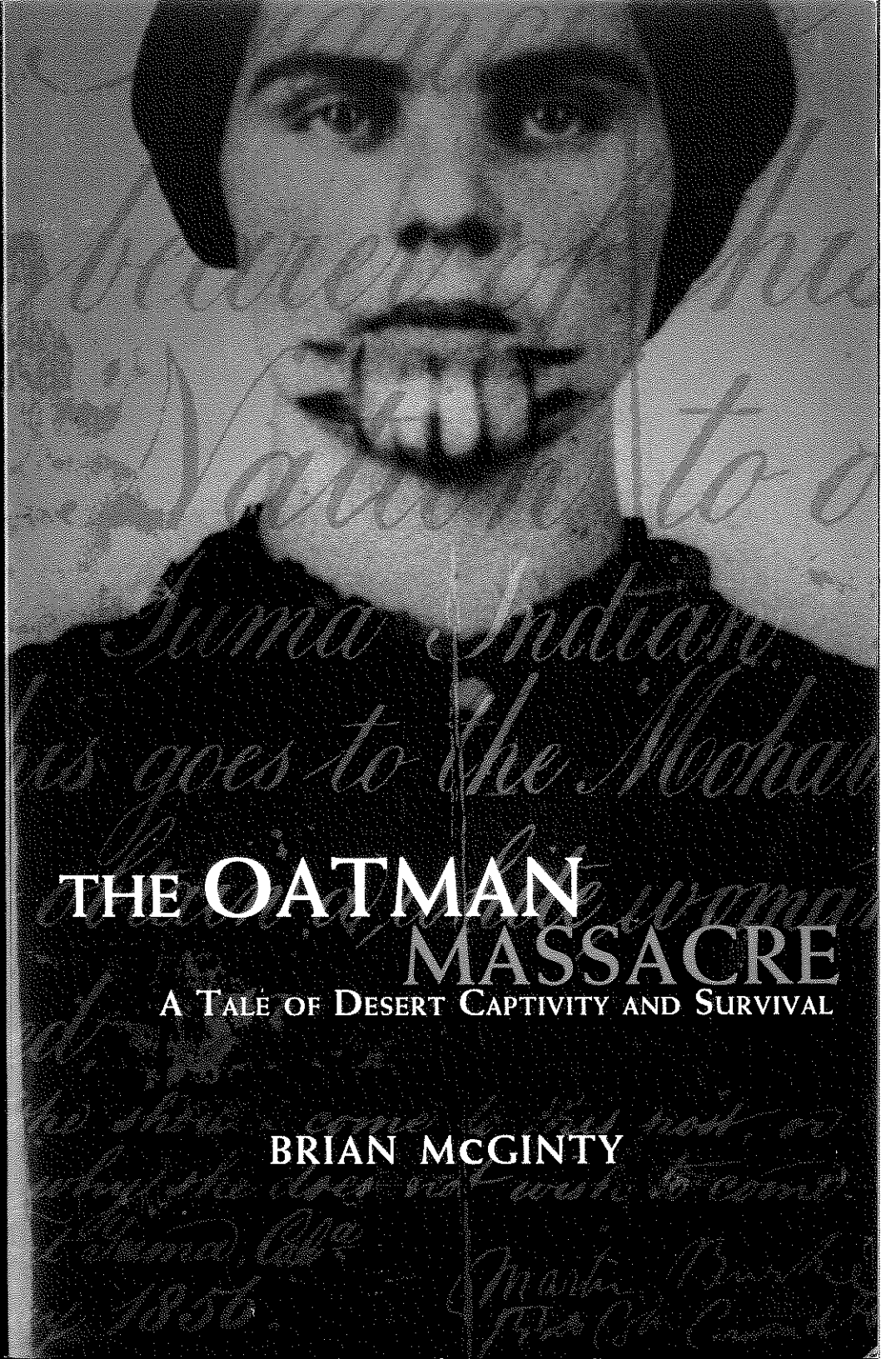

THE OATMAN MASSACRE

A Tale of Desert Captivity and Survival

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CHAPTER 1

The Family

The story of the Oatmans begins far from the southwestern desert—nearly a continent away, in the southwestern corner of Vermont, in a wooded valley where white settlers had, late in the eighteenth century, begun to clear timber and put up fences on land wrested from the Western Abenakis, a fishing and hunting people of the northeastern woods. There were a good number of Oatmans in Vermont's Rutland County when Roys Oatman was born in the first decade of the nineteenth century—enough to give his mother and father a sense that their home, though far from the population centers of New England, was secure and that their newborn would grow to manhood unmolested by "marauding Indians."

