

The Mormon Quest for a Perfect Society at Lamoni, Iowa, 1870-1890

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LAMONI, a small agricultural community in southern Iowa, was the only town ever founded by the Mormon sect known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The town arose in the late nineteenth century as an expression of the quest for a perfect society that had long been part of the Mormon religion. Almost from the origin of their movement on April 6, 1830, the Mormons had believed that they were commissioned to help usher in the triumphal second coming and millennial reign of Christ by building a utopia worthy of his presence. Accordingly, during the 1830s and 1840s they had established Mormon communities that they believed would foster a new, righteous social order and prepare the earth for Christ's return. They built settlements at Kirtland, Ohio; Independence and Far West, Missouri; and Nauvoo, Illinois. But in each case the noble vision of zion dissolved in failure and disillusionment. The reasons for failure were complex but rested essentially on the unwillingness of the Saints to live under the strict community laws established by the prophet and on persecution by non-Mormons.¹

1. The best analyses of early Mormonism's quest for an earthly zion can be found in Mario S. DePillis, "The Development of Mormon Communitarianism, 1826-1846" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1960); Leonard J. Arrington, Feramorz Y. Fox, and Dean L. May, *Building the City of God: Community and Cooperation Among the Mormons* (Salt Lake City, 1976), 15-40; Klaus J. Hansen, *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History* (Lincoln, Neb., 1967), 3-71; Leonard J. Arrington, "Early Mormon Communitarianism: The Law of Consecration and Stewardship," *Western Humanities Review* 7 (Autumn 1953), 34-69;

Although a mob murdered Joseph Smith, Jr., the Mormon prophet, on June 27, 1844, neither the movement he had founded nor his followers' aspirations for a physical zion died with him. Numerous groups arose after Smith's death to claim a portion of the Mormon legacy, each adopting in some measure the prophet's zion-building ideal. Brigham Young headed the largest of these groups and established his church's headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah, but other groups also flourished for a time. During the 1850s a number of these lesser Mormon factions coalesced into the Reorganized Church, with its headquarters and most of its membership in the Midwest. This group was composed largely of conservative Mormons who exemplified the most cherished virtues of American Christianity, but nonetheless it clung to a vision of a perfect community to be established by the church.²

On April 6, 1860 the small Reorganized Church achieved the status of an important Mormon faction when the founder's son, twenty-seven-year-old Joseph Smith III, assumed leadership of the sect. Young Smith dealt with many serious questions during his first years as president of the Reorganized Church, but his policy regarding the utopian society envisioned by his father was one of the most important issues of his administration.³ While convinced that his father's approach toward organizing utopian communities was basically correct, Smith realized soon after taking office that the early Mormons had tried to accomplish too much too quickly. He believed that neither the early Saints nor local nonmembers had been sufficiently prepared to overcome their fundamentally selfish human nature and accept an all-sharing utopian society. Smith noted that the Saints had never exhibited the respect for each other that made possible a communitarian experiment, nor had they shown the personal piety and striving for perfection crucial to

Joseph A. Geddes, *The United Order Among the Mormons (Missouri Phase)* (New York, 1922).

2. Alma R. Blair, "The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints: Moderate Mormons," in *The Restoration Movement: Essays in Mormon History*, ed. F. Mark McKiernan, Alma R. Blair, and Paul M. Edwards (Lawrence, Kan., 1973), 207-230.

3. Richard P. Howard, "Images of Zion in the Reorganization," in *Zion: The Growing Symbol*, ed. David Premoe (Independence, Mo., 1980), 45-49.

the successful establishment of such a Christian utopia. Non-Mormons, on the other hand, did not understand the significance of such a society to the Mormon movement's millennialism and invariably castigated it and in some cases sought to destroy it.⁴

Smith soon came to believe that the Reorganization's zion-building effort should be more liberal and all-encompassing than it had been during his father's lifetime. The younger Smith believed that the millennial kingdom of God could be initiated only through personal righteousness and moral perfection and would reach full fruition only if the righteous destroyed evil in society. Therefore, the logical conclusion of Smith's philosophy was an emphasis on the spiritual nature of zion rather than its physical, community-building aspects.⁵

