**Running the Mormons out of Town**

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[note: bold/underlined words will be hot links]

It all started with my wondering why the heck I was born in San Bernardino, of all places. My mother and her father were also born there; her parents and all of her paternal aunts and uncles lived in San Bernardino. I spent most holidays and many summer weeks in that unremarkable, somewhat derelict smog-filled city just off the decidedly not scenic freeways northeast of Los Angeles. Why was that our birthplace, and not the Bay Area, where my mother’s hip and fun maternal aunts lived with their families and descendants? A picture of my mother and her mother on their ranch near San Bernardino, and then one in San Francisco with Aunt Bess, dressed to the 9s, says it all. How did we end up THERE?

[Insert photos: mom and grandma, then mom, grandma, bess]

I was about 5 or 6 years old when I last saw my great-grandmother, Irene Poppett, who was born in San Bernardino before the turn of the century. Who were her parents, and why were they in San Bernardino? I asked my mother’s brother this question to start off my quest, about five years ago.

“Her father was Robert Poppett,” he told me. “He was indentured to the Mormons. Walked all the way with a handcart.” When I asked whether Robert had been a Mormon, his response was emphatic. “No. He was INDENTURED to them. That’s all. He just had to work it off.”

My curiosity deepened. A trained journalist with a Harvard MBA, who graduated from Nancy Drew to Agatha Christie to Daphne DuMaurier to Masterpiece’s ***Prime Suspect*** and ***Bletchley Circle***, who does the Sudoku and Jumble right after reading the op eds in the daily newspaper, and who hung a large tintype of an unidentified ancestor she dubbed “Constance” in her bedroom at the age of 12, I had to know more.

Soon I was in the San Bernardino Public Library, and found the candy store that is their “**California Room**.” The knowledgeable and helpful librarian there, Sue Payne, (“I’m what’s left of San Bernardino’s Genealogical Society”) quickly gathered a stack of books, newspaper articles, and 3 ring binders for me to peruse. The *San Bernardino Daily Sun* had done a series in the 1930s called “Covered Wagon Stories,” each week highlighting the key points of a different pioneer to San Bernardino, and Robert Poppett’s story was told *xxxx date*.[[1]](#footnote-1) I read “his father, recent convert, wished….”

OK, two things. One: this was far more than “indentured” to the Mormons. His father was an actual Mormon convert. So I have actual Mormons in my direct family line? I felt as if I had discovered Nazis in my family. I had to find out how far that went.

And two: what kind of father would put his 9-year-old motherless son on a ship full of strangers to sail to another country, knowing he may never see him again? What kind of a monster was this father of Robert Poppett’s?

And three: wow, was this Robert Poppett one resilient dude.

Five years later, this quest has taken me deep into the **history of the Mormon church**, within the context of **the Second Great Enlightenment**. I’ve absorbed the impetus for the LDS church’s **first major missionary thrust to the British Isles in the 1840s**, to the heart of one of the **coal mining areas in the Midlands** during the early part of the **Industrial Revolution**. From there to the sequence of Joseph Smith’s unsuccessful attempts to establish Mormon colonies, first in Ohio, then Missouri, then Illinois. To **the overland tra**ils his successor, Brigham Young, and his resourceful, resilient followers blazed and documented, and the **way-stations** they built along the way that not only facilitated the evacuation of a community of 15,000 people from one location to another far more remote one, but after their departure to Utah, these tidy towns they built also served as the impetus and foundation of the **settlement of Iowa**. The story continues into Utah, of course, but from there takes a surprising turn: a group of 438 Latter-Day-Saints departed on *March x, 1851*,[[2]](#footnote-2) to establish a satellite Mormon colony in southern California as the new state was sorting out how they would distribute the **land grants from the territory they had just conquered from Mexico**, which would end up being—wait for it—in **San Bernardino**. Three years later, 15-year-old Robert Poppett would walk this Old Spanish Trail[[3]](#footnote-3) alongside the wagons of some of the families who had become his kin[[4]](#footnote-4), through the Mojave Desert into the oasis that was the thriving Mormon colony in San Bernardino, where he, and they, would find home.