The Oatmans were descended from Dutch emigrants who had arrived in New York from Holland at the end of the seventeenth century. Their first American ancestor was a gold- and silversmith named Johannes Outman [sic] who with his wife, Femmetje Koch, worshipped in New York's Dutch Reformed Church. In the early eighteenth century, Johannes Outman's descendants began to migrate into neighboring colonies, first Connecticut, then, sometime after 1749, Vermont. The first Outman to make his home in Vermont was Johannes's grandson George, who settled in the town of Arlington

about 1760. George and his son George Jr. (who Americanized the spelling of the family name to "Oatman") both fought in the American Revolution on the side of the colonists. After the war, the son moved to the Rutland County village of Middletown, where he cleared a plot of forest that became known as the Oatman Farm. George Jr.'s son Lyman married Lucy Hartland of Middletown on November 27, 1801, then set about raising a large family that eventually included twelve boys and five girls. Roys, the fourth child and the third son of Lyman and Lucy Hartland Oatman, was born on or near the Oatman Farm on an unrecorded date in 1809.[1]

The Oatmans had apparently abandoned the Dutch Reformed Church of their ancestors sometime before they moved to Vermont, for George Sr. was a practicing Anglican by 1747. But the communion of the English kings and queens proved no more durable an association for the Oatmans than the Dutch faith, and sometime around the turn of the nineteenth century, they were caught up in a new religious fervor that swept over the hills and valleys of Vermont. This was the "rule and method" developed in England by the brothers John and Charles Wesley and planted in the United States when the first "Methodist" bishop in North America was installed at Baltimore in 1784. The first Methodist minister appeared in Middletown in 1801, and though a permanent Methodist church was not built for many years (the town's two oldest churches were the Congregational and the Baptist), there was a flurry of Methodist activity early in the new century—study classes, sermons given by itinerant ministers, and camp meetings. Much of the local enthusiasm for Methodism was inspired by a compelling if eccentric preacher named Lorenzo Dow, who traveled widely along the Atlantic seaboard. Dow spoke outdoors, sometimes for as long as three hours at a time and always held his audiences rapt. He often closed his perorations with a parting promise: "One year from this day, at 2:00 P.M., I will preach here again." The people laughed at his audacity in setting an appointment so far in advance and dismissed

him as "Crazy Dow"; but a year later to the day, who should appear in town at the appointed hour but Lorenzo Dow? As the expected crowd gathered round him, the preacher shouted with evident pleasure, "Crazy Dow is with you once again."[2]

Roys Oatman's grandfather George Jr. converted to Methodism, and Roys's uncle Eli Oatman was one of the founders of the Methodist Episcopal Society in Middletown. Roys was also a Methodist, and when his oldest son was born in 1836, he named him Lorenzo Dow Oatman, in honor of the itinerant minister who had preached in Middletown during his youth.[3]

Though the mountains and valleys of Vermont were often breathtakingly beautiful, much of the soil was far from fertile. To farm previously untilled land, Vermonters had to clear it of its dense tree cover and haul away the rocks that choked the ground. Settlers also found that the weather in Vermont could be harsh. The summer of 1816, when Roys Oatman was seven, was particularly cold, with snow in June and a hard frost in July that wiped out crops across the state (for years after, Vermonters called this year "eighteen hundred and froze to death"). The Oatman family left Vermont not long after this disaster to settle on a new farm near the town of Locke in western New York.

