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De Witt

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Abstract: A short historical essay around the Latter-day Saint settlement in the town of De Witt, Missouri, located in Carroll County in that state. The inhabitants there would suffer greatly during persecutions of the Mormon-Missouri War of 1838.

square, directly south and close by the cellar for the Lord's House. "Here friends greeted friends in the name of the Lord. Isaac Morley, Patriarch at Far West, furnished a beef for the Camp. President Rigdon provided a supper for the sick, and the brethren provided for them like men of God, for they were hungry, having eaten but little for several days, and having traveled 11 miles that day; 866 miles from Kirtland, the way the camp traveled."

Wednesday, 3rd. The Camp continued their journey to Ambrosial Creek, where they pitched their tents. The Prophet went with them a mile or two, to a beautiful spring on the prairie, accompanied by Elder Rigdon, Brother Hyrum and Brigham Young, with whom he returned to Far West.

Thursday, 4th. The Camp arrived in Adam-ondi-Ahman, Daviess County.

"This is a day," writes the Prophet Joseph, "long to be remembered by

that part of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints called the Camp, or Kirtland Camp No. 1, for they arrived at their destination and began to pitch their tents about sunset, when one of the brethren living in the place proclaimed with a loud voice: 'Brethren, your long and tedious journey is now ended, you are now on the public square of Adam-ondi-Ahman. This is the place where Adam blessed his posterity, when they rose up and called him Michael, the Prince, the Arch-Angel, and he being full of the Holy Ghost predicted what should befall his posterity to the latest generation.'"

The Kirtland Camp arrived at the time the persecutions were raging against the Saints in Missouri, and about a month later the whole "Mormon" population, including the Saints from Kirtland, were forced, by the mob, to vacate Adam-ondi-Ahman and remove to Far West.

DE WITT

De Witt, a village in Carroll County, Missouri (550 inhabitants in 1880), is located on the north side of the Missouri River, six miles above the outlet of Grand River. In the beginning of 1838 it contained only a few houses, but through the urgent solicitations of Henry Root and David Thomas, owners of extensive tracts of land in the neighborhood, the Saints, who at that time were fast filling up Caldwell County, about fifty miles to the northwest, were induced to settle at De Witt, the opportunities offered them for getting homes there being very favorable. As quite a number of

Saints were expected from Canada that season, it was decided by the authorities of the Church that they, upon their arrival in Missouri, should locate at De Witt, if the place suited them; but previous to this quite a number of families belonging to the Saints (mostly from Ohio) settled there, and were busily engaged in agricultural pursuits during the summer. About the 25th of September (1838) Elder John E. Page arrived in De Witt with about fifty wagons and several hundred Saints from Canada, and a few days later a small company arrived from the same province under

the direction of Christopher Merkley. Zenos H. Gurley and Francis and Alexander Beckstead, from Williamsburgh (now Morrisburgh), Upper Canada, came in the latter company.

About the 12th of September, 1838, previous to the arrival of the Canada Saints, some sixty or more mobbers entered De Witt and warned the brethren to leave the place, but it was not until the 20th of that month that any serious demonstration of mob violence occurred. On that day about a hundred, perhaps a hundred and fifty, men rode into the settlement and threatened the Saints with violence and death if they did not agree at once to leave the place and move out of the county; but after some deliberation they concluded to give them till the first of October following to take their departure. They threatened further that if the "Mormons" were not gone by that time they would exterminate them without regard to age or sex, and destroy their chattels, by throwing them into the river, etc. Two days later (September 22nd) a petition, signed by about fifty of the brethren, was sent to Lilburn W. Boggs, governor of Missouri. This petition set forth the above doings of the mob and prayed the executive "to take such steps as would put a stop to all the lawless proceedings." But the governor gave no heed to their prayers.

In the meantime Dr. Austin, who had commanded the mob forces in Daviess County, was compelled through the prompt action of Generals David R. Atchison and H. G. Parks, to cease his operations in that part of the country (see *Adam-ondi-Ahman*); but instead of obeying the general's order to disperse and

go home, this notorious reprobate repaired to Carroll County with most of his outlaws, and there united with the mobbers who were already besieging De Witt.

