his Priesthood Joseph Smith organized the Church and ever after the Church was subject to his direction, because he was President of the Priesthood; a calling above that of the Church.4

Therefore, Musser reasoned, he was subject only to direction from those priesthood leaders who accepted the "truth" on the issue of plural marriage.

Musser further rationalized his dissenting witness with arguments about the fact that his stake president, Frank Taylor, and his counselor, John M. Cannon, both of Salt Lake City's Granite Stake, had performed plural marriages during the first decade of the twentieth century, which created a confusing, ambiguous environment for those, like Musser, who questioned the Woodruff Manifesto, the official declaration that the Latter-day Saints would no longer perform plural marriages. When Musser chose, after his excommunication, to worship God outside the parameters of the established church, he assumed a posture of dissent in the very truest sense.
Edwin Scott Gaustad describes dissent as the “distillation of the religious quest. Dissent is autonomous, inner-directed and displays all the pompous arrogance, heroic sacrifice a free spirit is capable of.”

Musser filled the definition well after the church began to crack down on polygamists. As he wrote of his position in 1940, “It should be observed here, that while the Church Authorities have changed many of the ordinances, the Priesthood as a separate organization, has not thus gone astray and one day it will rise up and save the Church from final rejection.”

Musser’s dissent was in part inner-directed, but it was also imitative of a seventy-year tradition of civil disobedience by the Mormon pioneers on the issue of polygamy. Despite the most obvious similarity between the historic defense of plural marriage and Musser’s continued adherence to the principle after the Woodruff Manifesto, the most glaring difference was that Musser not only isolated himself from mainstream America but also from the Latter-day Saint church.

It is not enough, therefore, to say that he was simply continuing in the footsteps of his polygamist father, for he was making a very dramatic step to the left in choosing to worship through the “invisible” church, the “priesthood,” which he believed had authority over the “visible” church as a formal organization.

Dissent, like religion, takes many forms and, as Jesus Christ told Nicodemus in describing the spirit, is as hard to define as the wind, “for you can’t tell from whence it cometh or whither it goeth.” Dissent is uniquely individualistic. The church called modern-day polygamists “fundamentalist Mormons,” those people clearly outside the official church because of excommunication proceedings against those who accepted a more literal or unique interpretation of scripture. Musser said, “The appellation ‘fundamentalist’ has been attached to a group of people whom the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, known as the Mormon Church, had ostracized for adhering to its original doctrines.”

The road from a faithful household to one ostracized for dissenting beliefs began when Musser was a child. His father, Amos Milton Musser, was one of the assistant church historians to the Latter-day Saint movement. Musser, born in the Mormon stronghold of Salt Lake City in 1872, had a strong Latter-Day Saint background. Amos Musser and Mary Elizabeth White had left Nauvoo with the main body of Saints for the trek to Utah. They remained faithful, sacrificing members of the church throughout the difficult pioneer years and the accommodation period around the turn of the century.

Musser viewed his father as living a “patriarchal life,” with thirty-five children and four wives, and as being a “defender of the faith.”

Amos Musser received a special commission from the First Presidency to keep a record of all acts of persecution as well as the “names of the persecutors of those acts against the church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” He himself was prosecuted under the provisions of the Edmunds Act outlawing plural marriage and spent six months in the penitentiary “for acknowledging his wives and caring for the mothers of his children.”

Joseph Musser’s religious worldview evolved in an environment that heralded the effort of those prosecuted for their righteous beliefs. “Coming from such an ancestry and being reared in a polygamous atmosphere, by parents devoted to their religious conception,” he wrote, “I naturally inherited and imbibed a strong spiritual nature. From early youth I devoted my time to the church. I believed intensely in the mission of Joseph Smith, and were it possible to become fanatically religious, but not obdurate toward the religion and actions of others nor offensively dogmatic.”

Musser would lead much the same life as his father. At a young age, Rose Selms Borquist married him in the Logan Temple on June 29, 1892. They rented two rooms in Amos Musser’s home, bought a few articles of furniture and a cookstove, and set up house on Joseph’s $40 a month clerk’s salary. Their first son, Joseph B., was born while his father was on a mission to the southern states.