Locke was eight miles south of Lake Owasco, one of the long, narrow Finger Lakes of western New York. The family that Lyman and Lucy Hartland Oatman brought to Locke was large, though, judged by the standards of the time, not extraordinarily so. When the United States census taker visited their home in Locke in 1820, he found ten Oatmans in residence, eight of whom were minor children and two who were adults.[4]

Roys Oatman probably did not stand out from his siblings in this ample brood. Like his brothers, he worked on his father's farm, rising early in the morning, retiring early at night, perhaps stealing a few hours at the end of the day to read a book by candlelight. He attended school, at least for a while, and acquired a fairly good education.

During the spring and summer, he spent most of the daylight hours working in the fields, following the directions of his older brothers and father. It is unlikely, however, that he did this with much joy. Years later, his children remembered him as a cheerful man with an optimistic outlook on life. But men and women who traveled with him on the western trail knew he could be difficult: he did not like to follow orders; he had an obstinate turn of mind; and once he had set his mind on a course of action, it seemed that he would rather suffer some calamity than back down.

Life in Locke was not much different from that in any small northeastern town during Roys Oatman's boyhood. If the routine of farmwork was dull, it was enlivened by an exciting, at times even frightening, religious life. In western New York, Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians vigorously contended for members. On Sundays preachers lectured their congregations about the virtues of Bible study, and on hot summer evenings they retreated to tents at the edges of the towns and urged their audiences to repentance. Revivals swept across western New York with such regularity that the region came to be called the "Burned-Over District," a place where the fires of faith and devotion burned hot and repeatedly. The evangelical fervor of western New York was reflected in other parts of the United States, as traveling preachers exhorted the population to piety, laying the foundations for new denominations (among them the "Millerites," later renamed the Seventh-Day Adventists, and the "Campbellites," or Disciples of Christ) and raising existing sects to new prominence (Methodism exploded from just over a thousand members in 1773 to one million in 1844, making it the largest denomination in the United States). Religious feeling reached a pitch not seen since the "Great Awakening" of the 1730s and 1740s, prompting historians to describe the period as America's "Second Great Awakening."

The Oatmans were not immune to the religious ferment of the time. If they were already committed to Methodism, the tent revivals

of the itinerant Methodist ministers no doubt stimulated their faith, while meetings conducted by other preachers hinted at the wider world outside the revival tents.

The Oatmans remained in Locke for a dozen or more years. Although western New York must have seemed a vast improvement over the rocky hills and valleys of Vermont, it was hardly an earthly paradise. The completion in 1825 of the Erie Canal (which crossed the Finger Lakes region just thirty miles north of Locke) gave western New Yorkers hope of new prosperity, but when towns and cities along the canal did not grow as rapidly as expected, settlers began to talk of moving farther west. A steady stream of settlers left New York in the 1820s and 1830s for the Ohio River Valley. The Oatmans joined this throng, leaving Locke probably in the early 1830s. They may have lived for a short time in Ohio but soon moved across Ohio and Indiana to Illinois.

They found a tract of land in the western part of Illinois, on a prairie between the Illinois and Mississippi rivers. There, in the town of Franklin—later renamed La Harpe, after an early French trapper—in Hancock County, about fifteen miles from the Mississippi and twenty-five miles northeast of Keokuk, Iowa, Lyman and Lucy Oatman built a one-and-a-half-story log cabin and fitted it up as a public inn. The business prospered, and by 1836 they were able to buy two lots across the road and put up a larger building that they called the Tremont Hotel.

It is not clear whether Roys was with his parents when they first arrived in Illinois or he came on a little later. He was by this time an adult, capable of choosing his own home and the woman he wanted to share it with. In 1832, the year he turned twenty-three, he married Mary Ann Sperry, the eighteen-year-old daughter of Joy and Mary Ann Lamont Sperry of Trumbull County, Ohio. The marriage took place in the Sperry's home in Mecca, Ohio.[5]

Like the Oatmans, the Sperrys had pursued a steady westward course in the early years of the nineteenth century. Mary Ann's

mother was born in New York and her father in Massachusetts, but they had all moved into northeastern Ohio sometime before 1820. Roys Oatman did not cut a very impressive figure: though no pictures have survived, his children recalled that he was not much above five feet tall and had a round face and black hair. But the Sperrys were probably satisfied with the match, for in the same year that Roys and Mary Ann were married, Roys's sisters Florella and Lorania both married Sperry boys. Bound by three marriages, the Oatman and Sperry families would follow closely parallel paths in the years that followed.