Smith's personal emphasis on the inner purity of the Saints, and the necessity of working to change the world for the better, prompted the young leader to immerse himself in humanitarian reform movements and to urge his followers to do the same. In the mid-1860s, for instance, he published an editorial in the church's official newspaper, the *True Latter Day Saints' Herald*, that succinctly stated his beliefs: ". . . the church should begin to take a high moral ground in regard to the very many abuses in society, which can only be reached, to correction, by a strong setting upon them of the current of public opinion." He called for a churchwide crusade to eliminate sin, the primary barrier to the establishment of zion, and early in his career took a keen interest in social and political reform movements. The reform effort might take decades, even centuries, but Smith believed the church would triumph ultimately if it moved in a cautious, steady, and unified manner.⁶

4. Smith to J. J. Pressley, 31 March 1880, Joseph Smith III Letterbook #3, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints Library-Archives, Independence, Mo. (hereafter cited as RLDS Archives); *Book of Doctrine and Covenants* (Independence, Mo., 1970), sections 42, 57, 77, 81; "The Location of Zion," *True Latter Day Saints' Herald* 3 (October 1863), 74 (hereafter cited as *Herald*).

5. Smith to Alfred Hart, 9 May 1880, Joseph Smith III Letterbook #3; Smith to William H. Kelley, 22 March 1871, William H. Kelley Papers, RLDS Archives.

6. *Herald* 8 (1 September 1865), 67; *Herald* 29 (18 February 1880), 49; *Herald* 27 (18 September 1880), 284; Smith to Rev. F. Wilson, 23 September

While Joseph Smith III tried to deemphasize the community-building tendencies of Mormonism during his first years as Reorganized Church president, most of his followers longed for the time when the church would establish a settlement modeled after the experiments of the early Mormon movement. An 1863 article in the Reorganization's newspaper summed up the membership's sentiments by saying that the members lived "daily as strangers and pilgrims on the earth, who look for 'a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.'"⁷ Joseph Smith's move to Plano, Illinois, and the location of most church offices there in early 1866 curtailed the membership's clamor to start utopian community building. For a time, at least, Plano seemed to satisfy the Saints' communal expectations: with its large church population, numerous important church officials, and supporting institutions it served as an unofficial gathering location for the movement.⁸

Plano did not quiet the church members' desires for long, however, and increasing pressure during the late 1860s forced Joseph Smith to respond to demands that the church begin its "zion-building mission." He wrote in the *True Latter Day Saints' Herald* in 1866 that he heard from every quarter the constant cry for zionic experimentation, and he scolded the church for wanting zion before completing the self-purification necessary to success. "Strife and contention, with disobedience," he chided, "are sure fruit that the gospel, the great witness, has not wrought in us the work of peace, and without peace in our hearts we predict that *no perfectness will come in Zion.*" He claimed that only when the Saints ceased "evil of any and every kind, [and] become champions of truth, [then] there will be no want of definite action or policy" in forming a utopian society.⁹

1878, Joseph Smith III Letterbook #2; Smith to David R. Ramsey, 6 August 1879, Joseph Smith III Letterbook #2; *Weekly Argus* (Sandwich, Ill.), 16 July 1881; *Kendall County Record* (Yorkville, Ill.), 8 December 1875, 4 April 1878.

7. "The Location of Zion," *Herald* 3 (April 1863), 138.

8. Joseph Smith, "The Memoirs of President Joseph Smith (1832-1914)," *Herald* 82 (25 June 1935), 817-818; *Herald* 82 (2 July 1935), 848-850; Inez Smith Davis, *The Story of the Church* (Independence, Mo., 1969), 499-506; Joseph Smith and Heman C. Smith, *The History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Independence, Mo., 1901), 3:239, 297, 409.

9. Joseph Smith, "Pleasant Chat," *Herald* 13 (1 June 1866), 168-169; *Herald* 14 (1 August 1867), 81; *Herald* 16 (1 September 1869), 146.

Smith suggested that the Saints continue to live justly in their diverse locations and not concern themselves with community building until they were worthy of the task.

