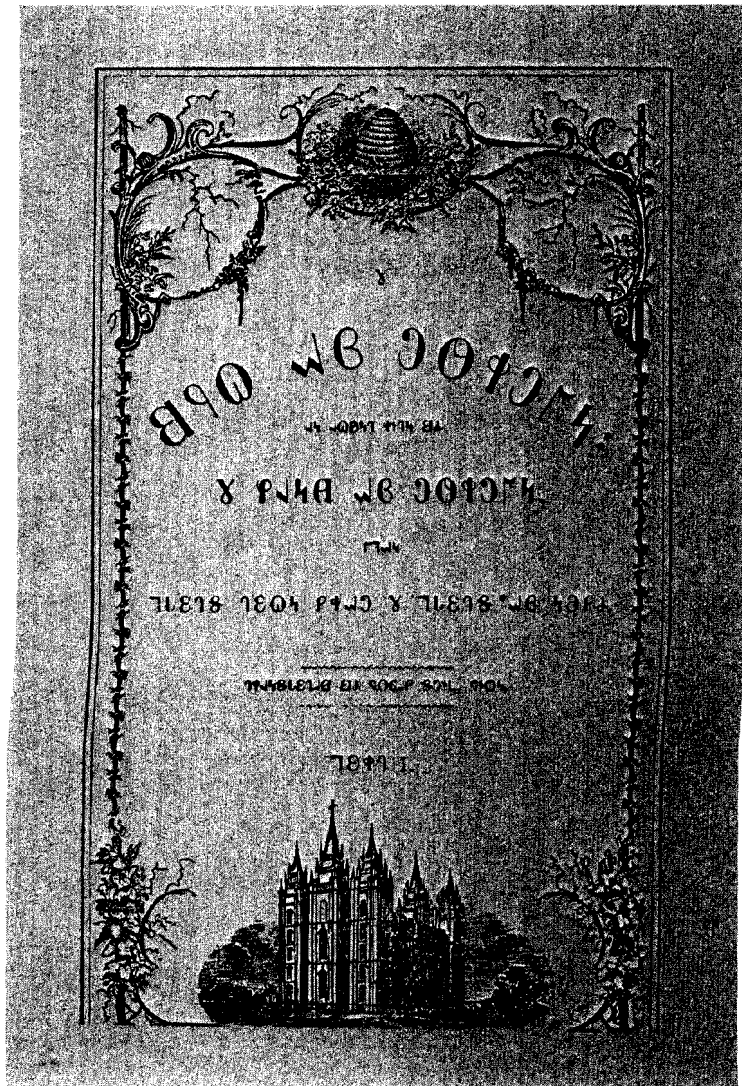


*Thirty-Eight*

MORMON  
CHARACTERS

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*A Forgotten Chapter in  
Western  
Typographic History*



*The cover of Part I of the Book of Mormon as done  
in the Deseret Alphabet*

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MORMON CHARACTERS

*A Forgotten Chapter in  
Western Typographic History*

By

ROBY WENTZ



1978

*For the Zamorano Club Jubilee*

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA



*The title page of Part I of the Book of Mormon as done in the Deseret Alphabet*

## *Thirty-Eight*

### MORMON CHARACTERS

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IT IS SAFE TO SAY that most enthusiasts of American printing history are unaware of the existence of the Deseret Alphabet. Yet we are talking about a 38-character system conceived and perfected under Mormon auspices in Utah—or Deseret—in the 1850s and 1860s which eventually was used in the printing of a number of complete books, including the Book of Mormon.

I learned of the Alphabet while killing an hour before plane-time in a Portland bookstore. A slim black leather spine with odd characters stamped on it in gold drew my attention. The front cover, light blue paper over boards, displayed a title in the same bizarre characters, along with a vignette of the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City. Must have something to do with Utah!

The main title page was composed in the same characters, but at the foot stood a line or two in roman letter: "Russell Bros., New York, 1869."