If Roys had not moved to Illinois before his marriage, he arrived soon thereafter, settling in the same Hancock County township as his parents. He bought land on the prairie and set about farming it but, after a couple of years, opened a store in La Harpe. Mary Ann presented him with children almost with the regularity of prairie corn crops. A daughter, Lucy, was born in August 1834, and a son named Lorenzo Dow in July 1836. A second daughter, Olive Ann, was born on September 7, 1837. Mary Ann, named for her mother, followed in 1843, Roys Jr. in 1846, Charity Ann in 1848, and Roland in 1849. Before they left Illinois, Roys and Mary Ann Oatman were the parents of seven children.[6]

Meanwhile the prairies of western Illinois were filling with settlers. Wagons heavy with grain raised clouds of dust as they rolled along country roads cut through fields of corn and wheat. Steamboats from the delta country of Louisiana docked along the shore of the Mississippi to discharge traders, speculators, and freight and receive cargos of grain. In Hancock County, as elsewhere in western Illinois, towns were growing rapidly. Joy and Mary Ann Sperry, Mary Ann Oatman's parents, moved from Ohio in 1836, settling on a farm in Adams County, just south of Hancock. Within the year, however, they moved on to La Harpe, where Joy built a house and took up a small farm. While his unmarried sons, William,

Aaron, Charles, and Harrison, helped with the farmwork, Joy worked in and around La Harpe as a carpenter and millwright.[7]

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The character of western Illinois changed dramatically in April 1839, when a charismatic former Vermonter named Joseph Smith, Jr., settled at the western edge of Hancock County, about thirty miles from La Harpe. Smith was well-known to the Oatmans and Sperrys before he came to Illinois, for he had achieved an astonishing celebrity (some called it notoriety) as the self-proclaimed prophet of a religious sect officially designated the "Latter-day Saints" (or "Saints of the Latter Days") but informally known to most Americans as Mormons.

Like Roys Oatman, Smith was a native of Vermont (he was born in 1805 in Sharon, about forty miles northeast of Oatman's birthplace in Middletown). Like the Oatmans, the Smiths were farmers who had struggled year after year to extract a living, first from Vermont's rocky soil and then, after 1816, from land near Palmyra in western New York, less than fifty miles from the Oatman farm at Locke. From western New York the Smiths had moved farther west, to Ohio, then to Missouri, and finally to western Illinois. But beyond those superficial resemblances, the story of Joseph Smith's life could hardly have been more different than Roys Oatman's—or that of almost any other young American of his generation.

From an early age, Smith evinced an extraordinary gift for spiritual (some might say magical) insights. He used "seer stones" (polished rocks with some of the same properties as crystal balls) to see "ghosts, infernal spirits, [and] mountains of gold and silver" buried in the ground. When only twenty-five years old, he published his celebrated *Book of Mormon,* a "volume of holy scripture" that he had "translated" from golden plates he found buried in the side of a hill near his father's farm. The *Book of Mormon* purported to be a history of ancient peoples who fled Jerusalem about 600 B.C. and later settled in North America, where Jesus visited them after his resurrection. Two of

these peoples, the Nephites ("a white and delightsome people") and the Lamanites ("a dark, a filthy and a loathsome people"), engaged in a long series of wars concluding in the Lamanites' defeat of the Nephites. Smith was secretive about his golden plates, concealing them in a locked box so skeptics could not examine them, hanging a curtain across the room in which he worked at his translation so no one could see the process by which he transformed the "reformed Egyptian" characters on the plates into something that resembled the English style of the King James Bible. His New York neighbors were first amused, then puzzled, and finally outraged by the *Book of Mormon*. While some were willing to dismiss it as a piece of harmless fiction, others branded it an "impudent fraud" and "blasphemy."

