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UTAH TERRITORY ~ 1853

by
Wm. Powell
3/68

The day had been pleasantly warm, but the feel of Fall was in the air; the leaves were beginning to show their fall colors; nature was gently nudging summer aside, making way for winter.

The Saints in the Great Basin were completing preparations for winter feeding of the church livestock. President Brigham Young had spent the day inspecting some of these facilities and planning for winter care of these herds which meant so much to survival in the valley.

Feeling quite satisfied with the project, he started the long ride home, enjoying the beauty of Fall in the valley. He noted the changing colors, the obvious preparation of the wild life for the cold weather ahead. The Sege Lily seemed to be resigned to the fact that its season was about over and was awaiting the frost and the blanket of snow that would usher in its long sleep until Spring.

As he journeyed homeward, he reviewed the past year, its trials and tribulations, its achievements -- the temple site had been consecrated, the corner stones laid. The Indians had been particularly annoying, causing some deaths and destroying property; nine shiploads of converts had departed from Liverpool -- destination -- Zion in the Mountains; construction of a six mile "Spanish wall" around the city had been started; the first number of a sixteen page octavo publication, The Journal of Discourses had been published in England; many wagon trains had arrived from the East -- Zion was growing. Missionaries had been banished from Norway and Prussia; successful preaching in Cape of Good Hope, England, Iceland. Floods in City Creek and Iron County - Capt. John Gunnison killed by indians, Elder Willard Snow died and buried at sea.

It was after dark when he arrived home; an unmistakable chill of approaching winter was in the air. With his thoughts of the day now filed away in his mind, his thoughts now turned to his family as he entered the house to receive a warm welcome.

As he passed by the study room where the tutor was instructing some of his children and some young lady converts from Denmark in the art of spelling and pronunciation, he overheard an almost impatient voice saying, "No! You spell 'though' 't-h-o-u-g-h', not 't-h-o'."

After dinner, in the quiet of his room, he pondered this remark and was reminded of other observations in this regard and his own difficulty in learning the cumbersome system of phonetic spelling. "Why," he asked himself, "couldn't a more practical system be devised? What could be done to make learning the English language easier for the non-English speaking converts and the children of Zion?"

The next day Brigham Young met with the Board of Regents of the newly-formed University of Deseret and laid the matter before them, suggesting that a study be made in view of some spelling and pronunciation reforms.

This was the beginning of

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A CHRONICLE of (THE)

1853


(DESERET)


(ALPHABET)

October 1853

The newly organized University of Deseret (now the University of Utah), was at that time not a class-teaching institution, but an education-promoting, supervisory and examining organization. This was certainly the place to submit such a problem. Could the principles of phonography be used in this reform? Many such questions were asked that day and many ideas proposed. A committee was formed to study this new project and develop some ideas for discussion. This committee appears to have consisted of Parley P. Pratt, Heber C. Kimball, Orson Pratt, Wilford Woodruff, Robert C. Campbell, and George D. Watt. W. W. Phelps was also mentioned by one writer; however, it is believed that George D. Watt was principally responsible for the resulting alphabet.

(Continued)

In the River Ribble, near Preston, George D. Watt, the first convert in England was baptised.⁽⁵⁾ He migrated to Nauvoo in 1840, continued active in the church and returned to his native England to fill a mission. His mission was two-fold; to preach the gospel to his countrymen and to learn the Pitman method of shorthand, then being taught in England.

He applied himself diligently to the completion of his assignment in both callings, and returned to Nauvoo where he applied his newly learned system of shorthand in recording many sermons of the early leaders of the church.

He moved West and became the church reporter, a position he held for many years. His name appears as reporting conferences into the year 1866, almost 20 years of reporting service using shorthand he originally learned in England.⁽⁶⁾

November 24, 1853

The Deseret News reported that the Board of Regents had met frequently with the governor (Brigham Young) and others to investigate *"The elementary sounds of language."*

They believed that *"the present orthography of the English language is too full of absurdities to be tolerated by an enlightened people without a gradual and complete reformation."*⁽⁷⁾

December, 1853

The Deseret Alphabet as finally adopted was an odd assortment of thirty eight characters, one for each of the discernible sounds in the English language. The letters C, D, L, O, P, S, and W of the Roman alphabet were retained (after a fashion), however, even these letters took on some new sounds. Thirty-one new characters were added, some taken from illustrations of ancient alphabets in an old Webster's dictionary, and Watt designed some himself.⁽⁸⁾ The letter to be sounded as G seems to be a copy of the demotic Egyptian phonetic valued e symbol.⁽⁹⁾

December 1854

Governor Young spoke before the territorial legislature promoting the project:

"...While the world is progressing with steam-engine power and lightning speed in the accumulation of wealth, extension of sciences, communication and dissemination of letters and principles, why may not the way be paved for the easier acquisition of the English language, combining as it does great extension and varied expression with beauty, simplicity and power and being unquestionably the most useful and beautiful in the world. But while we freely admit this, we also have to acknowledge that it is perhaps as much abused in its use and as complex in its attainments as any other."