Musser would later remember that in November 1899 he and Rose received a “written invitation” from President Lorenzo Snow to go to the temple to receive “Higher Anointings.” The Muszers, along with four other couples, went to the Salt Lake Temple on Thanksgiving morning, “where the most glorious blessings known to man were sealed upon us. We literally spent a few hours as in heaven ‘mid the glorious calm and quiet of our holy surroundings. We were near the Lord and Oh! how happy!’” Musser was twenty-seven in 1899, the husband of one and father of two. He wondered at being so favored, “for we were being sealed with the ‘Holy Spirit of Promise.’”

It would be Lorenzo Snow who would introduce Musser through an intermediary to the idea of entering the “principle,” the way gentle Saints referred to the practice of plural marriage. “In the course of a few weeks,” Musser recorded in his journal, “word came from President Snow that I had been chosen to take more wives, and help keep the law of Celestial marriage alive among the Saints. This was a distinct shock to me, as we had been given to understand that to attempt such a move would mean excommunication from the Church. The Manifesto forbade it.” Quite shaken by the message, Musser considered its source, the prophet of the church, and felt compelled to
obey. "I did so," he would always say, "by marrying Mary Caroline Hill, a most beautiful daughter of Bishop William Hood Hill, of Mill Creek Ward." The couple would have six children: five daughters and a son, Guy, who would continue in his father's work. Musser would eventually marry and have children with a total of four women.

Musser courted his third wife, Ellis R. Shipp, while serving in the Uintah, Wasatch mission. Ellis, who had a degree in education from the University of Utah, had been called to introduce kindergarten work to the Wasatch Stake. During that same time President Joseph F. Smith issued what would later be called the "Second Manifesto." Issued in 1904, it read in part:

Inasmuch as there are numerous reports in circulation that plural marriages have been entered into contrary to the official declaration of President Wilford Woodruff, of September 24, 1890, commonly called the Manifesto, which was issued by President Woodruff and adopted by the church at its general conference of October 6, 1890, which forbade any marriage violative of the law of the land, I Joseph F. Smith, President of the church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, do hereby affirm and declare that no such marriages have been solemnized with the sanction, consent, or knowledge of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

And I hereby announce that all such marriages are prohibited, and if any officer or member of the Church shall assume to solemnize or enter into any such marriage, he will be deemed in transgression against the Church, and will be liable to be dealt with according to the rules and regulations thereof, and excommunicated therefrom.

In the future, plural marriage would be punished by excommunication.

According to Musser's recollection, in 1915 an unnamed apostle conferred upon him the "sealing power of Elijah, with instructions to see that plural marriage shall not die out, President Snow had said that I must not only enter the law, but must help keep it alive. This then, was the next step in enabling me to help keep it alive. I have tried to be faithful to my trust." 16

During the next few years, Musser could feel himself growing in the "work of the Lord," even as he witnessed his brother Don pull away from Mormonism and eventually announce his apostasy. "This was a fearful blow to both Father and me," Musser would remember. He began to view himself increasingly after his excommunication as having been unjustly cast out from "its [the church's] functions and benefits." Even so, he and his wives continued to pay their tithing and fast offerings through the late 1920s despite the fact that plural marriage barred them from temple attendance, the single most significant religious experience in Mormonism. In June 1929 Ellis Musser was barred from witnessing their daughter Ellis's temple marriage, even though she was what Musser described as a "tith payers and in good standing in her ward." 17 During the 1920s Musser emerged as a leader of a group of Mormon fundamentalists outside the church.

In spite of what he considered atrocious behavior in denying temple access to him and his wives, they all continued to wear temple garments and respect the ordinances that were performed in the temple. He told a group of fundamentalists, "The Saints must maintain the integrity of their garments. The flimsy make-shifts sold by the Jews and at the ZCMI department store as recently advertised, are an insult to God and offer no protection as promised by the Lord. Better wear nothing by that name, than to prostitute that which is sacred. No person having lain off their garments are permitted to take them up again and Hear them without proper authority." 18 Musser also counseled his followers about theology, religion, and behavior and sought to teach them about the importance of the temple in the overall plan of Mormonism's plural marriage.

Musser developed a unique defense mechanism to explain his inability to take advantage of the temple. In 1937 he counseled a small group of fundamentalist Saints about the importance of temple work. "Don't worry about not being able to do temple work. Get your genealogies ready and the day will soon come when the temples, which are literally the houses of the Lord, will be 'set in order,' and then the work will count. Much of the work now being done will have to be done over." 19 Thus, for Musser, Mormonism would be salvaged by some reformation, which, he thought, would bring it back to the "truth."