The Saints at De Witt had paid no attention to the demand of the mob made September 20th, that they leave the State by the 1st of October, but under the command of Geo. M. Hinkle, who had removed thither from Far West, commenced making active preparations for defense. On the 2nd of that month, early in the morning, about fifty men rode into De Witt and began firing upon the peaceful inhabitants of the place. Henry Root made out an affidavit to the foregoing effect, and at once went to General Parks with it, who was still in the vicinity of Adam-ondi-Ahman with two companies of militia. Leaving Colonel Thompson he at once ordered two companies of militia under the command of Captain Bogart and Houston to arm and equip, as the law directed, with six days' provisions and fifty rounds of powder and ball. With these companies he marched for De Witt, arriving there October 4th. Just before leaving Daviess County, he sent a messenger to a Colonel Jones, of Carroll County, to call out three companies of militia and join him at Carrollton, the county seat of Carroll County. This order, however, was ignored. In his report to General Atchison (dated October 6th at the brigade headquarters, five miles from De Witt), General Parks says that when he had arrived at De Witt two days previous he found the place surrounded by Dr. Austin's men, to the number of some three hundred, provided with a piece of artillery ready to attack the "Mormons" gathered in

the town. But he expressed the opinion that the "Mormons" could beat Austin even if he had five hundred troops. In the meantime his own forces were mutinous, and refused to act against the mob; hence he had sent word to General Doniphan to raise companies from Platte, Clay and Clinton counties, as he had no faith that troops ordered from Livingston and other counties would come.

During the time that trouble was threatened at Adam-ondi-Ahman, Governor Boggs, in addition to the militia ordered out under Atchison, Doniphan and Parks, had directed General S. D. Lucas, of the 4th division of the Missouri militia to march with 400 men to join General Atchison in Daviess County. Orders similar in their nature were issued to Major-Generals Lewis Bolton, John B. Clark and Thomas D. Grant. But the success of General Atchison in scattering the mob forces about Adam-ondi-Ahman led to the disbanding of the militia under the generals just named. This apparently was not relished at all by S. D. Lucas, who a few years previous had taken an active part in connection with Governor Boggs against the Saints in the Jackson County troubles. Hearing of the difficulty arising at De Witt, he thought it another opportunity to strike a blow at the defenseless people he before had assisted in murdering and driving from their homes. He passed down the Missouri River, near De Witt, October 1st (the time the actual hostilities began there), and reported the situation to Governor Boggs, and in concluding his letter he says:

"If a fight has actually taken place, of which I have no doubt, it will create excitement in

the whole of Upper Missouri, and those base and degraded beings (the Mormons) will be exterminated from the face of the earth. * * * It is an unpleasant state of affairs. The remedy I do not pretend to suggest to your Excellency. My troops were only dismissed subject to further orders, and can be called into the field at an hour's warning."

"Base and degraded beings!" comments Joseph the Prophet. "Whoever heard before of high-minded and honorable men condescending to sacrifice their honor by stooping to wage war, without cause or provocation, against 'base and degraded beings.' But General Lucas is ready with his whole division, at an hour's warning, to enter the field of battle on such degraded terms, if his own statement is true. But General Lucas knew better. He knew the Saints were an innocent, unoffending people, and would fight only in self-defense, and why write such a letter to the governor to influence his mind? Why not keep to truth and justice on your side, poor Lucas? The annals of eternity will unfold to you who are the 'base beings,' and what it will take to 'satisfy' for the shedding of 'Mormon blood.'"