January 19, 1854 — As reported in the Deseret News.

"The Board of Regents, in company with the Governor and heads of departments, have adopted a new alphabet, consisting of 38 characters . . . with the sanguine hope of simplifying the English language . . .

"These characters are much more simple in their structure than the usual alphabetical characters . . . The written and printed hand are substantially merged in one.

"The orthography will be so abridged that an ordinary writer can probably write one hundred words a minute with ease, and consequently report the speech of a common speaker without much difficulty.

"As soon as this alphabet can be set in type, it will probably be furnished to the schools of the Territory for their use and benefit, not, however, with a view to immediately supersede the use of the common alphabet which though it does not make the comers thereunto perfect, still it is a vehicle that has become venerable for age and much hard service.

"In the new alphabet every letter has a fixed and unalterable sound and every word is spelled with reference to given sounds. By this means, strangers cannot only acquire a knowledge of our language much more readily but a practiced reporter can also report a strange language when spoken. . . ."

January 1854

From "Incidents in Utah History", (1851-1854), we read the following:

"Governor Young met with the Regents of the Deseret University this winter for the purpose of reforming the orthography of the English language. After many attempts to render the common alphabet subservient, it was considered necessary to introduce a new set of characters, more simple in their structure, from which every superfluous mark should be excluded and in which every letter should have a fixed and unalterable sound excluding the use of silent letters." (10)

Considerable delay was experienced in getting the reform into use. After the alphabet was developed and agreed upon by the Regents, there had to be a way developed to reproduce the new characters on paper so they could be studied and then some method of printing had to be devised. The available type certainly was not suitable and getting type from the East was very expensive and took time. Paper was very scarce and at that time they did not have bookbinding equipment in Utah.

There was some work done during this year in preparing manuscripts written in the Deseret Alphabet by Parley P. Pratt, one of the original members of the committee, as evidenced by the following excerpt from his diary: (From "Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt", under diary date January, 1854.)

".....The remainder of the winter was spent in the ministry; in the active duties of a Regent of the University of Deseret (being one of the Committee on the Deseret Alphabet and a New System of Orthography); in teaching a class in the Spanish language; in ministering in the ordinances of endowments in the house of the Lord;"

Parley P. Pratt's death three years later ended his contribution to this cause. However, had he lived we may be sure he would have contributed substantially to the development of ideas and materials for the reform.

November 30, 1854

"....Governor Brigham Young met with the Regents of the Deseret University, when resolutions were passed to extend the teachings of the new alphabet. The Regents were directed to lecture in different parts of the country in favor of getting up schools..." (10)

1855

The Legislature appropriated \$2500.00 to further the cause "under the direction and control of the Chancellor and the Board of Regents in procuring fonts of Deseret Alphabet type, in paying for printing of books with said type and other purposes..." (11)

Orson Pratt, Professor of Astronomy and Mathematics at the University of Deseret, was assigned the leadership of this phase of the work and was dispatched to St. Louis to procure fonts of type, printing materials, etc., to commence actual printing of books and articles using the new alphabet. (12)

Orson Pratt's aptitude for this type of work and general business ability made his appointment a wise choice. It is believed that he did much of the translating.

This translating was very tedious work and many mistakes were made. A detailed treatise on the errors in the translating and printing of the Deseret Alphabet will be found in another section of this article.

February 4, 1856

"The Regency of the University met in Governor Young's room, at candle light and held till ten o'clock. The main subject dwelt upon was the getting up of first and second readers, for the children of Utah Territory.

A committee of three were appointed to get up these books, and present them to the Board, for acceptance. The committee were G. D. Watt, Saml. W. Richards, and W. Woodruff." (10)

"On the 11th, the Regency of the County met and the work of the committee was read and accepted. The committee of Revision or examination was appointed to assist those appointed as the first committee." (10)

"Prest. Young, for some time had his mind deeply exercised upon the getting up of the 'Deseret Alphabet' and carrying it into practical use. The committee were now making books under his direction, to be published in that Alphabet. They had to get new type made, as the letters were entirely different from any others in use at that time."