On July 22, 1909, the president of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, Francis M. Lyman, requested that Musser attend a meeting of his quorum at 4:30 that afternoon in the temple. At six, Lyman invited Musser into the apostles' room, where John Henry Smith, Heber J. Grant, Rudger Clawson, Orson F. Whitney, David O. McKay, George F. Richards, and Anthony W. Ivins as well as Lyman were questioning a series of suspected dissidents. For two hours the men questioned Musser's feelings on plural marriage, known violators of the 1904 prohibition on performing plural marriages, and his intentions for the future. They advised him on ways to handle delicate situations when approached about the subject of polygamy. "We want you hereafter to join with us in putting this thing down," President Ivins said, "If anybody comes to you for information or encouragement, tell them it..."
can't be done, that it is wrong to desire and that no attentions whatever should be bestowed upon the sisters with this in view." Joseph replied, "President Lyman, I cannot do that, but I suggest if you have any instructions to give me, it should be done through my Stake President, with whom I am in harmony and I will endeavor to remain so."

Musser was sufficiently confident of his stake president's posture on the subject to decline to side with the apostles of the church. When pressured to "get in harmony," he answered in a way similar to others who had been questioned that day. "One would think these brethren had rehearsed their pieces," Lyman said. After the event, Musser moved even further from the center. Finally, on December 14, 1909, the Latter-day Saint hierarchy disfellowshipped him for his continued belief in plurality of wives.20

Despite the investigation—Musser called it an inquisition—Lyman called Musser to preside, after the death of his father in 1909, over the India mission, a job that could be performed through the mail. In a letter dated January 6, 1910, Lyman wrote, "Keep your hand in the good work and the Lord will bless you abundantly and so will your father and the good, good saints of India. I bless you and will continue to do so and appreciate your work as if done to me; for they seem like my own." He signed the letter, "Affectionately your brother, Francis M. Lyman."21

During the early 1920s Musser became increasingly conscious of the lines drawn between those who continued to practice polygamy and those who did not. He gravitated toward association with those whose ideas matched his own, particularly those who seemed to have answers to the question of priesthood authority. In 1922, after his excommunication from the Mormon church, Musser recorded several oral accounts that originated with Lorin Woolley and Daniel Bateman, who had been present in the Woolley's Centerville, Utah, home in 1886 when President John Taylor reportedly received a vision of Jesus Christ and Joseph Smith, Jr.

Such stories had been circulating for a number of years, and Musser published them for the first time in a standardized version in 1929. The document specified the date of the vision as September 26 and 27, 1886, and reported an eight-hour meeting during the day of September 27, when Taylor put the other men in attendance "under covenant" to continue the practice of plural marriage. Those present were George Q. Cannon, L. John Nuttall, John H. Woolley, Samuel Bateman, Daniel R. Bateman, Charles H. Wilkins, Charles Birrell, Samuel Seden, George Earl, Lorin C. Woolley, and two women, Julia E. Woolley and Amy Woolley. The Musser account also stated that Taylor gave five of them—Cannon, Wilkins, Samuel Bateman, and John and Lorin Woolley—authority to perform plural marriages and ordain others to do the same.22 Perhaps because of this publication and Musser's stubborn refusal to defer to the authority of the church president, the Granite Stake High Council excommunicated him on March 23, 1921.23

Lorin Woolley's 1912 account of the same events, however, received limited attention. But Musser's 1929 redaction had a more profound effect on those Mormons who already questioned the church leadership's authority. He was especially able to sway those who, like Musser himself, had still failed to reconcile their feelings about plural marriage, the two manifestos, the church's increasingly severe separation from the principle of plural marriage, and the overriding issue of whether the "priesthood keys" (that is, the power) to perform plural marriages were still on the earth.

Perhaps in reaction to their unreconciled feelings about such issues, this type of sentiment, and the growing alienation between those continuing in the principle and those who were increasingly antagonistic to it, seven men met in Salt Lake City in 1929 and organized a priesthood council to fulfill the promise of the 1886 revelation. In addition to Musser, members of the first council included J. Leslie Broadbent, John Y. Barlow, Lorin C. Woolley, LeGrand Woolley, Louis Kelsch, and Charles F. Zitting. Lorin Woolley was named the senior member, and his leadership established the group as a major fundamentalist force. When he died on September 19, 1934, John Y. Barlow succeeded him as the senior member. Musser succeeded Barlow in 1949.