Among others, the people of Chariton County were asked to assist against the "Mormons" and to drive them from De Witt; but before taking any other action in the matter the people of that county held a public meeting on the question, and sent a committee of two (John W. Price and William H. Logan) to enquire into the situation and report. Their report is a complete vindication of the action of the Saints in this instance, which the following extract will show:

"We arrived at the place of difficulties on the 4th of October, and found a large portion of the citizens of Carroll and adjoining counties assembled near De Witt well armed. We inquired into the nature of the difficulties. They said there was a large portion of the people called Mormons, embodied in De Witt, from

different parts of the world. They were unwilling for them to remain there, which is the cause of their waging war against them. To use the gentlemen's language, they were waging a war of extermination, or to remove them from the said county. We also went into De Witt, to see the situation of the Mormons. We found them in the act of defense, begging for peace, and wishing for the civil authorities to repair there as early as possible to settle the difficulties between the parties. Hostilities have commenced, and will continue until they are stopped by the civil authorities."

Following is the Prophet Joseph's account of the difficulties in De Witt:

"About this time I took a journey, in company with some others, to the lower part of the county of Caldwell, for the purpose of selecting a location for a town. While on my journey I was met by one of the brethren from De Witt, in Carroll County, who stated that our people who had settled in that place were, and had for some time been, surrounded by a mob, who had threatened their lives, and had shot at them several times; and that he was on his way to Far West, to inform the brethren there of the facts.

"I was surprised on receiving this intelligence, although there had, previous to this time, been some manifestations of mobs, but I had hoped that the good sense of the majority of the people, and their respect for the Constitution, would have put down any spirit of persecution which might have been manifested in that neighborhood.

"Immediately on receiving this intelligence, I made preparations to go to that place, and endeavor, if possible, to allay the feelings of the citizens, and save the lives of my brethren who were thus exposed to their wrath.

"I arrived at De Witt on Saturday, October 6th, and found that the accounts of the situation of that place were correct; for it was with much

difficulty, and by traveling unfrequented roads, that I was able to get there, all the principal roads being strongly guarded by the mob, who refused all ingress as well as egress. I found my brethren, who were only a handful in comparison to the mob by which they were surrounded, in this situation, and their provisions nearly exhausted, and no prospect of obtaining any more. We thought it necessary to send immediately to the governor, to inform him of the circumstances, hoping to receive from the executive the protection which we needed, and which was guaranteed to us in common with other citizens. Several gentlemen of standing and respectability who live in the immediate vicinity, who were not in any way connected with the Church of Latter-day Saints but had witnessed the proceedings of our enemies, came forward and made affidavits to the treatment we had received, and concerning our perilous situation, offering their services to go and present the case to the governor themselves.

* * *

"Under the same date (October 6th), from the camp near De Witt, eleven bloodthirsty fellows, viz., Congrave Jackson, Larkin H. Woods, Thomas Jackson, Rolla M. Daviess, James Jackson, jun., Johnson Jackson, John L. Tomlin, Sidney S. Woods, George Crigler, William L. Banks and Whitfield Dicken wrote a most inflammatory, lying and murderous communication to the citizens of Howard County, calling upon them, as friends and fellow-citizens, to come to their immediate rescue, as the 'Mormons' were then firing upon them, and they would have to act on the de-

fensive until they could procure more assistance.

"A. C. Woods, a citizen of Howard County, made a certificate to the same lies, which he gathered in the mob camp; he did not go into De Witt, or take any trouble to learn the truth of what he certified. While the people will lie, and the authorities will uphold them, what justice can honest men expect?

"On Tuesday (October 9th), General Clark wrote to the governor, from Booneville, that the names subscribed to the enclosed paper (as before stated, 6th instant) are worthy, prudent and patriotic citizens of Howard County; men who would leave their families and everything dear, and go to a foreign country to seek the blood of innocent men, women and children! If this constitute 'worth, prudence and patriotism,' let me be worthless, imprudent and unpatriotic.

"The messenger, Mr. Caldwell, who had been dispatched to the governor for assistance, returned, but instead of receiving any aid, or even sympathy, from his Excellency, we were told that 'the quarrel was between the Mormons and the mob,' and that 'we might fight it out.'