The scorn heaped on the *Book of Mormon* did not seem to bother Smith's own family, who embraced it as "the word of God," or the family members and friends who, in April 1830, helped him found his "Church of Christ"—later renamed the "Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints"—at Fayette, New York, about twenty-five miles from the Oatman farm at Locke. Now calling himself a "Seer, a Translator, a Prophet, an Apostle of Jesus Christ," Smith took the headquarters of his church to Kirtland, Ohio, about thirty miles east of Cleveland, where he and his followers built a handsome stone temple. At the same time, however, he sent a colony of the faithful to western Missouri, where, according to one of the many revelations he received directly from the Almighty, they were to build their "New Jerusalem" or "City of Zion"—the "place of gathering" that would be the center of the "kingdom of God on earth."[8]

But Smith's "Saints"—or as other Americans now habitually referred to them, Mormons—aroused opposition wherever they went. In Ohio in 1838 Smith and several of his followers were tarred and feathered and then run out of the state. In Missouri differences between Mormons and "gentiles" (as Smith called all those who did not accept his leadership) led to angry arguments, battles, and finally

a "war" that did not end until the Prophet and about five thousand of his followers fled into Illinois in April 1839.

Most Illinoisans welcomed the Mormons to their midst, believing that they had been treated shamefully in Missouri. Still determined to build a "New Jerusalem" on the western frontier, Smith acquired a tract of land on the Mississippi about thirty miles west of La Harpe, named it Nauvoo, and began to transform it into another "City of Zion." As the foundations of an imposing temple were dedicated, Mormons from all over the country began to "gather" to the place. When the population topped eleven thousand, with a third more in the outlying areas of Hancock County, Smith's followers boasted that their "New Jerusalem" in Nauvoo was the largest city in Illinois.[9]

No one now knows precisely when or under what circumstances Roys Oatman and his family became Mormons. Years later Mary Ann Oatman's brother Charles Sperry recalled that their father, Joy, joined the church in the summer of 1839, shortly after Joseph Smith's arrival in Hancock County and that "part of the family" followed him at about the same time. The Oatmans, however, may not have joined the Latter-day Saints until about a year and a half later, when Mormon elder Z. H. Gurley spent several weeks in La Harpe proselytizing for "Zion." In March 1841 the church's official newspaper in Nauvoo, the *Times and Seasons,* reported that, in only six days, Gurley had the "unspeakable privilege" of baptizing fifty-two residents of La Harpe (all by the prescribed Mormon ritual of total immersion) and that there was "a prospect of great accessions to their number."[10] That the Oatmans were attracted to Mormonism is not surprising, given the enthusiasm with which they had embraced Methodism when it was new (Joseph Smith himself had once attended Methodist camp meetings). After a branch of Smith's church was organized in La Harpe, the town quickly took on the character of a Mormon village. There was almost constant contact between La Harpe and Nauvoo, and inhabitants eagerly read Mormon tracts and newspapers.

Though Mormonism was thriving in Hancock County, the same could not be said of all the Mormons themselves. Life on the western frontier could be hard, and wresting a living from a country where the winters were harsh and economic conditions unpredictable was a challenge. There were periodic financial crises, some precipitated by local conditions, others linked to events in distant parts of the United States. The financial panic that struck New York and other eastern cities in 1837 was the most frightening that the young republic had yet experienced, and its effects were soon felt throughout the country. On the western frontier, paper money became worthless and mortgage foreclosures were rife. An economic depression ensued that lasted for several years. Olive and Lorenzo Oatman later remembered that the hard times of 1842 and 1843 bore down heavily on their father. Unable to pay his debts, he tried to sell his land but found no market for it. Eventually his creditors resorted to legal process against him. Admitting financial failure, Oatman gathered his family and headed out of Hancock County to seek a new home in some other part of the country.[11]

His destination was an infant city near the southern tip of Lake Michigan called Chicago. Though not yet as large as Nauvoo, the city was strategically situated astride a major east-west trade route. Roys taught school, but he was not happy in Chicago and, after about a year, moved his family back to western Illinois.