I neither was, nor am, a collector of Western or of Utah history per se; but the eccentric typography drew from me the dollar or so that was asked for the book and it went on the plane with me (the Oregon bookseller knew no more about it than I).

Later on, in Los Angeles, I took it in to show to bookseller Maxwell Hunley; and that erudite man immediately

advised me that I now owned a printing of the Book of Nephi, one of the books of the Book of Mormon, and printed in the "Deseret Alphabet." About the latter, Max himself did not claim to be well informed; but he remembered that Bancroft's *History of Utah* makes reference to it.

The Deseret Alphabet in fact represents one of Brigham Young's few failures. For nearly a quarter-century, by fits and starts, as time could be taken from more pressing matters, Young did his best to win general acceptance of the Alphabet among Mormons and eventually had school-books printed in the "character"; but his death in 1877 removed the one driving force in the situation. For it was abundantly clear by then that, however much the body of communicants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints admired and respected President Young, they were not about to take to their hearts and minds this egregious system of writing and printing.

Nonetheless so great was Young's prestige and influence that, during the years between 1853 and 1877, considerable use was made of the Alphabet. A manuscript "History of Brigham Young" exists in it. It is reported that for a period of about a year Young's household accounts were kept in it. Travelers such as Jules Remy reported in the 1850s that it was used on at least some street markers in Salt Lake City; and that some shop signs employed it. The tombstone of John Morris, who died in 1855 in Cedar City, Utah, is said to be carved in the Alphabet, and still visible in the graveyard there. Articles in the Alphabet appeared intermittently in the *Deseret News*; and in the end, as already noted, no fewer than four complete books in the "character" were composed, printed and bound. After glancing through what Bancroft has to say on the subject (which is not much, although he does

display a full-page specimen of the characters) I shelved my *Book of Nephi* and forgot the matter until some years later, looking through a priced catalogue of the Streeter sale, I noted that a copy of a schoolbook printed in the Deseret Alphabet had fetched \$50. This impelled me to take another look at my Oregon find and while puzzling again over the strange lettering it suddenly occurred to me to wonder—as it should have long since—how, when, where and under whose auspices had the actual mechanical operations of getting into print this and the other books in the Alphabet taken place?

A flood of queries immediately presented themselves. The books had been produced by the letterpress process; that is, either printed direct from relief types or from stereotyped plates. But then: who had designed these outlandish characters? Who or what had determined their forms? Who cut the punches? Who drove the matrices and cast the letters? Could the work have been done at Salt Lake City; or had Young's people had to have recourse to Eastern commercial foundries?

Perhaps someone else had already asked and answered all these questions. I queried the active and well-run Historical Department of the Church at Salt Lake City, and was in return supplied with a sizable list of articles about the Alphabet, published over a long period of time, in a multitude of Church and historical society journals; plus a number of masters' and doctoral dissertations. Eventually I acquired copies of most of these. None, however, addressed themselves to my particular interest though an occasional reference to "punches" being cut, or "matrices" having been made, tantalized without either satisfying or confirming.

I consulted the prolific Douglas C. McMurtrie, as well as J. Cecil Alter's *Early Utah Journalism* (which, despite

Y B J S O T P L L J U P B P A L L

Long Sounds.			Letter.	Name.	Sound.
Letter.	Name.	Sound.	7	.....p	
ð	.....e.....as in.....eat,		8	.....b	
ɛ	.....a	" ate.	9	.....t	
ə	.....ah	" art.	0	.....d	
o	.....aw	" aught.	C	.....che...as in...cheese.	
o	.....o	" oat.	9	.....g	
o	.....oo	" ooze.	Q	.....k	
Short Sounds of the above.			Q	.....ga...as in...gate.	
†	.....as in.....it.		P	.....f	
↓	"	et.	6	.....v	
↓	"	at.	L	.....eth...as in...thigh.	
↓	"	ot.	Y	.....the " thy.	
↓	"	ut.	8	.....s	
9	"	book.	6	.....z	
o	.....i.....as in.....ice.		D	.....esh...as in...flesh.	
8	.....ow	" owl.	S	.....zhe " vision.	
w	.....woo		†	.....ur " burn.	
Y	.....ye		l	.....l	
Y	.....h		9	.....m	
			h	.....n	
			W	.....eng.as in...length.	

