

# THE MORMON WALDENSIANS

## *INTRODUCTION*

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints began settling the Rocky Mountain wilderness that would eventually be known as Utah, in July of 1847. Having been driven first from Ohio, then from Missouri, and later from Illinois, the Mormons finally sought sanctuary in the unclaimed regions of the western frontier. Almost from its inception on April 6, 1830 in Fayette, New York, the church had sent missionaries to preach the restored gospel throughout the United States, Canada and England. However, after establishing a permanent settlement in the Great Basin, missionary efforts were intensified and new missions were opened throughout the world.

At General Conference in October 1849, thirty-five-year-old Lorenzo Snow, a newly ordained member of the Twelve Apostles, was called to establish an L.D.S. Mission in Italy "and wherever else the spirit should direct." **1** It took Elder Snow and Joseph Toronto, a native Sicilian who accompanied him, over nine months to reach their field of labor.

While en route, in Liverpool, Elder Snow read of the Waldensians, Protestant sectarians who had inhabited the Piedmont region of the Cottian Alps for centuries. He was moved by their long struggle for religious freedom and saw many similarities between their simple doctrines and the restored gospel which he had been commissioned to preach. He felt empathy when he read that the Waldensians, like the Mormons, had suffered severe religious persecution and had been forced to seek sanctuary in a mountain retreat. Snow felt impressed enough to begin his missionary efforts in Italy among this simple mountain folk. Southampton Conference President Thomas B. H. Stenhouse joined Snow and Toronto. The three were likely excited by predictions made by Franklin D. Richards, President of the English Mission, that "thousands would, ere long, embrace the gospel in Italy, [and that from the commencement of labors in Piedmont the work should] extend triumphantly." **2** The trio began their missionary labors in Italy with great expectations.

But of the 21,000 Waldensians living in the Protestant valleys in 1850, only 187 joined the Mormon church. During the sixteen-year period the Italian mission remained open, 74 of this group were excommunicated, 72 emigrated to Utah (primarily members of twelve families), and the remaining converts drifted into inactivity or returned to their former faith. **3** Though the number of serious Mormon converts was

disappointing to the missionaries in the mid-1800s, from the vantage point of historical perspective we can observe many lasting contributions that the Waldensian emigrants and their descendants have made to the Mormon Church. As the young converts married, often into polygamy, and raised large families, the number of Mormons who claimed Waldensian ancestry increased. Today thousands of Mormons in Utah, Arizona, California and throughout the church trace their ancestry back to the Italian Waldensians of the Protestant valleys. In August 1985, the author attended the opening sessions of the yearly Synod of the Waldensian Church held at Torre Pellice, Italy. The question most often asked by members of the Synod was, "Whatever became of the Mormon colonies?" This question was valid considering how little has been published about the colonies since the departure of the last convert family from Pinache in 1868.

George B. Watts devotes one chapter to this question in his 1941 publication, The Waldenses in the New World. However, Watts focused on Mormon missionary efforts in the Protestant valleys, and devoted only a few pages to the emigrating families. **4** His biographical material in the appendix was incomplete. For example, Watts completely missed the Justet family and Michael Rostan. Also, the names of some of the immigrating children were omitted. Helen Z. Papanikolas devotes only two paragraphs to the Waldenses in her 1976 publication, The Peoples of Utah. **5** In many cases, church records of the Italian Mission and family records conflicted, complicating the task of compiling lists identifying immigrants. Extensive research has been required to resolve discrepancies. Some descendants of Waldensian pioneer families such as Michael W. Homer (Bertoch family), Marriner Cardon and Professor James L. Barker **6** (son of Margaret Stalle Barker) have published articles on their Waldensian ancestors. The author is indebted to these writers for their information and research. However, these articles focus on specific families and include very little about the other Waldensian immigrants who shared similar experiences. A collective biography treating the Italian saints as a community is long overdue.

The "Mormon colonies" can best be understood when seen as ethnic enclaves. For the Waldensians, like the Norwegians, Danes and other ethnic groups who emigrated to Utah, generally settled together. The first Waldensian immigrants chose to establish communities in Ogden and Logan where they worshiped, worked and socialized together, often intermarrying. As these cities grew and polygamous families were disrupted by federal officers in the late 1870s and '80s, many of these families relocated in Arizona and Mexico. Often the Waldensian experience as Mormon converts mirrored the experiences of other ethnic groups: first there was contact with the Mormon elders in their homeland, next came conversion, then immigration and settlement, followed by amalgamation into the larger Mormon society.

