

In Another Time  
*Sketches of Utah History*

first published in

**The Salt Lake Tribune**

HAROLD SCHINDLER

Utah State University Press  
Logan, Utah  
1998

Billed at the Salt Lake Theatre April 10, 1882, Wilde was to speak on the subject: "Art Decoration, Being the Practical Application of the Aesthetic Theory to Every-Day Home Life and Ornamentation." Salt Lakers who attended the performance didn't know what to make of the lecturer. And the *Salt Lake Herald* reporter who covered the event devoted more than two columns of front page space to saying as much. It was not a rave review.

The large attendance at the lecture, he said, was due to curiosity. Wilde, he said, is on the whole a jolly good fellow, sharp as a whip, and has enough sense to know how the ducats can best be seduced from the astute American. His costume struck the journalist as "not entirely favorable." Wilde was dressed in "a black velvet coat somewhat approaching the conventional claw hammer in style, black velvet vest, ruffles at the throat, breast and wrists, black knee breeches, black stockings, and low pumps with pointed toes and silver buckles." The lecture delivery was "as odd and unpleasant to the ear as his appearance to the

eye." His style was no more monotonous than the delivery, and there was a total absence of gesture, though he occasionally pulled out his handkerchief or affectionately disturbed his long straight tresses, remarked the critic.

In closing his fifty-minute lecture, Wilde told his audience, "Let there be no flower in your meadows that does not wreath its tendrils around your pillars; no little leaf in your Titan forests that does not lend its form to design; no curving spray that does not live forever in carven arch or window of marble; no bird in your air that is not given the iridescent wonder of its color, the exquisite curves of its flight, to make more precious the preciousness of simple adornment; for the voices that have their dwelling in sea and mountain are not the chosen music of liberty only, or the sole treasure of its beauty." Commented the critic, "a mere recognition of the close of the lecture was conveyed by the brief and short-lived applause."

And so, in another time, did Artemus Ward and Oscar Wilde make their marks in Utah.

## THE DESERET ALPHABET

IN 1869, YOUNGSTERS IN THE UTAH PUBLIC SCHOOL system were being taught a second written language. It wasn't Spanish and it wasn't Latin. It was Deseret.

The new language had an alphabet of thirty-eight characters and was an outgrowth of a frustrating effort by the board of regents of the University of Deseret (today's University of Utah) to simplify English. Failing that, the regents decided instead to "invent an entirely new and original set of characters." The Deseret Alphabet was the result.

Just why the project was undertaken at all is still a matter of some dispute, but at least one western historian has theorized that greatly expanded missionary activity on the part of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the 1850s may have precipitated for Brigham Young, governor of Utah and president of the church, a pressing need

for revision of the language. Alone in the Great Basin save for the occasional trapper and trading post, the Mormon settlements were swelling with converts from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and France, as well as from that "greatest mission field of all, the British Isles," wrote the late scholar and historian Dale L. Morgan. "These converts presented difficult problems of assimilation. If they were to be knit into the Kingdom of God, they should have to learn to speak and write a common language," Morgan said. And that's what Young set out to do.

In October 1853 the board of regents appointed a committee of three—Parley P. Pratt, Heber C. Kimball, and George D. Watt (an accomplished Pitman shorthand reporter or "phonologist")—to "prepare a small school-book in characters founded on some new system of orthography whereby the spelling and pronunciation of

the English language might be made uniform and easily acquired." In the simplest of terms, the committee was to streamline English.

Three months later the committee reported a setback; it had despaired of reworking English and instead had opted to "invent an entirely new and original set of characters." An impossible task? Not so. By January 19, 1854, the *Deseret News* was able to report the university regents, in company with the governor (Brigham Young) and heads of departments, were adopting a new alphabet of thirty-eight characters. With minor variations, the final version was the alphabet determined for use in the schools.