The Oatmans may have returned to La Harpe, at least for a while. Their Oatman and Sperry relatives still lived in the town and could have helped them reestablish their home; and in La Harpe they could have renewed their commitment to Mormonism. The population of Latter-day Saints was still growing rapidly in Hancock County, though gentile opposition was also increasing. The Mormons in and around Nauvoo as a whole impressed their non-Mormon neighbors as hardworking people, and even their detractors confessed admiration for their religious devotion. Yet there was something about the Mormons that aroused resentment. It was not just that

they held unconventional religious beliefs: radical religious sects were legion in the nineteenth-century United States, but none aroused as much opposition as the Latter-day Saints. Perhaps it was their stubborn insistence that they alone were God's "chosen people"; perhaps it was the suspicion that Smith was laying plans to seize political as well as religious power and unite church and state in a "kingdom" with himself as its head. More than anything else, it may have been the growing awareness that Smith and some of his closest followers were engaging in sexual practices that not only offended prevailing moral principles but also violated Illinois law. Smith never publicly defended polygamy (or what he preferred to call the "principle of plural marriage"), but he received a revelation (disclosed only to his family and closest associates) that not only sanctioned the practice but also threatened divine destruction for anyone who opposed it. After his death no one was surprised to learn that he had taken many wives, but the total number—more than thirty, perhaps even as many as fifty—was shocking even to many Mormons.[12] And it soon became known that other Mormon leaders had also embraced "the principle" with what detractors regarded as unseemly enthusiasm.

Fair-minded "gentiles" in Illinois wanted to ensure the Mormons the kind of religious freedom they had been denied in Missouri. But as they saw the walls of Smith's temple rising above the Mississippi, as they watched the prophet parading with his "Nauvoo Legion" (a private army of which he was the "lieutenant general"), and as they learned more about the sexual "indiscretions" practiced in Nauvoo, they began to wonder if they could live in peace with "such people." To more and more gentiles in Hancock County, Mormonism seemed not just harmless humbug but a menace to the community.

Disaffection with Smith's leadership was also growing among the Mormons themselves. Some of his advisers grumbled about his political activities, others about his reckless financial practices; yet others expressed outrage at his sexual profligacy. By mid-1844 opposition to Smith among Mormons was so strong that a newspaper was

launched to publicize it. On June 7 the first (and also the last) issue of the *Nauvoo Expositor* rebuked Smith for his concupiscence and his efforts to unite church and state under the leadership of a "king" ("[C]hrist is our only king and lawgiver," the *Expositor* declared). Outraged, Smith ordered the Nauvoo Legion to smash the newspaper's press. As non-Mormons raged against the Prophet's assault on freedom of the press, Hancock County authorities procured a warrant for his arrest. He fled across the Mississippi into Iowa, but on assurances of safety from Illinois governor Thomas Ford, he returned to await trial in the Hancock County seat at Carthage. There, on June 27, two hundred state militiamen, transformed by anti-Mormon rage into a lawless mob, fired a barrage of rifle shots into the cell Smith occupied with his brother Hyrum and two other Mormons, almost instantly killing the two brothers.

Smith's death left an eerie emptiness in Nauvoo. Only thirty-eight years old when he was murdered, the Prophet had made no preparations for succession to the highest church leadership. Sidney Rigdon, the sole surviving member of the church's three-member First Presidency, quickly claimed the right to be the church's "guardian." James Jesse Strang, a recent convert to Mormonism from Voree, Wisconsin, produced a letter from Smith purporting to confer the mantle of leadership on him. But Rigdon and Strang were both challenged by Brigham Young, a one-time carpenter from Vermont who, as president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, had demonstrated not only an unswerving devotion to the principles of Mormonism but also an exceptional administrative ability. Holding no personal claim to Smith's authority, Young argued simply that the Quorum held the "keys of the kingdom of God in all the world," and a general conference of Saints promptly agreed. Thus Brigham Young, as president of the Quorum of Twelve, acceded to the highest leadership of Joseph Smith's church.