Joseph Smith's reluctance to put into concrete expression this great vision of the church, however, brought only further complaints from the membership. Consequently, he began to rethink his position regarding church-established settlements, and formulated a plan that would appease most of his followers without violating his central belief about the spiritual nature of the zionic mission. In late 1869 Smith first advanced a compromise between the two positions, suggesting that the Reorganization establish not a true communal experiment, but a less ambitious joint-stock company that would make land available to Latter Day Saints on terms equitable to both the company and the settlers. In so doing, the church would indirectly sponsor a settlement of church members and satisfy the repeated pleadings of many Saints to begin such an experiment, but it would have neither official church management nor the millenarian overtones of similar settlements established by the Saints in Missouri and Nauvoo during the 1830s and 1840s.¹⁰

MOVEMENT toward founding the joint-stock company and the settlement that would later become Lamoni began at the Reorganized Church's general conference in October 1869. During this meeting, Joseph Smith informed representatives from throughout the church about the prospects of beginning a company to establish a religious community. He made it clear that he did not intend the experiment as a zionic community: ". . . it is given as a means to an end, not as the end itself." Nonetheless, Smith called the organization of this corporation a step toward the full realization of the church's zionic ideal. His proposal received enthusiastic support from the conference body, and with this approval Smith moved quickly to organize the company.¹¹

Immediately after the conference Smith appointed Bishop

10. Arrington, Fox, and May, *City of God*, 15-40; Larry E. Hunt, "Frederick Madison Smith: Saint as Reformer" (Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri—Columbia, 1978), 153; *Doctrine and Covenants*, sections 106, 114.

11. Joseph Smith, "What Shall It be Called?" *Herald* 17 (1 March 1870), 144-148.

Israel L. Rogers, the church's chief financial officer, to take charge of the organization. During the winter of 1869-70 Rogers and a carefully selected group of associates prepared a proposed constitution for the company. They called it the Order of Enoch—the same name used by Joseph Smith, Jr., for the organization that had managed the Mormon communal experiment in Missouri between 1831 and 1833—but it was a secularly constituted organization empowered to buy and sell land and securities, construct buildings, and lease assets. The proposed constitution stated the company's purpose:

The general business and object of this corporation shall be the associating together of men and capital and those skilled in labor and mechanics, belonging to the church . . . for the purpose of settling, developing and improving new tracts of land, . . . to take cognizance of the wants of worthy and industrious poor men, who shall apply therefore, and provide them with labor and the means for securing homes and a livelihood; and to develop the energies and resources of the people who may seek those respective localities for settlement.¹²

Rogers and his committee recommended that the Order of Enoch's charter specify a twenty-year existence, at which time the shareholders could either renew the charter for another twenty years or let the company dissolve.

With the details of the Order of Enoch's governance drafted, Rogers was ready to begin soliciting support and financial commitments from the church membership; in February 1870 he sent a printed circular to each congregation requesting support. The members responded rapidly, and by May 1870 the Order of Enoch had received initial pledges of \$28,000. Rogers wrote in the church newspaper that this financial response came because the Saints believed "that the *First Order of Enoch* is but the beginning of the prosperity of Zion."¹³

On May 15, 1870, Rogers addressed an open communication to the church commending members on their generous pledges and announcing the formal organization of the Order of Enoch to take place the next September. He asked that as many

12. "Proposed Constitution of the First United Order of Enoch," *Herald* 17 (15 February 1870), 126.

13. Israel L. Rogers to Samuel Powers, 10 February 1870, Miscellaneous Letters and Papers, RLDS Archives.

subscribers as possible attend the first meeting, to be held in conjunction with the church's general conference at Council Bluffs, Iowa. Joseph Smith was present but took no part when the subscribers met on September 19, 1870. At this meeting they ratified the Order's constitution as presented and chose a board of directors consisting of seven faithful Saints. They elected Elijah Banta, a giant, amiable man from Sandwich, Illinois, president and Rogers treasurer of the company.¹⁴

Then they moved on to what many Saints thought was the most important and historic event of the meeting, the appointment of a committee to seek "a suitable location for the purchase of land @ the operation of said company." Elijah Banta; David Dancer, a wealthy businessman from Wilton Center, Illinois; Israel Rogers; and Phineas Cadwell of Magnolia, Harrison County, Iowa, a future member of the Iowa state legislature, assumed this responsibility. Smith and Rogers believed, as Rogers had written in May 1870, "we feel assured that the committee will be directed in the search for a location by that Spirit which had charged the affairs of God's people . . . [and] that a step toward the redemption of Zion may be taken, and taken now." As the first stockholders' meeting of the Order of Enoch ended the Saints believed that their dreams of a physical community would soon be realized.¹⁵

The committee on location went to work immediately after the fall conference looking for ideal land for settlement. Banta became their prime field operative, traveling throughout Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri in search of inexpensive but productive land. He stumbled across a large tract in Decatur County, Iowa, quite by accident but immediately saw that it was exactly what he had been seeking. The Reorganized Church had a strong, active congregation at Pleasanton, Iowa, a few miles east of this land, and Banta had gone there to visit some of the

14. Israel L. Rogers, "To the Saints," *Herald* 17 (15 May 1870), 289-290; "The Order," *Herald* 17 (1 October 1870), 595; Jason W. Briggs, "A Condensed Account of the Rise and Progress of the Reorganization of the Church of Latter Day Saints," M. H. Forscutt—H. A. Stebbins Letterbook, RLDS Archives.