The Deseret Alphabet

its title, offers much solid local Utah printing history). Alter refers frequently to a "Salt Lake Type Foundry" or, alternately, the "Deseret News Type Foundry," both probably the same facility. The earliest such reference, however, is dated in 1871; and we now know that by this time all of the four books in the Alphabet were off the presses, bound and delivered—the four being, so far as is known, the last printing of any importance using the Alphabet letter.

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As for McMurtrie, he refers in passing, in *The Beginnings of Printing in Utah* (p. 47), to one J. H. Rumel who, using matrices brought overland, in 1854 cast the first type made in Salt Lake City. I have traced McMurtrie's source for this to an article in a 1900 edition of the *Deseret News Press*. However, there is nothing to indicate whether the matrices were those of the Deseret Alphabet and the inference is that they were for common roman sorts.

However, persistence, the welcome assistance of Donald T. Schmidt, Church Librarian, and in particular that of another and higher personage of the Church, produced some partial answers.

First, however, it is proper to ask: *why the Deseret Alphabet at all?* Why did Young want it, and why did he spend so much time, and substantial amounts of money, in promoting it?

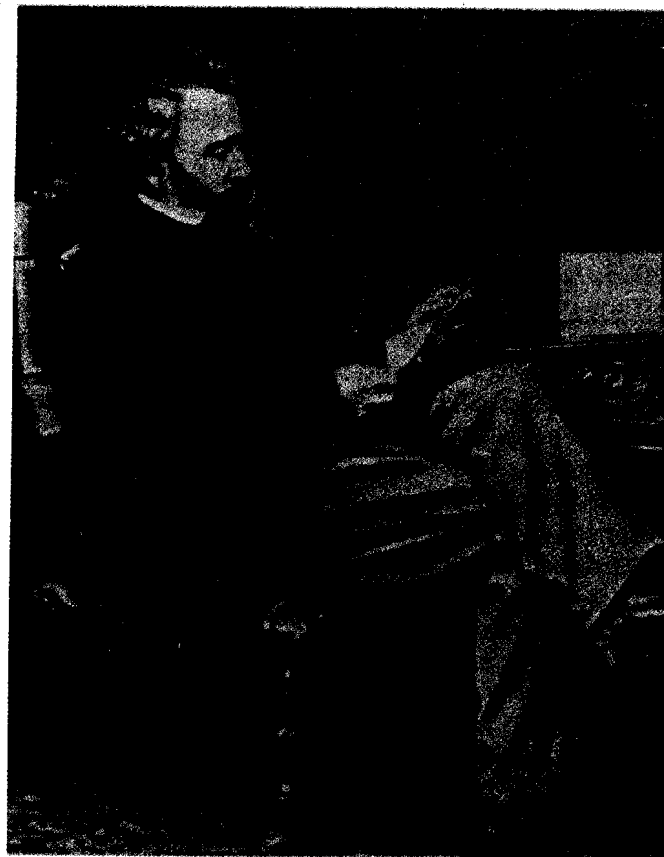
Bancroft offers the obvious and facile explanation, accommodated to the conventional wisdom of the 1880s as regards "a separate people having a separate language and perhaps in time an independent literature." Underlying is the implication that Young, out of doctrinaire zeal, intended by means of a separate alphabet to isolate his people not only geographically, but intellectually, from the rest of the world (this view found its most

extreme form in the writing of a Scottish divine who would have the Mormon leaders hoping by such means to hide "their blood-curdling records from the eyes of the unfriendly world.").