Learning about the San Bernardino colony shifted my aversion to my hometown to pride. I discovered that my ancestor, Robert Poppett’s name was on the plaque commemorating the founding of this town. [[5]](#footnote-5)And the memorial was dedicated Jan 3, 1965 was sponsored by the local Mormon Church. Which I know because my aunts and uncles had placed an ad commemorating their father in the program. [[6]](#footnote-6) I was only four years old, but still. Why was I not told?

On ancestry.com several years ago I connected with a Poppett cousin, Diana, who I remembered only through their Christmas card photos. Incredibly, she lived just north of Seattle, where I live, and she had inherited her grandmother, Frances Poppett’s, stash of newspaper articles and photos. The two of us family history junkies spent long days immersing ourselves in her stash, combined with those my mother inherited. The San Bernardino we learned about had little to no mention, however, of Mormons. Newspaper articles referred to the early settlers as simply “pioneers,” a conspicuous absence that served to heighten my curiosity. Had they really been Mormon? I would have to go further back in Robert Poppett’s life before San Bernardino to answer that question.

And I still wondered how a father could send his son off like that. Would young Robert ever see his father again? Or his older brother John? Or his sister Elizabeth? Or his many cousins who remained in Shropshire? And who were these people, these Mormons, whom Robert would consider his family? What was I to make of this connection? I kept going.

Obama was president when I started this quest. His middle name, Hussein, became a powerful hook his opponents used to re-position this otherwise non-threatening, respectable and qualified candidate him as a Muslim, to stir up fear and dread that would mobilize the base of the opponent’s party. The 9/11 terrorists were Muslim, so Muslims must be terrorists, the flawed logic went. (name the logical flaw). Last year’s political campaign, which turned into the current administration, successfully used Fox News’ megaphone to the frightened conservatives, and amplified and expanded its message and reach through the now ubiquitous social media to create an environment in which Muslims became seen as an unhealthy, threatening element to be sent away, or exterminated. This mob mentality has been used by those in power to maintain the status quo as far back as the Crusades, and as recently as the Holocaust. This Muslim-villain-izing is no different than Gaston’s whipping the townfolk up into a murderous mob in fear of the Beast just because he wants to get the Beauty for himself.

Not long ago I started my day reading about the Muslim Travel Ban in the New York Times. Then I turned to my research, which that day was to understand why the Mormons left Missouri. I read this:

“quote from the Gov of MO about exterminating the Mormons”[[7]](#footnote-7)

When will we ever learn from history?

Another day I would read the *L.A. Star’s* description of the Mormon Colony in San Bernardino: ”it’s beautiful, the Mormons are wonderful neighbors and great citizens”[[8]](#footnote-8), then read this excerpt from an *L.A. Star* article a mere four years later: “they are horrible and we have to get them out.”

Here’s what I have learned about the Poppetts and their circle of **Friends Neighbors and Associates in San Bernardino**: they were, in large part, as a group: honest. Respectful. Kind. Resilient. Productive. Supportive of each other. Family values? My family in San Bernardino were a tight group. They were all of these things. So, apparently, were his FAN. Their stories are remarkable. Yet these are the same people the Missouri governor wanted to eradicate. That the Illinois mobs ran out of the state at gunpoint. Were they perfect? No. Were they human? Most definitely. One can only wonder what Missouri and Illinois threw away when they ran them across the borders. Or what San Bernardino might have become had the community not destroyed? Were the fears proportionate, or were the townfolk being whipped up by a Gaston who had a stake in the status quo? This is a question that we should be asking ourselves today when we try to build a wall around “us” to keep “them” out.

What are we really afraid of?

1. Footnote here [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Footnote from Leo Lyman book [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Map the route, from Leo Lyman book [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Footnote about the Enoch Reese wagon train and who was on it [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Photo of memorial [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Photo of the ad along with the program cover [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Wallace Stegner book (or many others) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. LA Star book [↑](#footnote-ref-8)