15. Order of Enoch, Minutes 1870-1882, RLDS Archives, 7; Rogers, "To the Saints," 290; Joseph Smith, "The Movement," *Herald* 17 (15 July 1870), 435.

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members. Ebenezer Robinson, one of the congregational leaders, told Banta that he had experienced a vision in which he had been told that the Latter Day Saints were to gather in large numbers on either side of the state line west of Pleasanton. In this vision, Robinson had heard the voices of angels singing this verse:

Give us room that we may dwell!
Zion's children cry aloud:
See their numbers—how they swell!
How they gather, like a cloud!

As a result of Robinson's testimony Banta decided to investigate this area, and he found rich, inexpensive, and sparsely settled acreage readily available.¹⁶

Excited by his discovery, between October 3 and November 24, 1870 Banta made several visits to Decatur County to gather information about the property. He relayed this information and his recommendation to purchase the land to the committee on location, which met with the board of directors and Joseph Smith on April 5, 1871 and approved the transaction. Shortly thereafter Banta contracted on behalf of the Order of Enoch for the purchase of 2,680 acres in one large tract and several smaller parcels in southern Decatur County for the sum of \$21,768.84. This purchase amounted to slightly more than eight dollars an acre.¹⁷

The Order of Enoch's directors immediately began planning for the land's development. Banta dispatched surveyors to the newly acquired property during the summer of 1871, and the team divided it into eighty- and 120-acre parcels. Other company officials prepared for the first settlers to move onto the land, establishing priorities for choosing the first colonists and formulating policies for the community. With these activities still underway the first settlers arrived in covered wagons from Wisconsin during early July 1871. These settlers,

16. "Report of the Board of Directors to the Stockholders of the First United Order of Enoch," supplement, *Herald* 18 (17 June 1871), 1-4; Frederick W. Blair, comp., *The Memoirs of President W. W. Blair* (Lamoni, Ia., 1908), 174-175; *The Saints Harp* (Plano, Ill., 1870), Hymn 939.

17. Elijah Banta journal, Book B, Mormon History Manuscripts Collection, Frederick Madison Smith Library, Graceland College, Lamoni, Ia., 157-158; Order of Enoch, Minutes 1870-1882, 7-12.

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the families of Samuel Ackerly and Robert K. Ross, had waited years to "gather" with the Saints and were heartened by the beginning of the Order of Enoch experiment. Soon other settlers followed, and the handful of families on the property began building homes, breaking land, and making other improvements.

Most of these first settlers purchased their farms from the Order of Enoch outright, but Elijah Banta and other members of the board offered rental or rental-purchase arrangements to settlers with less money. As a result the Order of Enoch often built homes and assorted outbuildings on eighty-acre tracts and rented them to the settlers, the Order collecting one-third of the crops for the use of the property. For a larger proportion of the crop yield, however, the Order of Enoch would allow settlers to acquire title to their farms.¹⁸

When Israel Rogers made his first secretary's report to the Order of Enoch shareholders on September 1, 1871, he enumerated the successes of the company's first year. Most important, Rogers reported that the company was financially secure. Purchase of the Decatur County property left \$22,731.16 in the Order's coffers, an amount sufficient to continue developing the settlement. Rogers also reported that the settlers were industriously improving the property. He noted many had already completed "spacious accommodations," and that the Order had erected twelve homes at the cost of \$7,678.40 for property renters. Additionally, Order of Enoch employees and settlers had worked together to break the sod of 1,600 acres, to plant hundreds of acres of nursery plants, and to make other improvements.¹⁹

From the community's inception, the Latter Day Saints settling there considered religious fellowship its most important advantage. Virtually all of the colonists participated in the Reorganized Church congregations nearest their farms. In November 1871, fifteen settlers who had been attending the Little

18. Pearl Wilcox, "The First United Order of Enoch and the Founding of Lamoni," *Restoration Trail Forum* 6 (February 1980), 4; Asa S. Cochran, "The Founding of Lamoni and the Work of the Order of Enoch," *Herald* 54 (22 January 1908), 78-79.