A calmer approach, however, confutes such simplistic answers. Based on Young's own statements and those of persons who worked closely with him, Brigham was in fact an early and ardent would-be orthographic reformer in the direct line of such worthies as Bernard Shaw and Col. Robert McCormick. Rather than choose their route of simplified spellings, however, Young wanted to go the whole hog and base his solution on nothing less than an entire new alphabet for expressing what were determined to be the 38 basic sounds of the English tongue; hence, the 38-character Deseret Alphabet.

There was a practical basis for his approach. By the early 1850s a flood of European converts to Mormonism were pouring into the Salt Lake Valley. They came, not only from English-speaking countries, but from Norway, Denmark, Germany, and many others. Communication with them was a serious problem. It was of prime importance that the newcomers learn as quickly as possible to read and write English. But the vagaries of our spelling vis-a-vis pronunciation (e.g., bough, plow, enough, slough, etc.) added greatly to the normal difficulty of learning any new tongue.

Young therefore directed George D. Watt, an Englishman, and an early Mormon convert, to create a new alphabet based on English language phonic values. Watt may have been Young's personal secretary. What is certain is that he was expert in the then-new and very popular Pitman system of shorthand. The alphabet assignment was handed to Watt in 1853, and by the following year he was able to lay before Young a 32-character system



*George D. Watt, chairman of the committee appointed by Brigham Young to "create" the Deseret Alphabet, was an Englishman, an expert in the Pitman shorthand system, and supposedly the first native British convert to Mormonism.*

(eventually increased to 38). It was observed that many of the "letters" bore marked resemblances to symbols of the Pitman stenography, though some learned onlookers professed to detect, here and there, likenesses to Greek and even Ethiopic (!) characters.

Now, then: how did the "Alphabet" find its way into cold print? Verifiable data there are; but they produce about as many questions as they answer. Nevertheless, certain facts emerge.

Two separate cuttings were made, the first perhaps as early as 1855, the second in the late 1860s. It is very possible that the first punches were cut in Salt Lake City. The *Millennial Star*, a Mormon publication for overseas readers, in its issue of November 10, 1855, states that "Punches, matrices and moulds are being prepared by brother Sabins for casting type for the new Alphabet; and we are in hopes of seeing, ere long, a font of handsome letter cast, and primary books in the new style printed for the use of our schools."

This bears the mark of a routine, straightforward report of work in progress (one assumes at Salt Lake City) under the direction of someone who knows what he is doing. And as already noted, there was at Salt Lake, at this time, that J. H. Rumel who already had done some typesetting there (we will have more to say about "Sabins" below).

It is confusing, then, to find Mormon writers stating that the first of the two known *castings* of Deseret letter was done in St. Louis, presumably at the then-operating St. Louis Type Foundry of Ladew & Peer. A letter from Young to H. S. Eldredge, dated May 29, 1857, notes that Erastus Snow was in St. Louis trying to secure type needed for printing (in the new Alphabet). Also, a Mormon writer, in an article published in 1947, quotes a contemporary publication: "*The Mormon* reports, under date of

August 29, 1857, that a font of pica type for the new alphabet has been cast in St. Louis."

Why? It appears that there was casting equipment in Salt Lake City and people who knew its use.

Whatever the true answer to where the type from the first cutting was cast, it is certain that the weekly *Deseret News* was the first publication to publish an article in the new type. In its issue of February 16, 1859, we find an extract from the Gospel according to St. Matthew printed in the new characters, accompanied by a salutatory in ordinary roman face. The editor was able to restrain his enthusiasm. "We present to the people the Deseret Alphabet, but we have not adopted any rules to bind the taste, judgment or preference of any. Such as it is, you have it." Not exactly a roaring send-off.

For the rest, the *News* kept on publishing in the old reliable 26-letter roman alphabet. In fact, the first version of the Deseret Alphabet was not a critical success. The characters had been designed, by Watt or whoever, with neither ascenders nor descenders. The result was a very monotonous-looking line of type. The adjective "crude" was used to describe the letter forms. Young was not happy with them.