Rigdon remained for a while in Nauvoo, but after Young brought charges against him for "fomenting dissension," he was "cut off"

from the church and delivered over to the "buffetings of Satan." Rigdon left Nauvoo in the fall of 1844 for his home state of Pennsylvania, where he established his own "Church of Christ," reaffirming his faith in the *Book of Mormon* but condemning the "debasing and demoralizing" doctrine of plural marriage.[13]

While dissension racked the church's highest ranks, Mormons in Hancock County pondered their futures. In La Harpe and neighboring towns, priests and elders met to debate whether Young, Strang, or Rigdon (or perhaps some other person entirely) was entitled to Smith's mantle. While Joy Sperry and his family were confident that the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was the church's lawful governing body, Roys Oatman was not so sure. In September 1845 he met one of Rigdon's missionaries traveling along the Mississippi, and the man quickly won him over to Rigdon's cause. Oatman soon offered himself as a priest in Rigdon's church. Sometime in late 1845 or early 1846, he, Mary Ann, and their children headed eastward to Rigdon's "Adventure Farm," near the town of Greencastle in south-central Pennsylvania. Blessed with fertile soil and ample timber, Adventure Farm seemed well suited to become "the glory of the whole earth" that Rigdon promised it would be. But the Oatmans found Rigdon's leadership difficult to follow. Sick and ill tempered, he delivered angry sermons, made frightening predictions about the imminent destruction of the world, and quickly alienated almost all of his followers.[14]

Convinced that Rigdon was not the right man to lead Smith's church, the Oatmans returned to Illinois, this time to Whiteside County in northwestern Illinois, where they found a tract of rolling prairie just east of the Mississippi River town of Fulton, about 120 miles northeast of Nauvoo. The land there was fertile. Old-timers in the area said the Sauk and Fox Indians, known to be skilled agriculturalists, had once farmed it, and the wooded bluffs it backed up to promised a ready source of timber. For their first year in Whiteside County the Oatmans lived in a cellar carved out of the prairie soil,

but then Roys erected a log cabin and furnished it as a farmhouse. While Mary Ann busied herself in the kitchen, Roys began to plow, and his children took their lessons in a one-room school at nearby Cottonwood Corners.[15]

Meanwhile the Mormon community in Hancock County was in turmoil. After Joseph Smith's death, Brigham Young seemed to believe that the Saints could remain in Illinois for the foreseeable future. But a rising chorus of gentile newspapers cried out for their expulsion. It was not an easy matter to move the whole population of the state's largest city, particularly when nobody had a clear idea of where they might go. More important, Young and the other Mormons wanted desperately to finish the temple that Smith had begun, for it was only within its walls that they could conduct the "endowment" rituals that Smith had told them were essential to "exaltation in the celestial kingdom."[16] And so while Young assured the gentiles that the Saints would soon be leaving, Mormons worked feverishly to complete the temple. As the temple continued to rise above Nauvoo, the non-Mormons' patience grew short. The two groups skirmished more than once; guns were fired, houses burned, and even some murders committed. Finally, Young bowed to the inevitable, promising that the Saints would leave for a new Zion in the West in the spring of 1846. He kept his word, sending the first party of Saints across the Mississippi in February of that year.

Joy Sperry and his wife, Mary Ann, made preparations to leave Hancock County with Brigham Young in the spring of 1846. Roys and Mary Ann Oatman came down from Whiteside County to see them off. They wanted, no doubt, to wish Mary Ann's parents well on their journey westward: they were going to a "New Jerusalem" somewhere in the West, but exactly where not even Brigham Young knew for sure. But the visit quickly took on a disagreeable tone. Sperry, an ardent Young supporter, may well have tried to persuade the Oatmans to join them on the trek. But Roys wanted none of Young's leadership. The two Mormons argued their respective positions for about

a week, until the day the Oatmans were to start back to Whiteside County. Joy's son Charles later remembered that the two men "got to arguing at the breakfast table and they both got quite warm and in earnest in their argument." Finally Roys said to his father-in-law, "I see, Father Sperry, it is no use to talk with you. I prophesy in the name of the Lord that if you go west with your family, your children will go hungry and some will starve to death and your throats will be cut from ear to ear by the Indians." A more reasonable man would have regretted the words as soon as they parted his lips, but Roys Oatman apparently never did so. Joy Sperry was older, perhaps wiser, but no less firm in his convictions. His only reply to Roys was "Be careful how you prophesy in the name of the Lord."[17]

The Sperry family crossed the Mississippi into Iowa soon after the Oatmans said their final good-bye in La Harpe in May or June of 1846.