19. Israel L. Rogers, "Report of the Secretary of the Order of Enoch," 1 September 1871, RLDS Archives.

River congregation, located in the western part of the county, organized a new group that met on the Order's property. This group fixed up a ramshackle little barn to meet in that they called the "sheepshed," partly because they considered themselves sheep of the fold of Jesus Christ but also because the barn had been used in the past to shelter sheep. Soon, however, as the membership of this little group grew it decided to rename the congregation, calling it the Lamoni branch, after a benevolent king in the Book of Mormon.²⁰

After the initial flurry of activity the directors of the Order of Enoch allowed the settlement in Decatur County to develop independently and by 1874 it had grown into a modest farming community. It had a population of about two hundred (most of whom were Reorganized Church members), a general store, a blacksmith shop, a few homes near these shops, and ranging farms. In 1875 the settlers asked the Order's directors to begin the incorporation of the community as the town of Lamoni to further development, but little progress was made. The directors did not forcefully manage the experiment during the mid-1870s, and the colony operated virtually autonomously under what might be called a policy of "benign neglect."²¹

JOSEPH SMITH, who had no official role in the Order of Enoch project, watched the development of the Lamoni experiment from his church administrative offices in Plano. The community's establishment had been a boon to the church, giving the members hope for an expression of the best intentions of the movement. But he had wanted the Order of Enoch to serve as a crucible out of which might arise a people with the spiritual unity and moral integrity needed to begin the establishment of a physical zion. He was disappointed, therefore, that the Order's leadership seemed to allow affairs at its colony to drift aimlessly. As a result, he quietly prodded these leaders to act more responsibly by encouraging them at every opportunity and by

20. Cochran, "Founding of Lamoni," 80-83; Order of Enoch, Minutes 1870-1882, 7-12; Hunt, "Frederick Madison Smith," 156-157.

21. Order of Enoch, Minutes 1870-1882, 38-48; *History of Ringgold and Decatur Counties, Iowa* (Chicago, 1887), 782-788; Smith and Smith, *History of Reorganized Church*, 4:120.

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intimating that in time the church headquarters would be located in Lamoni.²²

Smith's efforts to promote more forceful leadership were only moderately successful, for the directors of the Order of Enoch acted lethargically in all too many cases. They hesitated to take advantage of an opportunity broached by a railroad in 1875 to allow it to pass through the company's land. This move would have both ensured the settlement's easy access to the outside world and provided a focus for the establishment of an important town. Instead it came to nothing. Seeking to prod the directors still further, Joseph Smith persuaded the church's general conference of April 1875 to designate a special committee of removal separate from the Order of Enoch "to arrange for and effect the purchase of land, locate a town site, and perform such acts as are consistent with the making of such locations [of gathering]." Smith's political skills were obvious in this maneuver; he realized that the threat of removing church support from the Order of Enoch and placing it elsewhere would be a powerful lever on the Order's leaders. Smith could either use the church-authorized committee to support the Order's work or pursue an independent experiment in community building under direct church control.²³

In retrospect, it seems that Joseph Smith had no real intention of withdrawing church support from the Order of Enoch, but the conference action served the purpose he had intended. The Order of Enoch leaders had perceived the new committee as a threat to the welfare of the Lamoni settlement. This perception was compounded by Smith's apparent willingness to consider other gathering locations. For instance, he met with the leaders of Nauvoo in the mid-1870s to discuss their offer that the Reorganization make its headquarters there. As a result, the

22. Smith, "The Movement," 435; Smith to David Dancer, 26 November 1877, Joseph Smith III Letterbook #1; W. W. Blair, "The Gathering," *Herald* 23 (1 September 1876), 513; Blair, *Memoirs of W. W. Blair*, 187-188.

23. *Herald* 22 (15 May 1875), 299-300; Smith to Bro. Hendrick, 4 January 1877, Smith to J. W. Brackenbury, 6 March 1877, Smith to William H. Kelley, 22 March 1877, Smith to Charles Derry, 9 June 1876, all in Joseph Smith III Letterbook #1; Smith, "Memoirs," *Herald* 82 (5 November 1935), 1424; Joseph Smith diary, 18 December 1877, RLDS Archives; *Carthage* (Ill.) *Gazette*, 26 December 1877; *Plano* (Ill.) *Mirror*, 22 June 1876.

