

AMERICAN
FOLKWAYS



EDITED BY ERSKINE CALDWELL

MORMON COUNTRY

by

WALLACE STEGNER

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Shibboleth . . .

⊔ 8θ ε ω∩γ

IF you had been a child in a Mormon school in the eighteen sixties, you would have been required to read that. You would even have been required to know that it meant "I see a cat," and to write some sort of reply in kind. You might have nudged the tow-headed girl ahead of you and scribbled on your slate, with the tenderest school-days' shyness, ⊔ ∫∩β √ω, and been thumped by the teacher, not for the orthographic crime you had committed, but for inattentiveness.

And if you had been an adult Mormon in those years, a recently-arrived convert of foreign extraction, you would have been studying in the *Deseret News* articles in these eye-tangling chicken tracks, with directions for making them give up their horrid secret. You would probably have been told in Sunday Meeting, if you hadn't already heard it from the tabernacle pulpit, that the English language you had been painfully acquiring since your landfall in America was a linguistic mistake of the first magnitude, a morass of unpronounced and unpronounceable consonants, sneaky diphthongs, c's that ought to be k's or s's, th's that might be either hissed or gurgled, gh's that might be anything from a grunt to complete silence. You new

proselytes, Danes and Swedes and Norwegians and Englishmen and Germans, would have been urged to study the Deseret Alphabet, a magic instrument by means of which all this confusion could be cleared up at a stroke and your path to linguistic felicity made straight and easy. It would be awkward if, in the imminent gathering-up of Zion, none of the newly-arrived Saints could read or spell the language that Zion would speak. Devote yourself, therefore, to the study of the new alphabet, an invariable system of characters whose sounds were always the same, as inflexible as numbers. You could always depend on 2 to mean 2. You could also depend on ∪ to mean the sound "k."

It is an odd spectacle to see the Saints, six years after their occupation of Salt Lake Valley, isolated from the world, scrabbling for a meager living in the sagebrush, fighting crickets and grasshoppers and locusts and drouth and mountain fever—a poor and uneducated people faced with a harsh environment and an unbroken land—busying themselves with so academic a problem as the inadequacies of the English language. It is so bizarre, on the face of it, that historians and travelers were led to make guesses at obscure politico-theological reasons behind the invention of the new orthography for Mormonism. They guessed, among other things, that the Mormons wanted a secret language, to prevent their blood-curdling records from being looked over by unfriendly strangers. They guessed that the Mormon leaders wanted to keep their flocks from the profane literature of the world. They hinted at dark practices that were best recorded in invisible ink in an exclusive code.

Actually, although all of those reasons have some weight, the explanation for the invention of the Deseret Alphabet is neither so darkly sectarian nor, on the surface, so inter-

esting. But from another point of view it is more interesting than if it had represented Mormon abdication from the United States and the secular government and orthography of man. Like the ghost government of the State of Deseret, like the careful and Heaven-dictated formula for the Mormon village, like the burning sense of dedication and the Canaan-dream which made the Mormons create city after city, community after community, and bear up under their Biblical wandering through the wilderness, the Deseret Alphabet fits the pattern of the up-building of Zion, the preparation for the Millennium. And like most of the millennial activities of the Saints, the idea was not a Mormon invention. It was something in the air, something caught from the religious and intellectual revivalism of the middle nineteenth century.

When Brigham Young got interested in the reform of the English language, and suggested it to the regents of the University of Deseret—a pitiful little clot of basic learning with an elaborate organization of boards and advisers and aims—he was completely in character as a nineteenth century reform leader. He was more than an ecclesiastic; he was part of the whole revivalist movement which looked for the reform of the churches, the individual, the nation, which advocated the purging of the salt of the earth in preparation for the last days and the inheritance of bliss. It would have been odd if language had been overlooked during the reform agitation that flowed through the nineteenth century. As a matter of fact, it had been started on the sawdust trail to redemption about the time that Joseph Smith was locating the Golden Plates and laying the cornerstones of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Pitman's *Stenographic Soundhand* had caused a stir in 1837. His *Phonographic Journal* had appeared in 1842.

Shorthand and phonetic spelling reform were in the wind, first in England and then in America, where Benn Pitman established a shorthand school in the forties. Five years after the board of regents of the University of Deseret met and plotted an alphabet in which every sound should have its invariable symbol, Graham's phonetic alphabet was due to appear.

This was a wind that blew not only from England to America, but all the way across the plains to a desert valley hidden among the mountains. The Saints, no matter how hard they tried to escape, were linked with the world and the world's concerns.

They had more reasons for a phonetic alphabet than some. Their great floods of proselytes came from England and Scotland and Wales, but there were many from the Scandinavian countries, and some from almost every corner of the globe. The English converts were ill-educated, the others were almost without English. The amalgamation of the diverse nationalities was a problem, and the difficulties of English spelling and pronunciation were a hurdle. Small wonder that Brigham should adopt the current methods of simplification and purification. A private alphabet, moreover, would be one more tie to bind the Saints into a group. Brigham was statesman enough to know the welding power of language. There was probably also, as the *Deseret News* suggested some years after the beginning of the experiment, a feeling that the "yellow-covered" literature of the Gentile world might be thus kept from the hands of young Saints. And there was undoubtedly, behind the initial interest and the practical incentives, the obscure drive of the millennial preparation.