But Young was not the man to give up easily. Throughout the harassments of a small-scale war with the U.S. Army (which the Mormons effectually won), plus the usual cares of state; later, negotiations and a good amount of trade with U.S. railroad interests as transcontinental lines pushed eastward and westward; and despite the calls on his time from a household of at least 25 wives and 40 children, Young would not forget *his* Alphabet.

The *Deseret News* had given up on the Alphabet in 1864 and ceased to print even extracts from the holy gospels in it. Finally, in 1867, Young gathered his forces



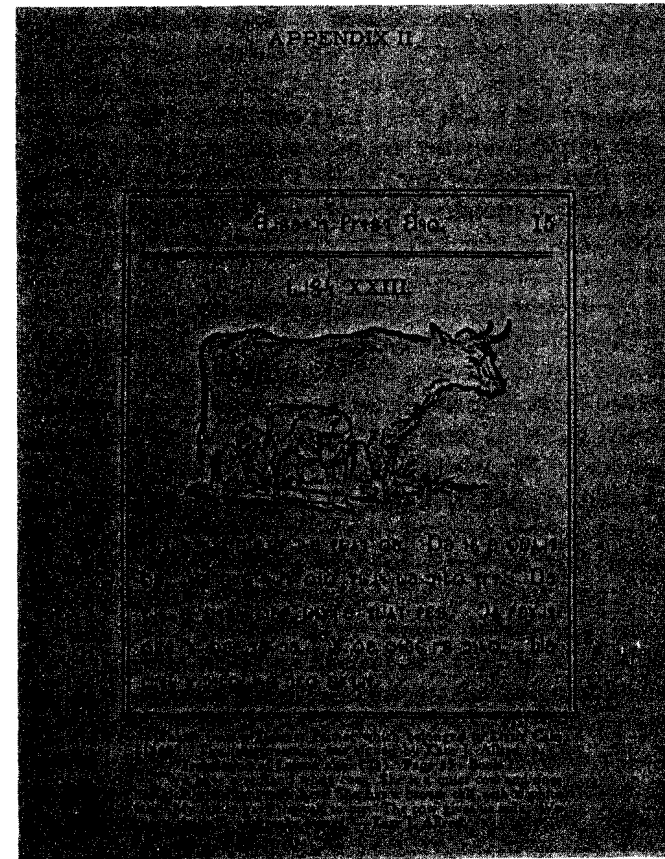
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for another go at alphabetic and orthographic reform.

It is difficult to fathom his thinking on the matter at this point. Here came the transcontinental railroad, bringing with it the promise of quickening and increasing contacts and commerce with that outside world which used the roman alphabet. Yet here is Young, vigorously pushing for virtual "bilingual" reading and writing for his people!

There was no turning back. Professor Orson Pratt of the University of Deseret was instructed to prepare Alphabet texts of two primers suitable for use in the primary schools. More important to our immediate purpose, a new cutting of the Deseret face was ordered; and at Young's behest, the substantial sum of \$10,000 was appropriated for cutting, making matrices, casting, etc., and for the printing of textbooks, as well as for a printing of the Book of Mormon itself in the Deseret character. Professor Pratt, having completed the monumental job of transliterating these several texts into the Alphabet (the spirit quails at the thought of the task involved), was dispatched to New York to maintain editorial oversight, verify proofs, and whatnot.

Initially, aside from the lines "Russell Bros., etc." on the title page of the little *Book of Nephi*, I had nothing to go on. At this juncture, I recalled that, while editor of the printing trade journal *Western Printer & Lithographer*, I had had a number of pleasant contacts, by mail, and eventually in person, with the then sales manager of the Deseret News Press, the commercial printing subsidiary of the daily *Deseret News*, one of the West's largest printing and binding houses. I wrote this gentleman, recalling our acquaintance, explained my modest researches into the mechanical aspects of the Alphabet, and expressed the hope that as a printer himself, he might find it interesting to assist. Specifically, I suggested that



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Page from one of the two primers for very young Mormons,  
designed to teach them the Deseret Alphabet.

there might exist in Church archives purchase orders, invoices, etc. bearing on the whole operation.