The seven-member council served as the precursor of the seventy-member Sanhedrin that Musser organized not long before his death in 1954. As he described it, "It was this body of men whom Moses brought before the face of the Lord. This body, when properly organized, is presided over by seven Presidents of the Great High Priest Order, the worthy Senior member being the presiding officer and the mouthpiece for the seven."24

Before Barlow died, he called two younger fundamentalists, LeRoy S. Johnson and J. Marion Hammon, and set them apart as apostles of Jesus Christ. He later called Guy H. Musser, Rulon Jeffs, Richard Jessop, Carl Holm, and Alma Timpson to serve as well.25 The history of polygamy in the next half century would become, in large measure, the history of these men and their posterity, a prodigious group who, by their union, selected for themselves a peculiar destiny.

When Musser was ordained a high priest apostle and a patriarch to all the world by Barlow, himself a high priest apostle, he was instructed to see "that never a year passed that children were not born in the
he would say, "I do not endorse all that President Grant does, and many things about him I cannot admire; and yet I love and respect him as the leader of the Church, and I have it in my heart to help him in his arduous labors." This respect, however, would deteriorate during the next decade as the distance between the two increased. In 1939 Musser observed that "he is prejudiced against me and that prejudice has spread throughout the council."33

The issue in contention among the official church leadership, and an issue of particular concern to President Grant, was the location of the power—"keys"—to perform plural marriages. Particularly after the deaths of Snow and Smith the idea was affirmed that no one was authorized to perform plural marriages anywhere on earth. The series of directives sent from the office of the First Presidency was designed to combat rumors of alternate claims to priesthood authority and undercut the credibility of those claiming to have authority to continue the practice. In 1921 President Grant "branded as plain simple liars those who undertake to say that anybody, aside from the President of the Church, had any right to give revelations to this people."34

The fight intensified when, in 1933, J. Reuben Clark, Grant's indefatigable counselor, drafted a definitive "Official Statement" published under the signatures of the First Presidency in the "Church News" section of the Deseret News. It censured the renewed interest in the "corrupt, adulterous practices of the members of this secret, oathbound organization," gave a careful accounting of the history of the controversy that had raged since the 1890 Manifesto, summarized the legal action that had been taken against the church by the federal government, cataloged doctrinal support of the principle, and described the continued practice of polygamy outside Mormonism. It stressed the contractual nature of the marriage union and the legal discontinuation of the principle, rather than the fact that it had once been evidence of a revelation.35 IT STRESSED THE NEED FOR PEOPLE SEEKING AUTHORITY

The Clark Official Statement not only solidified Mormonism's rejection of the practice of plural marriage, but it also clarified the Latter-day Saint doctrine of celestial marriage. The document carefully distinguished between celestial marriage and polygamous marriage, noting that celestial marriages were "monogamous marriages for time and eternity, solemnized in our temples in accordance with the word of the Lord and the laws of the Church."36 This flat statement dismantled the logic for continuing any plural celestial marriages that the fundamentalists had carefully constructed. But although the statement pacified mainstream Mormons, it unified fundamentalists.

Perhaps in reaction to the flood of literature against polygamy be-
ing promulgated by the official church in June 1935, Musser began publication of *Truth* magazine, a singleminded publication dedicated to the defense of plural marriage. He quoted profusely from nineteenth-century polygamous leaders—Joseph Smith, Jr., Brigham Young, and George Q. Cannon—to justify the modern practice and always emphasized its eternal and revelatory nature. *Truth* also provided a forum for and a means of reconciliation among the different factions of fundamentalist polygamists. Bound together solely by their belief in the plural marriage doctrine, they had been increasingly split asunder by alternative and competing claims to priesthood authority. Both issues divided them from the mainstream church.

In a journal entry on March 8, 1939, Musser reflected, “I have regretted more than I can tell the necessity of opposing my brethren of the Authorities, but the doctrines they are putting out are so rank with error I cannot refrain from publishing the truth. My desire is to establish the truth—to strike straight and fair the blow rest where it will.” Furthermore, he spoke to the issue of his dissenting position: “But we are said to be apostate, and yet our apostasy rests wholly on our adherence to the fullness of the Gospel as Joseph Smith established it. It seems so strange to me—and not strange in the light of scripture—that I should be singled out and lied about, shunned and in many ways forsaken, because I believe in the Gospel in its fullness and insist on my right to live it.”