But "language" was little more than a code. For an individual to be proficient in Deseret would require a measure of proficiency in English since it was based on the sounds found in English grammar. And it was crude, this "shorthand language." For instance, the Deseret characters (which cannot be reproduced by a conventional typewriter) for the First Reader's initial lesson are translated "Lesn I" and, for the heading, "L u urn [Learn] to [to] ur e d [read] woo el [well]." The *ur* in the third word is to provide the "r" sound in English. The *e* is given an "ee" sound, and the *d* is a "d". Makes one wonder why the regents and Brigham Young pursued this as they did.

Nevertheless, the regents met in February 1868 and voted to petition the legislature for \$10,000, then to send a practical printer to the East and have fonts of type cast and cut for the alphabet, and to "publish and import this season, spelling books, primers, readers, &c., to be introduced immediately among our children, and so continue from year to year, until we have published in that alphabet the cream of all knowledge relating to theology, science, history, geography, and all necessary educational works."

By April Orson Pratt was engaged in preparing the first and second readers to be printed in Deseret. The slim volumes—*The Deseret First Book* ran to thirty-six pages and the *The Deseret Second Book* to seventy-two—were illustrated with engravings from *Willson's Readers* (with permission from the publisher). *Willson's Readers* were gaining popularity across America, though they had not yet outperformed *McGuffey's Readers* in 1868. In total, twenty thousand copies of each Deseret reader were printed.

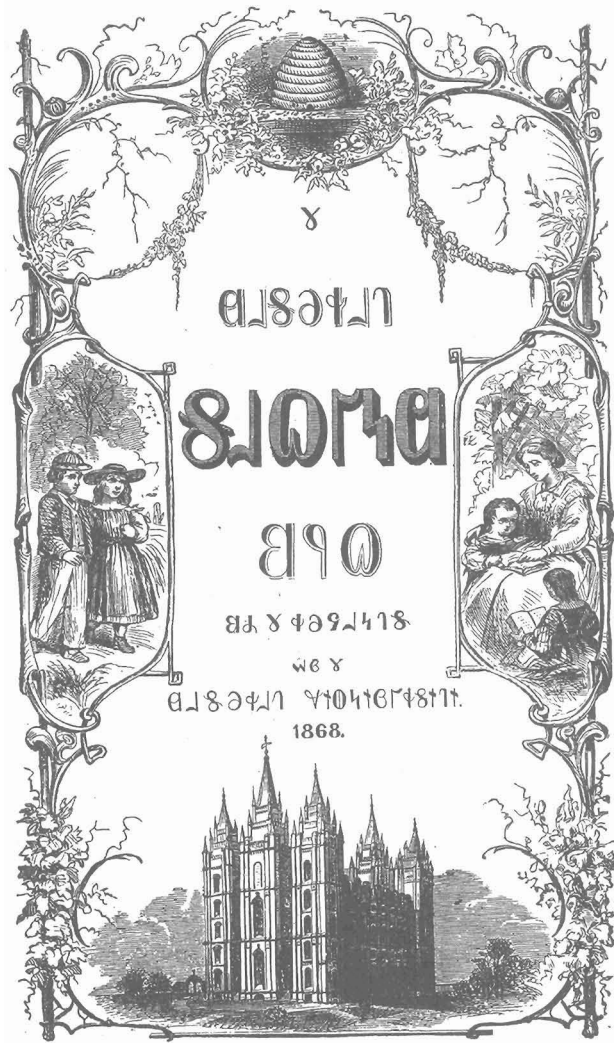
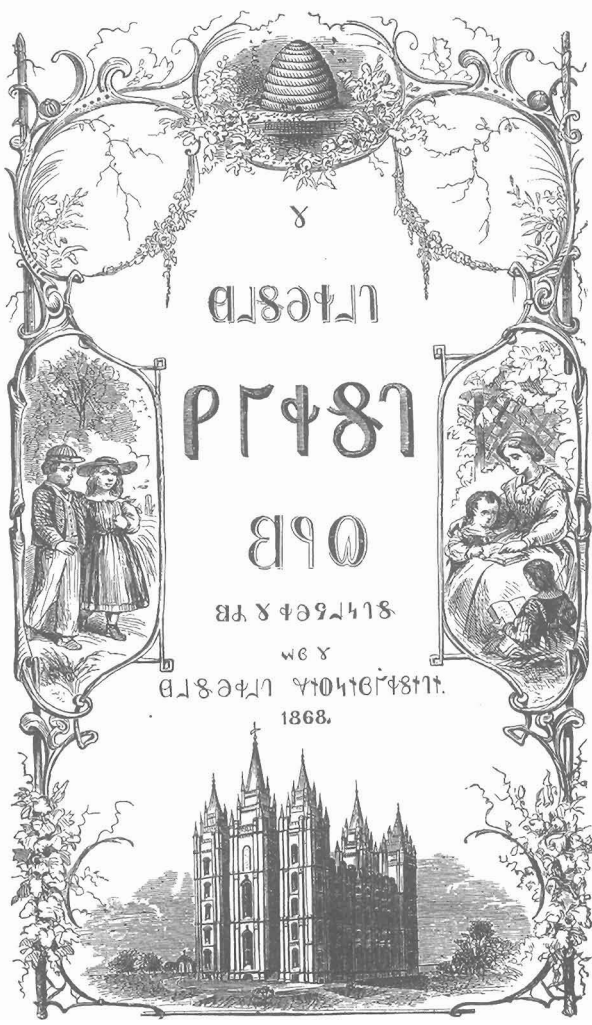
Brigham Young told church members at the LDS General Conference in October that thousands of the primers were on their way to public schools. They were offered for sale in Utah at fifteen cents and twenty cents each. (In the 1960s the LDS Church sold remaining copies of the primers for twenty-five cents each, and today the two little books in good condition will cost at least \$130 a set from rare book dealers.) But the books did not take hold. For nearly twenty years Brigham Young strove to persuade his followers that the new alphabet would restore purity to the language, yet there was the inherent flaw in its inception, having been developed as it was to a degree from Pitman shorthand and by individuals unfamiliar with the nuances of orthography and unprepared for the complexities of language. Explaining this "genuine difficulty," Morgan pointed out that the alphabet could be learned, "but except in communication it was functionless. It provided no access to the literature of the world, and provided no substitute for that literature."