Months passed. Then, one day, an oversized envelope arrived under a Salt Lake City postmark. Within was a warm letter from my friend on the stationery of the Church's Council of the Twelve. Of even greater interest: the envelope contained photocopies of just such business documents as one had hoped might exist, taken from the Orson Pratt Papers.

Like everything else in this half-finished research, they tell much and leave more to question. For example, "Russell Bros.": among the documentary material is an invoice from Russell's American Steam Printing House, located at 28, 30, and 32 Centre Street, New York City, Joseph and Theodore Russell, Props.

So far, so good. It would be pleasant to be able to say flatly that Pratt was sent to New York by Young, engaged Russell Bros. to do the work, and saw it through. However, at this point, some 14 or 15 years after he was first reported to be casting type beside the Great Salt Lake, our old friend J. H. Rumel (or Rumell) enters the story.

According to a four-page manuscript in the Bancroft Library (which probably was the basis for Bancroft's very sketchy mention of the Alphabet), written in the flowing Spencerian hand of Franklin D. Richards, a well-placed member of the 19th-Century Mormon establishment at Salt Lake, Rumel, or (more likely) Rumell, was also in New York at this time. If so, probably it was to oversee the technical or mechanical part of the work.

Invoices, however, were issued to Orson Pratt, Senr. Among items billed in the well-formed clerkly hand of the day, in this case covering mostly the production of Part I of the Book of Mormon, are:

34 Long Primer Punches and Matrices	\$171.00
Fitting Caps (for same)	38.00
4 new Matrices	4.00
38 Great Primer Matrices	133.00
38 Doub. English Matrices	133.00
260 lbs. Long Primer Type	161.20
13 lbs. Doub. English	11.18
7 lbs. Great Primer	7.00

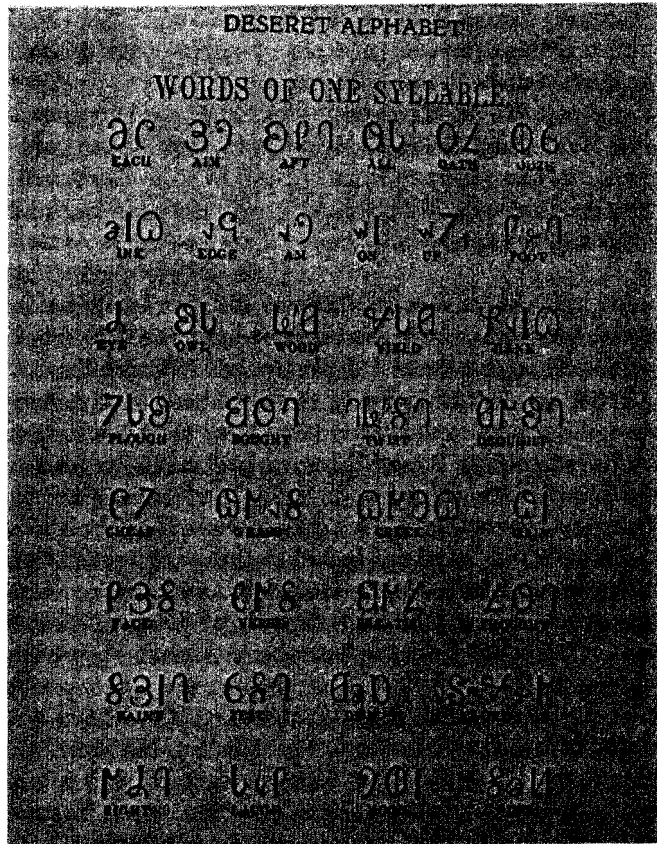
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We now know a great deal we did not know before about how, when, where and by whom the four books published in the Deseret Alphabet got into print.