The church, in part a reaction to the growing organization of the fundamentalists, stepped up its hunt for polygamists during the late 1930s. Furthermore, in 1938, to counteract the growing numbers of fundamentalists, the First Presidency authorized several loyal Mormons to conduct surveillance on persons suspected of fundamentalist sympathies and worshipped in meetings in private homes in Salt Lake City and Midvale, Utah. One who conducted covert operations, Casper Fetzner, later testified in court for the state that David O. McKay had him as a “calling” to find offenders against the strictures of the church and bring them to justice. On June 5, 1939, Paul C. Child, president of Salt Lake’s Pioneer Stake, reportedly instructed bishops that fundamentalists were “in very humble circumstances, being practically destitute, and if we help them we are helping to support plural families.” Withholding assistance, Child believed, would help bring a more speedy end to plural marriage.

During the same decade, the state government added to the difficulties of the polygamists. First in 1935 and then again in 1938 a number were brought to trial in Utah’s courts. In his journal on September 21, 1939, Musser wrote of the *State v. Jessop* case.

The trial of these boys was a farce. It was a Church fight, the Co. Atty [Orvin Hafen] being a counselor in the Stake Presidency there. The Dist. Atty. is a Mormon; the Sheriff who served the papers and furnished the chief testimony. AB Prince, and the Judge, Will L. Haft, were Mormons. The Jury of course, was comprised of Mormons. It was an effort to stamp polygamy out thereby bringing rejoicing to the heart of pres. Grant. Today the word “justice”: both in the Ecclesiastical and Civil or Criminal. Courts, in Mormon communities, is not.

The entry expresses the anger, the questioned misuse of power, and Musser’s growing sense of frustration at what he increasingly was coming to believe was the complete apostasy of the institutional leadership. This atmosphere of subterfuge, persecution, and increased tension between the visible and invisible church created a breach in communication between polygamists and their former church, such that it seemed that they were no longer describing the same religion. At the same time, the fundamentalists split further apart themselves—clustering around the personalities of Barlow, Musser, and Rulon Allred. During the 1940s, Barlow continued to consolidate his influence in Short Creek while Musser and Allred came to dominate fundamentalists in the Salt Lake Valley.

Nevertheless, both civil and ecclesiastical leaders identified all polygamists as representing the same problem in spite of important differences between them. The first large-scale assault on fundamentalists since the judicial crusade of the 1880s was led by U.S. attorney John S. Boyd and Utah state attorney general Brigham E. Roberts, a grandson of B. H. Roberts, and polygamists throughout the region were arrested. Two heavily armed FBI agents and two Salt Lake City police entered Musser’s home at 5:40 a.m. on March 7, 1944. After placing Musser under arrest, they began to search his office for records. They presented no search warrant but continued to search, despite Musser’s numerous protestations to stop. “This search continued until about 11:00 a.m. when the officers took me to the county jail,” he wrote. “Arriving there, I found a large congregation of my brothers. Of the Priesthood Council, were John V. Barlow, myself, Charles F. Zitting, LeGrand Woolley, Louis A. Kelch, also Guy H. Musser and Rulon T. Jeffs.” Musser was charged with federal conspiracy, state conspiracy, and cohabitation. Thus, sixty years after his father, Joseph White Musser joined the “honor roll” of Mormon men imprisoned for their belief in plural marriage.

Musser was seventy-two. While in prison he was frequently ill. “The
food did not agree with me, neither did the treatment nor the iron cell in which I was encased," he commented, "though I would have died there rather than renounce my faith." Although this was the case at first, after six months in prison Musser and ten other polygamists applied for parole and received it on the basis of a document they signed swearing that they would not continue the practice of plural marriage. It read:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:
The undersigned officers and members of the so-called fundamentalist religious group do hereby declare as follows:
That we individually and severally pledge ourselves to refrain hereafter from advocating, teaching or countenancing the practice of plural marriage or polygamy, in violation of the laws of the State of Utah and of the United States. The undersigned officers of the religious group above referred to further pledge ourselves to refrain from solemnizing plural marriages from and after this date contrary to the laws of the land; Dated September 24, 1945.

Musser’s eventual release from prison on parole allowed him to continue to publish Truth magazine. As he wrote of the incident:

We were told by the Parole Board we would have to live with our legal wives. We might visit the others and support our children, but we must not live with them. As Rose was my legal wife, but had not lived with me for nearly 20 years, and as my office, records, library, etc., were with Lucy, the mother of my two youngest children, Rose divorced me, thus permitting me to marry Lucy legally and maintain my residence with her. This arrangement was also endorsed by my wife Ellis. Rose made it clear she did not want a temple or a priesthood divorce; she wants our relationship to continue in eternity; and, of course, I am supporting her the best I can, as I have always done.