Order's directors met with Smith and other church officials on May 11, 1875. After obtaining their promise to act more responsibly, Smith pledged church support for the Lamoni community. On June 6, 1875, Smith privately told the Order's leaders that he and several close associates had investigated the possibility of moving the church's headquarters from Plano to Lamoni. As a result, Smith asked David Dancer; W. W. Blair, the prophet's closest advisor; and John Scott, a respected church member, to oversee the removal of the church's assets—administrative offices, publishing house, and religious education facilities—to Lamoni as soon as practicable. He cautioned that this committee should not act hastily, that the move should take several years. Nonetheless, this decision meant that Smith and the church looked forward to a bright future in Lamoni.²⁴

Encouraged by these meetings, the directors of the Order began to manage the Lamoni settlement more forcefully. When Joseph Smith visited the settlement in August 1877 he was favorably impressed. He said, "The country where the Order of Enoch had located the scene of their operations has been frequently described, but we found a changed land to that we visited and rode over some six years ago." He continued:

Then, a wilderness of arable land, untouched by the plow; and dotted only here and there by a farm or a grove, greeted the eye; now, a cheerful scene of busy farm life, a wide spread of growing corn and wheat and rye and oats and waving grass was seen everywhere, broken now and then by an interval of untilled land, showing the place yet open to the settler; where the cattle roamed freely, the occupants, literally, of a "thousand hills." It was rightly called a rolling country; very fair to look upon, and giving to the careful and industrious husbandman a just reward for his labor.²⁵

Following Smith's visit the Order's leaders continued to improve conditions at the Decatur County settlement, but little

24. Smith to Phineas Cadwell, 8 December 1877, Smith to Lars Peterson, 9 January 1878, Smith to David Dancer, 15 July 1878, all in Joseph Smith III Letterbook #1; Smith to David Dancer, 18 February 1879, 10 March 1879, Joseph Smith III Letterbook #2; Order of Enoch, Minutes 1870-1882, 49-60; Blair, *Memoirs of W. W. Blair*, 191-192.

25. Smith and Smith, *History of Reorganized Church*, 4:186; *Herald* 25 (15 January 1878), 24.

happened until 1879, when plans for a railroad through the property hastened the selection of a formal townsite. The Leon and Mt. Ayr branch of the Chicago and Burlington Railroad was being constructed in early 1879, but the plans dictated that the tracks be laid several miles north of the Latter Day Saint property on a nearly straight line between Leon and Mt. Ayr. Elijah Banta, representing the Order of Enoch, and several influential residents of the settlement met with the railroad officials and agreed to furnish certain concessions to the company in return for a route through the Order's property. Specifically, the Order agreed to plat a town on the railroad line, obtain a charter from the state legislature, provide two hundred acres of land for the town, and give several hundred acres as right-of-way to the railroad. Order of Enoch officials carried out these stipulations during the spring of 1879, and by the end of the year the railroad had been completed through the property. The first passenger train passed through the townsite on December 25, 1879.²⁶

In spite of the favorable activity there, Joseph Smith delayed the formal announcement of Lamoni as the church's official gathering place until 1880, but he let it be known that the church would soon be leaving Plano. Smith often received letters from church members seeking advice about the locations of concentrations of other Saints, and he had usually replied by asking them to remain where they were but adding that if they had to move, Plano was a good location. By mid-1879, however, he was telling them not to go to Plano under any circumstances because of the poor economic situation. He wrote one prospective settler in late 1879, "I would not like to encourage you to come, and then have you no chance to maintain yourself."²⁷ Instead Smith began advising the Saints to move to Lamoni.

Conditions in Plano worsened during 1880, even as they brightened in Lamoni, and the hard times there led Smith to

26. Joseph Smith, "Editorial," *Herald* 26 (15 October 1879), 312; T. J. Andrews, "Impressions on Visiting Decatur County," *Herald* 26 (1 August 1879), 228-231; Joseph Smith, "An Order of Enoch," *Herald* 26 (15 July 1879), 218-219; "Editorial Items," *Herald* 26 (1 September 1879), 263; Order of Enoch, Minutes 1870-1882, 61-62.