More cynical was the editorial comment some ten years earlier in a *San Francisco Globe* issue of December 15, 1857, after a sample of Deseret had crossed the paper's desk:

The Mormons . . . are a progressive people. They not only want more wives than is wholesome, but more letters to their Alphabet. Letters written with this Alphabet are as incomprehensible as the movements of woman or the hieroglyphics of the Chinese and the Egyptians.

The Mormon alphabet consists of about 40 letters, which have been so arranged and named to cause the greatest possible annoyance to outsiders. The Saints not only wish to convert Utah into an oyster, but to close the shell against all knives except those found in the vicinity of Great Salt Lake. The Mormons wish to isolate the "generation of vipers" which are to succeed them. For this reason they wish to get up a new alphabet, a new spelling book, and a new language. The idea is ingenious, but it will not succeed. To get a new language in this country is as difficult as to bore a hole through the Rocky Mountains with a leather auger.

In the long run, for all the effort and money that had gone into creating the new language, it was as troublesome to meld into the mainstream as the metric system in the 1990s. For schools the alphabet was impractical, and the general public



The Deseret First Book and Deseret Second Book readers, which employed the Deseret Alphabet.

was entirely disinterested. And as the years passed, the characters of Deseret disappeared even from the occasional lesson feature in the *Deseret News*. In all the project resulted in two school primers, *The Deseret First Book* and *The Deseret Second Book*; a 116-page volume of *The Book of Nephi* (published in 1869); a 443-page edition of *The Book of Mormon* (also printed in New York in 1869); and some seventy-two articles in the *Deseret News* from February

1859 through August 1864. In July 1877 Orson Pratt was sent to England to investigate the possibility of printing Mormon scriptures in Pitman. With Brigham Young's death that August, Pratt was called home. As Dale Morgan put it, "Mormon experimentation in alphabetic and orthographic reform never again lifted its head."