To identify all the Waldensians who emigrated to Utah before 1870, church

and family records, passenger lists, the crossing-of-the-plains index and histories from the church archives and other institutional records were consulted. After three years of intense study and careful research, the author believes that the list that follows [though it differs somewhat from lists published in other sources] **7** is accurate and complete.

The twelve families include:

1. **Bertoch, John**, a widower with five adult children, owned a small farm on the steep hillside near St. Germain. Three of his children, Antoinette, Daniel and James came to Utah. Marguerite and John Sr. died of cholera en route. John Jr. died of pneumonia near Fort Kearney.
2. **Beus, Michael**, a farmer from Pramol. He and wife Marianne Combe Beus had nine children ranging in age from infancy to twelve years. Ann, James, John, Michael, Paul, Louis Phillip, Mary and Magdalena completed the journey. Baby Joseph died in Liverpool enroute.
3. **Cardon, Philippe**, a builder, lived with his wife Marie Tourn Cardon and their seven children in San Secondo di Pinerolo on the edge of the Piedmont plains. He served as president of the St. Bartholomew L.D.S. Branch. Their children, Mary Catherine, Louis Philippe, Marie Madeleine, John Paul and Thomas Barthelemy, also immigrated to Utah.
4. **Chatelain, Henry**, a widower, was a glazier by trade, with four adult children, all of whom lived in St. Germain. He was sixty-six when he was baptized. Chatelain died before he could emigrate. Son Peter and daughters Lydia, Henrietta and Marie Louise all made their way to Utah.
5. **Justet, Daniel**, and wife Jane Rostan Justet, were the parents of seven children. Justet, a stonemason, his wife and all but his eldest daughter emigrated in 1868. The children were Antonett, Daniel, Madeleine, Marguerite, Suzanne and Catherine. Marie emigrated in 1861.
6. **Lazald, Peter** (later Lazear), was a farmer from Pinache. Married at the time he was baptized in 1852, he emigrated with two teen-age children in 1855. Apparently, Peter was the only member of his family to join the church in Italy. He died in Echo Canyon. Young John was the only member of the family to reach Salt Lake City.
7. **Malan, John Daniel**, owned a farm and oil press near La Tour.

Malan was a prominent member of the community. He and wife Pauline Combe Malan were the parents of eight children. He presided over the Angrogna Branch and acted as mission president in the absence of the missionaries. His children included Marie Catherine Gaydou (with her daughter Julia), Jean Daniel, Stephen, twins Madeleine and Emily Pauline, Jane Dina and Barthelemy.

**Pons, Berthelemy** and Marie Anne Lantaret Pons were the parents of seven children. The family lived in Angrogna where Pons owned a large grape vineyard, two blocks of connecting houses, two wooded lands and three meadow-lands. He was a retired lieutenant. Immigrating children included Marianne, John Daniel, David, Lydia and Emma. Pons died of cholera en route.

9. **Roman, David**, was a brother-in-law of Malan, and a widower with a two-year-old son (Daniel), living at La Tour at the time of his baptism. Both emigrated to Utah in 1856.
10. **Roshon, Michel**, twice widowed, was a carpenter who lived at St. Germain with his third wife Susanne Robert (pronounced Ro Bear), and their three children. A 19-year-old relative, Elizabeth Roshon, (perhaps Roshon's daughter from a previous marriage) emigrated with this family. Roshon and his two youngest children died en route to Utah. His oldest daughter, Elizabeth, either died or remained in New York. Susanne and son Jacque Robert survived the trek and settled in Utah. Susanne later married David Roman.
11. **Rostan, Michael**, and wife Marthe Avondet Rostan, were the parents of two children who died in Italy before the family emigrated in 1860.
12. **Stalle, Pierre**, who had been twice widowed, lived with his third wife Jeanne Marie Gaudin and their four children near St. Bartholomew, where Stalle owned a small farm. Children Susanne, Daniel, Marie and Marguerite (Margaret) and their mother, Jeanne Marie, completed the journey. Stalle died en route.