27. Smith to Henry Bach, 26 November 1879, Joseph Smith III Letterbook #2.

make the final step toward publicly declaring Lamoni as the new church headquarters. He wrote to W. W. Blair explaining that Plano was becoming a ghost town and that the church had to move its business center soon:

The bottom is out of the Plano real estate market. Deering is removing, car by car, all he has. The lumber yard is about empty, and the men are being discharged, one by one. Many are making removal to Chicago, and some are going elsewhere; and Plano will soon be a dismally dull business place.

He finally concluded, after many years of hesitancy, "I agree with you, *move at once*."²⁸

THE SAINTS who had been living in Plano began to leave soon after the official announcement that all church administrative offices would be moving. By early 1881 most of the church's membership had moved away, the bulk of them settling in the Lamoni area. And most of those still in Plano were packing. A last general conference met in the town in April 1881. Most of the Saints approached it with both a feeling of sorrow at leaving and a hope for a better future in Iowa. Joseph Smith demonstrated the general mood of the Reorganization during these months in a letter to a close friend. "There is now an opportunity to make a striking step forward in our work," he wrote on March 26, 1881. "I believe that we should take that step. I have made the matter one of constant study and prayer; and have that assurance that makes me bold to go forward."²⁹

During this time Smith purchased property from the Order of Enoch and had a huge Victorian farmhouse built on a rolling stretch of farmland west of Lamoni. He called his new home Liberty Hall because he believed that Lamoni represented freedom for the Saints. By October 1881 the home had been almost completed and Smith and his family packed their belongings and moved to a new town, a new house, and a new and unique lifestyle. Smith's move signaled the official demise of Plano as a Reorganized Church religious center and ushered

28. Smith to W. W. Blair, 30 October 1880, Joseph Smith III Letterbook #3.

29. Smith to David Dancer, 26 March 1881, Joseph Smith III Letterbook #3; Joseph Smith, "Editorial," *Herald* 27 (15 October 1880), 322; *Weekly Argus*, 15 May 1880; *Plano Mirror*, 14 April 1881.

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in the reign of Lamoni as the church's stronghold. Before leaving Plano, however, the Smith family received a warm send-off from the town. The local newspaper reported the farewell celebration:

The citizens of Plano presented Elder Joseph Smith with a magnificent gold-headed cane on Wednesday evening. J. H. Jenks presented it in a fine speech. The ladies of Plano presented Mrs. Joseph Smith with an elegant silver cake basket. As these were presented by those outside the [Reorganized] church, the speaker being a Methodist, it speaks well for the standing of Elder Smith in particular, and the Mormon people in general.³⁰

By November 1881 nearly all of the church institutions had been relocated in Lamoni and the little church settlement grew in activity.

The most important Reorganized Church institution to be moved from Plano to Lamoni, after President Smith's office, was the publishing house. The *Herald* office had been in Plano since 1863, and had risen to almost legendary status in the church. On October 15, 1881, Joseph Smith, the director of the establishment, announced in the *Saints' Herald* that the printing office was moving and that the next issue would appear on November 1 as scheduled from Lamoni, Iowa. Once moved, the *Herald* office set up temporary quarters in a frame building in Lamoni and later moved to a fine brick office in the heart of the town.³¹

The gathering of these Saints together in one location—over one thousand were in Lamoni by 1880—meant that the community suddenly became a powerful political force in the county. The Reorganization had discouraged using its numbers in local areas to elect church members to office or to influence the opinions of non-Mormon officials. In 1876 a statement in the *Saints' Herald* commented, "no subject is of less importance to the Saints than politics." But with the rise of Lamoni after 1880 the issue became very important.³² As naturally hap-

30. *Weekly Argus*, 17 September 1881; Smith, "Memoirs," *Herald* 82 (17 December 1935), 1615-1616; Joseph Smith, "Editorial," *Herald* 28 (1 November 1881), 322.