"About this time a mob, commanded by Hyrum Standly, took Smith Humphrey's goods out of his house, and said Standly set fire to Humphrey's house and burned it before his eyes, and ordered him to leave the place forthwith, which he did by fleeing from De Witt to Caldwell County. The mob had sent to Jackson County and got a cannon, powder and balls, and bodies of armed men had gathered in to aid them, from Ray, Saline, Howard, Livingston, Clinton, Clay and Platte counties, and other parts of the

State, and a man by the name of Jackson from Howard County was appointed their leader.

"The Saints were forbidden to go out of the town, under pain of death, and were shot at when they attempted to go out to get food, of which they were destitute. As fast as their cattle, horses or other property got where the mob could get hold of them, they were taken as spoil. By these outrages the brethren were obliged, most of them, to live in wagons or tents.

"Application had been made to the judge of the circuit court for protection, and he ordered out two companies of militia, one commanded by Captain Samuel Bogart, a Methodist minister and one of the worst of the mobocrats. The whole force was placed under the command of General Parks, another mobber, if his letters speak his feelings; and his actions do not belie him, for he never made the first attempt to disperse the mob; and when asked the reason for his conduct, he always replied that Bogart and his company were mutinous and mobocratic, that he dared not attempt a dispersion of the mob. Two other principal men of the mob were Major Ashley, member of the legislature, and Sashiel Woods, a Presbyterian clergyman.

"General Parks informed us that a greater part of his men under Captain Bogart had mutinied, and that he would be obliged to draw them off from the place, for fear they would join the mob; consequently he could offer us no assistance.

"We had now no hopes whatever of successfully resisting the mob, who kept constantly increasing; our provisions were entirely exhausted, and we were worn out by continually stand-

ing on guard and watching the movements of our enemies, who, on frequent occasions, during the time I was there, fired at us a great many times. Some of the brethren perished from starvation; and for once in my life I had the pain of beholding some of my fellow-creatures fall victims to the spirit of persecution, which did then and has since prevailed to such an extent in Upper Missouri. They were men, too, who were virtuous, and against whom no legal process could for one moment be sustained, but who, in consequence of their love of God, attachment to his cause, and their determination to keep the faith, were thus brought to an untimely grave.

"In the meantime Henry Root and David Thomas, who had been the sole cause of the settlement of our people in De Witt, solicited the Saints to leave the place. Thomas said he had assurances from the mob that if they would leave the place they would not be hurt, and that they would be paid for all losses which they had sustained; that they had come as mediators to accomplish this object, and that persons should be appointed to set a value on the property which they had to leave, and that they should be paid for it. The Saints finally, through necessity, had to comply and leave the place. Accordingly, a committee was appointed—Judge Erickson was one of the committee, and Major Florey, of Rutsville, another; the names of others not remembered. They appraised the real estate; that was all.

"When the people came to start,

many of their horses, oxen and cows were gone and could not be found; it was known at the time and the mob boasted, that they had killed the oxen and lived on them. A great number of cows, oxen and horses have never been seen since; the mob, no doubt, took and kept them, and that was all the brethren ever received of the promised to pay for all their losses at De Witt. Many houses belonging to my brethren were burned, their cattle driven away, and a great quantity of their property was destroyed by the mob. Seeing no prospect of relief, the governor having turned a deaf ear to our entreaties, the militia having mutinied, and the greater part of them being ready to join the mob, the brethren came to the conclusion that they would leave the place and seek a shelter elsewhere. Gathering up as many wagons as could be got ready, which was about seventy, with a remnant of the property they had been able to save from their ruthless foes, they left De Witt and started for Caldwell County on the afternoon of Thursday, October 11, 1838. They traveled that day about twelve miles and encamped in a grove of timber near the road.

"That evening a woman, who had a short time before given birth to a child, died in consequence of the exposure occasioned by the operations of the mob, and having to move before her strength would properly admit of it. She was buried in the grove without a coffin.

"During our journey we were continually harassed and threatened by the mob, who shot at us several times, while several of our brethren died from fatigue and privations which they had to endure, and we had to inter them by the wayside, without a coffin and under circumstances the most distressing. We arrived in Caldwell on the 12th of October."

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