After his release he suffered a debilitating stroke and was attended by his associate in the fundamentalist cause, Rulon Allred, who was also a physician. While under his treatment in 1949, Musser appointed Allred his successor in the senior spot in the priesthood council, passing over Barlow’s choice, LeRoy Johnson. This succession crisis, pressed by others who felt they had a superior claim to seniority, divided the council, and it split into two separate bodies. Musser died five years later, on March 28, 1954.

As was true in the nineteenth century, opposition weeded out the faint-hearted, strengthened the strong, and found willing martyrs. The assumption that God required great sacrifices of the faithful provided meaning to their hardships. Guy Musser would compare his father to Jesus Christ in 1939: “he went about doing good; lifting the thoughts of men from degradation and shame; turning their eyes heavenward with a genius that marked him as a man of unflagging courage, of vision, faith, charity, long suffering; with a heart that felt keenly the needs of his followers, ... in many stations and in many classes of people you have been able to leave an indelibly written account of a righteous and fearless crusader for truth.”

Musser never deviated in his testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel. His words are a poignant reminder of both the ties that bound him to the movement and the walls that separated him:

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the very and only Church of Jesus Christ on earth today its members who are living the fullness being members of the Church of the First Born. ... While in many respects the Church is out of order, a condition in which the Church has always fallen through the weaknesses of men, it has not been rejected—it is still the Church of Jesus Christ, and will always remain so... Meantime those attempting in perfect good faith, though weak, to live the higher law—the law of Consecration and of Celestial Marriage in its fullness, the latter of which the church rejected in the Manifesto of Wilford Woodruff, must continue on; they must endure the stigma hurled against them—of apostasy and excommunication, persecution, imprisonment, with other abuses, until the Lord sees fit to take a hand. And my faith is that when the Lord rights the wrongs of His leaders the faithful Saints will be crowned with glory and eternal lives, a consummation worth suffering for, as many are now doing.”

Musser’s piety is the key to understanding his division from the church. As with other fundamentalist Mormons, he viewed a direct immediate private and incontrovertible experience of God as more valid than organized or authority directed religion.

Perhaps Musser’s type of dissent can be understood through a comparison with another group of dissidents. In today’s Israeli army there is a group of soldiers, many of whom are officers, who refuse on moral grounds to go into occupied territories taken from other nations and participate in what they call “acts of oppression.” The Israeli army has a legal mandate that requires soldiers to disobey illegal orders or orders based on false interpretation of law. These soldiers, “refusniks,” believe
Fawn McKay Brodie: Dissident Historian and Quintessential Critic of Mormondom

Newell G. Brimhurst

Every summer hundreds of faithful Mormons travel to Huntsville, Utah, a Mormon community about ten miles east of Ogden. They visit the boyhood home of David O. McKay, ninth president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and one of the most beloved figures in the twentieth-century church. However, most visitors are unaware that the old David McKay "farmhouse with [its] fourteen rooms" was also the childhood home of Fawn McKay Brodie—one of the church's most famous recent dissenters, reviled by many of the faithful with almost as much passion as her uncle is adored.1 Such negative Mormon feelings toward Fawn M. Brodie are nurtured in large measure by her controversial book No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet, which presented the founding Mormon prophet's motivations as primarily nonreligious or secular. In Brodie's words, "I was convinced before I ever began writing that Joseph Smith was not a true prophet."2 Brodie, moreover, remained a quintessential critic of things Mormon following the publication of her provocative biography—a role she actively promoted for the remainder of her life.

In terms of family background, patterns of childhood behavior, and early religious beliefs, Fawn McKay Brodie seemed an unlikely dissident. Born in 1915, she came from patrician Mormon stock.3 Her paternal grandfather, David McKay, helped found Huntsville. Her father, Thomas E. McKay, a respected church leader, served as president of the Swiss-German Mission, president of the Ogden Stake, and assistant to the Quorum of the Twelve. Politically active, he was president of the Utah state senate and later state public utilities commissioner.

Brodie's uncle, David O. McKay, was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve when she was born. Her mother's father, George H. Brimhall, served as president of Brigham Young University from 1904 to 1921.

The future dissident fondly recalled her formative years in Hunts-