31. Joseph Smith, "Editorial," *Herald* 28 (15 October 1881), 322.

32. Joseph Smith, "Editorial," *Herald* 23 (15 November 1876), 262.

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pened in an area with many people of like mind, a voting bloc quickly and informally developed that ran counter to the established party system. Between 1875 and 1885, for instance, the Saints at Lamoni radically shifted their voting pattern six times, and in every case the shift was toward a Saint or proven friend of the church who was a candidate for office. A typical example came in 1883 when Elijah Banta ran for the Iowa legislature as the Democratic nominee from Decatur County. The Lamoni vote was 2 to 1 in favor of Republican candidates for all other races during this election, but reversed itself to a 2 to 1 majority for Democrat Banta. This election, as in other cases, brought a highly critical reaction from a local newspaper, the *Decatur County Journal*, published in Leon, the county seat:

One word to our Republican Mormon friends. If you were told we opposed Mr. Banta because he is a Mormon, it was a falsehood. We had no objection to his religion. We opposed him as a political trickster, and a man of intemperance habits; but most of our Republican Mormon friends supported him because he is a member of their church. To this we solemnly protest, and declare we do not wish to mix politics and religion.³³

If these political activities antagonized the non-Mormons in Decatur County, it did not push them so far that they ever undertook violence to rid the countryside of the sect, as had been the case with the early Mormon church. Neither did the Reorganized Church members pay much attention to these outside influences. Instead, Lamoni was largely ingrown and isolated from the world outside. For the most part it was a homogeneous society of politically conservative, morally upright, and economically compatible people. Joseph Smith thought the environment especially attractive because of the general upstanding nature of the society: it seemed to draw out the best characteristics of humanity, he thought, for people demonstrated a concern and trust for one another he had rarely

33. Joseph Smith, "Editorial," *Herald* 29 (15 May 1882), 152; *Herald* 31 (27 December 1884), 825-827; *Herald* 32 (23 May 1885), 333; *Herald* 38 (25 September 1886), 593; *Decatur County Journal*, 6 July 1882, 11 October 1883, 18 October 1883; Alma R. Blair, "A Loss of Nerve," *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought, and Action* 1 (September 1970), 29-36.

seen before. He enjoyed meeting in the large church with his friends and neighbors, and seeing his followers in the street. He seemed to take great delight in serving as the pastor of the flock of Saints in the town. More important, however, Smith came to believe in the 1880s that Lamoni had filled its purpose well. It had become a Reorganized Mormon mecca, a center for the Saints, and a stable, deferential society in which all knew their place and rarely stepped out of it. It was, Joseph Smith believed, a viable first step toward the zionic goal of the church.³⁴

But Smith's contentment with life in Lamoni did not mean that he became complacent or parochial in his view of zion. His commitments were still to the spiritual perfection of his people and the eventual building of a zionic society in Mormonism's centerplace. As a result, he set his sights on Independence, Missouri—the traditional centerplace of zion in Mormon thought—as the ultimate location of the church headquarters, and he encouraged the Saints living there to serve as Christian examples to their neighbors. Because of Joseph Smith's interpretation of the Lamoni experience as a mere stopping point on the journey toward zion, when the time came for the Order of Enoch's charter to expire in 1890, he asserted that no purpose would be served in continuing the organization for another twenty years. The company's shareholders accepted Smith's conclusion that the Order had served its purpose in providing a place where the Saints could live together in relative peace and harmony. Therefore, the company's board of directors divided the assets among the owners and ceased operations. They did so, however, pleased with the success of the experiment and fully convinced that the Lamoni settlement had helped give the Saints strength to move toward the eventual building of a spiritual kingdom of God on earth.³⁵

34. Smith and Smith, *History of Reorganized Church*, 3:582-584, 598, 616, 4:274; Alma R. Blair, "Lamoni—A Hundred Years," address presented at the annual meeting of the Mormon History Association, 26 May 1979, Grace-land College, Lamoni, Ia.

35. Smith to F. C. Warrity and the Saints at Independence, Missouri, 22 April 1880, Joseph Smith III Letterbook #3; Smith to Joseph Luff, 22 February 1881, Joseph Smith III Letterbook #3; Joseph Smith, "Editorial," *Herald* 24 (15 January 1877), 25; Smith to D. S. Mills, 17 July 1883, Joseph Smith III Letterbook #4; Smith to Samuel Brannan, 17 July 1883, Joseph Smith III Letterbook #4.

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With the demise of the Order of Enoch, Lamoni started to lose much of the uniqueness that had set it apart from so many of the agricultural communities of Iowa during the nineteenth century. This situation was accelerated in 1906 when Joseph Smith, by then an old man, moved his family to Independence, Missouri. Within a decade many of the church's other administrative officers had moved as well and by the early 1920s the Reorganized Church had formally established its headquarters in Independence. Even so, the Reorganized Church and the Order of Enoch had created Lamoni and traces of the legacy of both can still be found in that small community.

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