"The committee last appointed were Albert Carrington, D. H. Wells and Wm. Willes." (10)

1857

The available records show few advances in actual printing of books and lesson material during the next nine years. However, the leaders of these years were well aware of the need of education and were continually encouraging the saints to study and improve their minds.

May 1858

To further complicate the development and actual use of the new alphabet, the Deseret News press and supplies were moved to Fillmore in preparation for abandonment and the possible burning of Salt Lake City rather than give the city intact to Johnson's Army. Brigham Young also gave instructions that if Fillmore was endangered, the press and other materials and equipment were to be moved one hundred miles further south to Parowan to insure survival of the priceless equipment. (13)

The project of alphabet reform was laid aside giving way to more important things of the day; however, it was not forgotten.

With grim determination the Saints made the "move" south and awaited the outcome of the army's arrival.

An interesting and personal story of the "move" and the army's activity is recorded in the book "Autobiography and Poems" by Hannah Cornaby, 1881, Page 49.

"In the spring of 1858, the 'move' commenced, when all the people living north of Utah County, removed south. This made our little town quite lively. Several families encamped upon our lot, constructing temporary shelter for themselves. The government, having been misled by mischief-makers, thought it had made a mistake; so sent commissioners to Utah to find out what was the matter with the Mormons. On inquiry, it was found they were 'right side up', so they proposed to forgive us if we asked their pardon for keeping them out in the cold all winter, which we did with a very good grace, they promising to be quite peaceable if we would let them come in. The army entered our peaceful valleys and encamped at Fairfield, not as an invading force, but restricted and shorn of its power; bringing with it, money, clothing, provisions and supplies of almost every description, which were placed within easy access of the people. Thus the army which threatened destruction to us as a people, like so many of the efforts of our enemies to destroy us, only proved a blessing in disguise, and the wrath of man was made to praise the Lord. In July, the people returned to their homes in peace. We prospered temporarily, and enjoyed the blessings of life as well as the consolations of our holy religion."

The territorial superintendent of schools, Robert Campbell, was a champion of the reform project and had this to say:

"The Superintendent takes great pleasure in seconding the efforts of President Brigham Young and the Board of Regents of the University of Deseret, in the introduction of the Deseret Alphabet. That English orthography needs reform is patent to all who have given the matter the slightest consideration. To follow in the footsteps of our venerated fathers in a system of orthography so inconsistent and ridiculous and which has never helped to make the comers thereunto perfect, is unworthy of a people whose constant and highest aspirations are to be associated with truth and intelligence, and who discard error in whatever form it is presented." (16)

1860

Brigham Young's enthusiasm for this new alphabet and system of spelling even influenced the Utah monetary system. Gold coins were minted in Utah in 1849 and in 1850. In 1860, the coins were redesigned and minted with the words "Holiness to the Lord" written in the peculiar hieroglyphic-like figures of the Deseret Alphabet. This was the last year of gold coinage in Utah, the practice being forbidden by Governor Cummings. The United States Government redeemed all gold coins that were made available with the current United States gold coinage, thereby creating a short supply of these coins for the collectors of today. (17)



March 1864

Apparently the problems of acceptance of the Deseret Alphabet began to plague the leaders of the church and Brigham Young considered an alternate or substitute for the Deseret Alphabet.

"Ex Gov. Young desired the Regency of the Deseret University to consider the system of phonotype instead of the Deseret Alphabet." (10)

There is no record available of the Regents' action on Brigham Young's suggestion and it is assumed that it was "shelved" and that the effort in behalf of the Deseret Alphabet as originally designed was continued.

1864 --- 1867

There is very little recorded of the activity of the alphabet project during this period. Apparently some further transcribing was done but the populace made small gains in learning the new alphabet and very little printing was done.

However, it was not forgotten. From an address given in the new tabernacle by George A. Smith on October 9, 1867 as recorded in the "Journal of Discourses", Vol. XXII, Page 138-141, we read the following:

"In speaking of the education of our children, I wish to draw the attention of the Saints particularly to the system of phonetics, or the Deseret Alphabet, which has been referred to by President Young and some of the brethren. This is calculated to considerably abridge the labor of our foreign brethren in learning to read English. I think that in all our schools phonetics should form one branch of study, and as fast as works of phonotopy can be obtained they should be introduced, for there is no doubt that a general reformation will be effected in our English orthography. It is said that the Lord will restore to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon Him with one consent. While we urge our brethren to acquire the English language, and to make themselves proficient in the useful branches of education, we wish them to remember that the orthography which the English nation has adopted is by no means perfect, for our present mode of spelling might be materially improved..."