The alphabet that the regents devised and Brigham Young approved is a curious hodge-podge. The British

world-traveler Captain Richard Burton, he who had pried into the holy mysteries of Mecca and who tried unsuccessfully to wheedle out of Brigham a look at the Mormon Endowment House, noticed the similarity of the alphabet to Pitman's symbols. The historian Bancroft thought he saw similarities to the "reformed Egyptian" characters of the Golden Plates, a page of which Joseph Smith had reproduced in *The Pearl of Great Price*. An eastern editor, commenting with kindly interest on the linguistic experimentation going on in Zion, was reminded of the Ethiopian alphabet in the back of Webster's Dictionary.

Anyone trying to track down the sources of the Deseret characters is due for a painful and probably fruitless search. The "reformed Egyptian" is a blind alley—no parallels exist there. There are specifically eight resemblances to Pitman characters, but the symbols never represent the same sounds as they do in Pitman. And there is a resemblance or two, perhaps accidental, with the Ethiopian alphabet, which is also purely phonetic. But the net result of scratching among the hieroglyphics is the conviction that the Deseret Alphabet is an eclectic job, the handiwork mainly of one George Watt, stenographer and secretary, who had introduced Pitman's phonography to the Saints in Nauvoo and had been an official Church reporter ever since. With the help of Parley P. Pratt, W. W. Phelps, and other regents, Watt made up an alphabet of phonetic symbols, thirty-eight of them, and presented it to the board.

It was no mere speculative gesture the Mormons were making. They seldom stooped to idle speculation. When they took up speculation it was with a practical end in view. The end in this case was the introduction of the new orthography in the schools of the territory. In 1855 the leg-

islature dutifully voted an appropriation of \$2,500 for the casting of a font of type. The discussion that had been going on about the project in the *Deseret News* took on a tone of solid and progressive optimism. Arguments about the relative merits of the phonographic and phonetic styles of language reform gave way to exhortations that one simple, standard language be adopted against the imminent gathering-in, one orthography be readied for the coming crisis.

The alphabet had a hectic and interrupted existence. The troubles with the federal government, the Mormon War, the squabbles with territorial officials, constantly interrupted the reform movement. Through 1859 and 1860 Brigham Young's journals were being kept in the alphabet, as well as some of the Church records. A first and a second reader were printed in 1868, and the publication of the *Book of Mormon* in Deseret symbols was projected, though it was not to be accomplished until 1869.

But the children and the teachers complained. The flat monotony of the tailless characters made hard reading. Most Mormon kids were not vitally interested in schooling during those years, anyway, and the teachers were too often either amateur volunteers or underpaid starvelings. Reformed English practically died on the vine, in spite of Brigham Young's example and encouragement, though one product of those years has preserved it for posterity in numismatic collections. Gold coins made in the valley from California dust in 1860 exhibited a crouching lion and around him in Deseret Alphabet characters the legend, "Holiness to the Lord." In that one gold piece are shown two strands of the Mormon bond with other revivalist and reform movements. The alphabet comes from the same climate of perfectionism that produced the shorthand and

phonography of Pitman and Graham; the legend is the old battlecry of the hell-fire evangelist Finney which he carried into Oberlin on banners 9 feet high in 1835.

Though the alphabet struggled through the later sixties, there were signs of dissolution in the 1870's. Some of the priesthood, still sold on the idea of a perfected language, proposed that Pitman's system be substituted for the cumbersome local alphabet, and it was voted to publish the *Book of Mormon* in Pitman symbols. Still, the priesthood and the regents decided that for local consumption Deseret would do, and plans were made to go ahead with it. But Orson Pratt, on his way to England to arrange the *Book of Mormon* translation into Pitman, was stopped by news of Brigham Young's death, and with the passing of the Lion of the Lord all orthographic tinkering died quietly. Utah was now linked by rail and by telegraph with the rest of the world. It was apparent that the gathering-in of Zion was not going to be immediate. There would be time for foreign converts to learn the usual English, and there were other ways of uniting the Mormon people than making them struggle through a difficult alteration of their language habits.

Like most of the practical methods the Saints took to prepare for the millennium, simplified English got postponed and ultimately forgotten. Few copies of the three books which composed its entire literature even exist now. Few people even in Utah ever heard of the Deseret Alphabet. It is a collector's item, an artifact from a prehistoric barrow, a relic of the time when Manifest Destiny and the Hope of the Kingdom washed up together on the shore of the West, and Manifest Destiny, with history and probability and industrial and numerical strength on its side, swallowed the smaller wave. Until the expectation of glory

comes again, the English language will have to depend on I. A. Richards and the multiplying semasiologists for its reconstruction, and the perfect world will wait not upon the millennium but upon the triumph of Marx or Machiavelli or Henry Luce, prophets of another dispensation.