What we do not know is to which one of the many flourishing type foundries of New York City (or Boston, or Philadelphia?) Russell Bros. turned for the cutting of the punches for this second, highly professional-looking Deseret Alphabet. In New York, at the end of the 1860s, the New York foundries included Bresnan; Bruce; Conner; Farmer, Little; Hager; Heinrich; and Lindsay. Someone saw to it that craftsmen capable of doing a first-rate job on George D. Watt's 38-character Alphabet were employed. This second cutting has the sort of unity expected of any well-designed, well-cut alphabet. As to the press-work, it is sharp and clean. The bindings of the books are tight and sound. The four books produced in the character, including the Book of Mormon, are: The Book of Nephi; the First Primer; and the Second Primer.

The really mysterious and unresolved elements in the story (aside from who cut the punches at New York) are (1) the reputed original punch-cutter, of Alphabet Version Number One, Sabin; and (2) the St. Louis Type Foundry.

An obituary of a David Sabin, in the *Deseret News* for June 21, 1882, describes his accomplishments, which included considerable mechanical ingenuity. In 1854, for



A "key" to words of one syllable as expressed in the Deseret Alphabet.

example, he made the machinery for, and manufactured, revolving pistols, and rifles, in Utah; and soon afterward, the machinery for making the first cut nails. Sabin probably would have been able to cut punches for the first version of the Deseret Alphabet. But if we assume he did, and made the matrices too, why did not brother Rumell (we will adopt Richards's spelling) thereupon take over and do the casting on the spot? Why send the matrices the long overland journey to St. Louis to the type foundry of Messrs. Ladew and Peers? Was there an insufficient supply of type metal in the Valley of Utah? Was it of poor quality? Richards' manuscript at the Bancroft confuses matters more by stating that the type used by the *Deseret News* in 1859 and through 1864 "was made in this city (Salt Lake) by John H. Rumell." Obviously, there is a great deal here that needs clarification.

A final word on Rumell. He knew that the appearance of the first version of the Alphabet disappointed Young. On the day of the Alphabet's first appearance in the *Deseret News*, February 16, 1859, it is recorded that Rumell called on Young "and proposed to get up the punches and matrices to make a set of new type for the Deseret Alphabet," and offered to "lose the labor himself" (that is, not charge for it) if the revised cutting was not to Young's better liking. Young at that time said (this comes from his Journal of given date) that he certainly wanted a new "set" (font) cast, but the work should wait until the Alphabet itself had been "thoroughly revised and improved and then he would send it to England and have it cast there, where they had better facilities for casting type."

There was one last gasp for the Alphabet. This was a proposal that the Book of Mormon be printed, not in the Alphabet, but in Pitman "phonotype." characters. Rich-

ards, in the Bancroft manuscript, says the now-much-traveled Orson Pratt left for England with just that in view in July, 1877 . . . "but the death of Brigham Young in August of that year necessitated (his) return to Salt Lake City and the project . . . was abandoned." May one suspect with a sense of relief on everyone's part . . . ?

The Alphabet was never accepted by the otherwise obedient Mormon communicants. The primers, produced by the thousands by Russell Bros., seem to have been, for practical purposes, ignored by Utah pedagogues (who has ever been able to overcome the passive resistance of a passel of school teachers?). The words of Richards can serve as its epitaph. "It went out of use by a kind of tacit neglect, or by general distaste for it." It stands today as one of Brigham Young's few failures, and as the outstanding typographical oddity of Western printing history. Imagination wonders: could a font, or at least a few handfuls of stray letter of the Deseret Alphabet, still exist in some forgotten corner of a Utah archive? Matrices? Even punches?

As to the books in the Alphabet: as noted, they are four in number. At last word, the price for the set from a Salt Lake City bookseller was \$250. Obviously a "cache" exists. It may be presumed that condition is mint. That in itself is a commentary on the acceptance accorded the Deseret Alphabet so ardently promoted by Brigham Young.