The exodus from Nauvoo was one of the greatest organized migrations in U.S. history. More than ten thousand Saints left Hancock County between 1846 and 1850, crossing the Mississippi on ferries and leading their wagons onto rutted roads that led through the rolling hills of Iowa. From a place the Mormons called "Winter Quarters" on the west bank of the Missouri River, the trail led along the Platte and Sweetwater rivers to South Pass in the Rocky Mountains, thence toward the southwest, through the Wasatch Range and into the Valley of the Great Salt Lake. Brigham Young himself left Nauvoo in February 1846; he crossed the Wasatch and proclaimed the famous words "This is the place" on July 24, 1847, almost a year and a half after the trek had begun. His followers, stretched out over the whole length of the trail, took many more months to complete the journey.

Hardships on the trail tested the determination of both Young and his loyal Saints. At a place they called "Mount Pisgah" in Iowa, Joy Sperry and his family stopped long enough to build a shanty and lay out a little garden. They knew they could not make it all the way

to the new Zion without resting their animals and replenishing their dwindling supplies of food. While sixty-four-year-old Joy and his fifty-six-year-old wife, Mary Ann, rested, their three sons went back to gather provisions, Aaron and Charles to the Des Moines River and William all the way to La Harpe. When the brothers returned to Mount Pisgah, they learned that their mother had fallen victim to "chills and fever" and died. When, about a month later, a train of Saints from La Harpe came through Mount Pisgah, the grieving Sperrys accepted an invitation to join them on the next leg of the journey. By the time they arrived at a camp called Highland Grove, Aaron was suffering from great sores on his feet and legs (his brothers said he had the "black leg," caused by a lack of fresh vegetables). After Charles and William and even father Joy came down with the "ague" (malaria), the family was nearly immobilized. In mid-December, Aaron died, and on January 1, 1847, Joy Sperry followed his son.[18]

When word of the deaths of Joy, Mary Ann, and Aaron Sperry reached Whiteside County, Mary Ann Oatman was crushed. Although there is no record of Roys Oatman's reaction to the news, he should not have felt any vindication. Although he had predicted an awful fate for the Sperrys if they followed Brigham Young westward, he had told them they would die of starvation and Indian attacks, not "black leg" or the "ague." Yet even he must have realized that the hardships of the western trail were not of Young's making. The surviving Sperrys, at least, were convinced of that, for after they buried their dead, they continued their journey, finally arriving at the Great Salt Lake in October 1847.[19]

While the Sperrys struggled on toward the Great Salt Lake, Roys and Mary Ann Oatman remained on their Whiteside County farm. They increased their holdings from a small tract to two hundred acres. Anxious to advertise their success, they invited Mary Ann's younger sister, Sarah, and her new husband, Asa Abbott, to take up land near theirs. The Abbotts had been married less than a year when they accepted the Oatmans' invitation. In July 1847 Asa and

Sarah purchased 120 acres adjoining the Oatman farm and began building a cabin. Soon they invited Asa's parents, Benjamin and Dorcas, to join them. By 1848, when the elder Abbotts settled at Whiteside, the area around the Oatman farm had come to resemble a little village.[20]

But the Abbotts did not share the Oatmans' enthusiasm for Mormonism. Sarah was a Baptist and Asa a trustee of the local Methodist church. The Oatmans were still Mormons, but it was difficult for them to follow their faith without a leader to direct them. By 1848 the community of Mormons who had gathered around Sidney Rigdon after Joseph Smith's death had scattered through several states, and only a handful still looked to him for leadership. James Jesse Strang was a more compelling leader, but most Mormons regarded the letter naming him as Smith's successor a palpable forgery. And many were troubled by Strang's obvious enthusiasm for plural marriage. Of course, Brigham Young embraced "the principle," but many Mormons still found it profoundly offensive (Rigdon condemned it as "ruinous to society").[21]

Saints like the Oatmans who rejected Young, Strang, and Rigdon but still maintained their faith in the *Book of Mormon* were constantly looking for signs that a new leader would appear to them. They had no idea how or when that leader might be revealed. They were confident, however, that it would be through the intercession of the Holy Spirit, the same divine "personage" who had inspired Joseph Smith in the early years of Mormonism.