Three young adults who emigrated were relatives of the

preceding families:

1. **Anthony Gaydou** was the estranged husband of Mary Catherine Malan Gaydou. The Gaydous were divorced in Philadelphia, where Anthony

settled.

2. **Susanne Goudin (Gaudin)** was a near relative of Pierre Stalle and was the only member of her immediate family to emigrate.
3. **Madelaina Malan** was a relative of the Malan family. She married Peter Chatelain in St. Louis, Missouri, en route.

Other young adult immigrants appear not to have been related to the twelve families. These included:

1. **James Bonnett**, from Pinerolo, a former neighbor of Susanne Robert (Roshon) who emigrated at the age of seventeen.
2. **Dominic Brodero**, 27, from Marseilles, France, who was a friend of David Roman. Brodero married Henriette Chatelain in Utah.
3. **Marianne Catherine Gardiol**, 20, from Prarustin. She was the only member of her immediate family to emigrate.
4. **Jacob Rivoir**, 35, from St. Germain, presided over the region after the missionaries left and most of the branch leadership had emigrated. Rivoir immigrated to Utah in 1866.

See the map of the Piedmont valleys at the end of the introduction to identify the locales from which these families emigrated.

Several other Waldensian families came to Utah in the 1880s and 1890s after the Italian Mission was combined with the Swiss Mission. These families were not converts to the Mormon church but many were relatives or friends of the original Italian immigrants. The second wave of Waldensians who came to Utah included about fifteen families and approximately the same number of single individuals. **9** This group represented only a few of the thousands who left the valleys in the late 1800s seeking "an opportunity to win their bread from a more hospitable soil." **10** As they arrived after the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, they were not counted as Utah pioneers or considered early settlers. Consequently, they are not included in this study unless they intermarried with the original group; though many in the second wave settled into existing Waldensian communities. Once in Utah, this group "'melted' into the local Protestant churches and communities, expressly encouraged to do so by their Church in Italy." **11** In time, many of this second group or their descendants became Mormons, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Though the Waldensian Church had been left behind, in the decades that

followed, descendants of Italian Waldense would trace their roots back to northern Italy. They would contemplate their rich religious heritage and intrigued by what they had learned, many would return to the valleys to discover for themselves the secrets of their ancestral home.

## NOTES

1. Eliza R. Snow, Autobiography of Lorenzo Snow (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1884), p. 109. (Hereafter cited as Lorenzo Snow.)
2. Ibid., pp. 122-123.
3. All statistical information concerning the original Mormon Converts was compiled from membership lists which appear in the appendix of Daniel B. Richards's The Italian Mission, the Scriptural Allegory in Three Parts (Salt Lake City: Magazine Publishing Co., 1931), pp 297-312. (Hereafter cited as Scriptural Allegory.)
4. George B. Watts, The Waldenses in the New World (Durham: Drake University Press, 1941), pp. 42-44, 227- 229. (Hereafter cited as Waldenses in New World.)
5. Helen Z. Papanikolas, The Peoples of Utah (Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society, 1976), p. 306.
6. Michael W. Homer, "For the Strength of the Hills We Bless Thee--Italian Mormons Come to Utah", paper presented to Dr. Davis Bitton, University of Utah. Marriner Cardon, "Children of the Valleys", Transcript of the sound track of an 8 mm documentary motion picture, privately published by the author, November, 1977 in Phoenix Arizona. James L. Barker, "Pioneer Reminiscences of Mrs. Margaret Stalle Barker", Relief Society Magazine (July, 1926).
7. See Appendix of Richards, Scriptural Allegory, pp. 297-312. Also Appendix in Watts, Waldenses in New World, pp. 227-229.
8. Watts, Ibid., pp. 232-239.
9. Giorgio Tourn, The Waldensians, the first 800 years, trans. Camillo P.

Merlino (Torino: Claudiana, 1980), p. xv. (Hereafter cited as *The Waldensians*.)

**10.** Ibid. The author was told at the 1985 Synod in Torre Pellice that when the Protestant valleys could no longer accommodate the large population, the "Waldensian church did a very brave thing. Emigrating Waldense were told not to organize but to go into the world and do as the spirit directs." Interview with the Reverend Frank Gibson, Executive Director of the American Waldensian Aid Society, August 24, 1985.

## Map of the Piedmont Valleys



